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An analysis of social media's influence on the consumption of self-published romantic fiction from 2010-2019

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Johannesburg
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Abstract

The aim of this research assignment is to better understand how social media is affecting the publishing industry, with specific focus on self-publishing romantic fiction authors. How social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram are used to promote content and grow an author's following, and whether this influences the consumption of the content, will be investigated. It will also investigate whether the interactions between authors and readers on social media influences the creation of self-published romantic fiction, and if so, how?

This report will also study how social media is changing how readers are consuming content, the content created and published by the authors, who its target market is, and how successful it is as a publishing and marketing tool.

Authors are increasingly using social media platforms to promote their published content (paper, electronic, and audio). This is possible because social media provides authors with an effective platform for two-way engagement between themselves and their readers that facilitates the building of a loyal readership and following.

Social media provides users with a sense of community, and this paper aims to analyse the effect the sense of community that readers receive through social media reader communities and whether it influences the consumption of self-published romantic fiction. Readers often feel criticised for reading romantic fiction, specifically highly sexualised content, so this paper will investigate whether these communities provide readers with safe space where they can discuss the content they enjoy without fear of criticism.

The proposed methodology for the research paper includes a) a literature review of existing research that has been published and critically evaluates social media's footprint on the publishing industry; and b) an analysis of primary data gathered through two questionnaires shared with self-published romantic fiction authors and their readers.

Keywords

Social media; Self-published romantic fiction; Egocentric social media sites; Sense of community; Self-published authors; Commercial publishing.

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Lastly, a special thank you to my mother, whose strength and grace inspire me every day. Thank you for your unending love, support and guidance – I could not have done any of this without you.

"Why fantasy? Because reality has no authority there."

Samantha Young

Michelle Saffy

Johannesburg

2020

PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

I Michelle Rose Saffy (Student number: 880371) am a student registered for the degree of MA Publishing Studies in the academic year 2020.

I hereby declare the following:

- I am aware that plagiarism, that is the use of someone else's work without their permission and/or without acknowledging the original source, is wrong.
- I confirm that the work submitted for assessment for the above degree is my own unaided work except where I have explicitly indicated otherwise.
- I have followed the required conventions in referencing the words, thoughts and ideas of others.
- I understand that the University of the Witwatersrand may take disciplinary action against me if there is a belief that this is not my own unaided work or that I have failed to acknowledge the source of the ideas or words in my writing.

Signature: Saffy Date: 12 March 2020

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Glossary

Adult genre – content with protagonists that are 25 and older with "characters who know who they are, but have reached a place of change, where they have to face new challenges and see if the identities they have developed are strong enough to conquer these new goals" (West, 2018)

Author – the creator or originator of any written work such as a book or play (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2019)

Book – the traditional definition of a book is a written or printed work consisting of pages glued or sewn together along one side and bound in covers (Lexico, 2020), however, through digital technologies, the definition of a book is expanding to include ebooks, novellas, and content (as is defined below).

Content – is no longer just a book, it can take on many different forms, especially through digital technologies such as social media

Egocentric social media sites – Allow users to construct profiles of themselves on virtual platforms facilitating identity construction and connections

eBook – is either an electronic version of an existing printed book, or a publication specifically designed to exist in a digital format (Atanasovski, 2018)

New adult genre – is a relatively new classification with protagonists aged between 22-25, about college students and young professionals just starting their first jobs (West, 2018)

Pages – are places on Facebook where artists, public figures, businesses, brands, organisations and non-profits can connect with their fans or customers

Profile – is a place on an egocentric social media site, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, where you can share information about yourself, such as your interests, photos, video, etc. (Facebook, 2020)

Reader – describes the consumers of the authors' content, the people who purchase the content published by the authors

Romantic fiction novel – a novel which primary focus is the romantic relationship between characters, with a fictional supporting storyline and sexual interaction

Self-published author – an independent author who controls and pays for the entire publishing process without the aid of a publishing house, mostly on online platforms such as Kindle Unlimited, and retains all rights to, and royalties from, their published content

Sense of community – a "sense of belonging, emotional connection, of mattering to others within the community and a belief that the group members can meet each other's needs" (Laing, 2017, p. 257)

Social media – internet-based technologies that facilitate conversations and offer users a platform for content creation, content upload, networking, conversing, media sharing and bookmarking

Willingness to participate – consumer engagement, or active involvement, with a brand, product, service, or company through acts such as creating content (Parent, Plangger & Bal, 2011).

Willingness to pay – "a consumer's motivation to pay a price that is higher than the prevailing market price for a good or service as a result of their perception of that good or service's higher value" (Parent, et al., 2011, p. 220)

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, authors interacted with their readers in person, and during book events and signings in bookshops, libraries, literary conventions, and book festivals. This interaction is now more commonly taking place online on social media sites. This has made communication between authors and readers much easier, but it has also made it possible for these groups to connect directly, which was previously not possible (Rowe, 2018).

It is assumed that social media enhances the symbiotic relationship between the authors and readers of self-published romantic fiction, and has allowed authors to significantly grow their reader following (Tripler, 2016). The purpose of this research paper is to determine whether author-reader social media engagement influences the consumption of self-published romantic fiction and if this inadvertently impacts the publishing industry as a commercial entity.

According to the Romance Writers of America (2019), the romantic fiction industry is worth $1.08 billion per year; in 2016, romance made up 23% of the overall US fiction market, second only to General Fiction. Despite the large number of sales, romantic fiction as a literary genre is often criticised by the public (Tripler, 2016). Social media is creating a space for the readers of this genre to interact with each other, create a sense of community, and openly discuss their views without fear of criticism.

For the purpose of this research report, the term ‘author’ is used to describe the creator or originator of any written work such as a book or play (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2019). Little distinction is drawn between authors who publish books or online content such as blogs, websites and social media posts. The one author distinction that is drawn in this research is that of the self-published romantic fiction author, but this description is not limited to the platform on which the authors publish.

The term ‘reader’ describes the consumers of the authors’ content, the people who purchase the content published by the authors. Readers also form part of the audiences, communities and fans described in this research, but their main identifying characteristic is the consumption of the authors’ content.

The term ‘social media’ refers to internet-based technologies that facilitate conversations and offer users a platform for content creation, content upload, networking, conversing, media sharing and bookmarking (Parent et al., 2011).

The term ‘self-organised communities’ describes internet-based pages where like-minded individuals congregate to share content and opinions on shared interests (Antoniadis & Le Grand, 2009). For the purpose of this research paper, self-organised communities include reader communities and author fan pages found on Facebook and Instagram.

The aim of this research paper:

- To analyse social media’s influence on the consumption of self-published romantic fiction from 2010-2019.

The objectives are to:

- Understand how and why authors are using social media and the benefits thereof.
- Describe the effects of social media on the self-publishing process and identify whether the connections and engagement between authors and readers positively impact the creation and consumption of content.
- Analyse the effects of the sense of community which social media provides to readers and the impact of this on the consumption of criticised romantic fiction.

This research paper will consist of three main sections, each analysed separately before being applied to the specifics of this research. The three main sections of this research paper are:

1. Self-publishing – an in-depth look into the definition of self-publishing and an analysis of the reasons it has become such a popular publishing method over the past 10 years.
2. Social media – the description of social media, the different types of social media platforms that exist, how authors and readers use social media to interact with each other, and the impact of social media on the consumption of self-published romantic fiction.

3. Romantic fiction – a description of the romantic fiction literary genre, with specific focus on contemporary and paranormal romantic fiction, where both subgenres have explicit sexual scenes, the criticism attached to the genre in public, and why a sense of community is important for the readers of this genre.

The proposed methodology of this research is to conduct a literature review of previously published literature followed by primary research through the use of questionnaires as data-collection methods. The main targets of the questionnaires are two distinct groups: self-published romantic authors and readers of self-published romantic content. To properly understand the relationship that exists between the authors and readers through online social media communication, data will be gathered from both of these groups.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The growth of the self-publishing industry

According to Van Rooyen (2010), self-publishing is what happens when an author decides that he or she does not need/want a publisher and chooses to handle the job themselves, thus working independently of a publishing house. Here, the author undertakes all risk and responsibility for the publication of their work. This process is also sometimes referred to as 'author-publishing', 'private publishing', or 'small-scale publishing' (Odendaal, 2008).

Self-publishing is not a new practice, but due to the advent of the electronic book (ebook) and the rising popularity of social media, it has seen a dramatic growth in the past 10 years (Thomlison & Belanger, 2015; Youngsuk, 2014).

An ebook is either an electronic version of an existing printed book, or a publication specifically designed to exist in a digital format (Atanasovski, 2018). eBooks have steadily grown in popularity among authors and among readers, and account for a large portion of self-published books (Rowe, 2018).

Authors choose to self-publish for many reasons, some of which are explained below:

Authors have full control over what they publish

Authors who self-publish are not limited to what content they can publish based on traditional publishing companies' strict corporate guidelines (Youngsuk, 2014). Authors also have full control over when to publish, how much to charge for the publication, and the publication's appearance.

Higher revenue percentages

Due to technological advances, self-publishing is relatively inexpensive; but some costs may still be incurred, such as distribution costs (either print through bookstores or ebooks through online selling platforms such as Amazon), cover design, conversion and layout, and marketing (Self-Publishing Relief, 2015). Authors can decide which of these costs they are willing to incur or not, and can instead opt for free alternatives; and, therefore, control the percentage of royalties they receive (Odendaal, 2008).

Technological advances

The internet, self-publishing platforms, and social media have significantly lowered the barriers of entry and have made the delivery and promotion of content much easier. Although these tasks require tremendous effort, authors can decide to undertake these activities themselves. Technological advances have made it cheaper and easier for authors to self-publish and distribute their content, and social media has made it possible for authors to promote their books and cultivate loyal followers (Turner, 2014).

Authors can self-promote their publications

Self-published authors have much more control over how the book is promoted, the platforms on which it is promoted, for how long it is promoted, and their level of engagement with their readers (Odendaal, 2008).

2.2 Transition from traditional books to content

Nowadays, the content that authors produce is not limited to books or plays, but can take on many different forms, especially through digital technologies such as social media (Turner, 2014). Authors are creating and sharing content such as quotes, bonus chapters, and sneak peeks from upcoming publications specifically for their readers to consume online for extra entertainment – this is known as short-form content (Barker, 2019).

In the eye of the internet and social media, content more often takes the form of short-form content such as a Facebook product or brand page, a Twitter tweet, or a YouTube video. All of these forms of content are pushed out to readers from the content creators, or authors (Parent, et al., 2011).

Content is the most important element in establishing a successful social media presence (Barker, 2019). However, because social media platforms are increasingly being used by authors as publishing platforms, defining authors as simply writers who produce books has become an incomplete definition.

The internet has become the ultimate publisher of content, with low barriers to entry, self-organising communities, and search technology with greater competition for the reader's attention (Youngsuk, 2014).

2.3 The 5 Rs of publishing

The internet has made it much easier for self-published authors (and the publishing industry as a whole) to provide readers with the 5 Rs of publishing (Turner, 2014):

1. Right content – Self-published authors who are active on social media and engage with their readers can more accurately provide readers with the content they want, instead of relying on traditional publishers to curate content from authors.
2. Right time – The quicker turnaround time for self-published content allows the author to publish content that is still relevant and desired by the readers.
3. Right audience – Self-organising communities on the internet provide authors with an accurate view of the audiences who would like their content. Self-publishing authors can target these audiences specifically, as they have full control over what they publish.
4. Right channel – Authors can more accurately determine where their readers would have easier access to their content, and via which channels they prefer the content to be delivered. Channels include how the content gets from the author/publisher to the reader, including traditional bookstores, online book platforms and ebook platforms.
5. Right format – Authors can determine in which format readers want their content. Formats include how the content is presented to the reader, including print books, digital books and serialised content.

2.4 The definition of social media

Social media can be defined as "internet-based technologies that facilitate conversations … They differ from more traditional web applications by offering users a platform for content creation, content upload, networking, conversing, media sharing, and bookmarking" (Parent, Plangger & Bal, 2011, p.220).

Some of the main social media platforms are Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, and Instagram (Digital Information World, 2019).

The global social media audience profile for two of the main social media platforms that will be analysed in this research paper, Facebook and Instagram, are expressed in the table below (We are social, 2019).

Table 2.1: Global social media audience profile

	13-17 years old	**18 – 24 years old**	**25 – 34 years old**	**35 – 44 years old**	**45 – 54 years old**	**55 – 64 years old**	**65+ years old**
Female	3%	11%	13%	7%	5%	3%	2%
Male	4%	16%	19%	9%	5%	3%	2%

Source:Adapted from We are social (2019)

The following table describes the categorisation of five different types of social media sites (Fraser & Dutta, 2008):

Table 2.1: Categories of social media

Categories of social media	Appeal	Examples of sites
Egocentric sites	Allow users to construct profiles of themselves on virtual platforms facilitating identity construction and connections.	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
Community sites	Imitate real-world communities, allowing groups to form around like-minded beliefs.	BigWaveDave.com, BlackPlanet.com
Opportunistic sites	Allow for different social organisation of users and facilitate business connections. Often defined vertically.	LinkedIn, Academia.edu
Passion-centric sites	Allow users to connect based on interests and hobbies. Often defined horizontally.	Goodreads, Pinterest
Media-sharing sites	Allow users to share rich media with each other. Defined by content, not users.	YouTube, Flickr, SlideShare

Source: Adapted from Fraser and Dutta (2008)

The above table will be used during the primary data-gathering phase of this research paper to identify in which categories of social media the readers spend most of their time. This will inform on which platforms authors should be most present in order to create the most impact or gain the most views.

2.5 The benefits of social media marketing

"Content marketing is a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience — and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action" (Content Marketing Institute, 2020). Social media marketing is a subdomain of content marketing. According to the Content Marketing Institute (2020) and LYFE Marketing (2020), the three key benefits of content and social media marketing are increased sales, cost savings, and more loyal customers through relationships.

Authors, like all brands, have a key product – their book. But as society moves towards the adoption of content marketing vs. traditional marketing, authors also need to provide their readers with valuable content. The best way for authors to do this is through social media

marketing and engagement. Therefore, their content is closely linked to their key product as both are published, but there is still a distinction as one is their product and the other drives the consumption of their product.

There are many different benefits to social media marketing as the value of social media marketing is evaluated from many different perspectives. According to LYFE Marketing (2020), the key benefits of social media lies in relationship-building, because "relationships build trust, and trust builds sales" (LYFE Marketing, 2020).

According to Lyfe Marketing, the nine benefits of social media marketing are (LYFE Marketing, 2020):

1. Advanced targeting – Authors can find the exact audiences they are targeting with social media. This is especially useful to authors who serve niche markets within the romantic fiction industry. This also allows authors to better understand their readers' needs and ensure they are meeting these needs with the content they are providing.
2. Direct access to customers – Social media allows authors the opportunity to connect with their target markets, prospects, and customers at any time.
3. Brand awareness – Authors can market themselves, their brand, and their content to thousands of readers around the world at any moment.
4. Lower advertising costs – Social media allows authors to spend less on advertising and marketing, while ensuring that their marketing and advertising efforts are reaching the exact target market.
5. Increased relationship capital – Authors can build relationships with their readers online through social media and connect with them on a personal level. This is beneficial because readers are more likely to buy from authors they know and trust.
6. Unbiased reviews on brand, product, or service – Authors can use the honest reviews left for them by their readers to monitor what is being said and improve where necessary. Readers are also more likely to trust reviews from their friends and peers. Social media makes it easier for readers to share their reviews, read reviews from their friends or peers, and for authors to share the reviews by their readers.
7. Build a community – Social media allows authors to build a community of like-minded people around their brand, which creates a sense of brand loyalty and a sense of community for the readers.

8. Word of mouth – Content on social media can reach more people in a shorter amount of time than traditional marketing.
9. Increase leads and sales – Authors can engage with their readers daily and may convert leads into sales. Social media can also generate traffic to the author's website or platform where their novels are sold.

From the above research, it is evident that authors are using social media as a tool to communicate and engage with their audience of readers. Social media is not only a valuable marketing tool, but also a product research tool that aids authors in understanding first-hand who their readers are, and what they like and dislike.

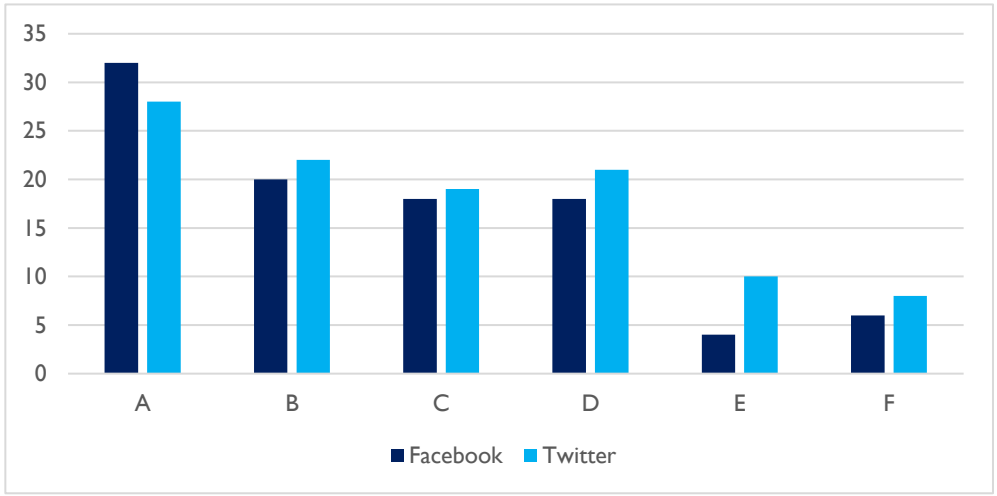
2.6 How authors are using social media

Laing (2017) conducted a mixed-method analysis of authors, with the main purpose of identifying the types of social media sites that are used by authors to make connections for the ultimate purpose of publicising and selling their writing. From her research, it was determined that the most popular social media sites for authors are Facebook and Twitter. The authors also alluded to blogs, Tumblr, LinkedIn, Goodreads, YouTube and Pinterest.

Of the 38 respondents, the main reasons for using Facebook and Twitter were identified as:

- Sharing thoughts and opinions
- Interacting with readers and fans
- Marketing and publicity
- Getting ideas for new books

Below are the culminated responses for Facebook and Twitter use by lesser known authors, based on the research by Laing (2017).

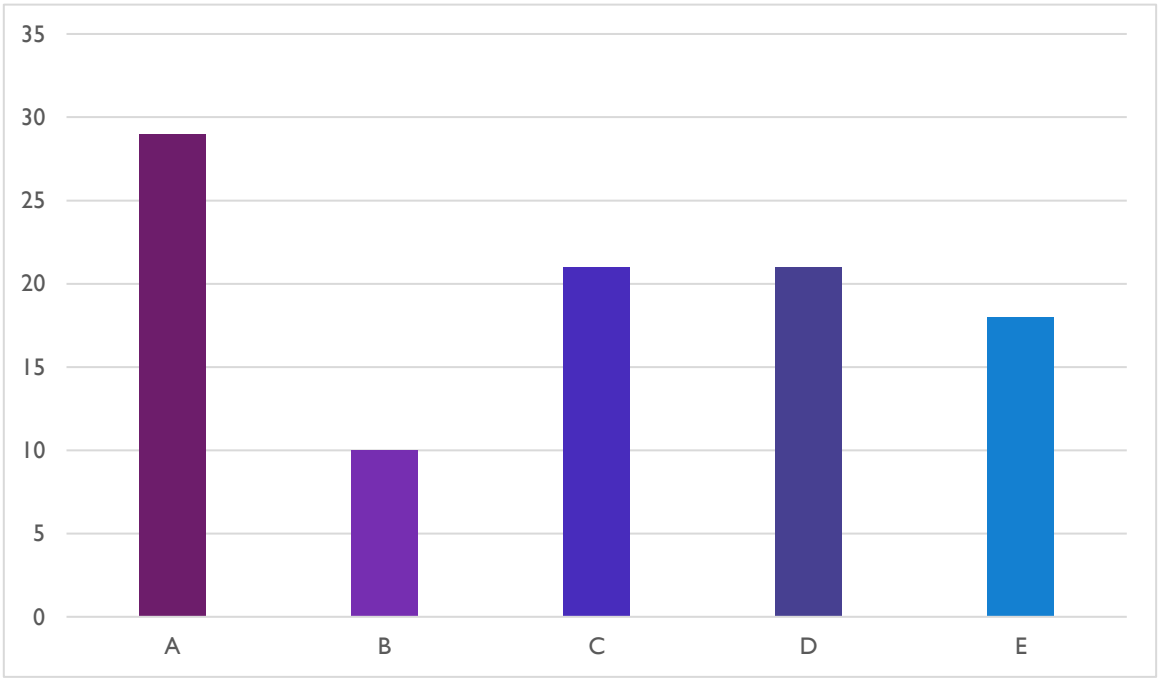


A – Facebook and Twitter use. B – Sharing thoughts and opinions. C – Interacting with readers and fans. D – Marketing and publicity. E – Don't use Facebook and Twitter. F – Other response.

Figure 2.1: Culminated responses for Facebook and Twitter use by authors

As shown in the figure above, it is clear that Facebook and Twitter are mainly used by authors to promote their writing (directly or indirectly) and to interact with their readers. However, another main comment captured during this research showed the use of these sites was dominated by authors' experiences with other authors as a support mechanism from the online author community.

In general, the respondents highlighted the following further uses of social media (Laing, 2017):



A – Sharing information about new books. B – Sharing ideas for future writing. C – Answering questions about my writing. D – Sharing political/social/cultural opinions. E – Sharing personal/family information.

Figure 2.2: Further uses of social media

From this section, it is clear that social media reduces the distance between author and reader and that it acts as a conduit in order to enable and increase the contact between author and reader (Laing, 2017; Beer, 2008).

Social media engagement and websites require near constant monitoring and frequent updates or content postings. Firms, and authors, need to understand that social media interaction or websites represent an investment that requires the staff and the time for ongoing engagement with their communities. Therefore, authors who wish to establish a social media presence that positively impacts the consumption of their self-published romantic fiction content must be prepared and willing to maintain the effort over the long run and allocate appropriate initial and operational investments. These investments can be monetary, but due to the availability and popularity of free social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, their investments usually consist of their time.

Although authors – traditional and self-published – feel pressured to be active on social media to promote their work and interact with their fans, there is a growing sense of confusion regarding the impact, or the benefit, of social media (Laing, 2017). Social media interaction requires thoughtfulness and planning, and is time-consuming for authors. Without a clear understanding of the benefits of social media and the interaction between the author and the reader, authors may become discouraged, dedicate less time to their social media platforms and ultimately allow them to become stagnant.

2.7 Layers of identity – authors' social media persona

Social media lends itself towards mass communication; however, people generally don different identities when they interact online. According to Van Dijck (2013), social media platforms are popular stages for self-expression, communication and self-promotion. The research discusses whether people use different identities on different social media platforms; for example, the self-expression of Facebook versus the professional self-presentation on LinkedIn.

Authors are having to walk the fine line of self-expression and professionalism on the main social media platforms they use, including Facebook and Twitter. According to research presented above, authors use social media for different reasons, but some of the main uses include interacting with fans, sharing personal views, and discussing their published content (Laing, 2017). Also discussed in this research paper is the idea that authors influence the consumption of their content when their readers have a greater willingness to participate on social media (Parent, et al., 2011).

Self-published romantic fiction authors are using social media platforms to engage with their readers and create a sense of community between them (Tripler, 2016). These interactions need to be genuine and the authors need to remember that a sense of community is established by meeting people's emotional needs (Laing, 2017). The readers' emotional needs will not be met if the author interactions are insincere or false, which decreases their willingness to participate and so also decreases the author's competitive advantage.

An author needs to present a single identity to their readers which presents different performances that mimic their naturally occurring responses in a series of interpersonal

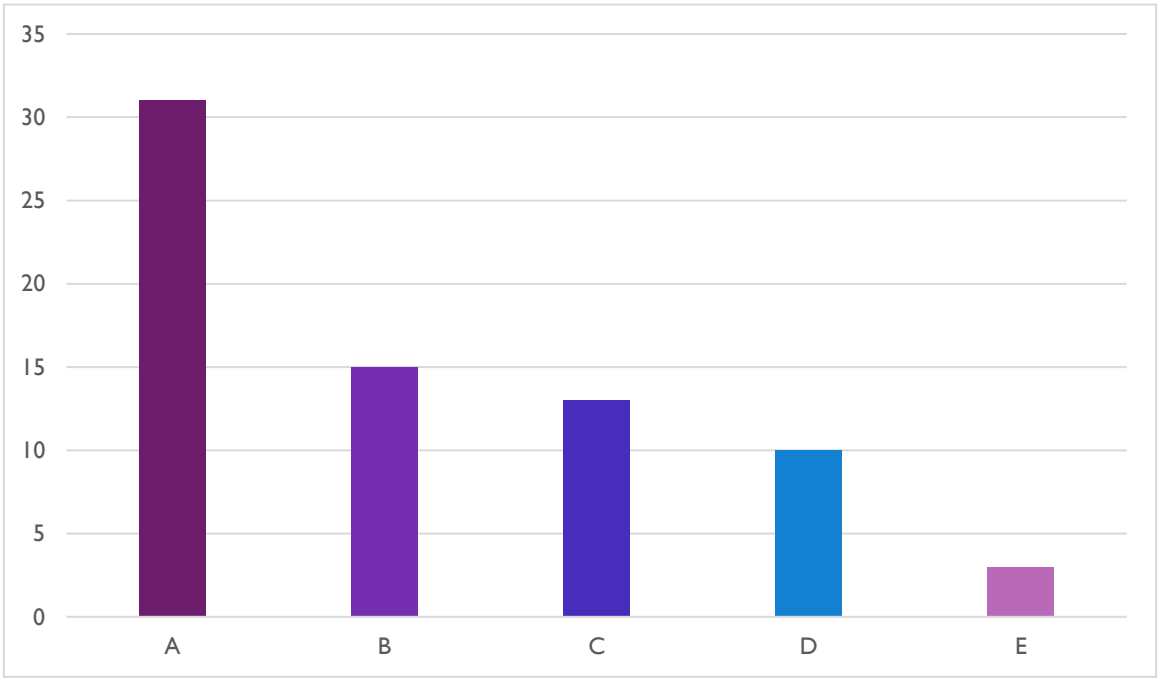
communication (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). By presenting a single identity, readers may feel like they get to know the author behind the content and form an emotional connection with the author. An objective of this research is to determine whether this emotional connection formed on social media platforms – readers becoming 'friends' with authors – positively impacts the consumption of the authors' content.

2.8 How readers are interacting with authors on social media

Currently, the most common social media sites where readers and authors can interact are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Goodreads (Global Web Index, 2018). At this stage, it is unclear which of these sites the readers prefer for the specific purpose of interacting with the authors they admire.

Social media allows for easy two-way communication between authors and readers. Authors are constantly competing for the attention of their readers – with other authors but also with movies, television, magazines, online content and more (Aliveventures, 2014). The question here is whether the interaction between author and reader on social media influences the reader's decision to purchase the author's content.

Above, the authors' use of social media and the reasoning behind it is discussed. Now, the reasons behind the readers' interaction with authors on social media will be examined. The following figure describes the types of comments that authors receive from their readers on social media (Laing, 2017).



A – comments/questions about authors' writing. B – Personal comments/questions. C – Ideas for new writing. D – Comments on authors' political/social/cultural beliefs. E – Other comments.

Figure 2.1: Reader comments on social media

As shown in the figure above, readers are using social media to try and personally connect with the authors they like. This is evident from the number of personal comments as well as questions and comments about authors' political, social, or cultural beliefs (Laing, 2017).

This personal connection is dependent on the authors' activity on the social media platforms and on their willingness to interact with their readers on a more personal level (Laing, 2017). This research paper will try to determine whether an established social media personal connection lends itself to an increase of the consumption of the authors' published content.

2.9 Willingness to participate

Traditionally, a company's competitive advantage stems from the difference between the cost the company incurs to provide a good or a service and the price the a buyer is willing to pay (Parent, et al., 2011). The greater the gap between cost and price, the greater the value captured by the company. When you apply this notion to self-published authors, their competitive advantage stems from the difference between the cost of creating their book (from writing to publishing) and the price their readers are willing to pay for their book. An author's competitive advantage accrues when readers are willing to spend more on the author's book than on a competitor's offering, and results in the perception that the author's book has greater value.

This phenomenon is known as the consumer's, or reader's, willingness to pay. Willingness to pay, therefore, refers to "a consumer's motivation to pay a price that is higher than the prevailing market price for goods or a service as a result of their perception of that good or service's higher value" (Parent, et al., 2011, p. 220).

When authors have a competitive advantage over their competitors, and the perception exists that their book is of greater value, they can maximise their competitive gap by lowering their costs and attracting more consumers, increase willingness to pay due to the perceived value increase, or force competitors to increase their relative costs (Corporate Finance Institute, 2019).

However, due to the internet and social media, this willingness is better reflected as consumer engagement – or active involvement – with a brand, product, service, or company through acts such as creating content. This phenomenon is known as willingness to participate (Parent, et al., 2011).

According to Parent et al. (2011), an increased willingness to participate has led to a greater competitive advantage when compared to the more traditional willingness to pay. Companies can leverage their community's willingness to participate to lower costs, increase loyalty, or both. When this phenomenon is applied to self-published authors, increased active and genuine social media interaction and willingness to participate between authors and their readers have led to an increased competitive advantage.

2.10 Criticism of romantic fiction in public

According to the Romance Writers of America (2019), the romantic fiction industry is worth $1.08 billion per year; in 2016, romance made up 23% of the overall US fiction market, second only to General Fiction. Despite the large number of sales, romantic fiction as a literary genre is often criticised by the public (Tripler, 2016). Social media however is creating a space for the readers of this genre to interact with each other, create a sense of community, and openly discuss their views without fear of criticism. For these reasons, this research paper will specifically focus on romantic fiction.

Romantic fiction is classified as a literary genre where the primary focus of the novel is on the relationship and romantic love between characters. These types of novels usually have an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending (Educalingo, 2019). There are many subgenres of romantic fiction including fantasy, historical, science fiction, paranormal, and erotica (Romance Writers of America, 2019).

The specific subgenres targeted in this research paper are contemporary romantic fiction and paranormal romantic fiction, both with highly sexualised content.

Romantic fiction novels are criticised in public and readers can sometimes feel uncomfortable reading this content out in the open (Tripler, 2016). This is especially prevalent in the case of erotica or intensely sexual content. Because of this, many readers have found comfort in reading this content electronically, where no one can see what they are reading (Self-Publishing Relief, 2015); and find it more comfortable to speak to other readers of the same content, where there is little fear of judgement.

The misogynistic view that women exist purely for the satisfaction of men and for the continuation on the human species reinforces and, perhaps, largely creates the taboo that exists around romantic fiction, a genre mostly targeted at women. There is a certain expectation that women should not admit that they enjoy sex and that they should be virginal; or, at the very least, inexperienced. These ideas propagate the criticism that surrounds women admitting to enjoying romantic fiction and, more specifically, erotica (Deventer, 2019).

According to Rowe (2018) self-published romantic ebooks have a larger market share than traditionally published books. Although there are many reasons for this, including accessibility and portability, another reason is that readers, and sometimes authors, can hide behind the anonymity of an avatar, device, tool, or platform (Tripler, 2016).

Social media, and the direct interaction between the authors and readers of this subgenre, has created a safe place where readers can openly discuss their preferences, without fear of judgement.

2.11 Sense of community

Online communities, made easily accessible through social media, provide users with a sense of community. A sense of community can be defined as a "sense of belonging, emotional connection, of mattering to others within the community and a belief that the group members can meet each other's needs" (Laing, 2017, p.257). Further characteristics of a sense of community include integration, fulfilment, and an emotional connection.

Janice Radway's pioneering study Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (1991), analysed the reading habits of 42 romance readers and the community they had created, centred around a trusted book keeper who made recommendations on what romance books they would enjoy. Radway analysed why these women enjoyed reading romances, and why they enjoyed interactions within the group. Through her research, Radway found that this sense of community, a place where readers could openly discuss what they were reading and how the topics that arose in the novels made them feel was one of the biggest reasons why the women continued to interact and form friendships.

According to Radway's study (1991), the most important component to a good title is word of mouth recommendation, by peers and fellow readers. The reader community that is analysed in Radway's work centred around a trusted bookstore owner and the women who relied on her recommendations for their romance novels. The growth of technology and social media means that communities are less bound to geographically fixed spaces, and this encourages users to communicate virtually and select their own communities (Laing, 2017). Readers can choose to interact with people they would not previously have had access to, gaining opinions from around the world. Now, reader communities have grown and shifted

into virtual spaces, but their impact remains the same - they provide a platform where readers can express themselves without fear of judgement.

When applied to the context of author and reader groups, online communities often emerge as a result of product consumption and the resulting reviews, or initially as a promotion platform for authors' content. Online reader communities provide a sense of community to their members as well as a platform where readers can openly express their opinions regarding subjects that are otherwise criticised.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodological framework that will be used in this research project. It will detail the methodology used in the research, an outline of the population, and a description of the data-gathering methods.

This research project will make use of the survey research methodology. Surveys are typically used for largely quantitative research projects; however, some qualitative data can still be gathered (Quinlan, Babin, Carr, Griffin, & Zikmund, 2015). The data-collection method that will be used is two different questionnaires, mainly comprising quantitative questions but also including some open-ended qualitative questions. One will be for the authors of self-published romantic fiction and the other for the readers of self-published romantic fiction authors.

The questionnaires will be designed by the researcher and the data gathered and analysed on Google Forms, an online survey administration cloud-based software (Google Forms, 2019).

The target population of the first questionnaire is a sample of self-published romantic fiction authors, from both South Africa and abroad. A combination of two non-probability sampling techniques will be used: judgemental, or purposive, sampling and snowball sampling (Kumar, 2019). Judgemental sampling will be used initially and the researcher will identify participants who meet the inclusion criteria of having published a self-published romantic fiction book. These authors will be contacted and, based on their level of response, the researcher will determine if further participants are required. If so, snowball sampling will be used. This means that the researcher finds one participant, conducts the research with that participant, and then asks the participant to recommend the next participant (Quinlan et al., 2015).

Five authors will initially be contacted to participate in this research. A minimum successful level of response is three of the five initially selected authors. If this minimum response level is not met, snowball sampling will be used to further identify willing participants until the minimum required response level is met.
The five initially selected authors are:

- Harper Sloan
- Quinn Arthurs
- Harper Wylde
- Meghan March
- Ivy Asher

The questionnaire will be sent to the authors (see Appendix A) and will investigate the following areas: a) basic, non-identifying personal information, b) personal social media use, c) reading and writing habits, and d) author engagement with readers.

The target population of the second questionnaire is a sample of people who read self-published romantic fiction content. The non-probability sampling method that will be used to identify participants is convenience sampling (Kumar, 2019), which will be done on two main social media sites, namely Facebook and Instagram (Quinlan et al., 2015). The researcher will engage these participants through online reading communities on these social media sites and will disseminate the questionnaire, as a link, to these groups. Readers who are willing to participate will click on the link and complete the questionnaire.

The four initially considered online reading communities where the questionnaire link will be distributed are:

- Phoenix Rising: Nix's Harem Readers Group
- Author Harper Sloan Fan Page
- Meghan March Fan Page
- Ivy Asher's Reader Group

Forty reader participants will be considered a minimum successful response level, and a maximum of 100 reader participants will be accepted, due to the time limitations on this study. If the minimum required response level is not acquired from the above-mentioned groups, further reader groups and fan pages of a similar nature will be selected by the researcher.

The questionnaire that will be sent to the readers (see Appendix B) will investigate the following areas: a) basic, non-identifying personal information, b) social media use and habits, c) reading habits, d) reader and author engagement, and e) sense of community in reader communities.

3.1 Limitations of this research study

The limitations of this research study are as follows:

- This study focuses directly on self-published romantic fiction authors, with no other literary genres or authors included, which might limit the feedback received. An idea for further study would be for other literary genres to be research, or other specific categories of authors, especially purely online content authors with no traditional books.
- Due to the immensely large population of self-published romantic fiction readers all around the world, only a very small sample of a maximum of 100 readers will participate in this study.
- Because of the public criticism attached to the romantic fiction genre, participants may consciously or unconsciously alter their responses due to the fear of judgement.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH PLANNING

Table 4.1: Research Planning Schedule

Events or Tasks	**Proposed Date**	**Final Completion Date**
Receipt of Clearance Certificate.	21 October 2019	31 October 2019
Communicating with the authors of self-published romantic fiction, requesting their participation in the research, with the link to the questionnaire provided. Via email, Facebook.	1 November 2019	7 November 2019
Sharing questionnaire with the readers of self-published romantic fiction and requesting participation via Facebook.	21 November 2019	13 January 2019
Follow-up email for author participants who have not responded.	21 November 2019	17 January 2020
Data analyses of the feedback from participants.	14 January 2020	31 January 2020
Final writing process and editing.	1 February 2020	12 March
Final handover to supervisors.	13 March 2020	13 March 2020

During the duration of the research and the data-gathering process, there will be continuous engagement between researcher and supervisor in the event of questions or unforeseen problems. The proposed deadlines and final dates are a guideline of expected completion dates for research.

CHAPTER 5: QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION OF PRIMARY DATA

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the major findings of the empirical data that was gathered throughout the course of this research process. It contains an analysis of the questionnaires that were sent to the authors as well as the readers of self-published romantic fiction, respectively. The format of the results follows the format of each questionnaire and analyses each question in the order originally presented. The results from the questionnaire for readers of self-published romantic fiction are analysed first, followed by the results from the questionnaire for authors of self-published romantic fiction. As per the questionnaires, there are a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions. The quantitative data is mainly represented through statistical graphics that offer clear visual presentations which convey information quickly and easily to the reader (Taylor, 2020). The open-ended, qualitative questions are analysed through highlighting the identified themes visible in the data collected (Merriam, 2009). Some common themes are identified and graphically presented.

Extensive raw data from this research paper is available in an excel spreadsheet upon request.

5.2 Readers of self-published romantic fiction questionnaire

A total number of 270 readers responded to the readers of self-published romantic fiction questionnaire (n = 270). The results are analysed question by question in the sequence in which they appear in the questionnaire, followed by some general findings and comments.

The table below depicts the Facebook groups that agreed to share the readers of self-published romantic fiction questionnaire link and when it was posted.

Table 5.1: Facebook groups which posted the questionnaire for readers of self-published romantic fiction

Author who agreed to post the questionnaire link	**Name of the readers group where the link was posted**	**Date that the questionnaire was posted**	**Number of readers in the Facebook group**
Ivy Asher – First published in 2018, with a total of eight novels published in the paranormal and reverse harem romantic fiction genre.	Ivy Asher's Reader Group	21 November 2019	6 252
Suzanne Wright – First published in 2012, with a total of 23 novels published in paranormal and contemporary romantic fiction genres.	Suzanne Wright's Readers Group	26 November 2019	1 694
Kaydence Snow – First published in 2018, with a total of five novels published in the paranormal and contemporary reverse-harem romantic fiction genre.	The Snow Lodge – a Kaydence Snow Readers Group	27 November 2019	2 368

Initially, the readers' questionnaire was posted on 21 November 2019 and the bulk of responses were received by 6 December 2019, with one additional response submitted on 13 January 2020.

Approximately 101 respondents answered from the Ivy Asher's Reader Group. This is known as the link was only available on that group for the first six days, while awaiting approval from other groups – however, it is possible that readers from this group continued to answer after these dates. Therefore, approximately 169 readers responded from the Suzanne Wright's Reader Group as well as The Snow Lodge – A Kaydence Snow Readers Group.

As can be seen in the chart below, the bulk of readers answered the questionnaire four days after each link was posted on each respective Facebook group. A correlation between the day the link was shared with the readers and the high volume of responses received immediately after posting indicates a high reader response rate.

This information aids the analysis of the reader response rate, as it highlights how active these participants are on their social media sites, their willingness to participate, and how active the readers are on the author's reader groups.

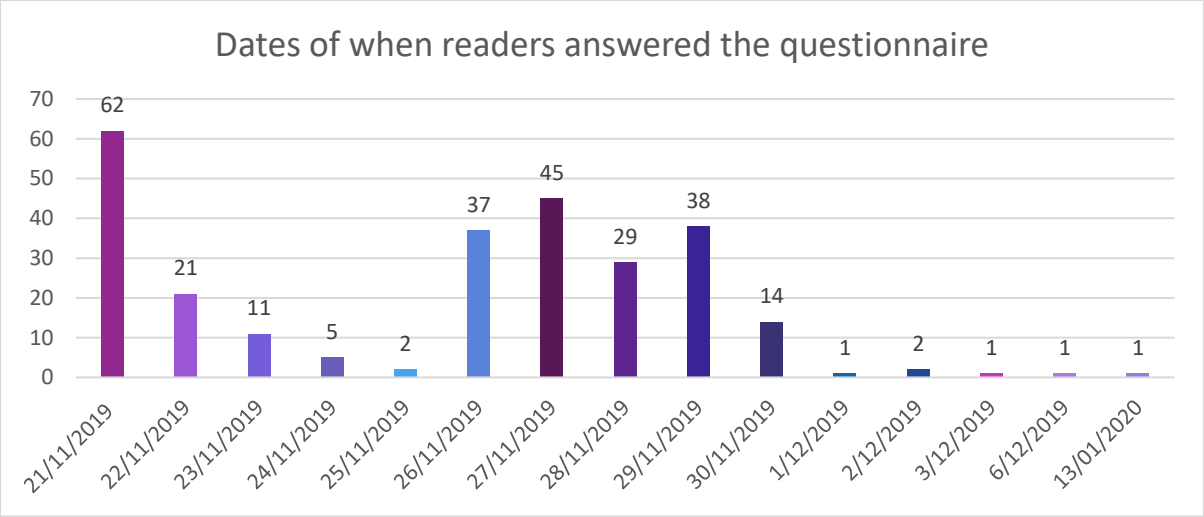


Figure 5.1: Dates of completion of the readers questionnaires

5.2.1 Gender of the readers

Of the 270 readers who responded to this questionnaire, 99,6% (269) answered this question and 0,4% (1) left the answer blank. The responses indicated that 0,4% (1) of the readers is male, and the remaining 99,3% (268) of the readers are female.

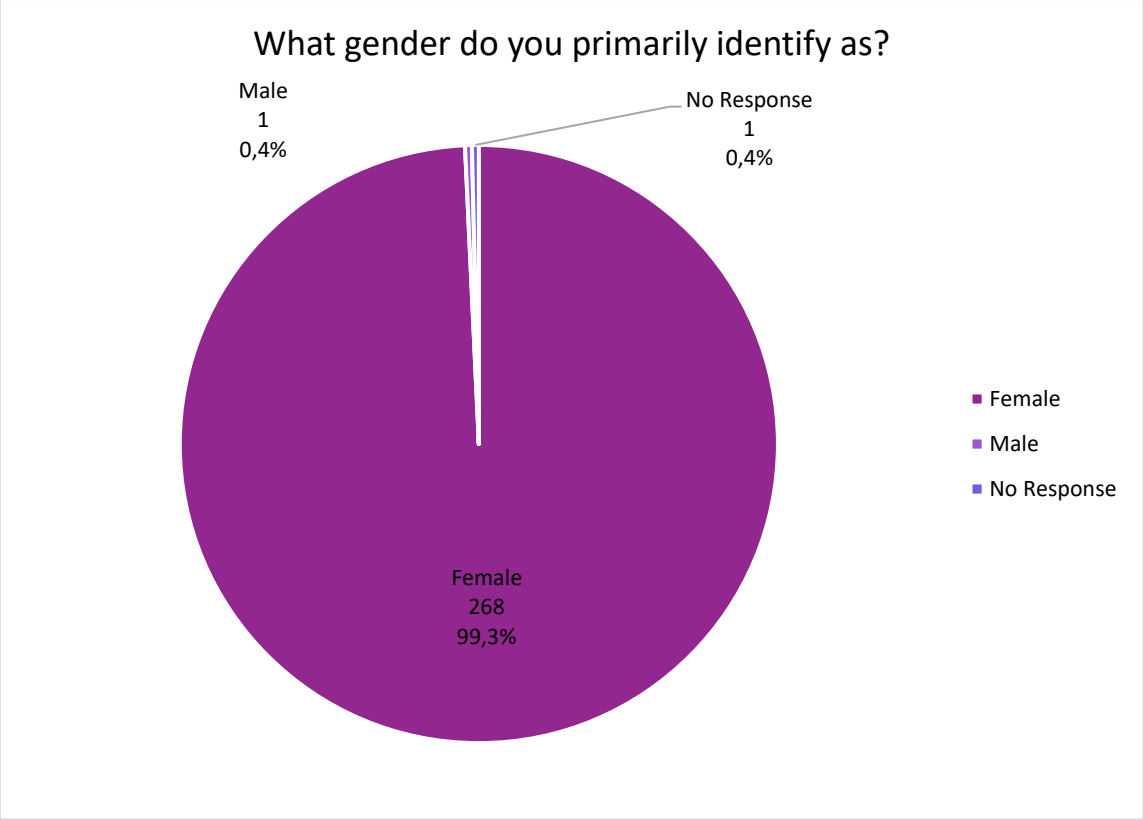


Figure 5.2: Gender of the readers

In 2016, Bustle Digital Group published data from 2014 and 2015 which revealed that 84% of romance readers are female and only 16% are male (Colyard, 2016). The data gathered for this research paper supports the fact that the market for romance novels is primarily female, but further specifies that the self-published romantic fiction market is dominated by women.

It is unclear at this time whether the discrepancy in the above data sets is due to the time elapsed between now and when the previously mentioned data was published, or due to the self-published romantic fiction market being more dominated by women as compared to the broader romance novel market.

5.2.2 Age of the readers

Of the readers who participated in the readers of self-published romantic fiction questionnaire, 16,6% (45) are between the ages of 16-25, 35,9% (97) are between 26-35, 31,1% (84) are between 36-45, 12,9% (35) are between 46-55, 2,6% (7) are between 56-65, and 0,7% (2) are over the age of 65.

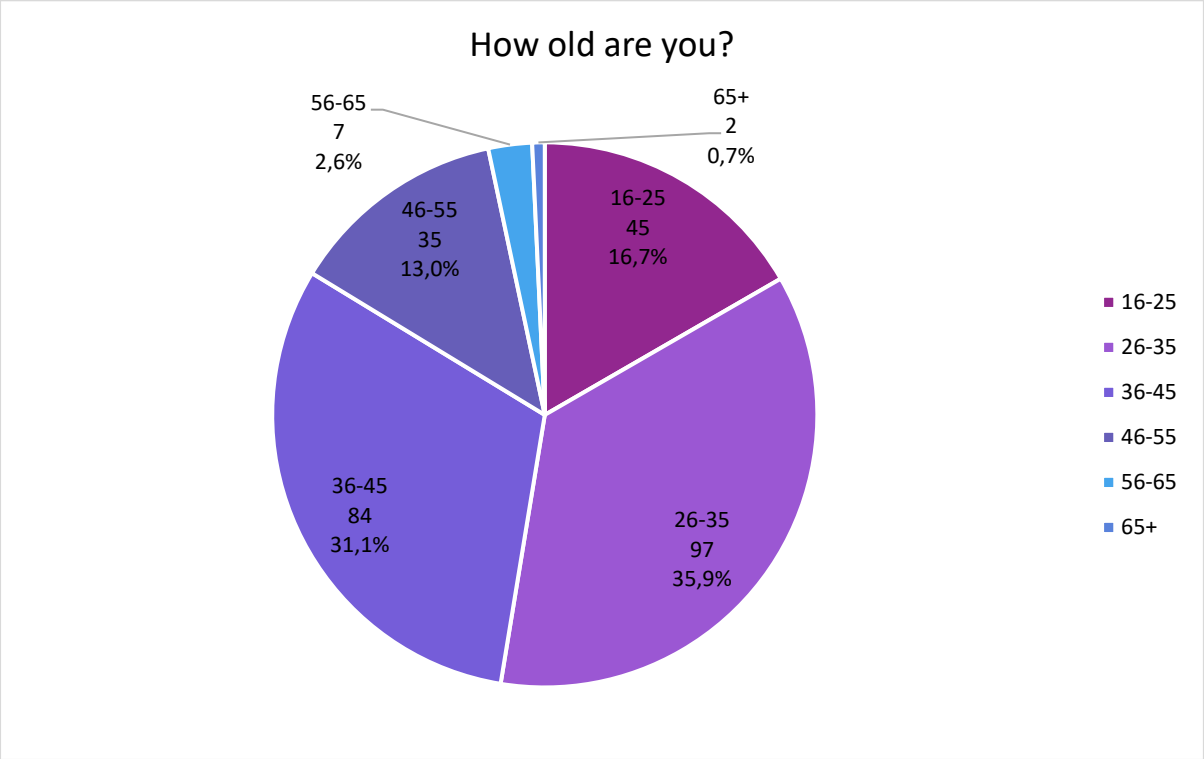


Figure 5.3: Age of the readers

According to Colyard (2016), the age groups that read the most romance novels are 18-29 and 30-44. The information gathered for this research paper supports the above, with 83,6% of the readers who responded falling in the above two categories. While Colyard also noted that people aged 45 and older comprise more than 40% of the romantic fiction market, the data collected for this research paper contradicts that; with only 16,3% of the respondents being older than 45.

The three major social media sites on which this research focused are Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. According to Hootsuite (2020), the most popular age group of users for all three of these sites is 25-34.

Table 5.2: Age Groups of Advertising Audience Across Social Media Platforms

Age Groups of Advertising Audience Across Social Media Platforms		
Facebook	**Instagram**	**Twitter**
13-17: 5,6%	13-17: 6,1%	13-17: 9,6%
18-24: 24%	18-24: 30%	18-24: 24%
25-34: 32%	25-34: 35%	25-34: 29%
35-44: 17,1%	35-44: 16,5%	35-49: 23%
45-54: 10,4%	45-54: 7,8%	50+: 15%
55-64: 6,1%	55-64: 3,2%	
65+: 4,4%	65+: 1,9%	

Source: Adapted from Hootsuite (2020)

The most popular age group of the readers who responded to this questionnaire is 26-35, with 35,9% (97) responses. This supports the data from Hootsuite (2020); however, contradictory to that research, the ages of the readers who responded to this questionnaire are older than the most popular age groups across social media platforms. This indicates that older people are more typically engaging with authors on the social media platforms discussed in this research paper.

The reader groups that questionnaire links were posted on promoted mainly New Adult and Adult self-published romantic fiction novels, with protagonists generally between the ages of 22-35. The New Adult genre is a relatively new classification with protagonists aged between 22-25, about college students and young professionals just starting their first jobs (West, 2018). The Adult genre usually has protagonists who are 25 and older with "characters who know who they are, but have reached a place of change, where they have to face new challenges and see if the identities they have developed are strong enough to conquer these new goals" (West, 2018).

With 83,4% of the readers over the age of 25 and 47,4% over the age of 35, it is reasonable to assume that readers enjoy reading content about protagonists who are either their age or younger.

5.2.3 Readers' language preferences

Ninety-one percent (247) of the readers responded that their first language is English, while the remaining 9% (23) of the readers responded "Other". A graphical representation of the respondents who answered "Other" are below, with their first languages given.

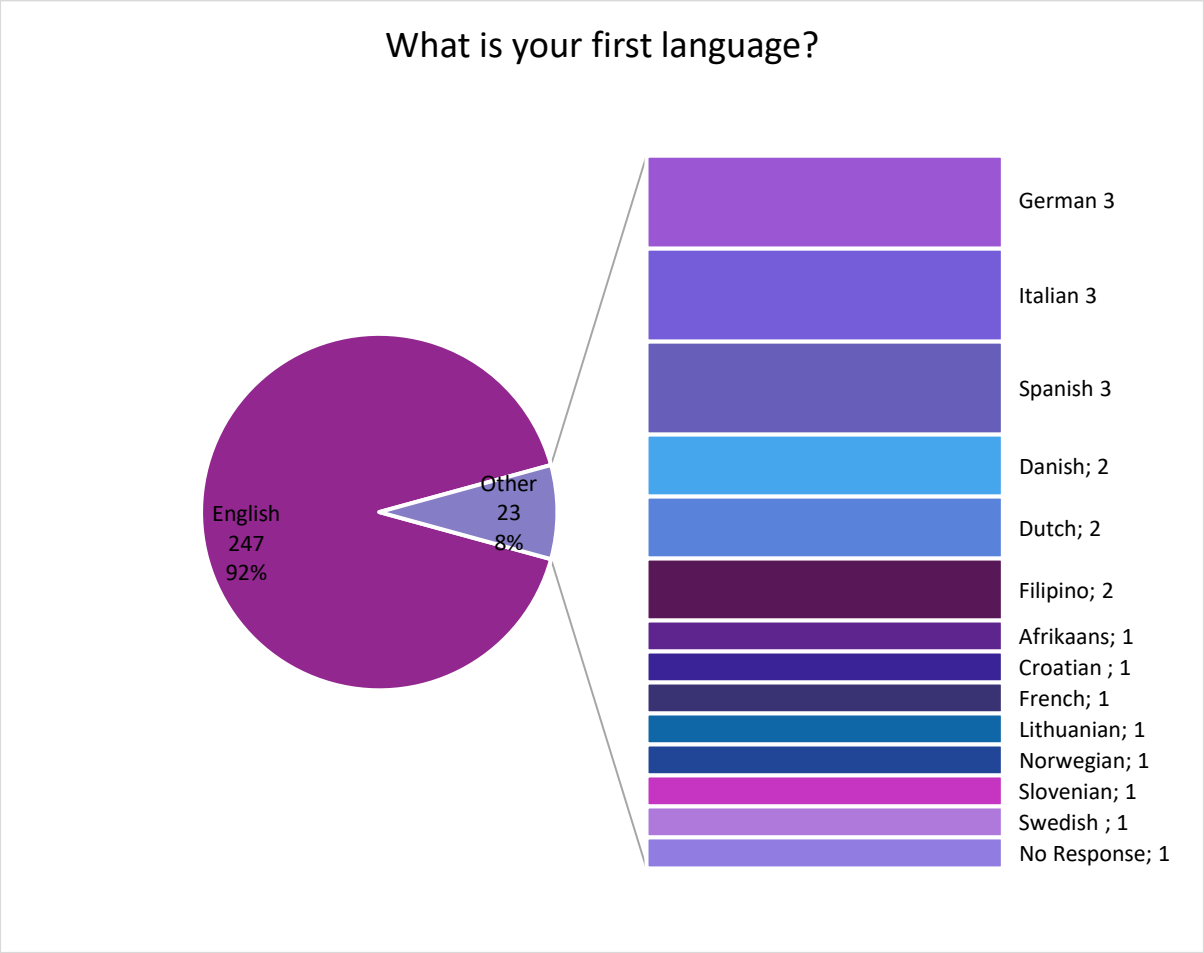


Figure 5.4: Readers' first language

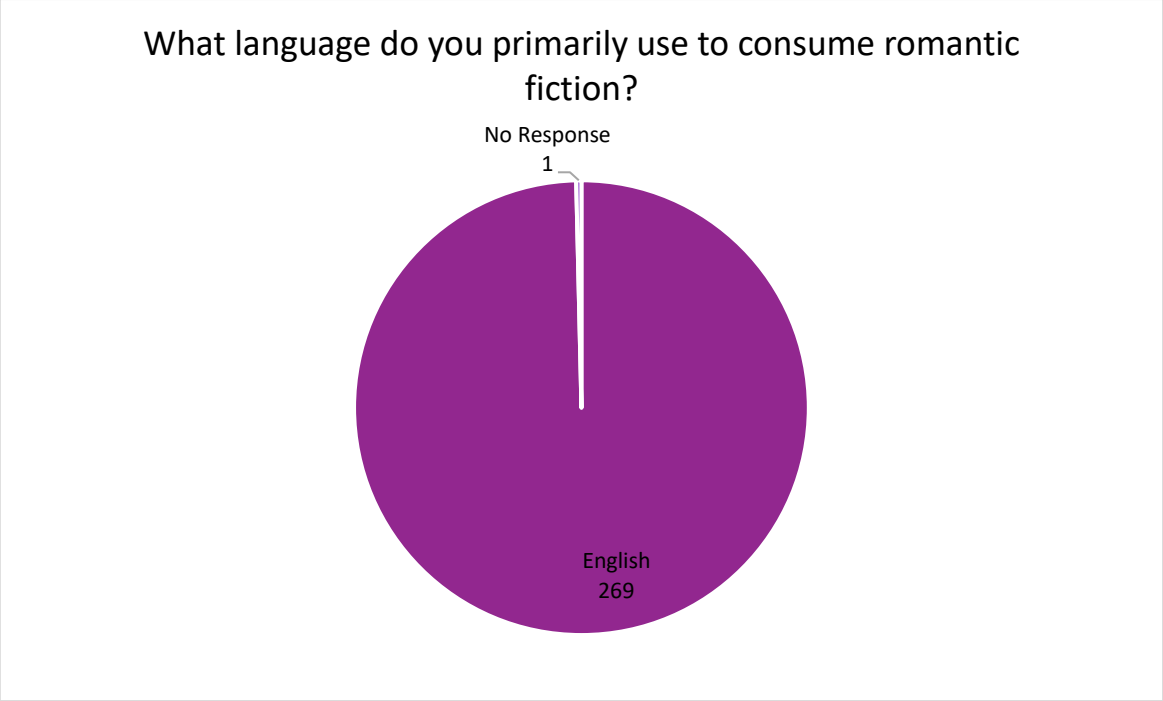


Figure 5.5: Readers' language of choice to consume romantic fiction

Some 99,6% (269) of the readers reported that they prefer to consume self-published romantic fiction in English, while 0,4% (1) elected not to answer.

Despite 8,5% (23) of the readers reporting that English is not their first language, 100% of the readers who responded reported that they preferred to consume self-published romantic fiction in English.

From the above information, it is clear that the self-published romantic fiction market is predominantly dominated by the English language. This could be because of the lack of content available in other languages, either because the authors' first languages are English and they choose to publish in that language, or because authors with different first languages believe that their content will be more popular if published in English. Based on the languages used on the world's top 10 million websites, English is by far the most popular language, with 56,8% of the websites in English (Hootsuite, 2020).

5.2.4 Readers' definition of social media

All 270 participants from this questionnaire chose a definition of social media. Participants were given four different definitions of social media from which to choose. The table below gives each of the four definitions and lists how many participants voted for each definition.

Table 5.3: Readers' responses per definition of social media

Definition of social media	**No. of votes**	**Percent of votes**
1. Internet-based technologies that facilitate conversations and offer users a platform for content creation, content upload, networking, conversing, media sharing and bookmarking.	178	65,9%
2. Platforms that allow users to connect based on interests and hobbies.	54	20%
3. Platforms that allow users to share rich media with each other.	4	1,5%
4. Virtual platforms that allow users to construct profiles of themselves that facilitate connections.	34	12,6%

There are many definitions of social media available; but of the above definitions, Definition 1 resonated most with the readers who responded to the questionnaire. This definition is adapted from (Parent et al., 2011) and from the definition of egocentric social media sites from Fraser and Dutta (2008).

The common theme which is present in all the above definitions is the conversations and connections with other users of the same sites. However, Definition 1 is important because it highlights the important aspects of social media to the readers of self-published romantic fiction, namely:

- Two-way connection between authors and readers.
- Both groups can create and share content.
- Both groups can network and interact with each other.

According to ReachOut Australia (2020), some of the main benefits of social media include the ability to maintain social connections; to network with people they would not usually be

able to contact; and be able to create, manage, and distribute content. This supports the important aspects of social media to the readers in this study.

5.2.5 Are readers regular users of social media?

Of the 270 participants in this questionnaire, 96,7% (261) of the readers reported that they were regular users of social media, 2,6% (7) said that they were not regular users of social media and 0,7% (2) elected not to answer.

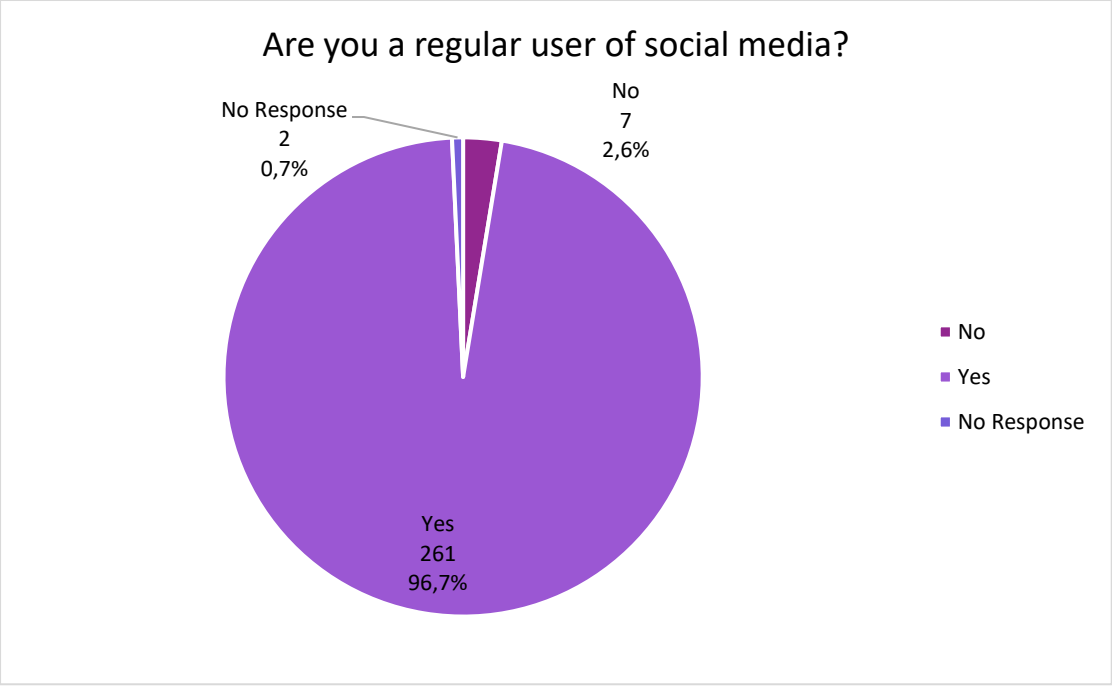


Figure 5.6: Are readers regular users of social media?

Readers' level of activity on social media is important to this study as each time a reader is active on social media, it represents regular interaction and connection with other social media users and opportunities for engagement and interaction between author and reader. These author and reader interactions and engagements provide greater insight into whether social media impacts the creation and consumption of self-published romantic fiction, which is discussed later in this research paper.

Later in this questionnaire, readers are asked how often they use egocentric social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, but this question gives a broader understanding of readers' total social media usage, not limited to only egocentric sites. This undeniably proves

how integrated social media is in our lives, which is supported by Hootsuite (2020), who states that globally, people spend an average of two hours and 24 minutes on social media per day.

5.2.6 Reader-preferred categories of social media platforms

As per the graph below, it is clear that 84,1% (227) of the participants prefer egocentric social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter; 10,7% (29) prefer passion-centric sites such as Goodreads and Pinterest; 4,4% (12) prefer media-sharing sites such as YouTube, Flickr, and SlideShare; 0,7% (2) prefers opportunistic sites such as LinkedIn and Academia.edu; and 0% prefer community sites such as BigWaveDave.com and BlackPlanet.com.

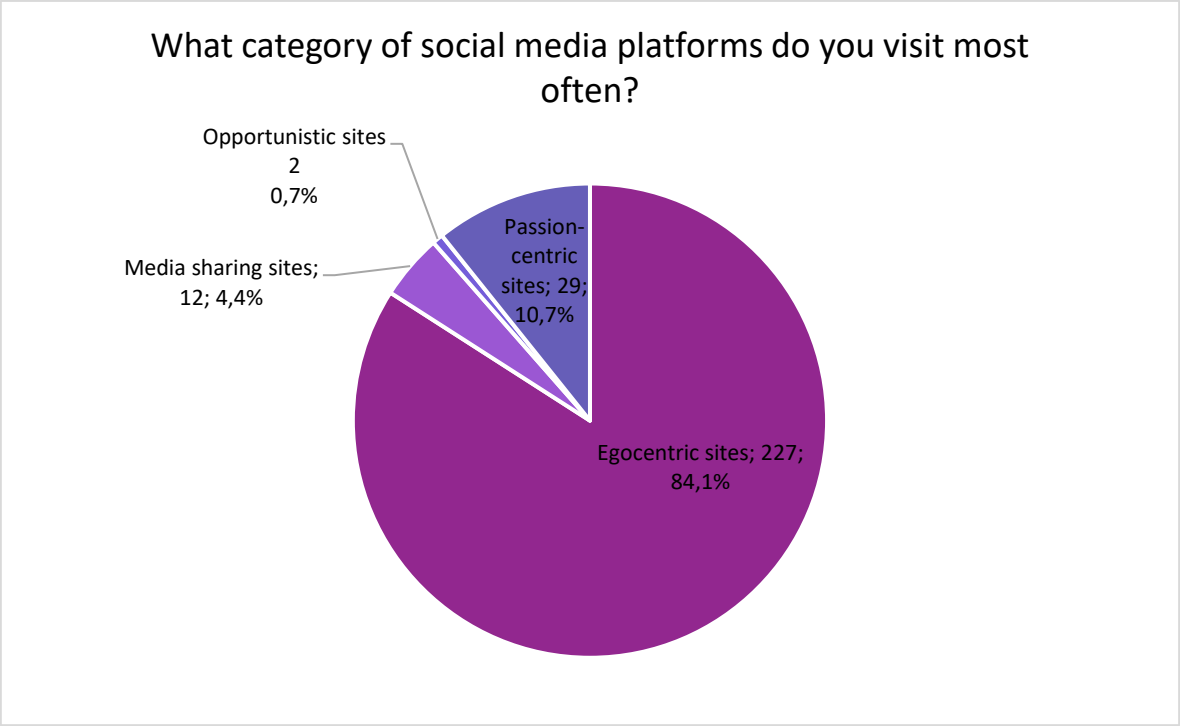


Figure 5.7: Readers' preferences per category of social media

This highlights the social media platforms most preferred by readers of self-published romantic fiction, where authors can engage and interact most efficiently with their readers.

As per the most preferred definition of social media discussed above, "internet-based technologies that facilitate conversations and offer users a platform for content creation,

content upload, networking, conversing, media sharing, and bookmarking" based on definitions by Parent et al (2011) and Fraser and Dutta (2008), it is clear that readers prefer egocentric sites most because they offer users these services simply and easily.
These types of sites are popular because they promote interpersonal contact between individuals and groups; build personal, professional, or geographical connections; and allow for content creation (Ansarin & Ozuem, 2014).

5.2.7 How often readers visit egocentric sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter

Of the 270 reader participants, all 100% answered this question. Of those responses, 64,1% (173) said that they visited egocentric sites more than three times per day, 18,5% (50) said three times a day, 15,9% (43) said once a day, and 1,5% (4) said once a week.

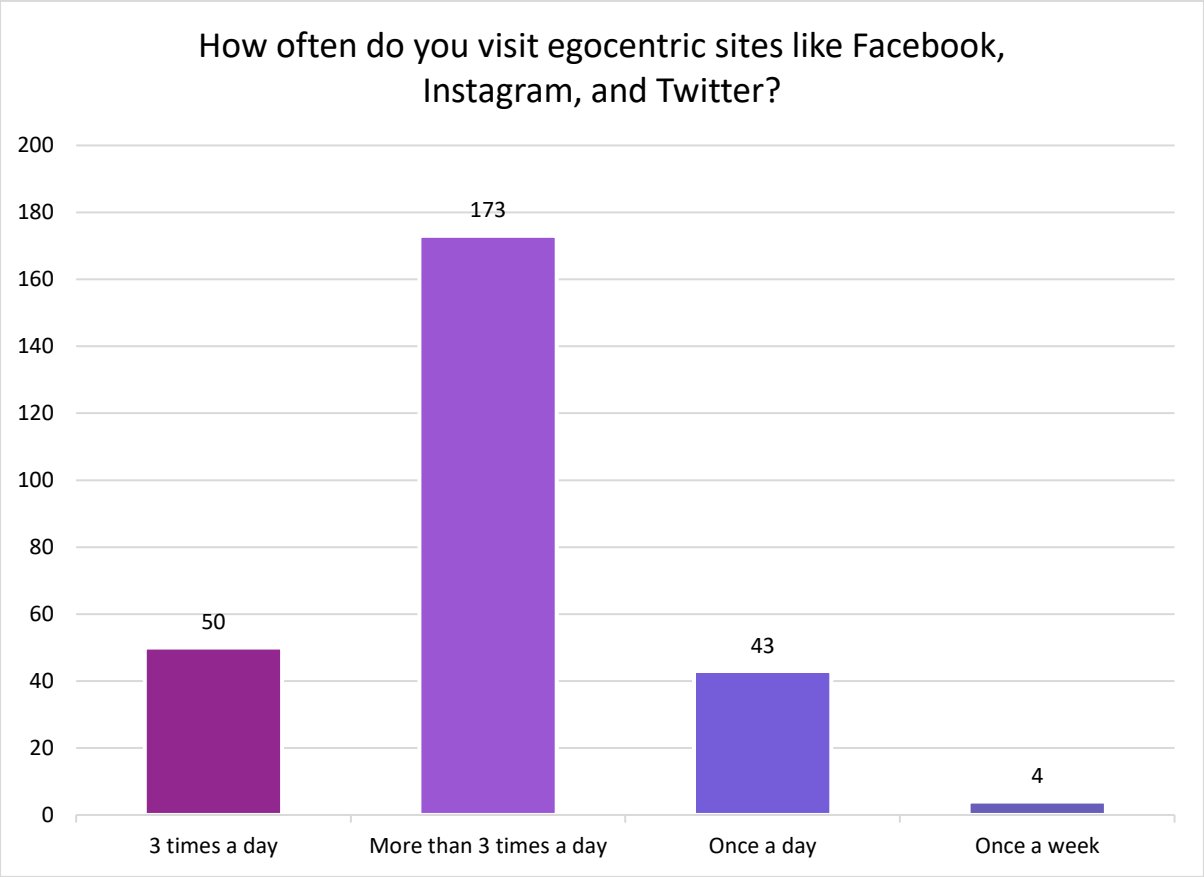


Figure 5.8: How often readers visit egocentric social media sites

In Section 5.2.5 above, readers were asked if they were regular users of social media – 96,7% (261) responded ‘Yes’, 2,6% (7) said ‘No’, and 0,7% (2) did not answer. It is interesting to note that when readers were asked if they were regular users of social media, no indication was given of what was interpreted as regular by the researcher; this was entirely based off their opinion.

Of the seven readers who answered ‘No’ to that question, two said that they visited egocentric social media sites three times a day, three said they visited these sites once a day, and two said once a week. This anomaly can be explained through either the readers misunderstanding Question 5.2.6, or because the readers do not recognise their social media use as regular because it is so ingrained in their daily lives. Hootsuite (2020) states that social media users spend an average of two hours and 24 minutes per day on social media platforms and that they have an average of 8,6 social media accounts each.

For future research, researchers should consider giving participants a baseline of the average amount of time spent on social media or how often a person visits a site per day so that participants can accurately report on their social media habits.

As explained above, this information is important because it highlights the opportunities for engagement, either between the readers and authors, or between readers and other readers.

5.2.8 Times of day that readers prefer to visit egocentric sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter

As per the 5 Rs of publishing described earlier in this research paper, in order to engage effectively with audiences it is important to identify the correct audience and give audiences the right content, at the right time, on the right platform, and in the right format (Turner, 2014).

When this theory is specifically applied to social media engagement between self-published romantic fiction authors and readers, it is important to find the right audience and give them the right content, on the right platform, at the right time and in the right format (i.e. the kind of content the readers want to consume, on the right social media platforms, and at the time when readers will be most responsive).

The reader questionnaire, specifically the Biographical Information and Social Media Use sections, attempts to understand the readers' preferences regarding the languages in which the readers want to consume content, the platforms on which readers prefer to engage, and the time of day when the readers are most responsive.

This question identifies the time of day when the readers are most active on the social media platforms they visit most often. All 270 participants answered this question, but each person was able to choose as many options as they liked; hence, there are 447 reader responses to this question.

The chart below shows that 'during the day' is the time when readers of self-published romantic fiction are most active on egocentric social media sites, with 68,1% (184) of the readers selecting this option. Next, 'during the evening' was selected by 44,8% (121) of the readers, then 'at night before readers fall asleep' by 27,8% (75) of the readers, and lastly in the 'morning before readers get out of bed', with 25,2% (68) of the readers selecting this option.

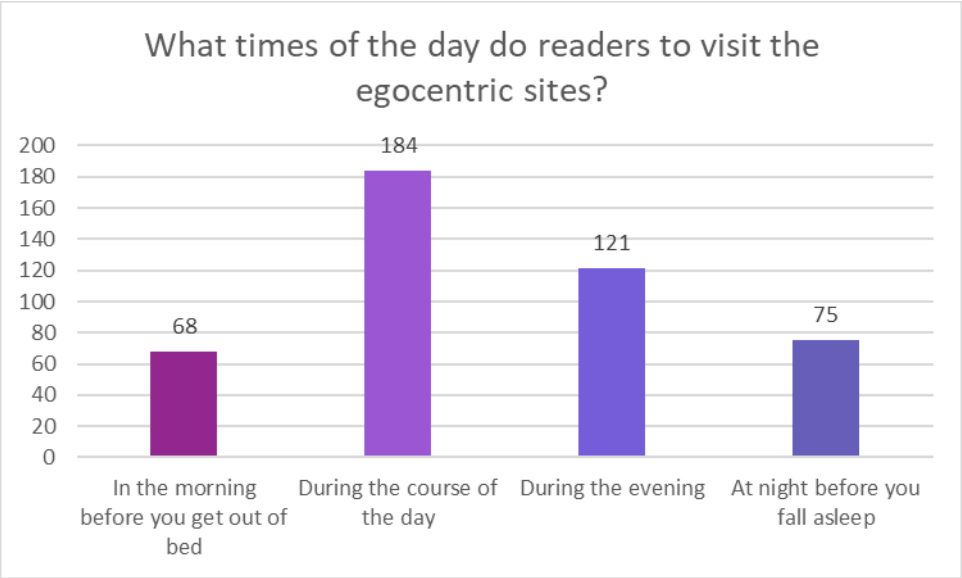


Figure 5.9: Times of the day readers access egocentric sites

Kaydence Snow, one of the authors who responded to the authors of self-published romantic fiction questionnaire and consented to being identified in this research paper, also allowed the

researcher to post the questionnaire aimed at readers of self-published romantic fiction on her readers' group – The Snow Lodge. When discussing this, she advised that the researcher send the post to her group at 8pm EST because that was when her readers were most active on the group.

Although the data collected here was more generalised to categories of times, it may still be useful for authors to identify when their readers are most active on social media to ensure the highest levels of engagement on their posts with their readers. It will also identify when the author's presence on social media will be most effective. Similarly, this information could be used by other parties who are targeting a similar market.

5.2.9 The kind of content readers prefer to access on egocentric sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter

This question pertains to the first and last 5 Rs of publishing, providing readers with the right content in the right format (Turner, 2014). Here, readers' preferences refer, in broad terms, to the kind of content they prefer to access on egocentric social media sites. Four options were given: mostly images, mostly text, mostly videos, and other (where readers could give their unique preference).

Of the 270 participants, 99,3% (268) of readers responded to this question, with 45,9% (124) saying they preferred text, 36,7% (99) preferring images, 8,1% (22) preferring video, 4,4% (12) preferring a combination of all 3, and 4,1% (11) providing unique answers not in the categories mentioned above.

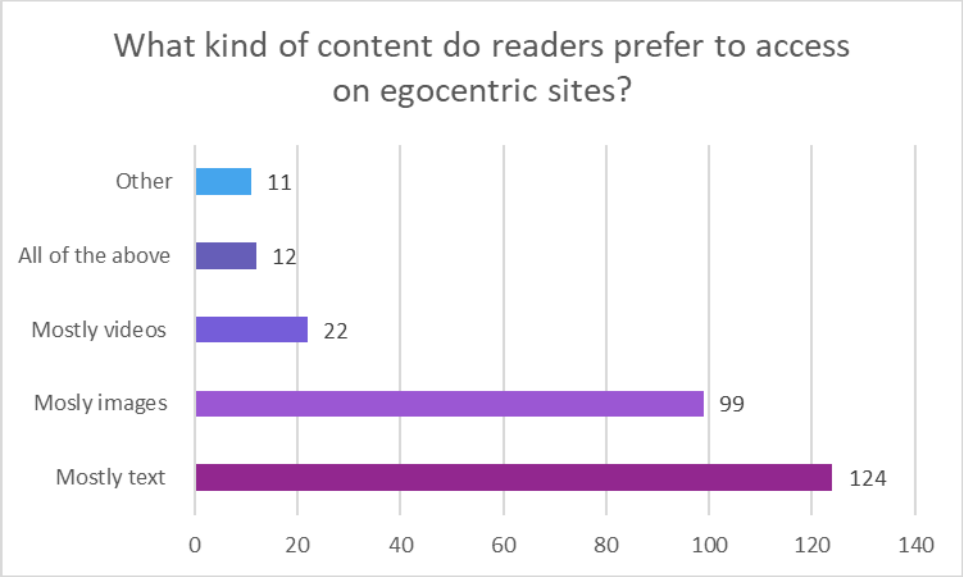


Figure 5.10: Readers' content preferences on egocentric sites

This data contradicts Hootsuite (2020), which states that the average number of people who engage with a Facebook page post compared to post reach are higher for video and images posts than text posts. People engaged with video posts thrice as much as they did with text post, per Hootsuite's accumulative research (2020). This could be because this research study targeted people who are known to read more than the average person, and that the content they subsequently prefer to access is more text-based such as book recommendations, new releases, information about authors, etc.

Below is a summary of the 11 'Other' responses:

- Book recommendations
- Information about book groups
- Information on new book releases
- Information about authors
- Communicating with, and information about, friends and family

A more in-depth analysis of the kind of content readers like to access when engaging with authors or other readers is conducted later in this research paper.

Although these 'Other' responses provided valuable insight, all of them except the 'Communication with, and information about, friends and family' option apply more to Question 24 – the kind of content readers prefer to access, see, and engage with when interacting with authors or other readers.

5.2.10 Readers' description of 'romantic fiction'

To determine readers' interpretations of the term 'romantic fiction', readers were given three definitions from which to choose, but also the chance where they could provide their own interpretation. Of the 270 participants, 99,3% (268) responded to this question. The table and chart below depict the number of responses per description.

Table 5.4: Optional descriptions for 'romantic fiction'

Description of 'romantic fiction'		
Description 1: A novel which primary focus is the romantic love between two people, and must have an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending.	40	14,8%
Description 2: A novel which primary focus is the romantic relationship between characters, with a fictional supporting storyline and sexual interaction.	186	68,9%
Description 3: Novels with strong, explicit sexual interactions which are inherent to the story, character growth and/or relationship development.	32	11,9%
All the above.	3	1,1%

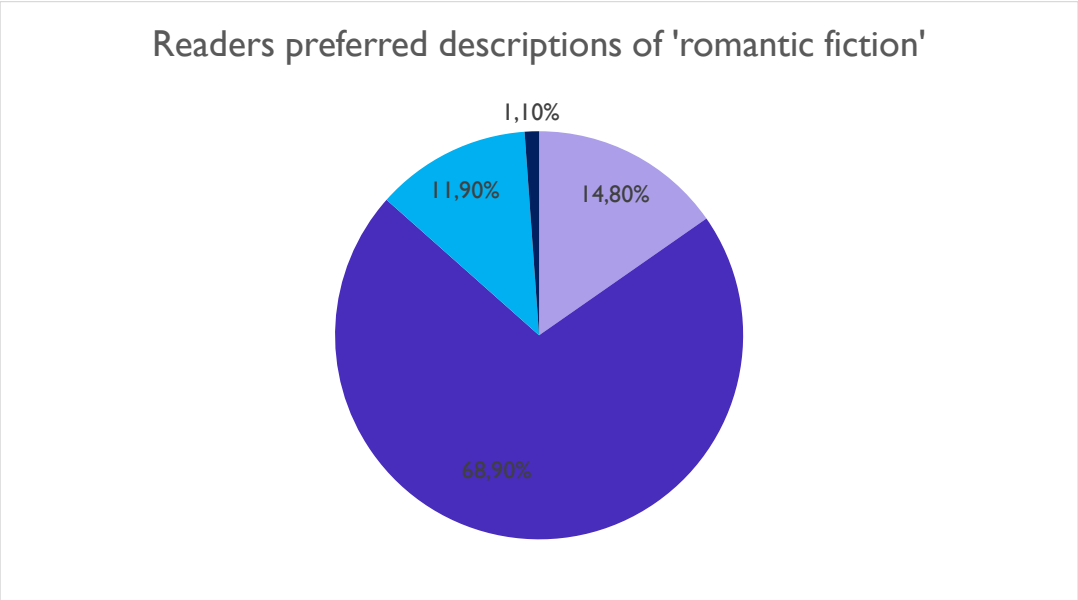


Figure 5.11: Readers' descriptions for 'romantic fiction'

Some 3,7% (10) readers selected the ‘Other’ category, with 1,1% (3) saying that their definition was a combination of all three definitions that were provided. The remaining 2,6% (7) of readers gave their own definitions with the following main themes:

- Varying degree of physical intimacy – readers provided definitions with varying degrees of explicit sexual interactions between characters.
- Two readers noted that the romantic love between characters could take place between two or more people (i.e. harem or reverse harem scenarios).

5.2.11 Readers’ description of ‘self-published’

This question was the first fully qualitative question, where participants were asked to give their own definition of the term ‘self-published’ with no pre-selected definitions provided by the researcher in the questionnaire. Of the 270 respondents, only 87% (235) responded to this question, however, 1,9% (5) of those responses were deemed inadmissible by the researcher, either because they were incomprehensible or because they did not answer the question despite giving a response. The remaining 85,2% (230) of responses were analysed through a thematic analysis using key words or phrases. Because the question was open-ended, many of the responses fell into more than one thematic category, resulting in 302 responses.

The main themes, in order of the frequency in which they occurred, which were identified in the readers’ responses are as follows:

- Published without the aid of a publishing house or third party
- Entire publishing process controlled by the author (including writing, editing, designing, formatting, marketing, and selling)
- Published on online platforms such as Kindle Unlimited
- Published at the author’s expense
- Independent or non-mainstream author
- Author retains all rights to their work

A distinction was made between the first and second theme, when a reader distinctly mentioned that the author retained all control of the entire publishing process.

Also, without the aid of a publishing house or third party could imply that the process was undertaken at the author's own expense, but the distinction was made when the reader mentioned the cost to the author.

An independent author is described as an "author who maintains complete creative control by self-publishing" (1106 Design, 2016). However, this was given its own theme when readers specifically used the terms 'indie, independent, non-mainstream'.

From the descriptions given by the readers, the following definition for 'self-published' was created to encompass all the above-mentioned themes:

An independent author who controls and pays for the entire publishing process without the aid of a publishing house, mostly on online platforms like Kindle Unlimited, and retains all rights to their published content.

5.2.12 Self-published romantic fiction reading habits of participants

Some 98,5% (266) of the participants answered Question 14. Of those, 97,4% (263) of the participants confirmed that they read self-published romantic fiction, while 1,1% (3) answered that they did not. While this question was mainly used as a bouncing board for the follow-up question regarding the number of self-published romantic fiction novels participants read per month, the following anomalies occurred.

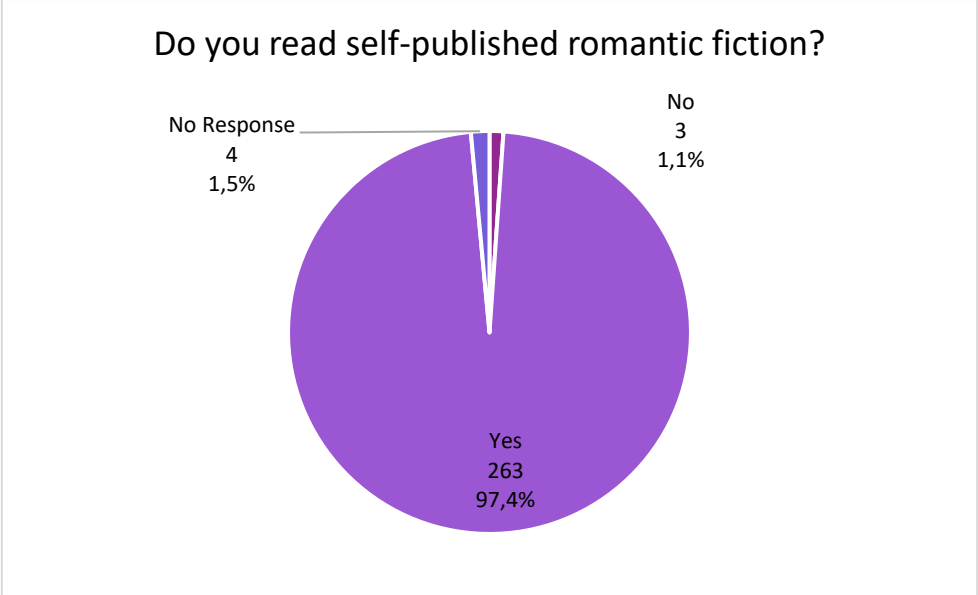


Figure 5.12: Number of participants who read self-published romantic fiction

Despite three of the participants having answered ‘No’ as to whether they read self-published romantic fiction, all three selected the ‘0-3’ category for the follow-up question regarding how many self-published romantic fiction novels they read per month.

Of the four participants who did not answer Question 14, two left Question 15 blank, but the other two participants selected the ‘0-3’ category in the follow-up question.

The graph below depicts all the responses from Question 15, with six participants refraining from answering, but because of the anomalies mentioned above, there may be five false positives in the ‘0-3’ category.

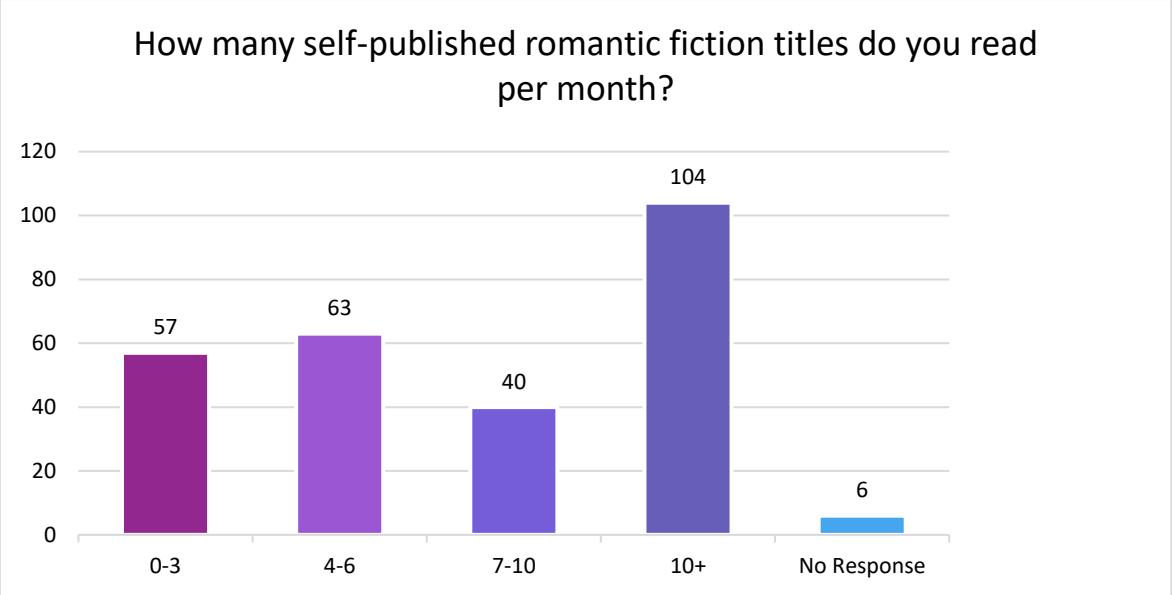


Figure 5.13: Number of self-published romantic fiction titles read per month

As depicted in the above graph, the most popular option was 10 or more romantic fiction novels per month with 104 answers (39,6%), followed by 63 answers in the 4-6 category (23,3%), 57 answers in the 0-3 category (21,1%), and 40 answers in the 7-10 category (14,8%).

These answers illustrate that there is a larger than expected market for self-published romantic fiction novels. According to a poll on Goodreads regarding how many books respondents read per month, only 13,2% of the respondents answered 10 or more books per month (Goodreads, 2020). Although this figure is more generalised to all books, it does show that readers of self-published romantic fiction read more compared to other readers.

5.2.13 Format in which readers prefer to consume romantic fiction titles

This question related to the fifth R of Publishing – the right format (Turner, 2014). For authors to maximise their potential sales, they need to provide their content in the format which their readers prefer.

Participants were asked to select the platform on which they most preferred to read self-published romantic fiction. However, they were also given the opportunity to provide their

own answer under the ‘Other’ option. Some 99,3% (268) of the participants answered this question, with 0,7% (2) giving no response.

By a significantly large margin, ebooks were the most preferred platform, with 91,9% (248) responses from the readers. Audiobooks were the second most preferred platform with 1,9% (5) of responses. Printed books were the third more preferred platform with 1,5% (4) responses. The remaining 4,1% (11) of the participants selected the ‘Other’ option, with 1,5% (4) responses for printed and e-books, and 1,5% (4) responses for all three options (printed, e-book, and audio). Only 1,1% (3) of the readers answered that they preferred both e-books and audiobooks.

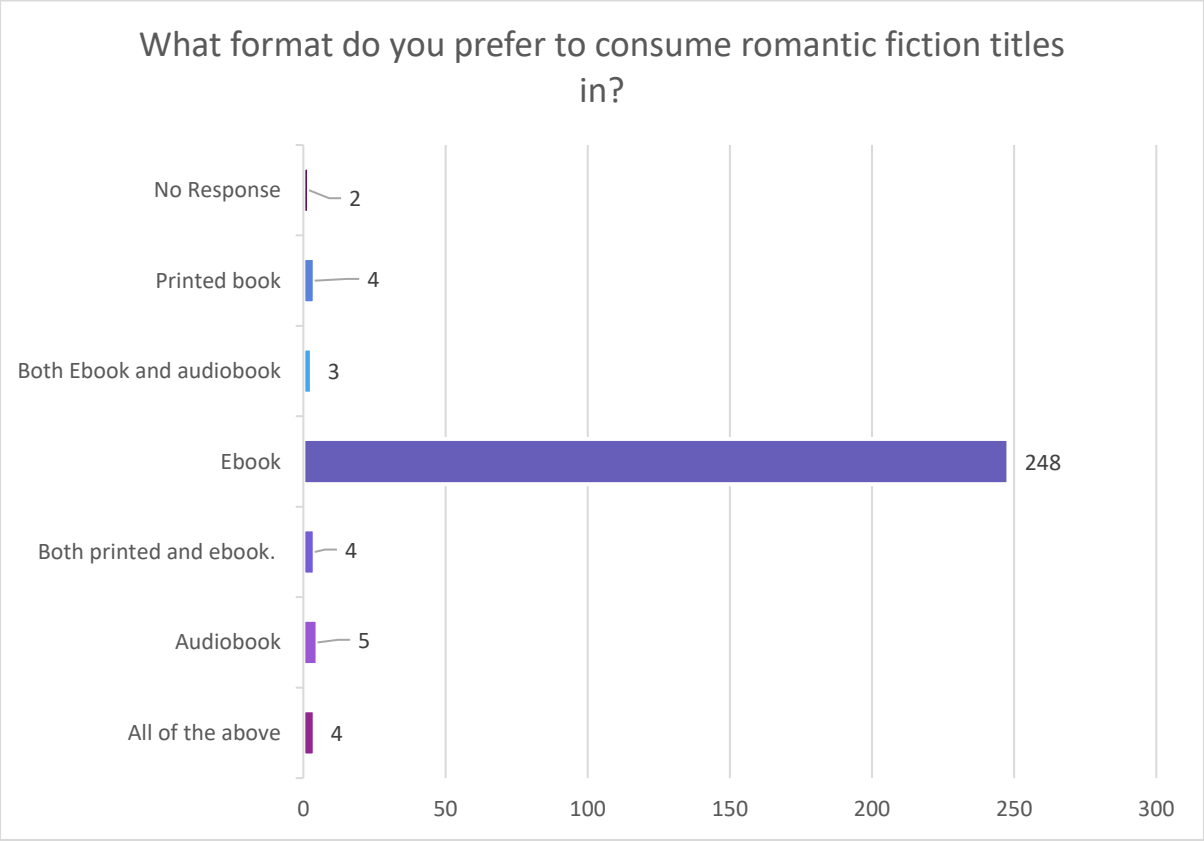


Figure 5.14: Readers’ format preferences for consuming self-published romantic fiction

5.2.14 Why readers prefer to consume romantic fiction titles in their preferred format

Of the readers who selected ebooks as their preferred format to consume romantic fiction titles in, through a thematic analysis, the following reasons were identified:

- eBooks are more convenient.

- eBooks are generally cheaper than printed and audio books.
- eBooks don’t take up a lot of space to store.
- Readers use subscription-based platforms such as Kindle Unlimited.
- Readers read a lot of novels very fast – ebooks make this easier.
- There are generally a broader variety of ebooks available.
- eBooks make it easier to consume adult content without the fear of being judged in public.
- eBooks are easier to consume for readers with disabilities.
- Children would destroy printed novels.
- eBooks are better for the environment.

The readers who identified audiobooks as their preferred platform on which to consume romantic fiction provided the following main reasons:

- Readers can multitask when listening to audiobooks.
- Audiobooks are more convenient.
- The covers of romance books are uncomfortable to have in public – through audiobooks, no one can see what readers are reading.

The readers who identified printed books as their preferred platform on which to consume romantic fiction provided the following main reasons:

- Readers like the feel of physical books.
- Readers enjoy detaching from technology.

With this information, self-published romantic fiction authors and traditional publishing houses can make informed decisions when deciding on which platforms to publish their books.

5.2.15 Criteria which readers use to decide to purchase/read a self-published romantic fiction title

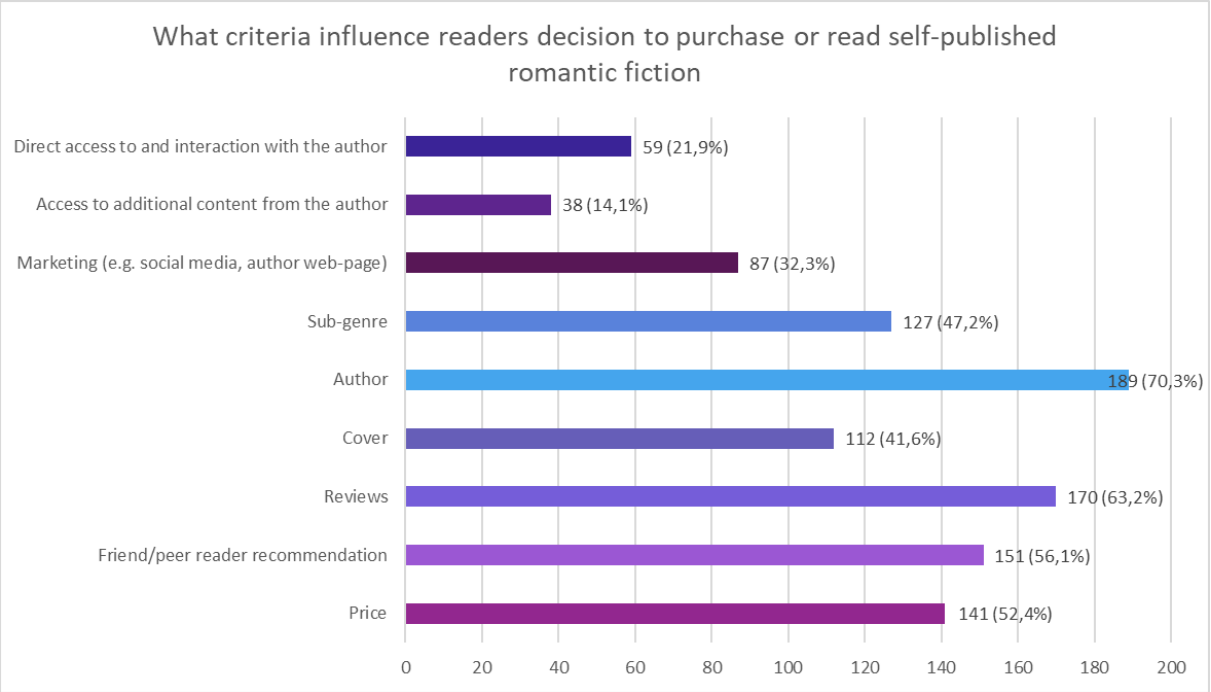


Figure 5.15: Criteria influencing readers' purchase decisions for self-published romantic fiction

Participants were given nine criteria that might influence their decision to purchase or read self-published romantic fiction. Readers were able to select as many criteria that they felt applied. Of the 270 participants, 99,6% (269) responded to this question, but because readers could select more than one option, there are 1 074 responses.

The top three criteria used by readers to decide to purchase/read self-published romantic fiction are:

1. Author 70,3% (181)
2. Reviews 63,2% (170)
3. Friend/peer reader recommendation 56,1% (151)

From this, it can be deduced that readers are more likely to purchase/read content written by an author with whom they have had a previous positive experience. According to BookNet

Canada (2018), this sense of familiarity or previous positive experience can be from readers having read work by the author, but it can also be from the author being a celebrity, a social media guru, a politician, or being featured in the news.

According to the information collected for this research paper, the following two criteria that most influenced readers' decision to purchase/read self-published romantic fiction are reviews and friend/peer reader recommendations. Social media has made it significantly easier for readers to access reviews and recommendations, and also easier for readers to post their own reviews and opinions. Knowing this, authors of self-published romantic fiction should ensure that reader reviews and recommendations are as visible as possible on their social media platforms.

This information contrasts the views of Lynch (2018), whose research suggests that reviews and friend/peer reader recommendations only influence 20% and 17% of her own readers, respectively.

5.2.16 Do readers follow authors of self-published romantic fiction on social media?

This question deals specifically with public author profiles that readers can follow, not author pages, reader groups, reader communities. Those are analysed later in sections 5.2.18 and 5.2.22, respectively.

A profile is a place on an egocentric social media site such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter where you can share information about yourself, such as your interests, photos, video, etc. (Facebook, 2020).

Of the 270 participants, 97,8% (264) of the readers confirmed that they follow self-published romantic fiction authors on social media platforms, 1,5% (4) denied following authors, and 0,7% (2) did not respond.

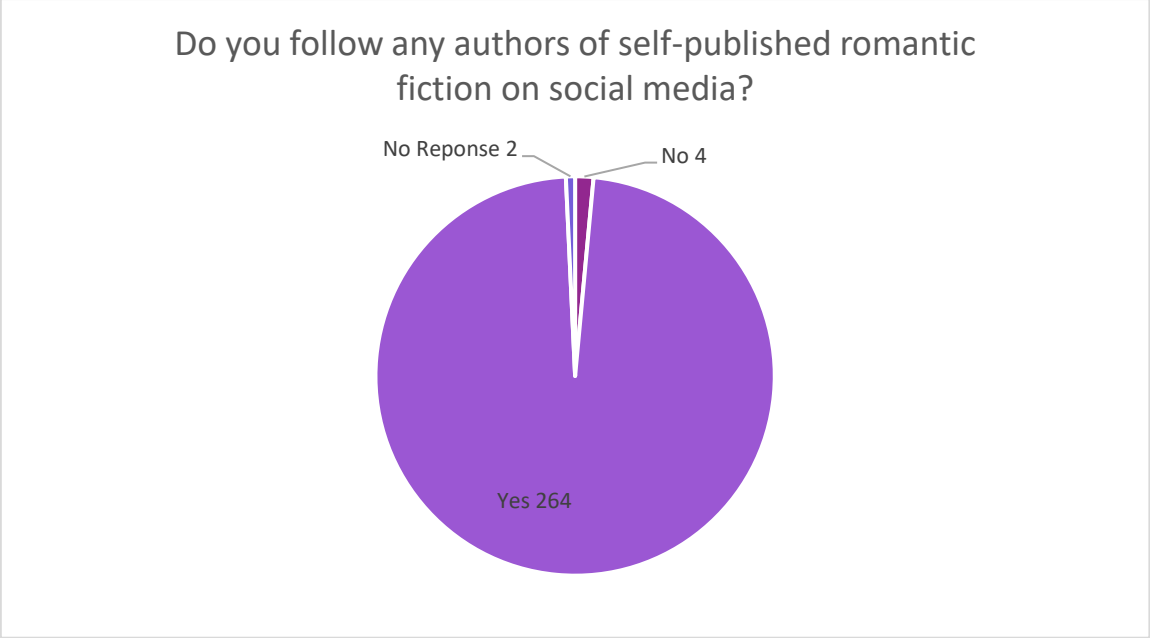


Figure 5.16: Number of respondents who follow authors on social media

Profiles on Facebook usually more allow for one-way communication from the author to the readers, with less engagement and activity compared to pages or groups (Facebook, 2020).

5.2.17 On which egocentric social media sites do readers prefer to interact with authors?

This question had a 100% response rate. Readers were instructed to only select their most preferred option and were not given the opportunity to comment. However, because readers were only given the opportunity to select one platform, their other preferences were not noted. As this question is closely linked to the previous one, results here will be staggered.

Of the 1,5% (4) of people who answered ‘No’ to the previous question, all four participants selected Facebook for this question. Of the 0,7% (2) of people who did not answer the previous question at all, both selected Facebook for this question as well.

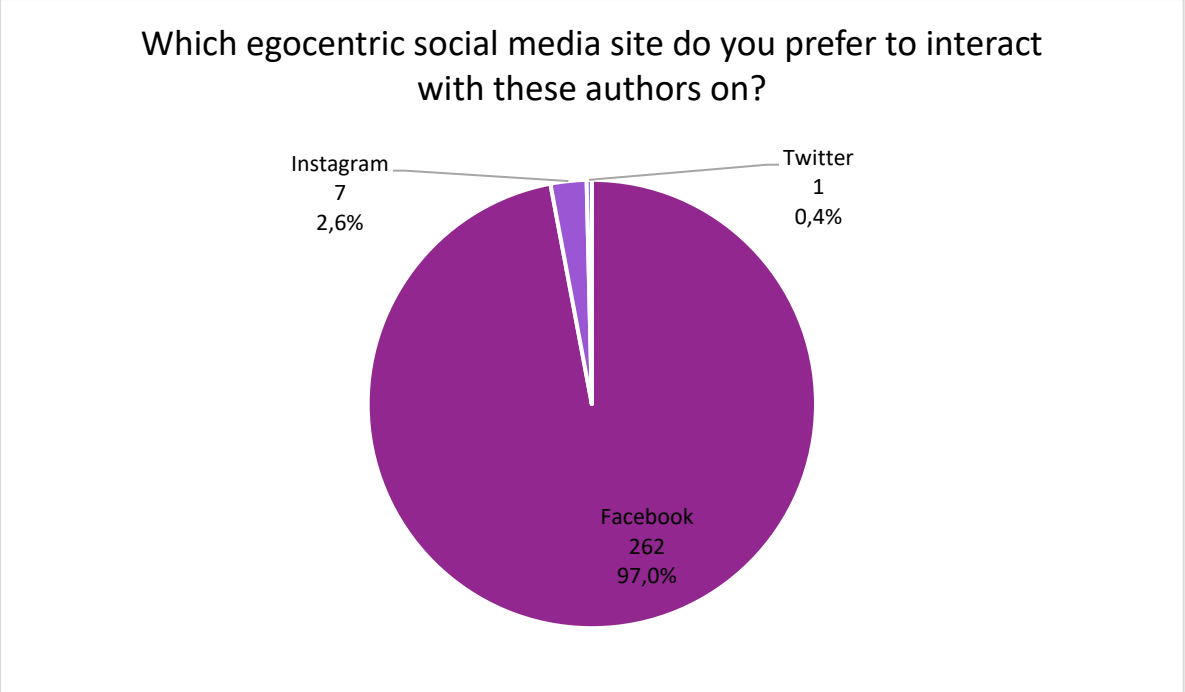


Figure 5.17: Readers' preferred sites for author interaction

From this data, it is clear that Facebook is still the most popular egocentric social media site for readers and authors on which to interact and engage. This information is supported by Laing (2017), whose research showed that Facebook was the dominant site for author and reader interaction and engagement.

The second most popular social media platform, according to this research, is Instagram with seven votes from readers. This information contradicts Laing's (2017) findings, which presented Twitter as the second most popular site for author and reader interaction and engagement. To further analyse this, the age groups of the readers who selected Instagram were as follows:

- 16 – 25: Two readers
- 26 – 35: Two readers
- 36 – 45: Two readers
- 46 – 55: One reader

This shows the reader age groups who are active on Instagram – and present an opportunity for authors to engage with readers on this platform – at which content should be targeted.

Twitter received only one vote as the readers' most preferred social media platform for author-reader engagement and interaction. The age group to which this reader belongs is 36-45.

5.2.18 Do readers belong to any digital book clubs or reader communities for self-published romantic fiction?

As depicted in the chart below, 87,4% (236) readers stated that they did belong to digital book clubs or reader communities, while 12,6% (34) readers said they did not.

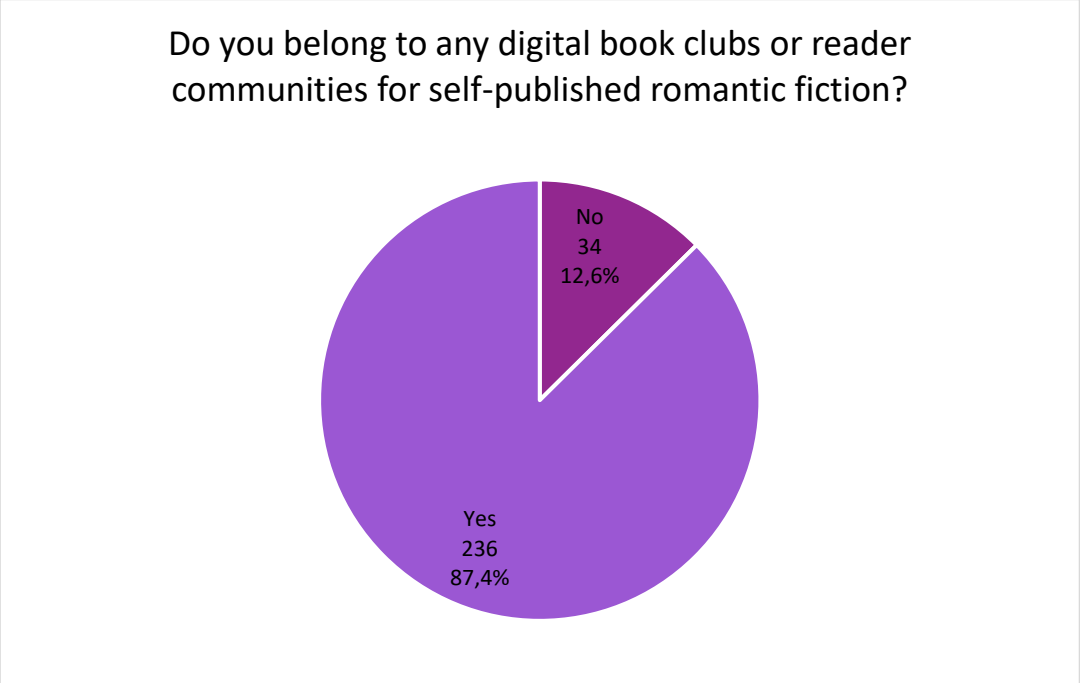


Figure 5.18: Number of readers who belong to digital book clubs or reader communities

This question dealt specifically with reader-created digital book clubs or reader communities, generally for a group of people who enjoy a specific genre. Authors may be part of these clubs or communities, but the discussions are usually centred around more than one specific book or particular author.

These clubs or communities generally encourage peer-peer communication where readers can discuss the novels they read with people who have read the same book or enjoy the same kind of content.

Due to a misunderstanding discussed in the following question, some of these responses may represent false positives. Corrective measures are also discussed below.

5.2.19 Why do readers choose to belong to digital book clubs or reader communities for self-published romantic fiction?

From the descriptions given for this question, it is clear that some of the readers did not properly understand the question. As mentioned above, these two questions were specifically designed to find out if readers chose to belong to reader digital book clubs or reader communities, and why or why not.

These clubs and communities are created by readers with little, if any, interaction or engagement with the authors. However, from the reasons given for their above question, some readers were under the impression that these were author-led groups.

For further researchers, perhaps a definition should be given to avoid misunderstandings such as the one experienced here.

However, of the data collected that can be applied to this question, the following results were noted. The readers who answered that they did not belong to digital book clubs or reader communities, gave the following main thematic answers:

- Readers did not know that these clubs or communities existed or did not know where to find them.
- Readers did not have the time.
- Readers did not want to join because they did not enjoy interacting with other readers.
- Readers did not want their opinions or choices to be influenced by other readers.

Readers who answered ‘Yes’ to the previous question, gave the following main thematic reasons:

- Readers enjoyed interacting with readers/peers who enjoyed the same genre or content as they did.
- Readers wanted book recommendations from readers who enjoyed similar, or the same, content as they did.
- These clubs and communities provided the readers with a sense of community.
- Readers enjoyed posts made by other readers.

The answers that were disregarded for this question included themes of:

- Supporting the author.
- Bonus content.
- Updates on new releases.

These answers were disregarded because, as mentioned above, the clubs or communities discussed in this question relate to reader-created clubs or communities where the author is generally not present.

5.2.20 Does interacting, connecting and engaging with authors on a personal level on social media influence readers' decision to purchase their content?

This question specifically targets the second objective of this research paper, to identify whether the connections and engagement between authors and readers positively impact the consumption of self-published romantic fiction.

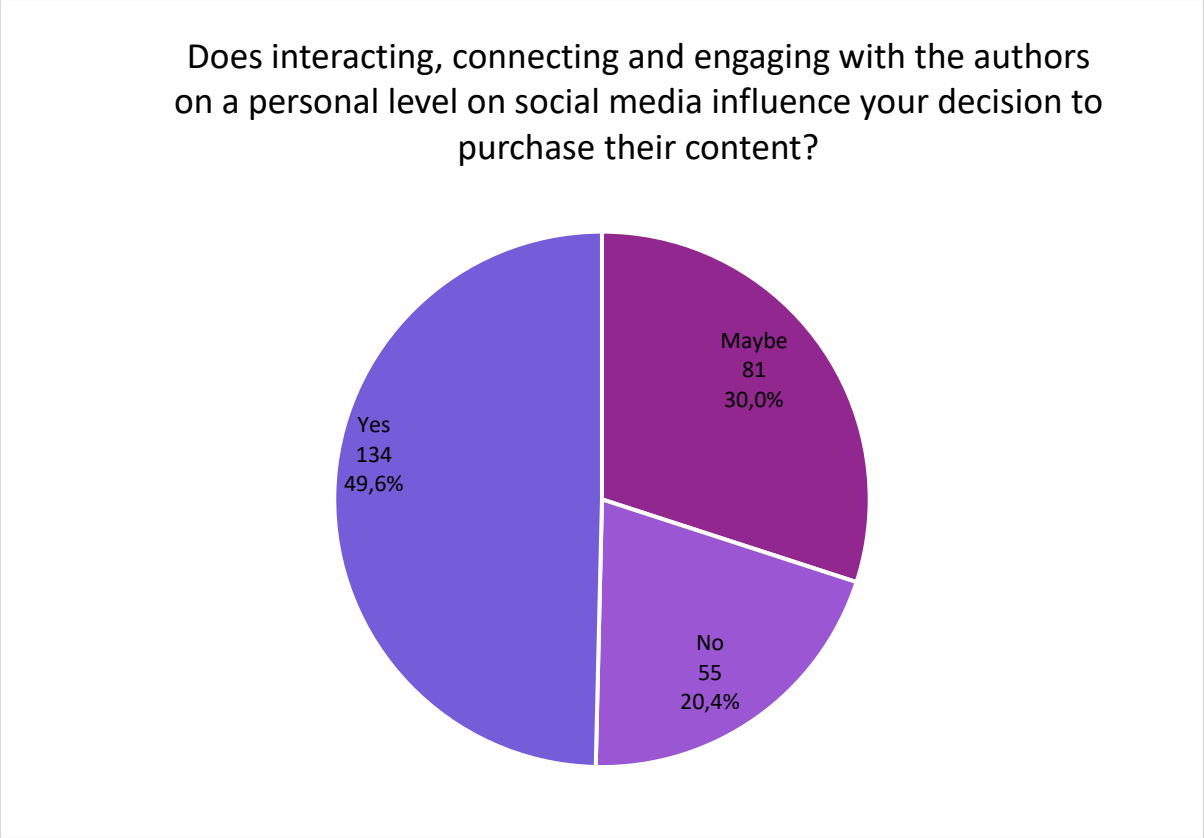


Figure 5.19: Interaction with authors as a purchase influencer

All 270 participants answered this question, with 20,4% (55) of the sampled readers saying that these interactions do not influence their purchase decisions. However, 49,6% (134) of the readers confirmed that connecting and engaging with authors on a personal level on social media influence their decision to purchase content written by those authors.

A further 30,0% (81) said that interacting, connecting, and engaging with authors on a personal level on social media might influence their decision to purchase content written by those authors. Therefore, 79,6% of the sampled readers confirmed that authors' social media presences and engagements influence the purchase of their content. This information should motivate authors of self-published romantic fiction to dedicate time and attention to their social media presence.

5.2.21 When interacting with authors on these sites, what kind of content do readers prefer to access, see and engage with?

In Question 11, readers were asked what kind of content they generally preferred to access on egocentric social media sites. Although these questions may sound similar, this question relates specifically to the kind of content readers want to access when engaging and interacting with authors on social media sites.

Participants were given seven types of content which they preferred to access when engaging with authors on social media and were given the option to add their own preferences. Readers were encouraged to select as many options as they liked. Of the 270 respondents, 99,6% (269) answered this question, but readers could select more than one option, resulting in 1 053 responses.

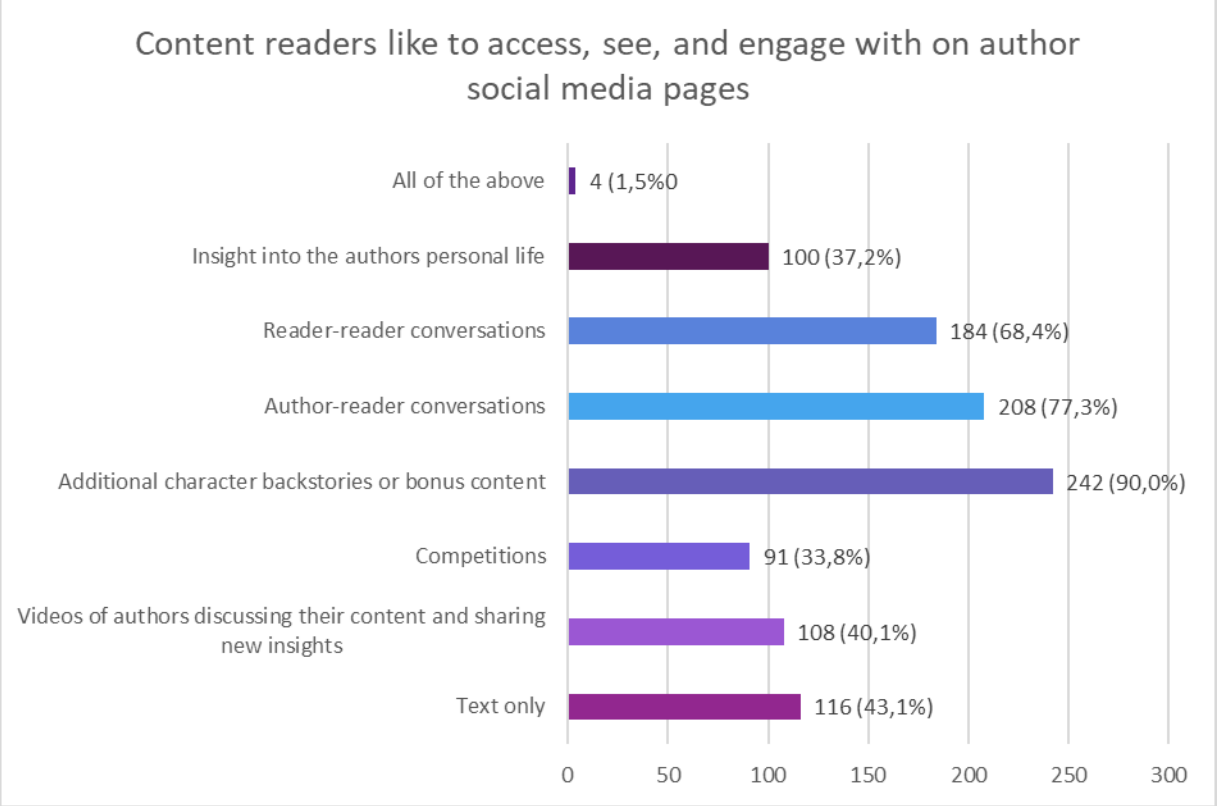


Figure 5.20: Readers' preferred content when interacting with authors

As depicted in the above graph, the top three types of content that readers like to access when engaging with authors on social media is:

- Additional character backstories or bonus content.
- Author-reader conversations and interactions.
- Reader-reader conversations and interactions.

Although providing all three of the above types of content was possible without egocentric social media sites, these sites have enabled the mass – and mostly free – dissemination of these types of content.

Some of the other content that readers like to access that were specifically mentioned include:

- New releases
- Meet and greet announcements
- Book recommendations from authors
- Sales
- Images of characters (selected by authors or fellow readers)

This is valuable information for self-published romantic fiction authors to keep in mind when planning their social media content. As mentioned previously, author familiarity is the biggest influencer of whether readers decide to purchase content. Mass engagement with readers regarding content in which they like to engage will increase author familiarity in the eyes of the readers.

5.2.22 Are you part of any fan pages for self-published romantic fiction authors/series/novels?

Of the 270 respondents to this questionnaire, all 270 responded to this question. Some 96,7% (261) readers confirmed that they are in fact part of fan pages for self-published romantic fiction authors/series/novels, while 3,3% (9) of the readers said that they are not a part of any of the above pages.

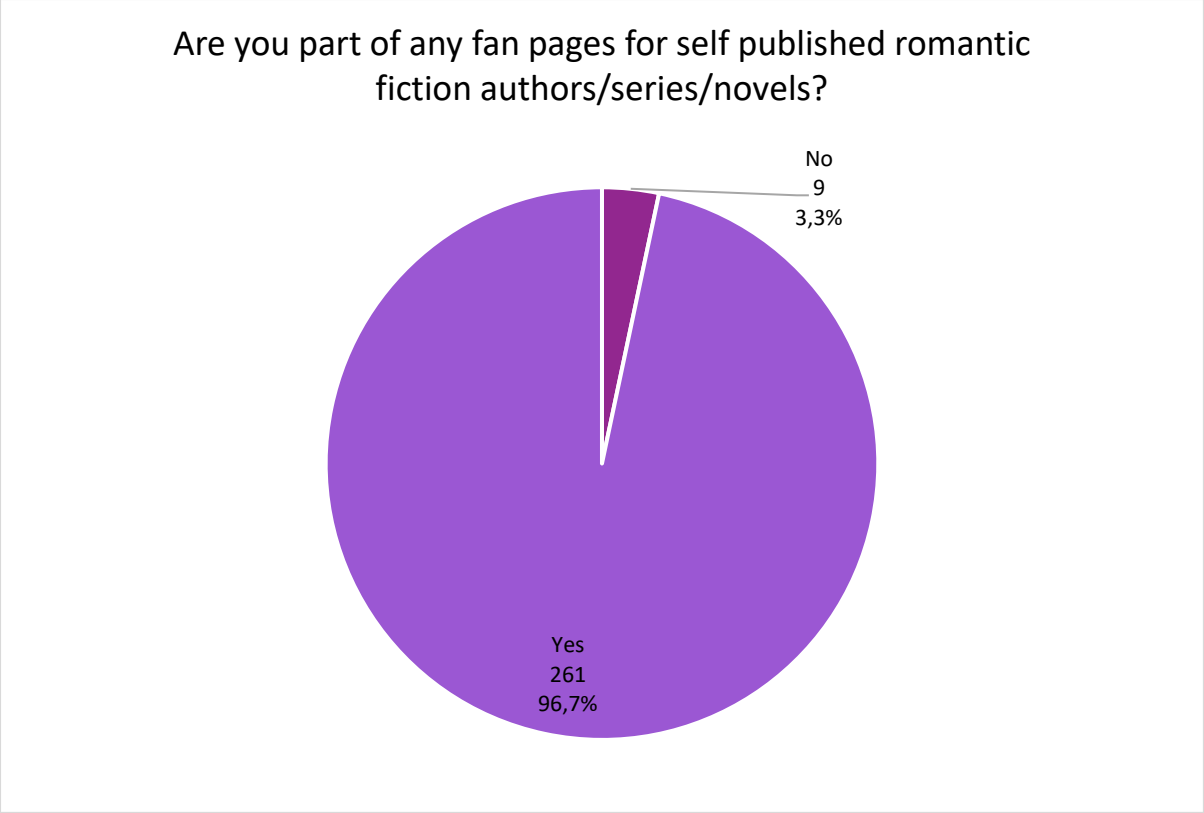


Figure 5.21: Number of readers who belong to fan pages

The fan pages for authors/series/novels discussed in this question can be author/series/novels pages or reader groups. Pages are places on Facebook where artists, public figures, businesses, brands, organisations and non-profits can connect with their fans or customers. When someone likes a page on Facebook, they can start seeing updates from that page in their news feed (Facebook, 2020). Groups are a place to communicate about shared interests with certain people. You can create a group for anything and customise the group's privacy settings depending on who you want to be able to join and see the group. When you join a group on Facebook, you starting seeing content from that group in your news feed (Facebook, 2020).

Applied to this question, author/series/novel pages are created by authors with the express purpose of connecting with their readers and providing updates that readers will see on their news feed. Reader groups are also created by authors, but the intention for these is to create a place where members of the group can communicate about their shared interest in the author/series/novel they choose.

This question speaks towards readers' willingness to participate with the authors/series/novels that they like. As discussed in the literature review above, due to the internet and social media, willingness to participate is better reflected as consumer engagement, or active involvement, with a brand, product, service, or company through acts such as creating content (Parent, et al., 2011). By actively engaging with the authors online, readers are demonstrating their willingness to participate with that 'brand'.

Authors can leverage their community's willingness to participate and so increase their competitive advantage by lowering costs, increasing loyalty, or both.

5.2.23 Why are readers a part of fan pages or social media reader communities?

Of the 270 participants, 96,7% (261) answered this question; however, there are 996 responses as readers were encouraged to select all the applicable answers.

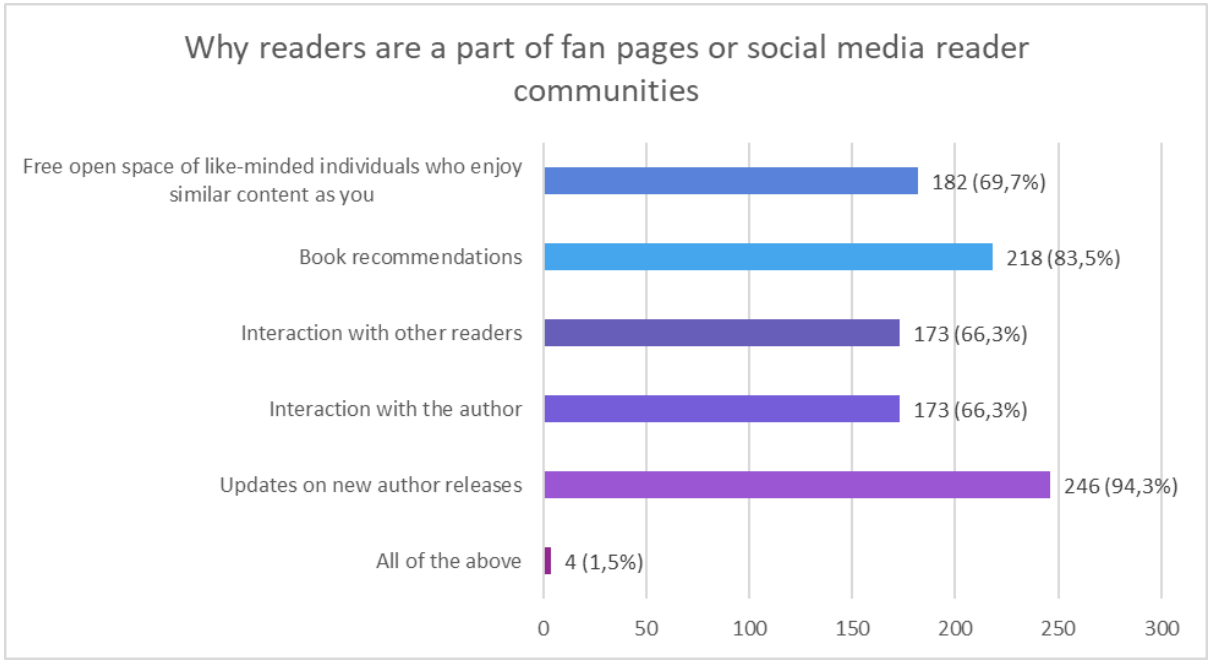


Figure 5.22: Reasons for belonging to fan pages or reader communities

As depicted in the chart below, the top three reasons for readers belonging to fan pages or social media reader communities are:

- Updates on author's new releases
- Book recommendations

- Free open space of like-minded individuals who enjoy similar content

The third objective of this research paper is to analyse the effects of the sense of community which social media provides to readers and the impact of this on the consumption of criticised romantic fiction.

As per the results of the research questionnaire, updates on author's new releases is the main reason why readers belong to these pages or groups. This shows a certain amount of reader loyalty towards the author and an intention to purchase new content as they await updates on new releases by the authors whom they follow.

Friend/peer reader recommendations were noted as the third most influential factor to readers when deciding whether to purchase/read self-published romantic fiction content. Therefore, book recommendations from friends/peers on social media can directly be linked to the increased consumption of criticised romantic fiction discussed on these reader communities.

According to the information gathered for this research paper, the third main reason why readers belong to author/series/novel fan pages or reader groups is because they provide a free, open space of like-minded individuals who enjoy similar content to them. In essence, they provide a sense of community for readers who enjoy a safe space to discuss with their peers the content they enjoy. This relates directly to the third objective of this research: to analyse the effects of the sense of community which social media provides to readers and the impact of this on the consumption of criticised romantic fiction. The following six sections further analyse this effect.

5.2.24 Do readers find discussing the content of self-published romantic fiction more enjoyable with readers in the social media reader communities?

The following two questions are closely linked and the reasons for the readers' responses are discussed in Section 5.2.26.

Of the 270 respondents, 98,9% (267) responded to this question. Only 2,2% (6) of the readers said that they did not find it more enjoyable to discuss self-published romantic fiction with readers of the same content on social media reader communities or groups.

Some 67,8% (183) of the readers said that they did find it more enjoyable to discuss self-published romantic fiction content with other readers, while 28,9% (78) said 'Sometimes'.

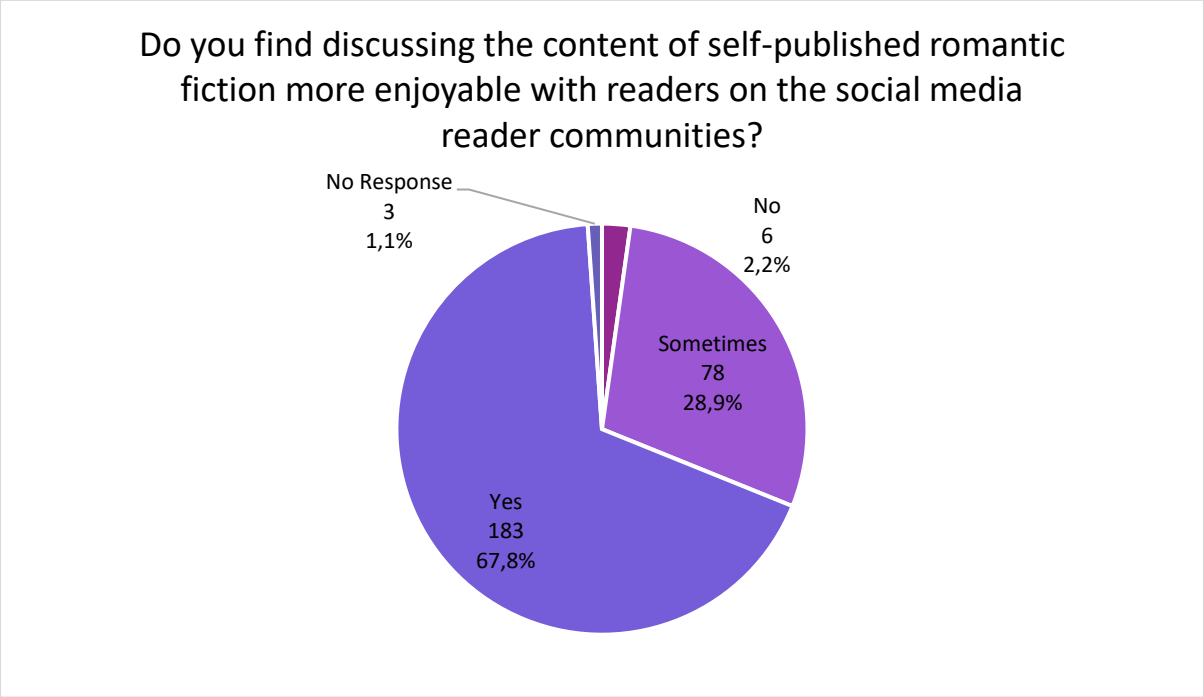


Figure 5.23: Number of readers who prefer discussing self-published romantic fiction with other readers on social media reader communities

5.2.25 Do readers find it important to interact with other readers of the same content?

Of the 270 respondents, 99,3% (268) answered this question with 38,5% (104) saying that it was important to them to interact with readers of the same content, 46,7% (126) saying sometimes, and 14,1% (38) saying no.

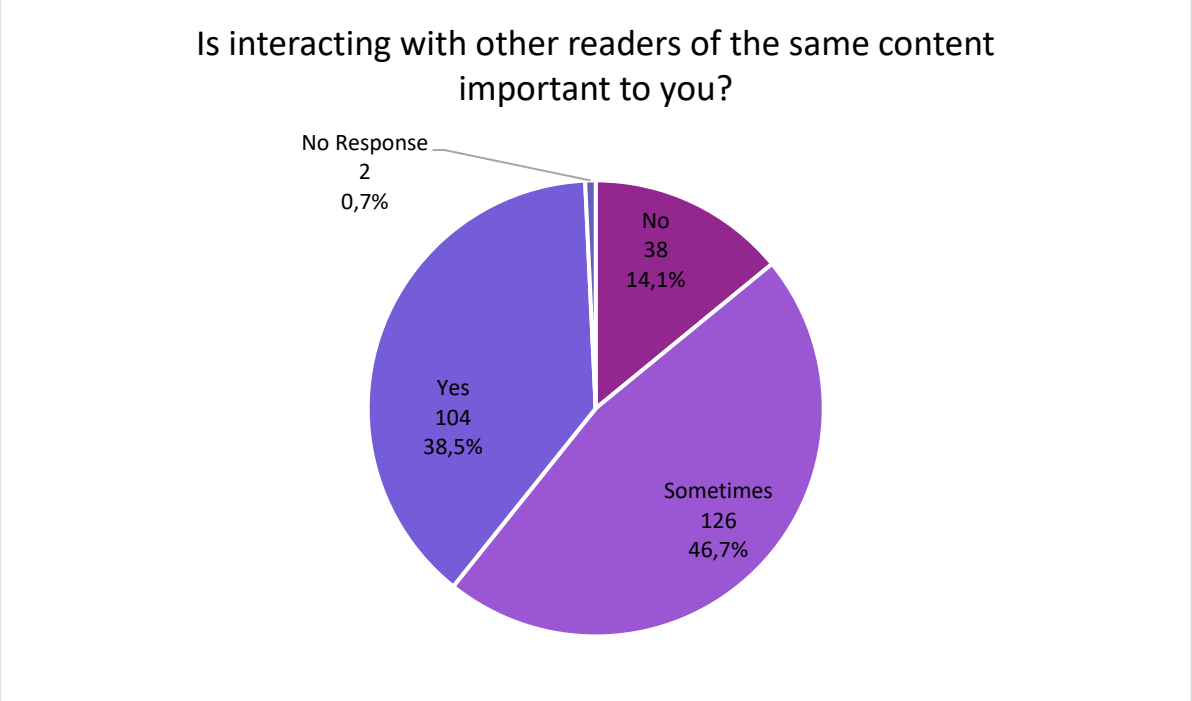


Figure 5.24: Importance of interacting with other readers

Of the six readers who answered ‘No’ in Question 27, five said ‘No’ in Question 28, and one said ‘Sometimes’. Of the 78 readers who responded with ‘Sometimes’ to Question 27, 14 said ‘No’ to Question 28, 53 said ‘Sometimes’, and 11 said ‘Yes’. Of the 183 readers who responded ‘Yes’ to Question 27, 18 said ‘No’ to Question 28, 72 said ‘Sometimes’ and 93 said ‘Yes’.

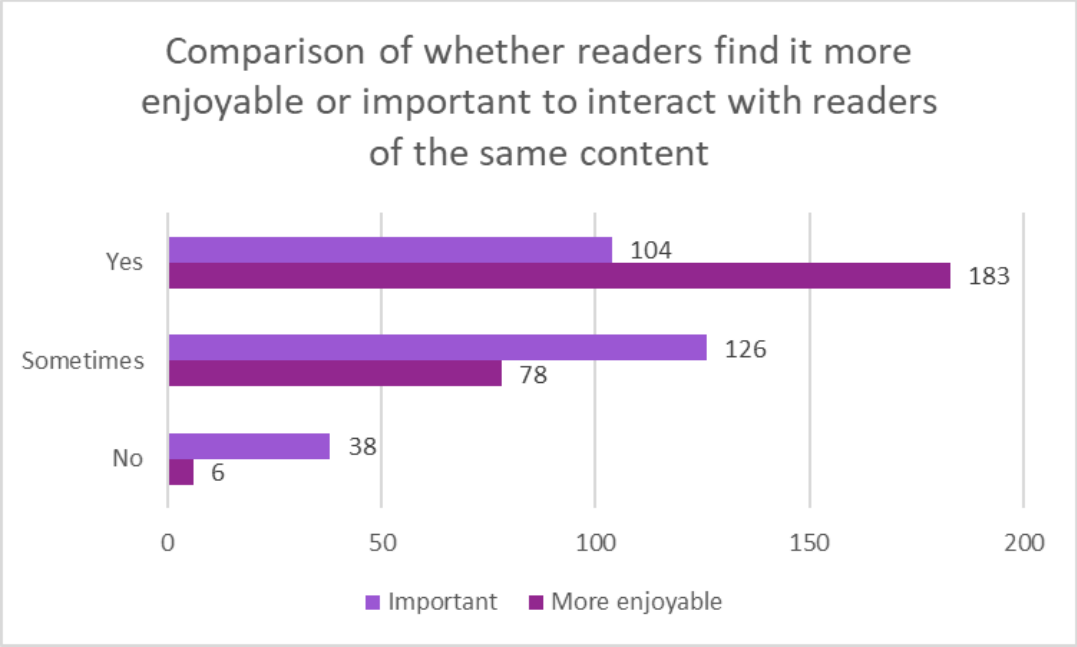


Figure 5.25: Comparison of enjoyability or importance of interaction with readers of the same content

This indicates that while 96,7% of readers find it more enjoyable to discuss self-published romantic fiction with readers of the same content, only 85,2% of them find these interactions important. This leaves a large percentage of this market open to interaction and engagement with each other on these platforms, where these interactions and engagements can influence readers' decision to purchase content through the recommendations, opinions, and insights of their peers.

5.2.26 Why readers prefer to interact with other readers of the same content

As shown above, the majority of the readers find it more enjoyable to discuss self-published romantic fiction with other readers, while fewer readers (but still many) find these interactions important. The main reasons that readers find these interactions more enjoyable and important, are as follows:

- Readers enjoy being able to speak about the content with people who also enjoyed it.
- These groups and pages provide a sense of community with like-minded people.
- Readers enjoy hearing other readers' insights about the content.
- Like-minded people give good recommendations.

- Readers feel like they cannot discuss some of the content with their friends or family.
- The groups and pages are fun and add value to the reading experience.
- The groups and pages are judgement-free zones.
- Readers can stay up to date regarding new releases.

One of the main objectives of this research paper is to analyse the effects of the sense of community that social media provides to readers and the impact of this on the consumption of criticised romantic fiction or content. One of the main reasons that readers said they enjoyed interacting on these pages or groups was because they provided judgement-free zones where readers could discuss less socially acceptable content (often of a highly sexual nature) that they felt they could not discuss with their friends or family.

This information supports Tripler (2016) and Self-Publishing Relief (2015), who state that romance novels are often criticised in public, making readers uncomfortable to read or discuss this content in the open. This has led to a preference of speaking to other readers of the same content, where there is less fear of judgement. The readers who participated in this research confirm the above statements through their explanations to this question, some of which follow here:

- *"It can be fun at times to discuss less socially acceptable content with others of a like mind."*
- *"It is important because there is a semblance of a 'judge-free' zone in these groups. These books tend to be a dirty pleasure and my family and friends wouldn't understand my interest."*
- *"You don't often find romance readers in the wild, since romance fiction is almost taboo."*
- *"It is nice to interact with like-minded individuals especially when there are few in your personal life who share this passion."*
- *"It's a sense of community on something I love that I don't get in my day-to-day life."*
- *"Because readers who prefer other genres are often incredibly judgemental. Romance is a huge genre, and I think other groups are threatened by it, so they turn their nose up at you when you say you like reading it. Romance readers are supportive of each other and it's a wonderful thing to be a part of."*

5.2.27 Do readers establish relationships with other readers or authors on social media reader communities or fan pages?

Of the 270 respondents, 98,9% (267) answered this question; with 38,5% (104) answering 'Yes', 27,4% (74) answering 'Maybe', and 33,0% (89) answering 'No'.

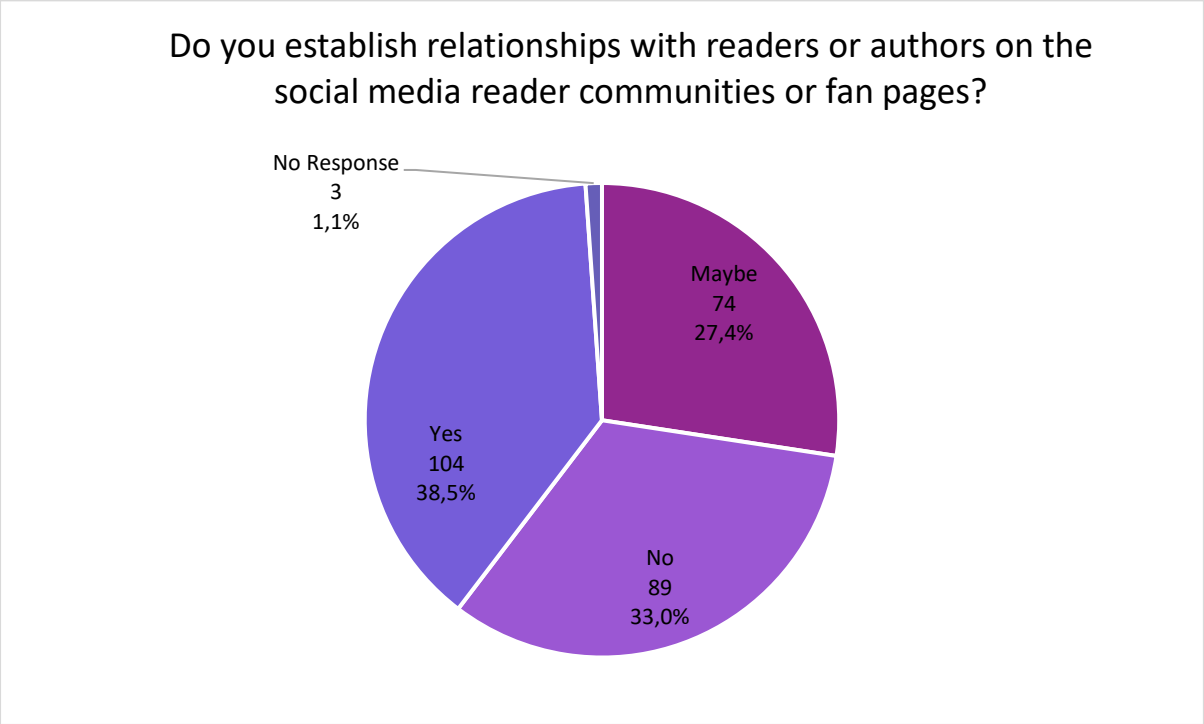


Figure 5.26: Number of readers who establish relationships with readers or authors on social media reader communities

This means that 65,9% readers establish, if not always relationships, at the very least connections with the readers or authors on social media reader communities or fan pages. This question is closely linked to the following two questions and is aimed at further understanding two of the three objectives of this research paper – identifying whether connections and engagements between authors and readers positively impact the consumption of self-published romantic fiction, and the effects of the sense of community that social media provides to readers and how it affects the consumption of content. Question 32 will answer how these connections or relationships impact the consumption of content.

5.2.28 Do the above connections or friendships influence readers' decisions to purchase or read content discussed in the groups?

Ninety-seven percent (262) of the readers responded to this question, with 62,6% (169) answering that the connections or relationships formed with readers and authors on reader communities or fan pages impact their decision to purchase the content discussed in these groups. Some 34,4% (93) said that these connections or friendships did not influence their decision to purchase content.

Of the 33% (89) of people who said they did not form relationships with authors and readers, only 21,5% (58) said that these relationships did not influence their decision to purchase content.

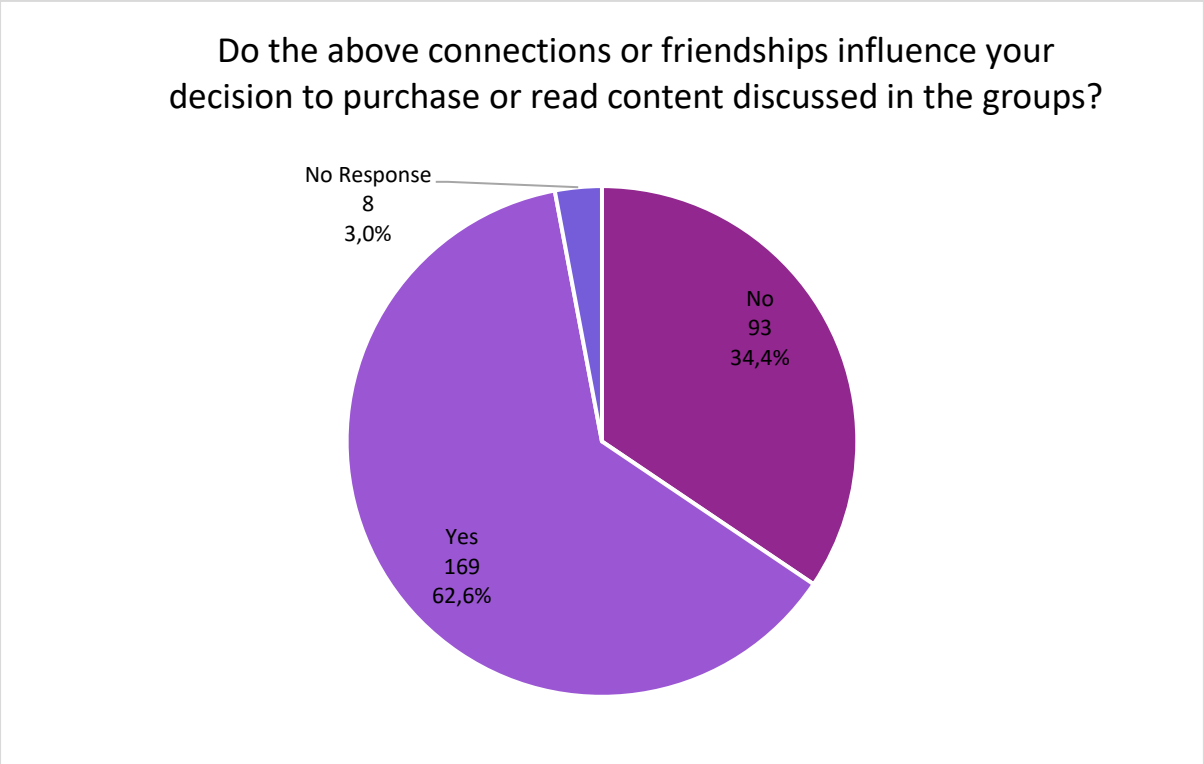


Figure 5.27: Connections or friendships as a purchase decision influencer

To the second objective of this research paper – to identify whether the connections and engagements between authors and readers positively impact the creation and consumption of content. This information shows that 62,6% of readers agree that connections and

engagements between authors and readers positively impact the consumption of self-published romantic fiction.

5.2.29 How do these connections or friendships influence readers' decisions to purchase or read content discussed in these groups?

Of the 270 participants of this questionnaire, only 64,1% (173) answered this question. Per the readers who said that friendships or connections with the authors influence their decisions, these are the main reasons:

- Readers become more emotionally invested in author with whom they interact.
- Readers like to support authors in whom they are emotionally invested.
- Readers are more likely to purchase an author's novel if they have conversed with the author.
- Readers are more likely to purchase an author's novel if they have seen the hard work and dedication the author put into the project.

Some quotes from the data collected for this research paper which support the above reasons follow:

- *"I am more likely to read and/or buy from people who I have a personal connection with as well as I am able to help them with their process."*
- *"After befriending an author if they have a new book I will often purchase even if I'm not looking for something at the moment to support [the author]."*
- *"If I have personally conversed with an author, I am more likely to read their next book."*
- *"A personal touch from an author inspires loyalty and you want to support their releases."*
- *"Well, if I like an author as a person and have talked to them, I am more likely to purchase a hard copy of their books because I want to support them."*
- *"If I am friends with, or at least interact with an author, I am more likely to automatically purchase their next book than if they are an author I know little about."*

- *"Getting to know an author personally makes me want to help them share their novels and get more readers."*

For the readers who said that friendships or connections with readers on the same group or page influence their decisions, these are the main reasons:

- Readers are more likely to trust recommendations from people with whom they have interacted before.
- Readers are more likely to purchase books if they have good recommendations.
- Readers are more likely to purchase books if members in their groups have enjoyed the book.

Some quotes from the data collected for this research paper which support the above reasons follow:

- *"If somebody I have had positive interactions with [and] recommends a book, I will have immediate positive connotations towards it."*
- *"If books are recommended by people who are in the same author pages I am, I take them more seriously that recommendations from a different source."*
- *"I often will purchase books that like-minded social peers recommended or avoid those that, though popular, seem unappealing."*
- *"Personal recommendations are more believable than reviews."*

The above information confirms that connections and engagements between authors and readers positively impact the consumption of content – i.e. it leads to more people purchasing the novel if readers have positive experiences with the author of the novel or with other readers of the same novel. It also confirms that the sense of community which readers receive from social media groups or pages impacts the consumption of self-published romantic fiction.

5.2.30 With which commercial publishing houses do readers engage?

Of the 270 respondents to this questionnaire, only 48,9% (132) responded to this question. However, because readers were encouraged to select all the applicable responses, there are 302 responses. As seen from the chart below, the publishing house with which readers engage the most is Penguin Random House with 40,4% (109) of the responses, followed closely by Harper Collins with 33,3% (90), Simon & Schuster with 14,8% (40), Macmillan with 14,1% (38), and Hachette with 9,3% (25).

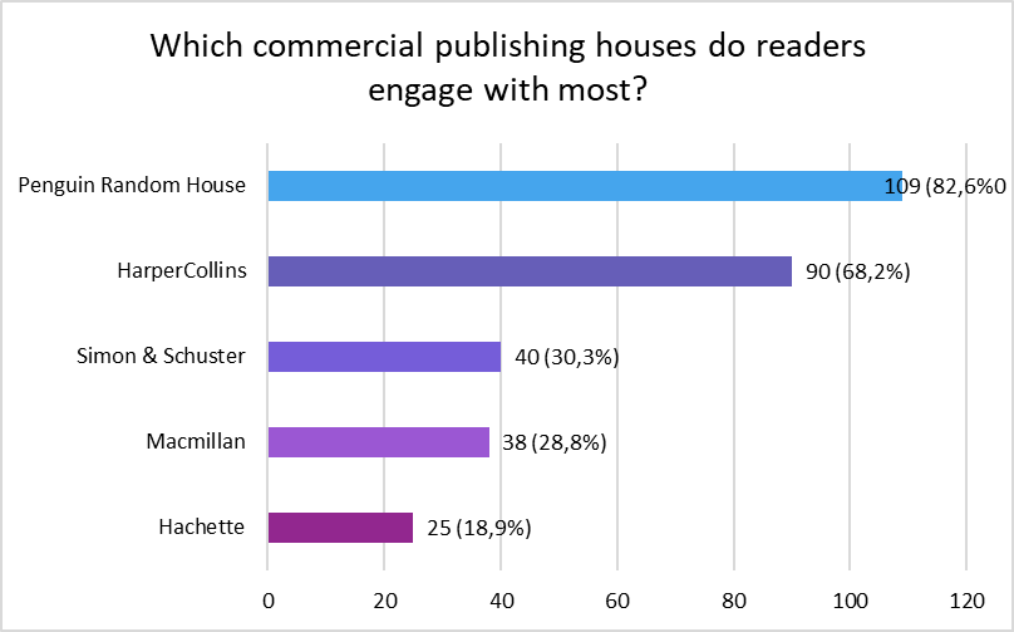


Figure 5.28: Readers' engagement with commercial publishing houses

5.2.31 How do readers prefer to engage with commercial publishing houses?

This question only had a 57,4% (155) response rate. Readers were asked to select their most preferred method of engagement with commercial publishing houses. The chart below depicts the readers' responses.

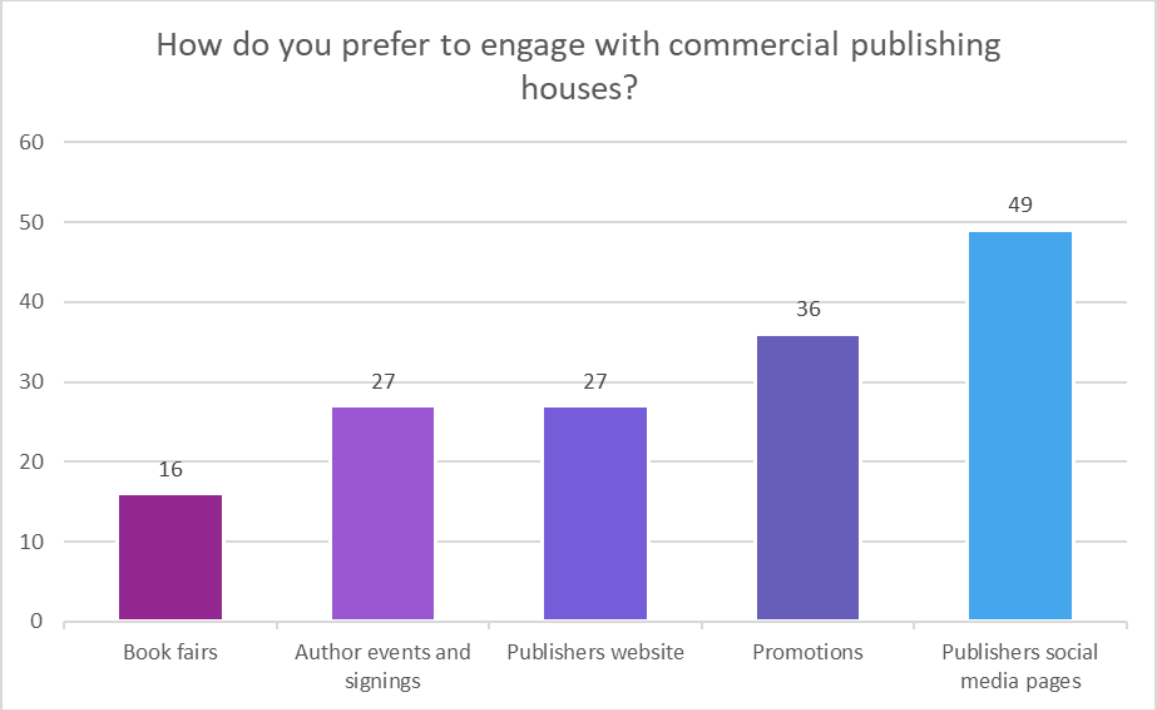


Figure 5.29: Readers' preferred method of engagement with commercial publishing houses

The top three most methods of engagement with traditional publishing houses among the sampled readers of self-published romantic fiction are:

1. Publisher's social media pages
2. Promotions
3. Publisher's websites and author events and signings (these two options were tied in third place).

Despite commercial publishing houses being able to spend more on reader engagement, this information shows where this sampled group of readers are finding their content – on social media and websites.

Although promotions, competitions, and sales influence the purchasing of self-published romantic fiction, they are at least impactful engagement content; whereas, with traditional publishing houses, promotions are listed as the second most preferred method of engagement.

Direct engagement with the authors at author events and signings was listed as the third most preferred method of engagement for commercial publishing houses. Despite some traditionally published authors being active on social media, self-published authors use online or social media engagement as their primary method of marketing and advertising their content. This means that they are more engaged with their audience, even if the audience for their content is smaller.

Although Section 7 of the questionnaire – related to traditional publishing houses – is not directly related to the three objectives of this questionnaire, it posed valuable insight into readers' willingness to participate with self-published romantic fiction authors, as compared to their willingness to participate with publishing houses. This shows the trend of readers moving towards self-published content and away from more streamlined content from traditional publishing houses, which is supported by (Jones, 2019).

5.2.32 Do readers prefer self-published or commercially published content?

Of the 270 participants, 70% (189) answered that they preferred self-published content, while only 12,6% (34) said that they preferred commercially published content. Some 17,4% (47) of the readers did not answer this question.

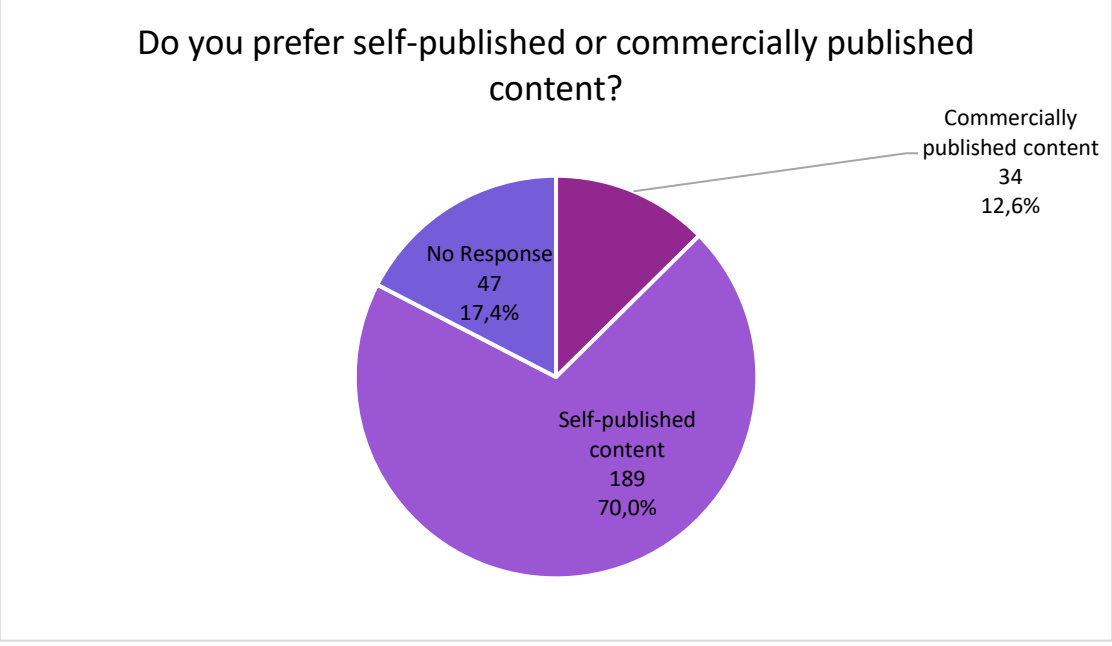


Figure 5.30: Readers' preferences for published content

This data may be skewed to favour self-published authors, as these readers were found on groups specifically for self-published romantic fiction authors. However, despite the possibility of skewed data, this still shows a large discrepancy between traditionally and self-published content. Publishing houses will need to develop new business models that are cheaper and develop relationships with their readers, instead of relying mainly on their relationships with authors and distributors (Morgan, 2012).

5.2.33 Why readers prefer traditionally or self-published content

Some 12,6% (34) of the readers responded that they preferred commercially published content. Not all of them gave reasons for their answers, but the remaining readers' reasons were as follows:

- Commercially published content is better edited.
- Commercially published content is better polished.
- There is a wider range available.
- Reader did not know any self-published authors.
- Readers find that self-published themes are repetitive.

Three percent (8) of the readers who chose commercially published content said that they had no preference on who published the book, as long as the book was good.

Of the 70% (189) of readers who selected self-published content, 13,7% (37) said that they had no preference regarding who published the book. Of the readers who explained their answers, the following reasons were identified:

- Lower price.
- Readers want to support self-made authors.
- Less restrictions on the kind of content self-published authors can publish.
- Self-published authors cater to niche markets.
- Self-publishing process feels more personal.
- Wider range is available with self-published authors.
- Self-published content is more interesting and imaginative.

- Self-published content is available through online subscription platforms such as Kindle Unlimited.
- Self-published authors have faster releases.
- Readers are not engaged with publishing houses/publishing houses do not make the effort to engage their readers.
- Self-published content is easier to access.
- Self-published authors make bonus content available and easily accessible.
- Publishing houses do not publish the content readers enjoy because they are not socially acceptable topics.
- Self-publishers seem more passionate and put more effort in.

5.2.34 General comments

The overall aim of this research paper is to analyse social media's influence on the consumption of self-published romantic fiction from 2010-2019. The aim of sending a questionnaire to the readers of self-published romantic fiction was to gather information on their social media habits and preferences, their opinions regarding whether the connections between authors and readers made on social media influence their purchase decisions, and to analyse whether the sense of community that readers gain from social media influences their romantic fiction consumption.

The questionnaire for this section was sent to three Facebook reader groups: Ivy Asher's Reader Group, Suzanne Wright's Reader Group, and The Snow Lodge – A Kaydence Snow Readers Group. A total of 270 responses were collected and analysed.

The overwhelming majority of the readers who responded to this questionnaire were female and between the ages of 26-45, with English as their home language and/or preferred language to consume self-published romantic fiction content.

Some 96,7% of the respondents said that they were regular social media users, with 64,1% stating that they visit egocentric social media sites (such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) more than three times per day; and 68,1% stating that they preferred to access these sites during the course of the day.

Contradictory to the general trend of post preferences, the respondents indicated that they preferred to access text and images over videos. The respondents also indicated a higher consumption of self-published romantic fiction novels compared to readers of other genres.

Some 91,9% of the respondents indicated that they preferred to consume self-published romantic fiction as ebooks and indicated that one of the main benefits of this was no judgement, specifically of highly sexualised content, in public.

Some 87,4% of the readers indicated that they belong to digital book clubs and reader communities because they enjoy the sense of community derived from them. Some 79,6% of

the readers agree that personal interaction with the author on social media can influence their decision to purchase content.

Some 96,7% of the readers indicated that they are part of fan pages or groups for authors/series/novels, and that the main benefits they derive from these pages and groups are updates on new releases, book recommendations, and a safe space where they can discuss the content with like-minded people with less fear of judgement.

Some 96,7% of the readers agreed that they found it more enjoyable to discuss the content with readers who have similar tastes on social media, while 85,9% of the readers indicated that these interactions with other readers and authors was important to them due to the sense of community they experienced on these sites with like-minded people in a judgement-free zone, and because they felt they could not discuss this content with their friends or family.

Some 65,9% of the readers establish personal relationships with authors and readers on social media and 62,6% said that these relationships influence their purchase decisions.

Despite larger marketing budgets, the readers indicated that social media was their preferred method of engagement with publishing houses and that Penguin Random House was still the publishing house with which they engaged the most.

Seventy percent of the readers indicated that they prefer self-published content, because this is generally cheaper, the readers enjoy supporting self-published authors, and because there are less restrictions on the kind of content self-published authors can publish, meaning they can cater to niche markets to which traditional publishing houses do not cater.

5.3 Authors of self-published romantic fiction questionnaire

Fourteen authors responded to the authors of self-published romantic fiction questionnaire, with a response rate of 35%. Originally, the target number of authors to respond to this questionnaire was five; however, only one of the listed authors responded. Knowing that this would be an insufficient response rate, the questionnaire was sent to another five authors (who met the minimum requirement of having self-published romantic fiction content within the last 10 years). Only two more authors responded, but Kaydence Snow (who agreed to be identified in this research) sent the link to a Facebook group (named Reverse Harem Writers) limited to only self-published romantic authors. From that request for participation, five additional authors responded. As mentioned in Chapter 3, if insufficient authors responded to the questionnaire, snowball sampling would be used. This sampling method was utilised when Kaydence Snow shared the authors questionnaire with the Author Facebook Group, she is a part of.

After a brief analysis of the data collected, the researcher concluded that there was insufficient data to draw meaningful conclusions. In the hope of increasing the response rate from authors in order to obtain sufficient data for analysis, the researcher decided to continue sending requests for participation to other qualifying self-published romantic fiction authors. The questionnaire was sent to an additional 30 self-published romantic fiction authors who met the minimum requirement of having self-published romantic fiction in the past 10 years (2010-2019). From this, a further six authors responded to the questionnaire, bringing the total number of respondents to 14.

The table below shows which authors responded, when they responded, and where they received the link for the questionnaire. Two of the 14 authors who responded (highlighted in red) did not consent to being identified in this research and will be referred to as Author 1 and Author 2 from this point forward. Another two authors consented to being identified, but did not share their identifying details with the researcher, and are therefore referred to as Author 3 and Author 4 (highlighted in yellow).

Table 5.5: Details of responding authors

No.	Date of response	Author name	Where they received the link
1.	21 November 2019	Ivy Asher – First published in 2018, with a total of eight novels published in the paranormal reverse harem romantic fiction genre.	Link shared by the researcher to the author through a private Facebook message.
2.	26 November 2019	Kaydence Snow – First published in 2018, with a total of five novels published in the paranormal and contemporary reverse-harem romantic fiction genre.	Link shared by the researcher to the author through a private Facebook message.
3.	27 November 2019	Author 1 – First published in 2012, with a total of 23 novels published in paranormal and contemporary romantic fiction genres.	Link shared by the researcher to the author through a private Facebook message.
4.	27 November 2019	Sariah Skye – First published in 2016, with a total of 15 books. Eight under the pseudonym Sariah Skye in the paranormal romance, reverse harem and poly, and bisexual romance genre, and seven books under the pseudonym Lizzie Fox in the contemporary romantic fiction genre (BookBub, 2020).	Author received the link through Kaydence Snow's post on Reverse Harem Writers – an author only Facebook group.
5.	27 November 2019	Elizabeth Ellen Carter – First published in 2013, with a total of 22 novels (including short stories, novellas, and anthologies) in the historical romantic fiction genre (Elizabeth Ellen Carter, 2019).	Author received the link through Kaydence Snow's post on Reverse Harem Writers – an author-only Facebook group.
6.	27 November 2019	Author 3	Author received the link through Kaydence Snow's post on Reverse Harem Writers – an author-only Facebook group.
7.	27 November 2019	AC Wilds – First published in 2019, with a total of 22 novels (including anthologies) in the paranormal reverse harem romantic fiction genre (Goodreads, 2020).	Author received the link through Kaydence Snow's post on Reverse Harem Writers – an author-only Facebook group.
8.	28 November 2019	Author 4	Author received the link through Kaydence Snow's post on Reverse Harem Writers – an author-only Facebook group.

9.	8 January 2020	Cece Rose – First published in 2017, with a total of 35 novels (including novellas and anthologies) in the paranormal, fantasy, and reverse harem romantic fiction genres (Goodreads, 2020)	Link shared by the researcher to the author through a private Facebook message.
10.	9 January 2020	Author 2	Link shared by the researcher to the author through a private Facebook message.
11.	10 January 2020	G. Bailey – First published in 2017, with a total of 89 novels published (including anthologies and novellas) in the fantasy, paranormal, and romantic fiction genres.	Link shared by the researcher to the author through a private Facebook message.
12.	13 January 2020	Darcy Ray – First published in 2019, with a total of six novels (two individually written and four anthologies) in the romantic suspense genre (Goodreads, 2020).	Link shared by the researcher to the author through a private Facebook message.
13.	14 January 2020	Tiegan Clyne – First published in 2018, with a total of 21 novels (including anthologies) in the reverse harem urban fantasy, mythological, and fairy tale genres (Goodreads, 2020).	Link shared by the researcher to the author through a private Facebook message.
14.	17 January 2020	Lucy Smoke/Lucinda Dark (same author, under two pseudonyms) – First published in 2017, with a total of 27 novels. Thirteen under the pseudonym Lucinda Dark in the paranormal, sci-fi romantic fiction genre, 10 under the name Lucy Smoke in the contemporary reverse harem and new adult genres, and four anthologies (Lucy Smoke, 2019).	Link shared by the researcher to the author through a private Facebook message.

5.3.1 Gender of the authors

This question had a 100% response rate; all 14 authors described themselves as female.

According to Cima (2017), the romantic fiction market has historically been dominated by female authors, with 1950 being the last decade in which male authors published more romantic fiction novels than female authors. Since the 1960s, female authors have published more novels, with 83% of the romance novels written in the last decade (2010-2019) written by women (Cima, 2017).

Of the 40 authors to whom the link to the authors of self-published romantic fiction questionnaire was sent by the researcher, only two were male, both of whom declined to respond.

5.3.2 Age of the authors

All 14 respondents answered this question, with the majority (64,3%) of the authors under the age of 35. The age category to which the most authors belonged is 26-35. Some 21,4% (3) authors are between the ages 16-25; 42,9% (6) are between the ages of 26-35, 14,3% (2) are between the ages of 36-45, and 21,4% (3) are between the ages of 46-55.

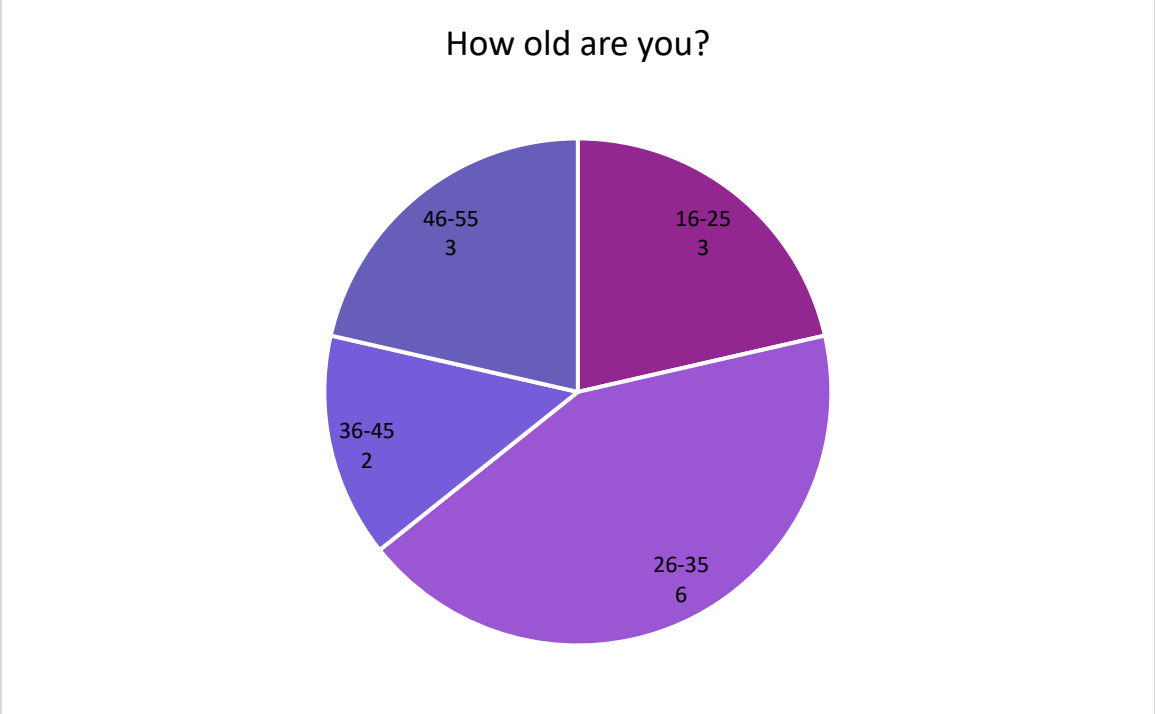


Figure 5.32: Authors' ages

According to Hines (2010), the average age of authors at the time they sold their first professional novel is 36.2 years. This discrepancy between ages could be caused by the time elapsed between the research (10 years), but it could also be due to Hines' research being based on authors who published novels with large publishing houses and an advance of US$2 000 or more.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this data is that self-publishing has opened the market to younger authors. The internet has allowed anyone to publish, at any time, without a publisher's acceptance. Online communities and technologies have allowed younger authors to break into the market without a publishers' approval or advance, because authors can easily and cheaply publish their own work (Youngsuk, 2014; Turner, 2014). These authors can also directly interact with their readers, which has created a new value chain for the creation of romantic fiction material, as they can do market research into what their readers want to read and market their books to their target market (Odendaal, 2008).

5.3.3 Authors' language preferences

As depicted below, all 14 respondents answered this question, with 92,9% (13) of the authors selecting English as their first language. The remaining 7,1% (1) author answered that her first language is Croatian.

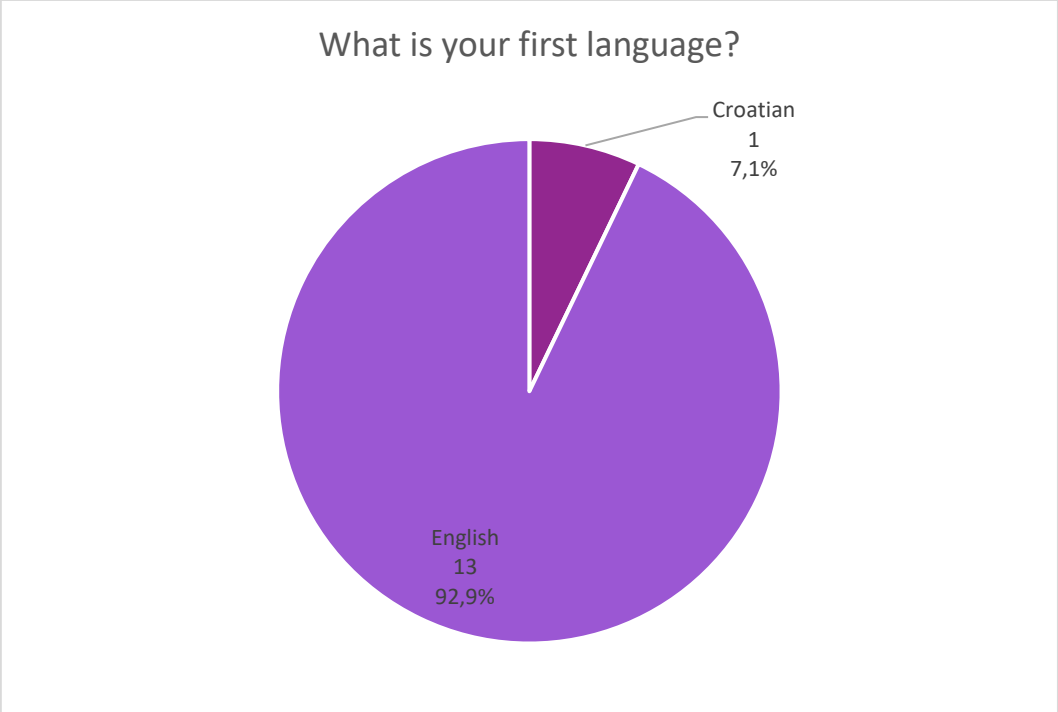


Figure 5.33: Authors' first languages

Despite one author answering that her first language is Croatian, 100% of the authors stated that they primarily self-publish their romantic fiction in English.

According to Kovač (2014), English is the language of popular culture and dominates global bestseller production. The information gathered for this research paper supports the conclusion that the publishing industry is dominated by the English language, and specifies that the self-published romantic fiction market is also primarily dominated by English. The reasons for this market being dominated by English novels, as discussed above, were that the authors' first languages are English or because the authors believe that their content will be more popular if published in English (Kovač, 2014).

The first reason can be confirmed, as 93% of the authors publish in their first language, English. The second reason cannot be confirmed by this research; however, it does supply

future research opportunities into the dominance of the English language in the publishing and self-publishing industries.

5.3.4 Authors' definition of social media

Participants were given four different definitions of social media and were asked to choose the one which resonated most with them. Definition 1, which was adapted from Parent et al. (2011) and the definition of egocentric social media sites from Fraser and Dutta (2008) resonated most with the authors who participated in this questionnaire.

Table 5.6: Authors responses per definition of social media

Definition of social media	**No. of authors**	**% of authors**
1. **Definition 1:** Internet-based technologies that facilitate conversations and offer users a platform for content creation, content upload, networking, conversing, media sharing and bookmarking.	10	71,4%
2. **Definition 2:** Platforms that allow users to connect based on interests and hobbies.	1	7,1%
3. **Definition 3:** Platforms that allow users to share rich media with each other.	0	0%
4. **Definition 4:** Virtual platforms that allow users to construct profiles of themselves that facilitate connections.	3	21,4%

When compared with the responses from the reader questionnaire, it is clear that readers and authors of self-published romantic fiction primarily agree on the definition of social media. As per the chart below, it can be seen that although there are some fluctuations, these are not major and that both groups agreed on Definition 1 as their preferred definition of social media.

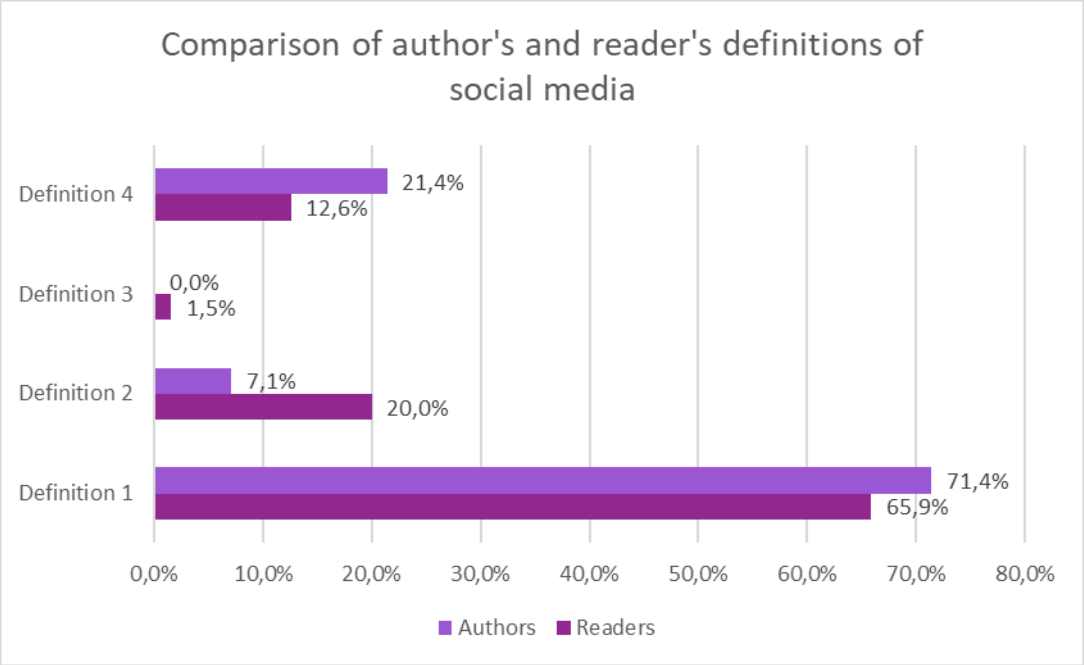


Figure 5.35: Comparison of author and reader definitions of social media

The fact that authors and readers mainly agree on this definition shows the elements of social media which are important to this market. Authors can use this information to provide more content to readers, which will create more engagement and interactions within the community.

The above section has explained what authors and readers agree on regarding what social media is; however, their responses also indicate what they believe social media is *not*. The remaining three definitions were characterised by singular characteristics, like Definition 2 – platform used to connect based on mutual hobbies, Definition 3 – share rich media, Definition 4 – facilitate connection. All of these singular aspects are present in Definition 1, supporting the idea that the readers and authors understand social media to be multi-faceted platforms with more than one use or purpose.

5.3.5 Are authors regular users of social media?

It is important to study authors' levels of activity on social media as each time an author is active on social media, it represents an opportunity for regular interaction and connection

with other social media users; specifically their readers. One hundred percent of the authors sampled in this questionnaire confirmed that they are regular users of social media.

Under sections 5.3.7 and 5.3.8, the research will expand on how often authors use social media and what times of the day authors are active on their preferred social media platforms.

When the sampled authors' and readers' social media habits were compared, it was found that 100% of the authors said they were regular social media users, and 97,4% of the readers said the same.

While these results are very close, they do indicate that authors spend more time on social media compared to readers. This could be because for the authors, social media is part of their job – to market their self-published romantic fiction. According to Hootsuite (2020), people spend an average of two hours and 24 minutes on social media every day. While it is difficult to calculate an exact average of the authors' responses to how much time they spend on social media per day, 71,4% of the authors reported that they spend more than two hours per day on social media.

5.3.6 Category of social media that authors visit most often

Participants were given five different categories of social media (adapted from Fraser & Dutta, 2008) from which to choose and were asked to select the category which they visited most often. This question had a 100% response rate; all 14 authors stated that they visit egocentric social media sites the most often.

When compared with the readers' most preferred category of social media platforms, similar results were achieved. As per the chart below, it can be seen that although some of the readers selected alternate categories, the vast majority also selected egocentric social media sites.

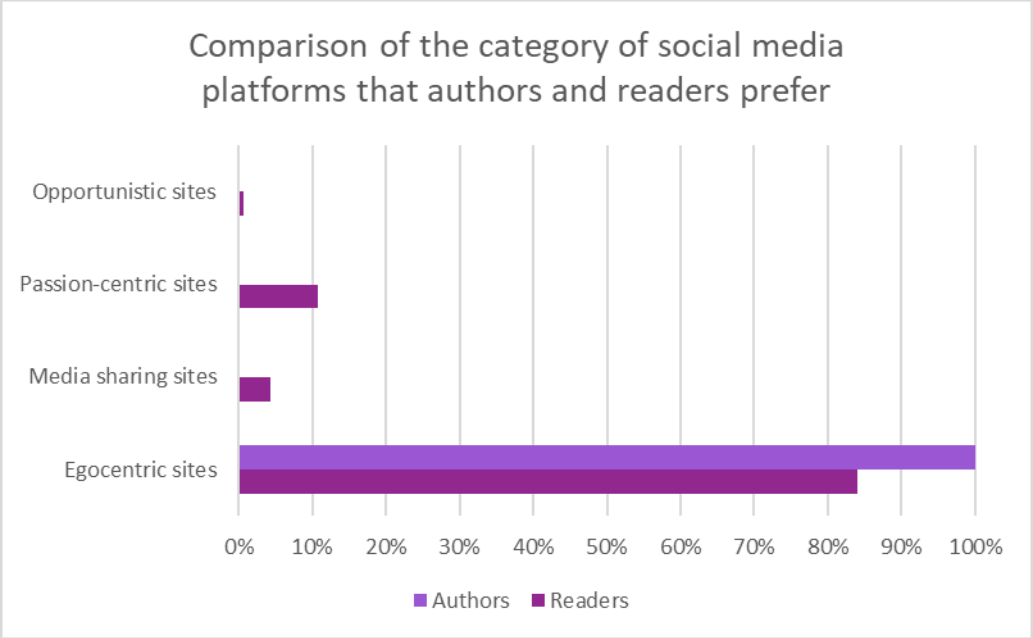


Figure 5.37: Comparison of preferences per platform of social media by readers and authors

These findings are further supported by Hootsuite's (2020) analysis of the world's 15 most used social media platforms, which include egocentric sites such as Facebook (as number one most used platform), Instagram (number 6), and Twitter (number 13).

5.3.7 How often do authors visit egocentric social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter?

This question had a 100% response rate, with 14,3% (2) of the authors stating that they visit egocentric social media sites three times a day. The remaining 85,7% (12) stated that they visit these sites more than three times a day.

As seen below, when compared to the results of the readers, similar responses were noted, with both groups selecting three times a day and more than three times a day as their most popular responses.

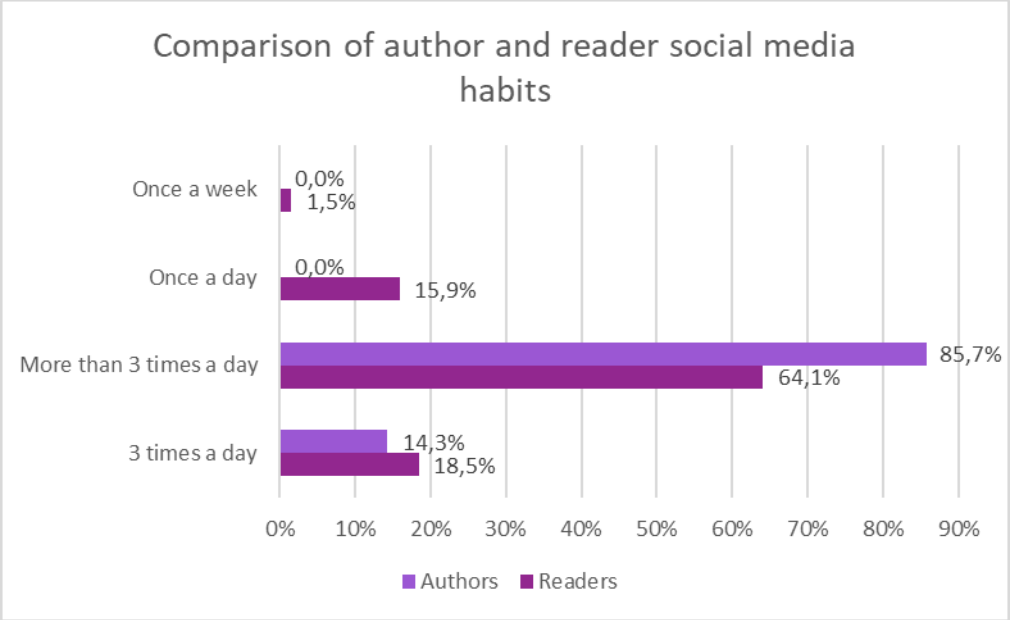


Figure 5.38: Comparison of author and reader social media habits

As indicated in the previous analysis in Section 5.3.5, the author participants are more regular users of social media. This question quantifiably confirms the above by highlighting the number of times all participants visit egocentric social media sites. Authors could be more active on social media sites, because as explained in Section 5.3.20 below, 100% of the participating authors believe that social media is a valuable marketing tool for their self-published romantic fiction content.

5.3.8 What times of the day do authors visit egocentric social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter?

Participants were given four categories of times throughout the day and asked to select when they preferred to visit egocentric social media sites. All 14 authors responded, but because participants were encouraged to select all applicable answers, there are 27 responses to this question.

As depicted in the chart below, ‘during the day’ was the most popular response with 92,9% (13) of the authors selecting it, followed by 42,9% (6) of the authors selecting ‘during the evening’, and then 28,6% (4) authors selecting both ‘at night before you fall asleep’ and ‘in the morning before you get out of bed’.

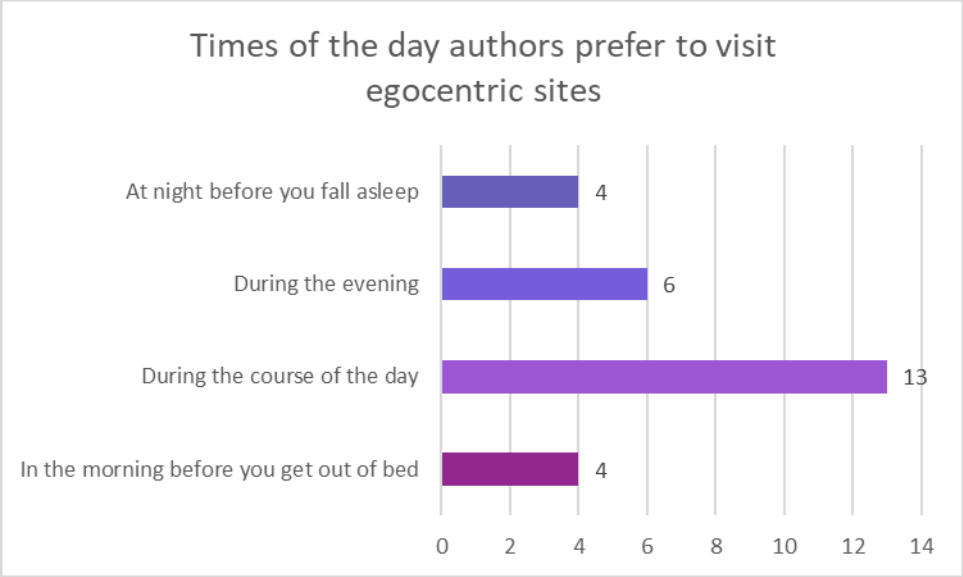


Figure 5.39: Times of the day authors prefer to visit egocentric sites

When compared with the readers' responses, similar trends were reported, with the order of most to least popular responses remaining the same. These trends are depicted below.

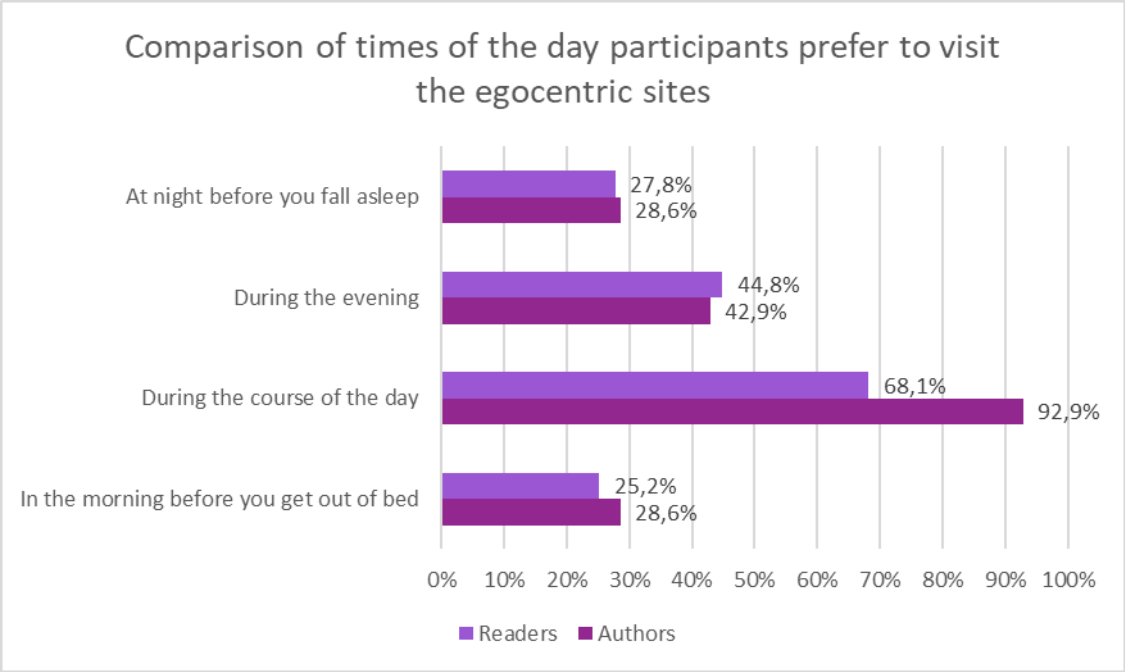


Figure 5.40: Comparison of times of access to egocentric sites by authors and readers

Although it was not specified whether these preferences were linked to the authors' personal or professional social media habits, these results can still be linked to the second of the 5 Rs of publishing – the right time (Turner, 2014). Being active on social media at similar times of

the day as their readers helps to ensure a quicker turnaround time for content that is still relevant and desired by the readers. Authors can use tools such as Facebook Analytics to track when their users are most active on Facebook to identify when they should be present online (Newberry, 2020).

As explained above in section 5.2.8, Kaydence Snow knows when her readers are most active on these sites and can schedule posts to be released at those times when they will be viewed the most; but by being active on these sites at the same time, she can ensure interactive and engaging participation between herself and her readers. When the researcher requested permission to post the reader questionnaire on her reader page (The Snow Lodge – a Kaydence Snow Readers Group) she responded with: "And I recommend posting in my group around 8pm Eastern Time – that's the most active time."

The content here specifically refers to social media posts, not novels. The kind of content which readers prefer to access are discussed in Section 5.2.21 and the kind of content that authors prefer to post are discussed in Section 5.3.15 and compared to readers' preferences later in this document.

5.3.9 What kind of content do authors prefer to access on egocentric social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter?

This question is aimed at authors' personal preferences of content they prefer to access on egocentric social media sites. The kind of content they prefer to share with their readers is discussed in Section 5.3.15.

Of the 14 respondents, all 14 answered this question, with 71,4% (10) indicating that they preferred to access 'Mostly images' on these sites, while the remaining 28,6% (4) indicated that they preferred to access 'Mostly text'.

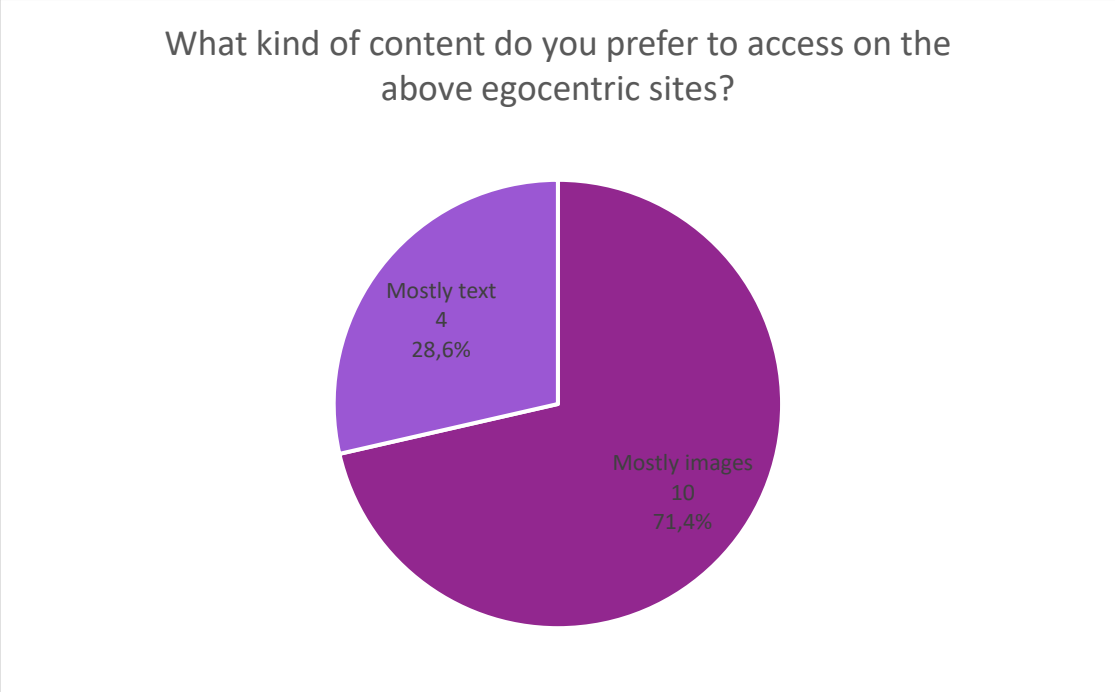


Figure 5.41: Authors' content preferences on egocentric sites

This contradicts Hootsuite's (2020) analysis of the average engagement rate for page posts with different types of content. According to Hootsuite, video posts have the most engagement, followed by images, and then text. It is worth noting that the readers who participated preferred text, images and then videos, again contradicting Hootsuite's analysis. It was suggested that this anomaly is due to the target audience of this research study comprising people who are known to read more than the average person. The same could be said for the authors, despite video being such a popular medium for the general population.

5.3.10 Do authors have separate professional social media accounts specifically dedicated to promoting content and interacting with readers?

In Section 5.3.6, 100% of the authors who participated stated that they had egocentric social media accounts. The aim of this question was to identify whether they used their personal accounts to engage and interact with readers and promote their content, or if they had a second 'work' account.

This question had a 100% response rate, with 85,7% (12) stating that they have separate accounts and 14,3% (2) stating that they did not have separate professional social media

accounts, implying that they used their private accounts to interact with readers and promote their content.

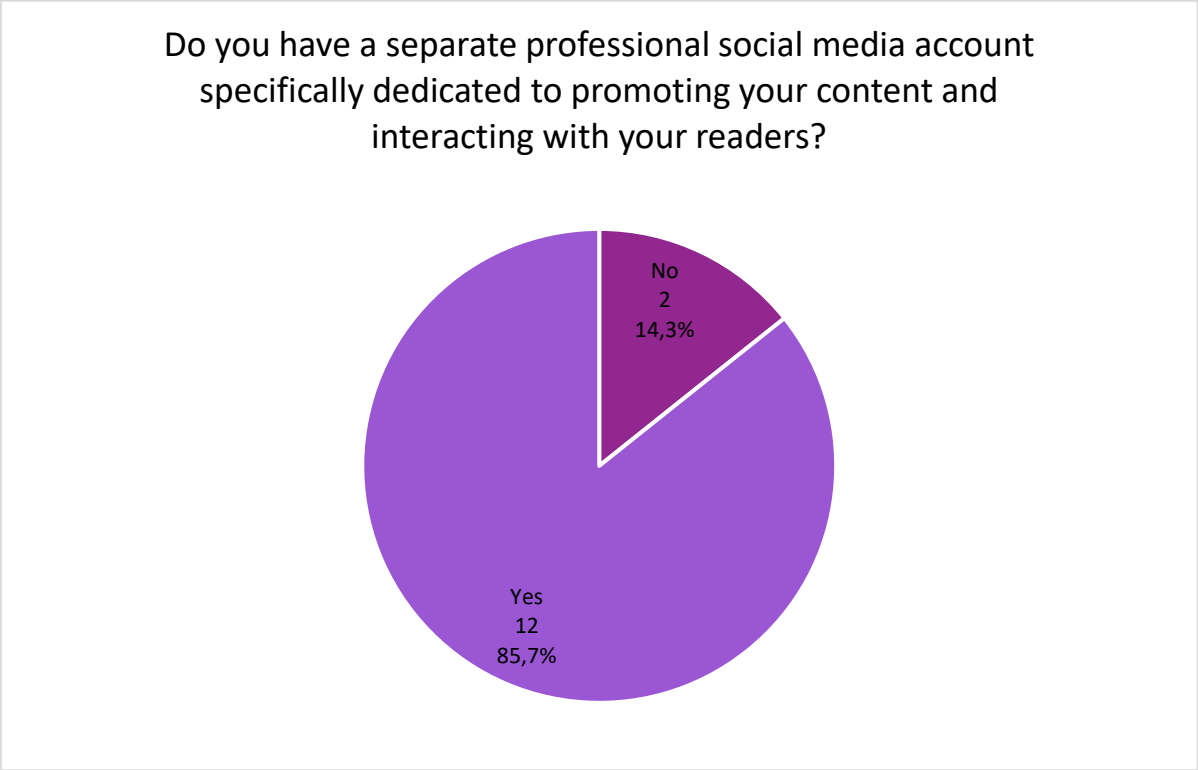


Figure 5.42: Percentage of authors who have separate personal and professional social media accounts

According to Bransford (2018), there are pros to using a personal social media account and having a business account. The pros for authors using a personal social media site to engage with readers includes:

- Facebook favours personal posts in the news feed – meaning more readers are likely to see the post.
- You only have to manage one account.

The pros of authors having a separate business account to engage their readers includes (Bransford, 2018):

- Authors can place advertisements and have access to additional analytical tools.
- Additional people can be added to manage the account and authors can schedule posts to be released in advance.

- By having a business account, authors can create a clear brand and can keep it consistent across all platforms. This helps to create a loyal following (Howson, 2018).

As discussed in Section 5.3.8, an analytics tool is very helpful for authors to track when their readers are most active, so that they know when they should be online. The benefits of a loyal following will be discussed in Section 5.3.17. The participating authors and the information discussed above supports the conclusion that having a separate professional social media account specifically dedicated to promoting content and interacting with readers is beneficial.

5.3.11 Which social media platforms do the authors use to promote their content and interact with readers?

For this question, participants were given four options to choose from: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Other, where they could provide any answer not listed above. Participants were encouraged to select or name all their preferred social media platforms which they use to promote their content and interact with readers. This question had a 100% response rate, but because the authors were encouraged to select or provide more than one option, there are 43 responses. The top three choices were:

- Facebook: 92,9% (13)
- Instagram: 85,7% (12)
- Twitter: 57,1% (8)

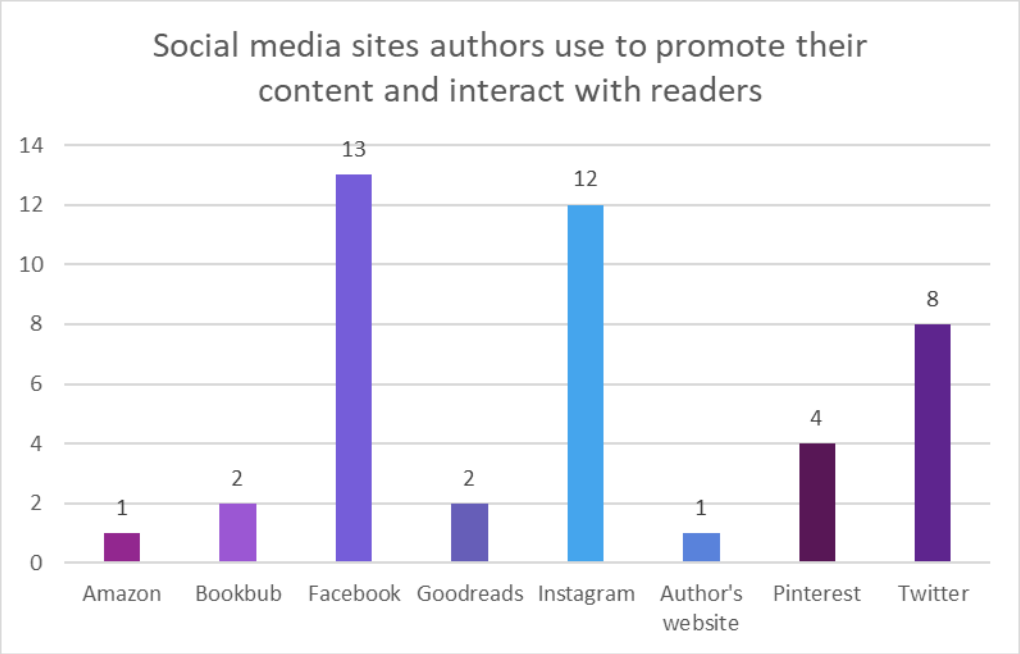


Figure 5.43: Social media sites authors use to promote their content

In Section 5.2.17, the social media platform on which readers prefer to interact with authors were identified as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The data gathered in this question shows that the authors are aware of the importance of these three platforms, as these are the sites most used by the authors to promote their content and interact with their readers. This information was confirmed by research conducted by Laing (2017), which indicated that these three sites were the most popular for author-reader interaction and engagement.

Whereas readers were asked to only select their one, most favourite platform, the authors were asked to list all applicable answers. While it would have provided great insight to gather all of the readers' preferred sites as well, it was deemed important to identify their first choices, i.e. where the readers are most engaged, so that authors can tailor their social media plans accordingly.

5.3.12 Have the authors created any social media reader community pages?

This question had a 100% response rate, with 92,9% (13) of the authors confirming that they had created social media reader community pages and 7,1% (1) saying that they had not.

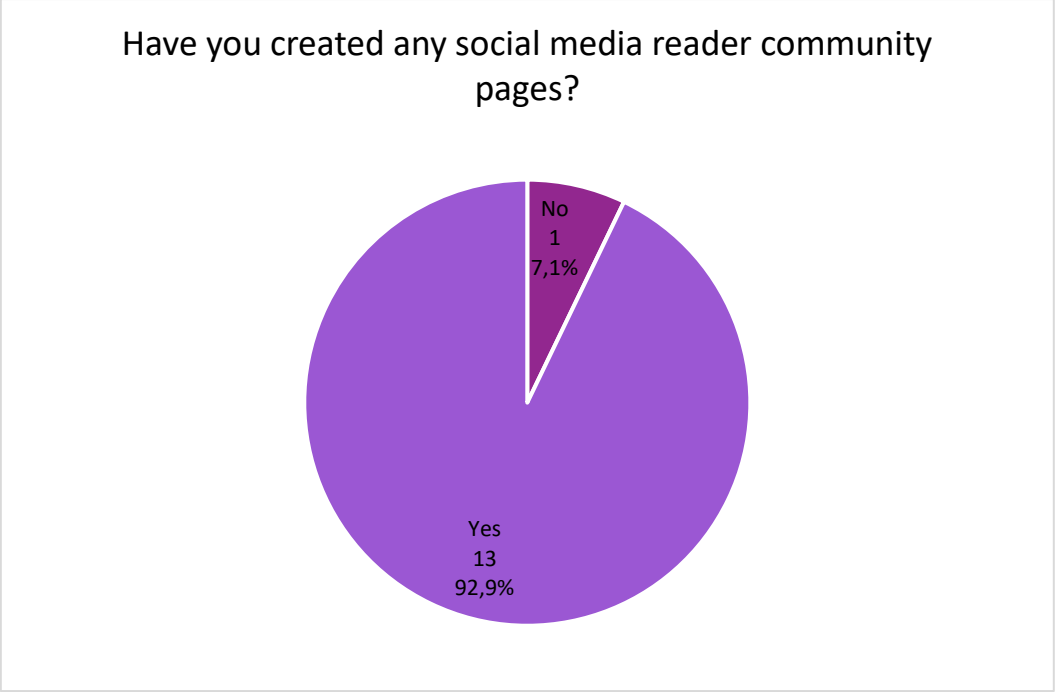


Figure 5.44: Number of authors who created social media reader community pages

G. Bailey, who consented to being identified in this research, answered previously that she had separate social media accounts dedicated to promoting her content and interacting with her readers. She stated that she had not created any social media reader community pages and while this is true, it is important to note that she does have an author page where readers can follow her for updates.

The remaining authors have reader community pages, but 14,3% (2) stated in Section 5.3.10 that they do not have a separate, professional social media account, so those two authors use their personal accounts to create these reader community pages.

5.3.13 Explanation of why authors created social media reader community pages

This question had an 85,7% (12) response rate. Through a thematic analysis of the responses supplied, the following main reasons for authors creating social media reader community pages were identified (from most popular to least popular responses):

- Social reader community pages and groups are the best way for authors to interact and communicate with their readers in a more relaxed, personal and authentic manner.
- These pages and groups allowed authors to run advertising, promote new content, and keep their readers updated on new releases.
- Authors wanted to create a safe space for their readers where they can interact with other readers based on their like-mindedness.
- These groups allowed and encouraged readers to interact with the authors.
- These groups are the best way to reach and connect with like-minded readers.
- Allowed authors to connect with those readers who are not connected to their (the authors') personal profiles.

The first objective of this research was to understand how and why authors are using social media and the benefits thereof. From this data, we can understand why authors use social media and some of the perceived benefits of using these platforms. From the reasons listed above, some of the main benefits of reader community pages include reaching wider audiences, keeping readers updated and engaged, and providing a safe space for readers to interact with like-minded people.

5.3.14 Which egocentric platforms have authors used to create social media reader community pages?

This question is aimed the first objective of this research paper – to better understand how and why authors use social media and the benefits thereof. This question is aimed at understanding the social media habits of authors of self-published romantic fiction, centred around their engagement and interaction with their readers.

Some 92,9% (13) of the authors responded to this question, but there are 19 responses because participants were asked to select all applicable answers and were given an option to add their own input.

The top three sites which authors use to promote their content – identified by the data collected for this research paper – are Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, in that order of preference. This supports Laing's (2017) conclusion that Facebook is still the most popular

site for author and reader engagement, but that the popularity of Instagram and Twitter is rising.

The data collected for this question supports the above-mentioned order of popularity, but adds a second layer of identification to the information, as this deals specifically with reader community pages and groups created by the authors on egocentric social media sites.

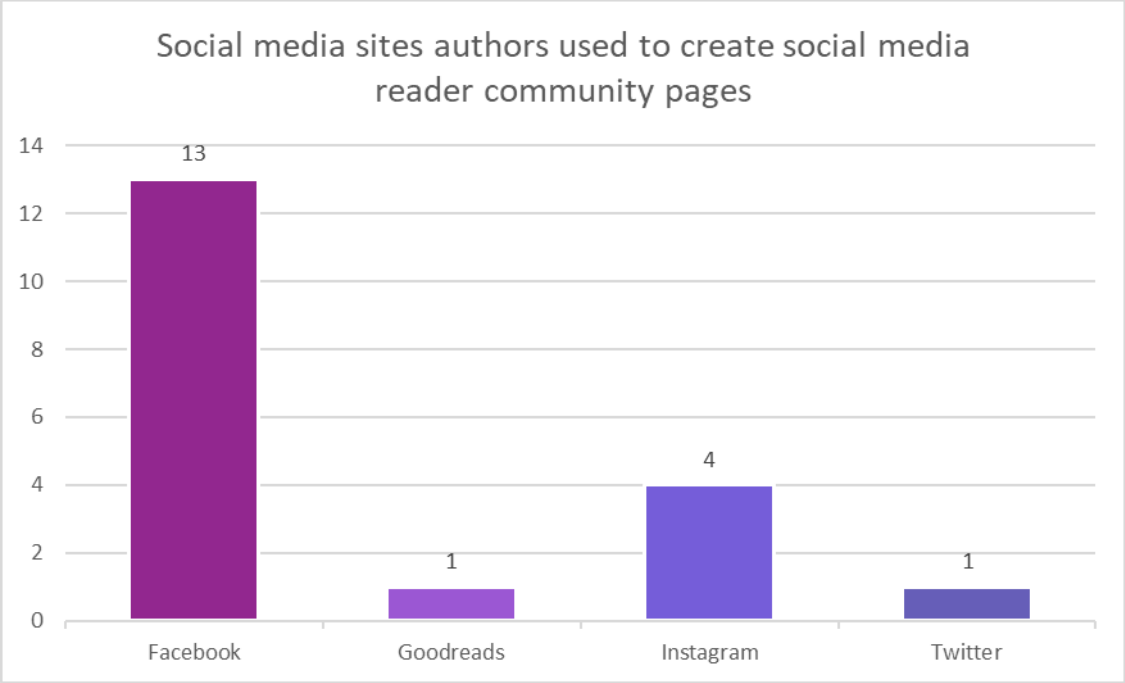


Figure 5.45: Authors' preferred social media sites for creating reader community pages

5.3.15 What kind of content do authors share on their professional social media reader community pages?

This question had a 100% response rate; however, because authors were encouraged to select all applicable answers, there are 55 responses. The percentage of answers for this question was calculated on the total number of author respondents, not the total number of responses. This was done to aid the comparison of information collected from the readers.

As depicted below, the top three types of content that authors share on their social media reader community pages and groups are:

- Additional character backstories or bonus content
- Updates on new releases
- Competitions

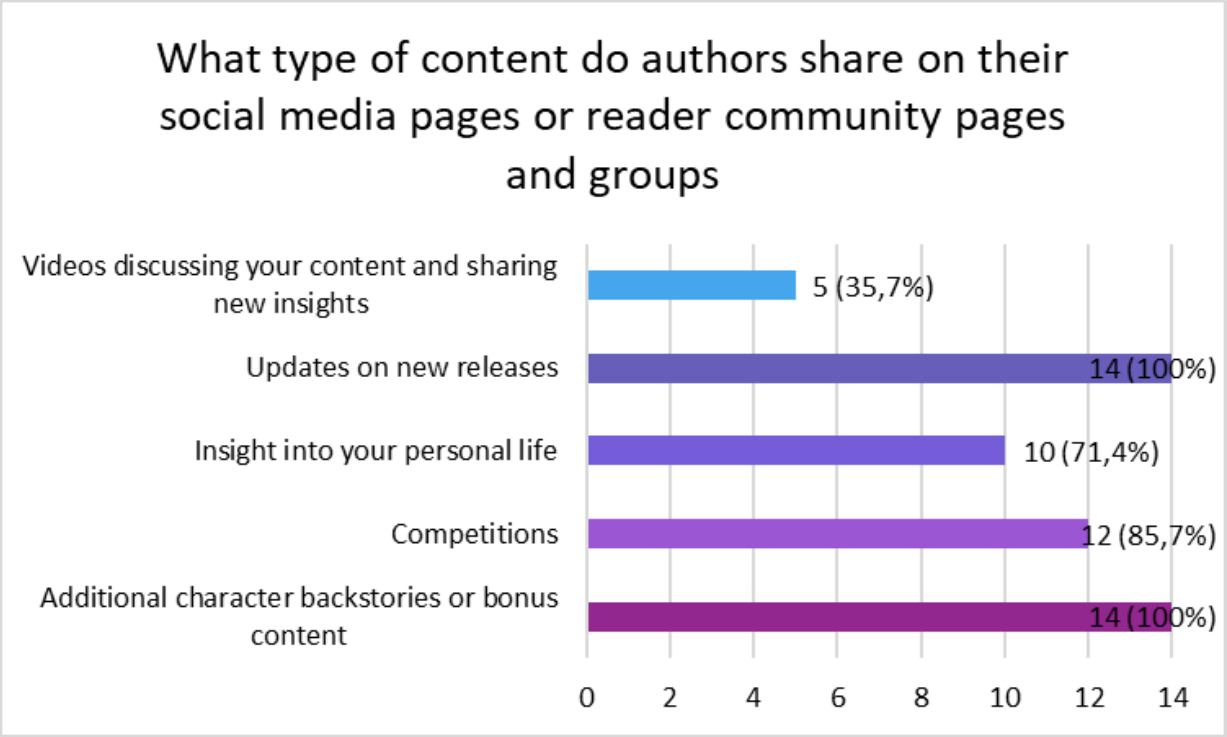


Figure 5.46: Type of content authors share on social media pages or reader community pages and groups

In Section 5.2.21, readers gave feedback on the kind of content with which they liked to engage with authors on their social media reader community pages and groups. The readers were given eight options from which to choose, including the option to provide their own response. The authors were given five options, but no option to add their own response. Four of the five author options were also given to the readers; the chart below will compare the responses of authors and readers, but only for the four identical options that were given to both groups.

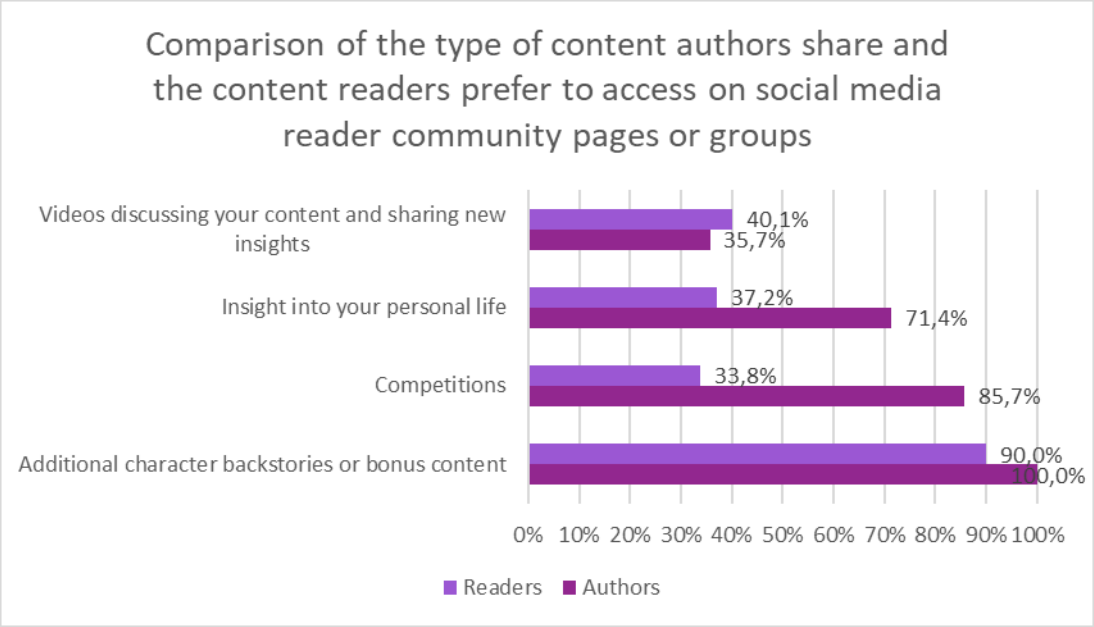


Figure 5.47: Comparison of content shared and preferred by authors and readers

This chart provides valuable insight into the kind of content authors share and the kind of content readers want. As can be seen, additional character backstories or bonus content are the most popular option for both groups, but beyond that, authors need to re-evaluate the kind of content they share to make it more in line with what readers want. According to Inkwell Editorial (2018), novellas, additional character backstories or bonus content is an author's most valuable marketing tool, as it helps establish a loyal fan base and keeps readers engaged while they await the next book in a series.

The chart shows that more readers prefer to engage with videos of authors discussing their content and sharing new content than authors who provide this kind of content. Authors should, therefore, start sharing or increasing the number of videos they share. Sections 5.2.9 and 5.3.9 discuss reader and author preferences on the kind of content with which they like to engage, and contradictory to Hootsuite (2020), video posts were low on these lists. This was attributed to the respondents reading more than the general population, and although this is true, it does not negate the need for video content – it merely emphasises the need for more textual content.

Some 85,7% of the authors said that they shared content on competitions, and while it is still believed that this is valuable content, only 33,8% of readers said that they liked to engage with this kind of content. Perhaps authors should decrease the number of competitions or

giveaways they share on their reader community pages or groups, or ensure that their competitions remain engaging.

Some 71,4% of the authors said that they shared insights into their personal lives, and while this is still important to develop genuine connections with readers, only 37,2% of the readers said that they liked to engage with this content. Laing (2017) states that readers enjoy using social media to connect with the authors whom they admire on a more personal basis and 79,6% of the readers in Section 5.2.20 said that personal engagement with the author could influence their decision to purchase content. Therefore, because insight into an author's personal life helps build genuine connections, authors should consider changing the kind of insight they share to increase the engagement on these posts rather than decreasing the amount of this kind of content they share.

5.3.16 Do authors think personal engagement with their readers on social media platforms influence their readers' decisions to purchase their content?

Part of the second objective of this research paper was to identify whether the connections and engagement between authors and readers on social media positively impact the consumption of content. This question provided the authors' opinion on this objective.

One hundred percent of the author participants believed that personal engagement with their readers on social media platforms influenced their readers' decisions to purchase their content. The explanation for their beliefs is discussed in the next question.

The chart below compares the authors' and readers' responses to this question. As can be seen, some 49,6% of the readers confirmed that the engagement with authors on social media influenced their decision to purchase that author's content, 30% said that the engagement might influence their decision to purchase, while only 20% of the readers said that these engagements did not influence their decision to purchase an author's content at all.

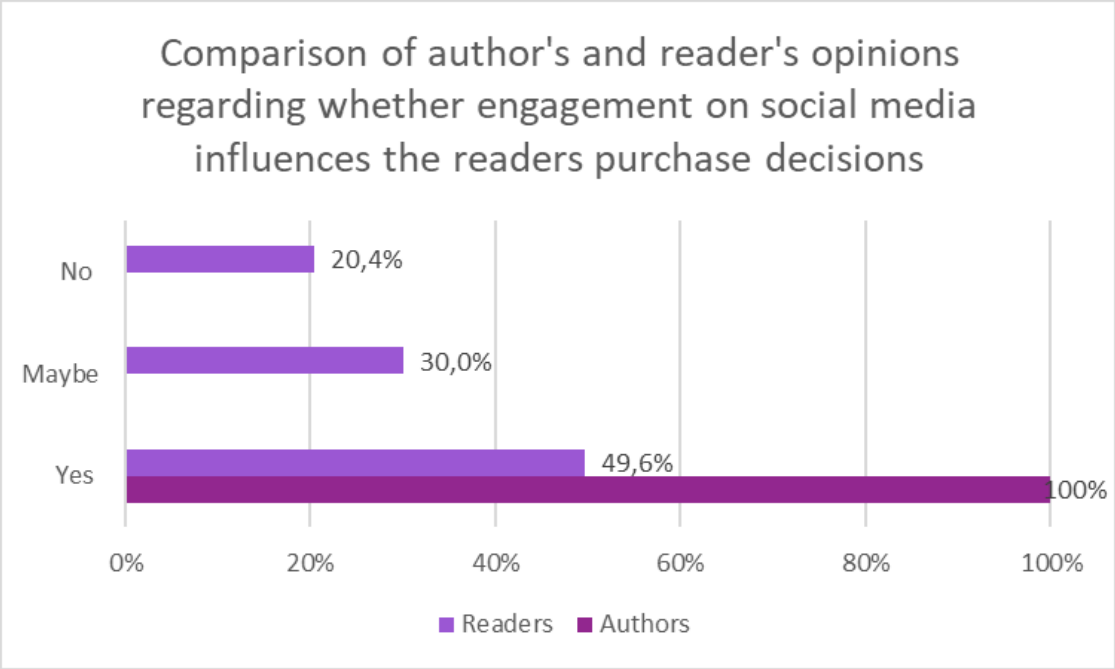


Figure 5.48: Comparison of author and reader opinions of engagement as a purchase decision influencer

This provides authors with the opportunity to influence 80% of their readers' decisions to purchase their content. According to NY Book Editors (2019), social media is an effective tool for authors to attract, and interact with, readers, which can affect their decision to purchase the author's content. The information gathered here supports the conclusion that authors have the opportunity to positively influence the number of people who purchase or read their content through effective social media engagement.

5.3.17 Explanation of how social media engagement influences readers' decisions to purchase content

This question explains why authors believe that engagement with readers on social media influences their readers' decisions to purchase or read their content. Only 12 authors responded to this question, but the major themes that were identified through a thematic analysis of their answers, in the order of popularity, are below:

- Engaging with readers helps to build lasting relationships, which make readers want to support the authors with whom they engage.

"I think when readers get to know an author, it can create a lasting relationship that goes beyond the books and characters. I think when readers understand how much an author cares for and appreciates them, it creates a deeper bond." Ivy Asher

"It's true that a reader will read a book from an author they never heard of it the book is good, but there's a higher chance of a reader buying your book if they interacted with you in a positive way. Not only does it help build the audience, it will solidify lifelong readers." Darcy Ray

- Engaging with readers allows the readers to get to know the authors in a more personal way, which encourages reader support.

  "I think readers like to support real people. So, I let them see more than just my content, I let them see me too." Cece Rose

  "It influenced me as a reader so I can only assume it does so for other readers. Having personal interactions with the author makes you feel like you know them on some level, makes you want to support them that little bit more." Kaydence Snow

- Engaging with readers on social media builds excitement for new content, which influences readers' decisions to purchase or read the content.

  "Passionate readers get really excited to talk to their favourite authors. Sharing teasers and bonus content (especially for new unreleased series before they go live) is wonderful to building up an excitement for it." Lucy Smoke

- Social media engagement allows readers to become part of the writing process (such as naming characters), which builds excitement.

  "*I think it makes things more memorable and can often allow readers to be a part of the writing process e.g. naming characters*." *Author 1*

- Social media engagement provides an effective platform for advertising their content directly to their readers.

  "*The majority of my readership comes from interacting on social media, as I do not have a large advertising budget. It's all 'grassroots', more or less." Sariah Skye*

5.3.18 Does engagement with readers on social media platforms influence the content authors create and publish?

The second objective of this research is to describe the effects of social media on the self-publishing process and identify whether the connections and engagement between authors and readers positively impact the creation and consumption of content.

This question had a 100% response rate, with 64,3% (9) of the authors confirming that engagement with their readers on social media influences the content they create. The remaining 35,7% (5) of the authors said that their engagement with their readers on social media does not influence the content they create. The explanations of these answers are given in the next question.

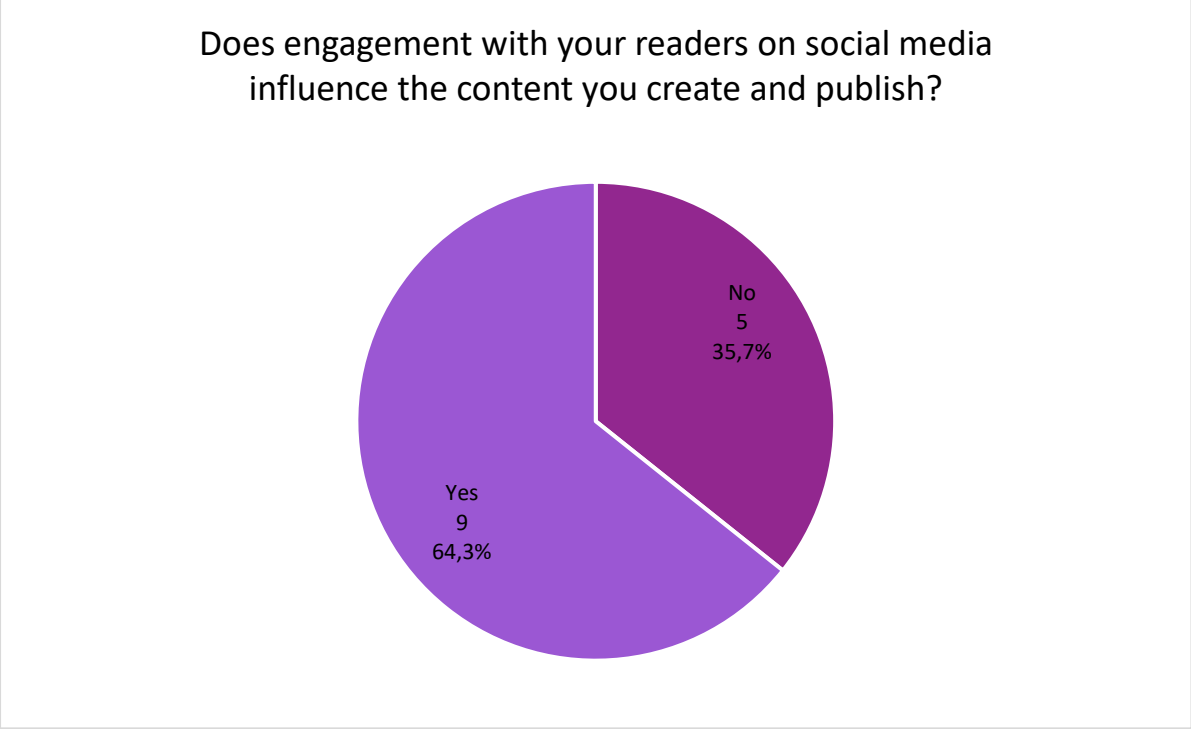


Figure 5.49: Number of authors whose content is influenced by social media

5.3.19 Explanation of engagement with readers on social media influences the content authors create and publish

Of the 64,3% (9) of the authors who answered 'Yes' to the previous question, the following main themes in their explanations were identified:

- Most of these authors said that although engagement influences the content they create, it does not change the kind of books they publish; it only influences the content on a superficial level, such as naming characters after readers to increase engagement with readers, or changing the amount or type of sexual interactions based on readers' opinions.
  "It doesn't influence the books I write but it can influence content. I like to add jokes or sayings that readers post or challenge to have put in a book. I will name characters or other things after readers. I like to deepen the connection with the readers in that way." Ivy Asher.
- Some authors said that they used social media engagement as part of their market analyses, to identify the demand for a certain book or series or to identify popular reading trends to supply the readers with their demands.
  "Part of marketing is understanding what your readers enjoy. Simply talking with them about other books they read gives me a good insight into what I should be writing." G. Bailey
- Authors said that they used social media engagement to identify specific stories that could be written to market demand – specifically designed to sell.
  "I don't think so. I try really hard to not let reader expectations influence my writing. Sometimes, I can't help it. I have started catering to some write to market series (series specifically designed with the intent to sell) but overall, my series are passion projects. Things I really care about and hope my readers do too." Lucy Smoke

Of the 35,7% (5) of the authors who answered 'No' to the above question, only four gave an explanation. The following thematic explanations were identified:

- Authors purposefully did not allow social media engagement to influence the content they create, believing that their artistic processes should not be interfered with.

"I write what I want because I believe writing is art from the author's soul. If readers dictate what's written, it won't be true to the author and the passion won't be there." Darcy Ray

- Authors explained that they could not write stories based solely on reader demands without a passion for the topic.
  "My writing schedule is planned two years in advance. My creative process takes place entirely outside of social media." Elizabeth Ellen Carter

5.3.20 Do authors believe social media is a valuable marketing tool for their content?

Still related to the second objective of this research – to identify whether social media engagement between authors and readers influences the consumption of content – this question specifically aims to identify whether authors think social media engagement is a valuable marketing tool for their content.

Social media marketing can be defined as "the use of social media platforms to connect with your audience, build your brand, increase sales, and drive website traffic" (Buffer, 2019). In the context of this study, the aim of this question is to identify whether authors believe social media marketing positively influences the consumption of their content.

Of the 14 respondents, 100% believed that social media platforms and engagement provided a valuable marketing tool for their content. The most valuable benefits of social media marketing, according to the author respondents, are discussed in the following question.

5.3.21 What do authors believe is the most valuable benefit of social media?

In continuation of the previous question, this question asks authors to identify the most valuable benefit of social media marketing. This question had a 100% response rate; but it was open-ended, with many of their answers falling within more than one theme per answer. Nine benefits of social media marketing were discussed earlier in this research; the data gathered here supports many of those conclusions.

According to the authors who participated in this questionnaire, the most valuable benefits of social media are:

- Social media allows authors to establish connections with their readers, potential readers, or other like-minded people.
- Authors can make direct contact with their readers at any time. This information supports LYFE Marketing (2020), which lists direct access to customers as one of their main benefits of social media marketing.
- Authors can identify and reach new target markets. LYFE Marketing (2020) lists advanced targeting as one of the main benefits of social media marketing, which supports the data gathered here.
- Authors use social media to legitimise their brand and increase relationship capital. According to LYFE Marketing (2020), social media marketing can increase brand awareness and relationship capital. The data gathered here supports that conclusion.
- Authors can use social media as a promotional platform for new content. Both LYFE Marketing (2020) and Laing (2017) state that social media marketing can increase leads and sales through effective engagement, marketing, and publicity.

5.3.22 How many hours per day do authors spend on social media, reader engagement, and content creation?

This question aids with understanding how authors are using social media, linked to the first objective of this research paper – to understand how and why authors use social media and the benefits thereof. The kind of content authors share on their social media, when they share the content with their readers as well as the benefits of social media have already been discussed. This serves as a guide for other self-published romantic fiction authors who are trying to find out how long they should spend on their social media engagement per day.

According to the chart below, some 57,1% (8) of the authors spend between 1-4 hours per day on social media, reader engagement, and content creation per day; with many of them indicating that this number usually increases on and around new-release days.

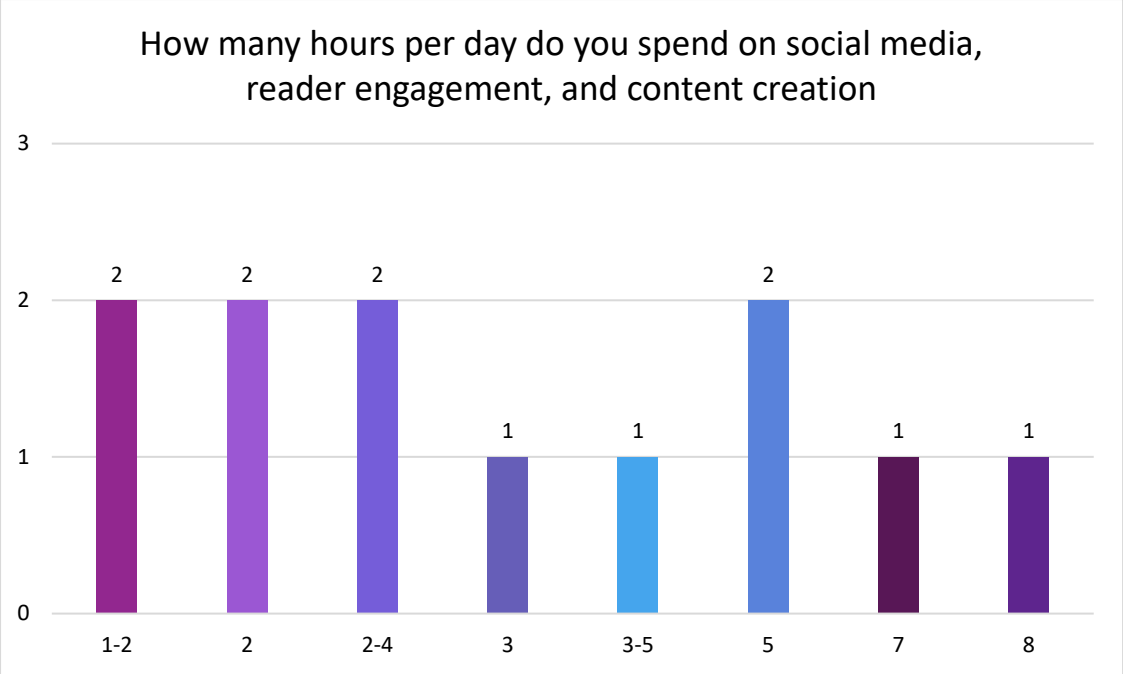


Figure 5.51: Hours per day authors spend on social media and engagement

As this question demonstrates, the effective use of social media requires a lot of time and effort. This question also demonstrates that the participants spend more time on social media per day when compared to the overall average of two hours and 24 minutes per day, according to Hootsuite (2020).

5.3.23 Do authors establish personal relationships with members of their social media reader community pages?

This question, and the next question, are aimed at the third objective of this research paper – to analyse the effects of the sense of community that social media provides to readers and the impact of this on the consumption of criticised romantic fiction.

As the chart below depicts, this question had a 100% response rate, with 57,1% (8) of the authors saying that they did establish personal relationships with members of their social media reader community pages, and the remaining 42,9% (6) saying that they sometimes established relationships with these members.

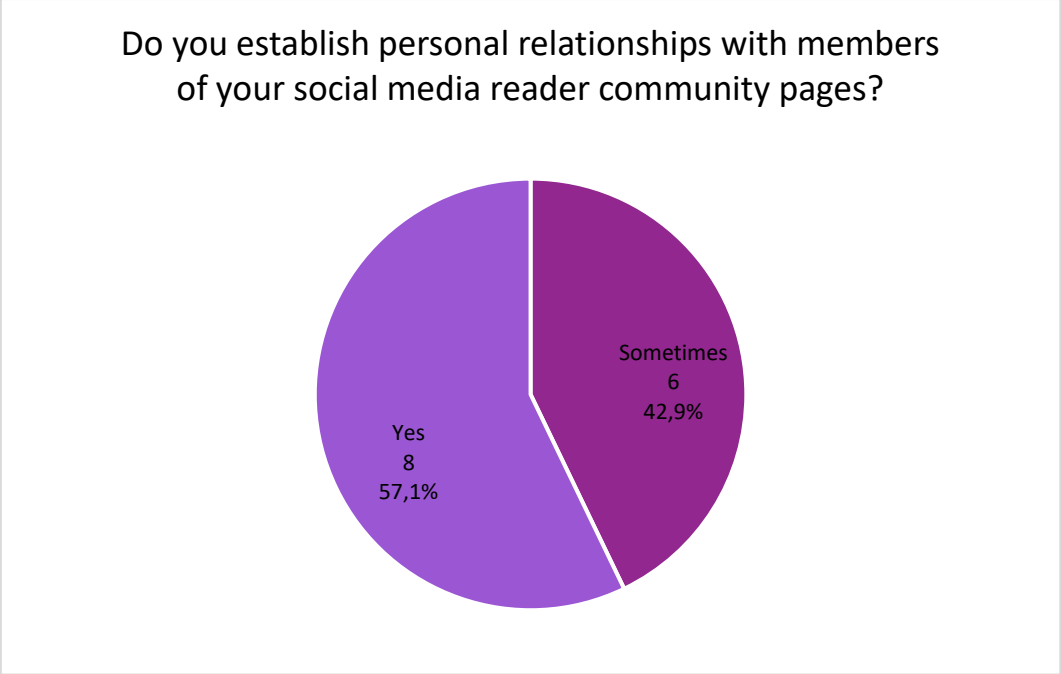


Figure 5.52: Percentage of authors who establish relationships with members of social media reader communities

As discussed above, when authors and readers develop personal, lasting relationships, readers are more likely to purchase the authors' content. It follows then that establishing relationships with the members of their social media reader community pages is more important to the authors than it is to the readers. The chart below shows a comparison of the author and reader responses to this question.

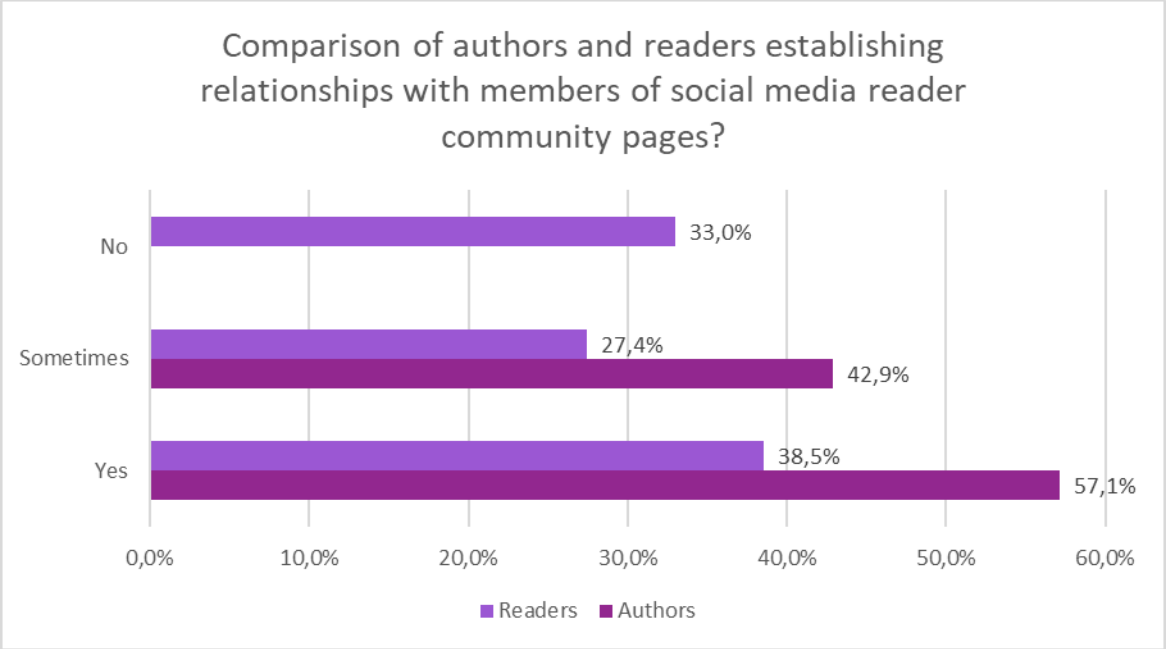


Figure 5.53: Comparison of authors and readers who establish relationships on social media reader community pages

Authors benefit from personal relationships with readers from their social media community pages because it leads to increased loyalty to the author and more purchases by the reader.

However, there is also a benefit to personal relationships to the readers, as they establish emotional connections and a sense of community with the authors and their fellow readers. According to Laing (2017) and the data collected for this research, online reader communities provide a sense of community to their members as well as a platform where readers can openly express their opinions regarding subjects that are otherwise criticised, which creates a value-added service to the reader.

5.3.24 Do authors believe that social media reader community pages create enabling environments for readers to openly discuss their content without fear of criticism?

As discussed in the above-mentioned literature review by Tripler (2016) and confirmed by the data collected for this research paper, readers of romance novels often feel criticised, especially when reading books with explicit sexual content.

All 14 (100%) authors responded to this question and said that they believed social media reader community pages create enabling environments for readers to openly discuss the content found in their novels without fear of criticism. In fact, one of the reasons that authors gave for creating reader community pages or groups was to provide readers with a safe space where they can interact with other readers based on their like-mindedness and without fear of judgement.

By comparison, 96,7% of the readers who participated in this study indicated that they found it more enjoyable to discuss the content of self-published romantic fiction with readers on the social media reader communities. The explanations for these responses are discussed in sections 5.2.24 to 5.2.26 but the three that mainly apply to this question are:

- These groups and pages provide a sense of community with like-minded people.
- Readers feel like they cannot discuss some of the content with their friends or family.
- The groups and pages are judgement-free zones.

5.3.25 Authors' descriptions of 'romantic fiction'

Participants were given three varying definitions of the term 'romantic fiction' and were asked to select the definition they felt was most accurate; they also had the option to provide their own definition if none of the supplied ones were correct to them. This question had a 100% response rate, with 85,7% (12) of them selecting one of the three supplied definitions and 14,3% (2) providing their own description.

The table below shows the authors' preferred definitions. The two self-supplied descriptions are discussed below.

Table 5.7: Authors' responses per definition of romantic fiction

	Authors' description of 'romantic fiction'	
1.	A novel which primary focus is the romantic love between two people, and must have an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending.	4
2.	A novel which primary focus is the romantic relationship between characters, with a fictional supporting storyline and sexual interaction.	6

3.	Novels with strong, explicit sexual interactions which are inherent to the story, character growth and/or relationship development.	2
	Other.	2

When compared to the readers' responses to this question, the same trend emerged. Description 2 was the clear favourite for both groups, followed by Description 1, and lastly Description 3.

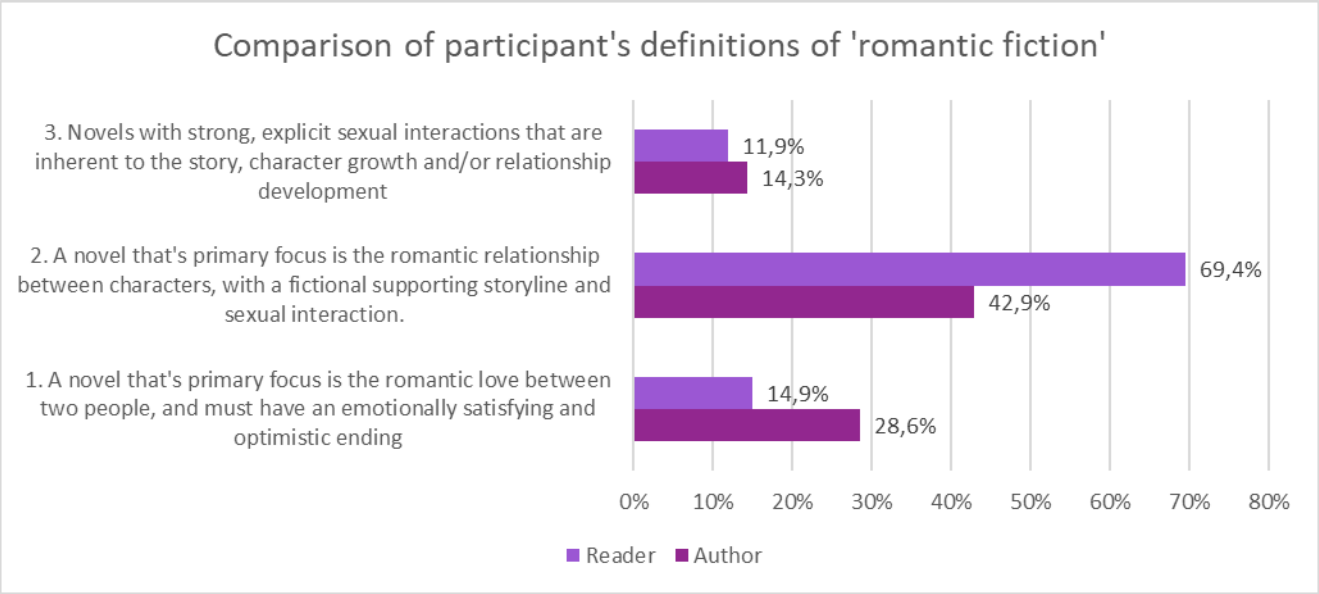


Figure 5.55: Comparison of participants' definitions of 'romantic fiction'

The two self-supplied definitions of 'romantic fiction' were variations of the provided definitions and contained the following themes:

- Both descriptions stipulated that the romantic relationship could take place between two or more characters.
- One author said that neither emotionally satisfying or optimistic endings and sexual interactions were required.
- One author said that an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending is necessary.

Given that both groups had majority votes for Definition 2, it will now be adopted as the definition of 'romantic fiction' from this point forward in this research paper.

5.3.26 Authors' description of 'self-published'

This was a fully qualitative question, where respondents were asked to provide their own description of the term 'self-published' without any prompts from the researcher. All 14 respondents answered this question and the main themes that were identified in the provided descriptions (in the order of frequency) are below:

- Published without the aid of a publishing house or third party.
  "To me it means you publish books without the aid of publishing houses." Ivy Asher
- Entire publishing process controlled by the author (including writing, editing, designing, formatting, marketing, and selling).
  "It means that an author publishes without a publishing house/publisher. They have complete, 100% control over the content, covers, royalties, etc." Sariah Skye
- 100% of the royalties go to the author.
  "It means that an author publishes without a publishing house/publisher. They have complete, 100% control over the content, covers, royalties, etc." Sariah Skye
- Published at the author's expense.
  "Self-published refers to an individual person who publishes literary content at their own expense." Lucy Smoke
- Author retains all rights to their work.
  "Having books available for purchase that were not published through the traditional publishing method (i.e. a publishing company) and retaining all the rights to one's own work." Kaydence Snow
- Published on alternative platforms such as Kindle Unlimited.
  "Publishing your book through Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, or other platforms, and receiving a higher royalty percentage." Author 2
- Independent or non-mainstream author.
  "Self-published is the same as independent publishing – no traditional publishing house or contract, with all benefits and risks assumed directly by the author." Tiegan Clyne

Although the frequency of the themes changed between author and reader descriptions, the themes stayed relatively the same. The only addition that the authors' definitions had was that 100% of the royalties go to the author.

From the combined definition of the term 'self-published' from the readers, the only change made to incorporate the author's opinions is the words 'and royalties from'. Therefore, the newly combined definition which will be adopted from this point forward in this research paper is:

An independent author who controls and pays for the entire publishing process without the aid of a publishing house, mostly on online platforms like Kindle Unlimited, and retains all rights to, and royalties from, their published content.

From the above definition, traditional publishing houses may investigate a new, or relatively unused, value chain for engaging authors who prefer to retain higher percentages of royalties. Publishing houses could offer authors individualised services where the author can select with which services they would like to engage, and which they would prefer to handle themselves. This way publishing houses will remain relevant, while authors can retain or relinquish as much control of the publishing process as they prefer. Although some publishing houses make use of this method, it is still a developing income stream that traditional publishing houses can further investigate

5.3.27 How many romantic fiction novels do authors self-publish per year?

This question had a 100% response rate, with 92,9% (13) of the authors saying that they self-publish two or more romantic fiction novels per year and one author who self-publishes one to two books per year.

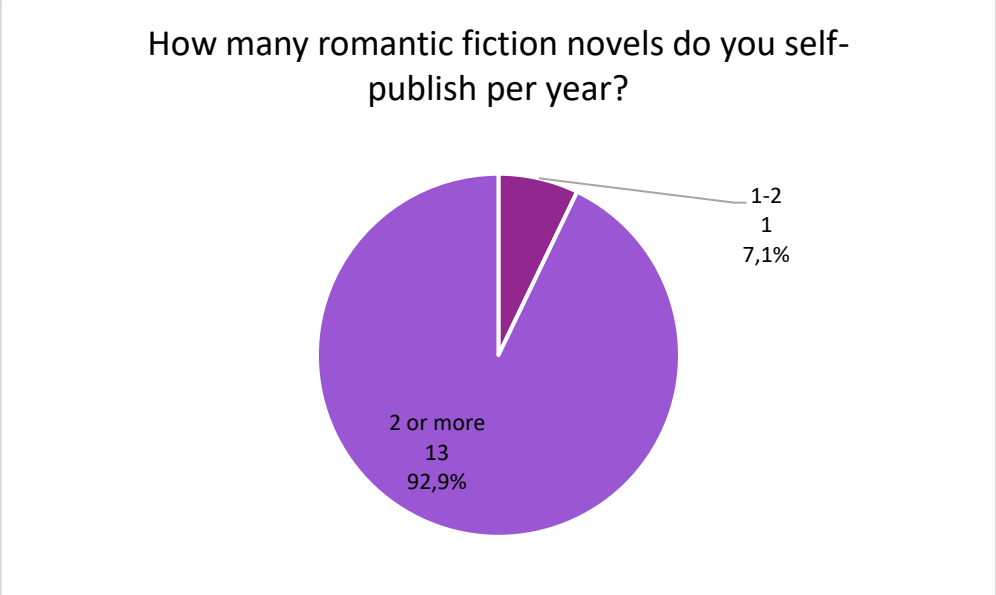


Figure 5.56: Number of romantic fiction novels authors publish per year

This was a surprising answer as, compared to traditional authors who on average publish one to two books every three to five years (Self Publishing Hub, 2020), the self-published authors publish much higher volumes of novels. There are, of course, exceptions to this information.

According to the Self-Publishing Hub (2020), this difference can be explained through self-published authors having removed many of the barriers of getting a book to the market, which allows them to spend more time creating more content and getting it to their readers quicker (Self Publishing Hub, 2020).

5.3.28 How many hours per day do authors spend on the writing of their novel?

Authors were asked to provide the number of hours they spent per day on the writing of their novels, from idea conception to after-publishing activities. The first chart below depicts their answers.



Figure 5.57: Number of hours authors spend on writing process per day

Previously, the authors were asked to provide the number of hours they spend on social media, reader engagement, and content creation specifically for their social media; their answers were reported above.

To better understand the authors' processes and the amount of time spent on each of these two categories of activities, a new chart was created which compared their responses. In the event where a range was given, the bigger value was taken to aide in the comparison. The chart below depicts the collected responses.

As can be seen from the chart, authors spend more time on the writing process of their novel (from idea conception to after publishing activities). This is hardly surprising, but still interesting to note as the average difference in time spent on social media and novel writing was two or more times as many hours per day.

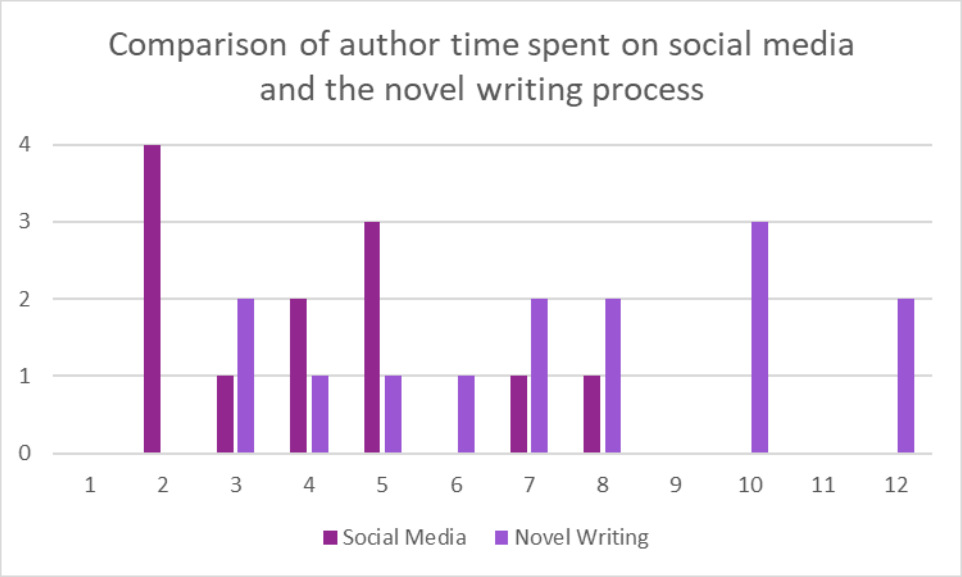


Figure 5.58: Comparison of authors time spent on social media and the writing process

The conclusion that can be drawn from the small average difference in time spent on social media and novel writing is that social media engagement is almost as important to and as time consuming for the author as is the novel-writing process. Clearly, the authors feel that successful social media engagement contributes towards their success.

5.3.29 Authors' self-published romantic fiction reading habits

This question had a 100% response rate and all 14 authors confirmed that they read self-published romantic fiction. This question was used as a bouncing board for the follow-up question of how many self-published romantic fiction novels authors read per month. Readers were asked the same question to determine the average size of the market for self-published romantic fiction novels and to compare the reading habits of readers and authors.

All 14 respondents answered the follow-up question and gave the following depicted results.

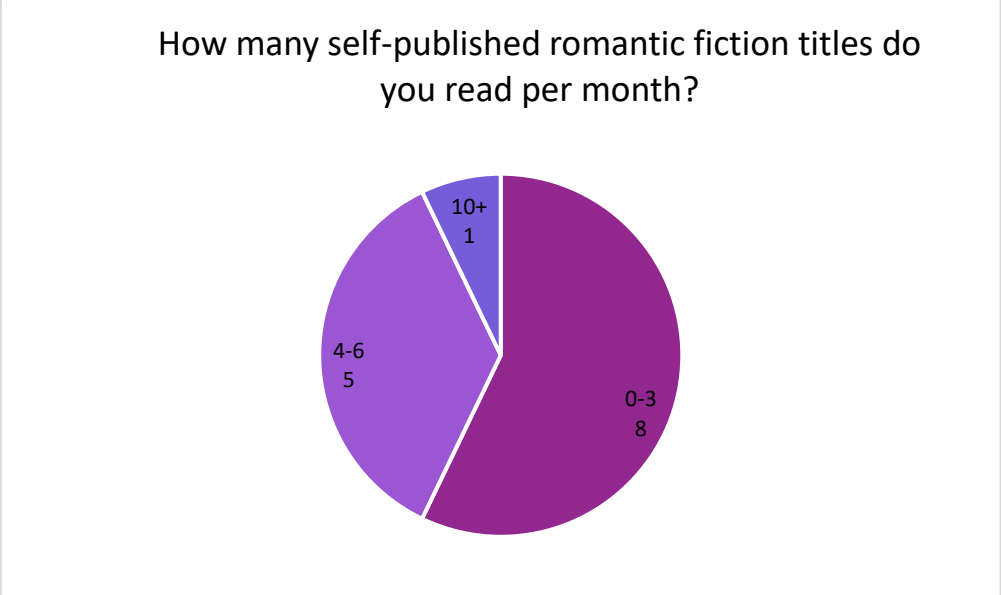


Figure 5.60: Number of self-published romantic fiction titles authors read per month

When the readers and authors answers were compared for this question, a noticeable trend emerged – that the authors read significantly fewer self-published romantic fiction novels than the readers.

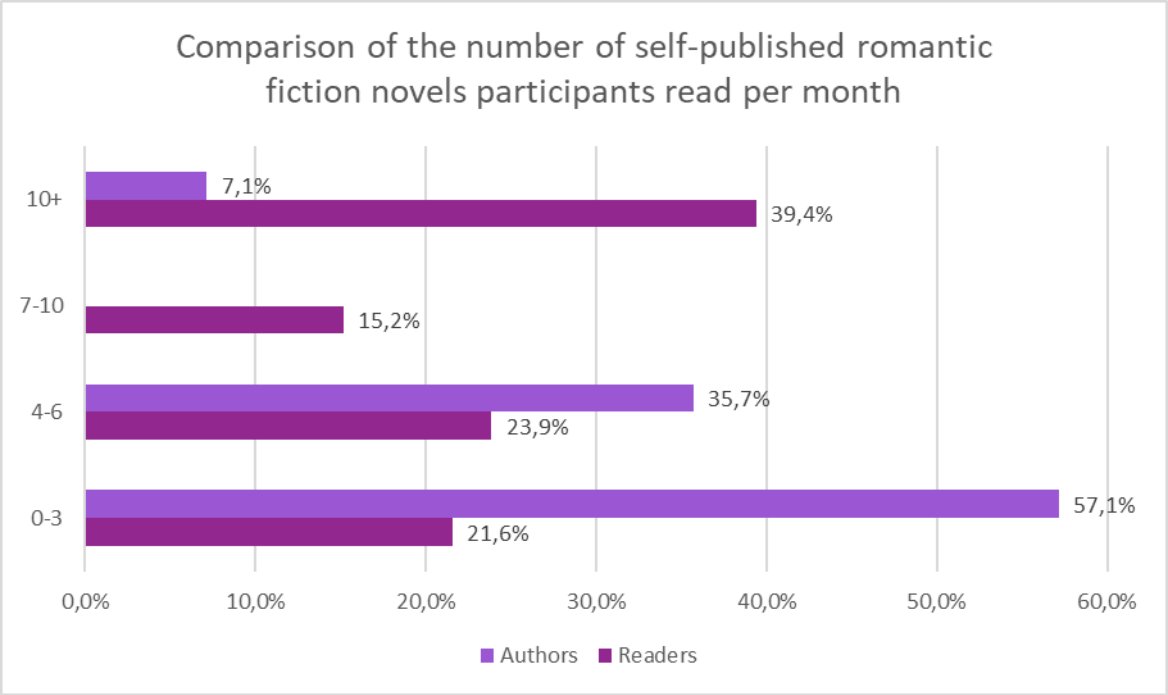


Figure 5.61: Comparison of the number of self-published romantic fiction novels participants read per month

This trend could be because the authors have less time to read; or because although it is a leisure activity, it is closely linked to their work and so they spend less of their free time reading similar content.

5.3.30 In which format do authors prefer to consume romantic fiction titles?

All 14 respondents answered this question, with 92,9% (13) of the authors answering that they prefer to consume romantic fiction titles in ebook format, and the remaining 7,1% (1) answering that their preferred format is audiobooks.

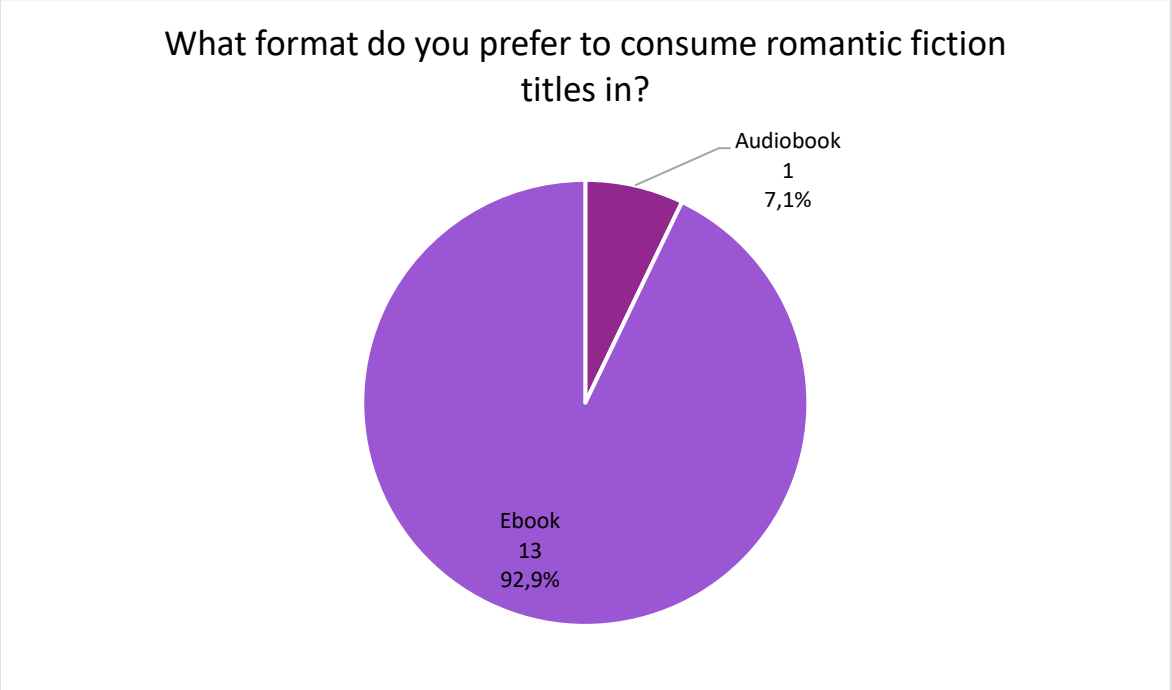


Figure 5.62: Author's preferred format for consuming romantic fiction

It is interesting to note that while not many readers selected printed books as their preferred format, no authors selected this format. This further supports the conclusion that audiobooks are becoming more popular than printed books.

5.3.31 In which formats do authors self-publish romantic fiction titles?

As discussed previously, the fifth of the 5 Rs of publishing is the right format (Turner, 2014). It is important for authors to provide their readers with the right content in the right format.

This question discusses the variety of formats in which the participating authors self-publish their romantic fiction. The results are depicted below.

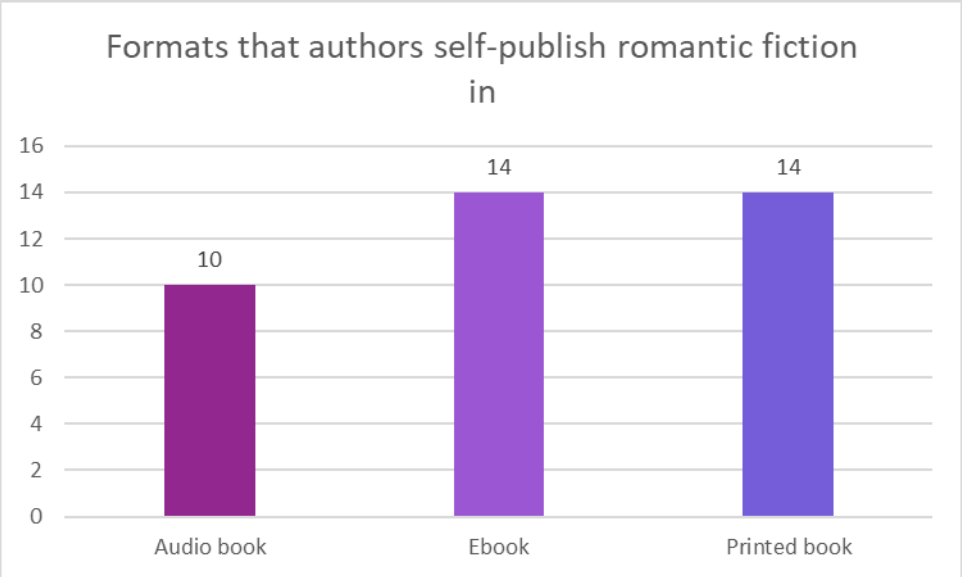


Figure 5.63: Formats in which authors self-publish romantic fiction

All 14 authors responded to this question, with 71,4% (10) of the participating authors answering that they publish their novels in all three of the mentioned formats (ebook, printed book, and audiobook) while the remaining 28,6% (4) of the authors only publish their novels in ebook and printed book formats.

Authors may soon need to re-evaluate the formats in which they publish their novels, as the reader responses showed a pattern moving towards audiobooks and not printed books. Although the difference was very small, if the pattern continues authors will need to adjust and publish more audiobooks than printed books.

5.3.32 What criteria do authors use to decide to purchase or read a self-published romantic fiction title?

While analysing the authors' reading habits, the criteria they use to decide to purchase or read a self-published romantic fiction title were also identified. This question had a 92,9% response rate and the results are depicted below.

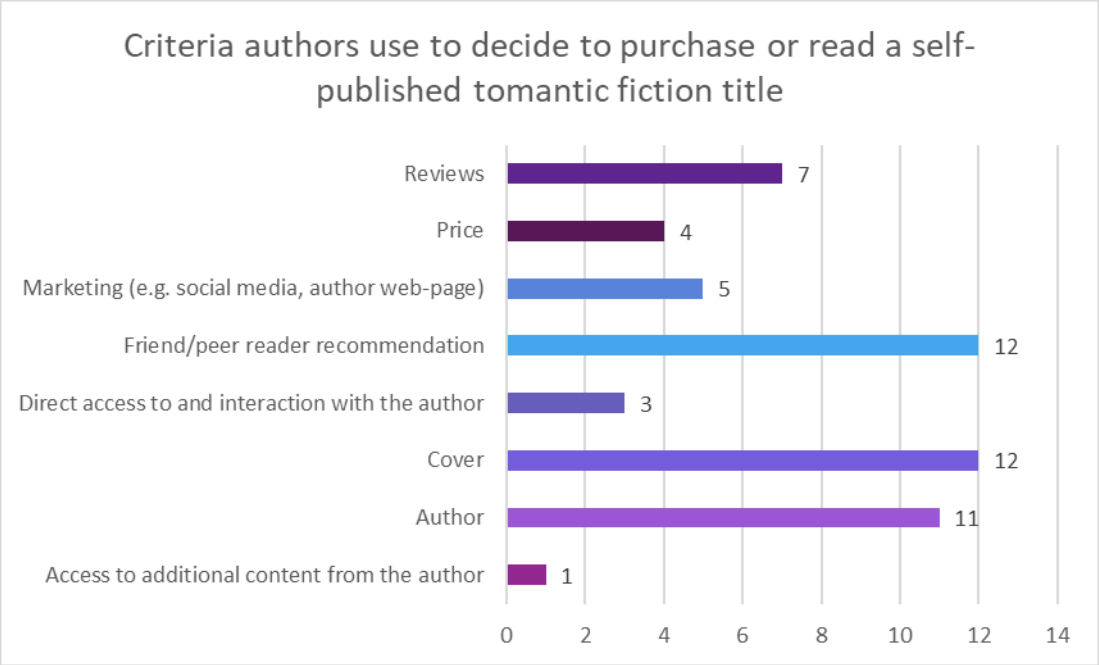


Figure 5.64: Criteria influencing authors' purchase decisions

The main three criteria the authors base their decisions on are:

- Friend/peer reader recommendations
- Cover
- Author

The friend/peer reader recommendations and cover category tied at 85,7% (12) responses each.

The comparison between reader and author responses for this question revealed that both authors and readers selected author and friend/peer reader recommendations as two of their top-three criteria. However, from the depiction below, it is clear that authors rely more on personal recommendations than reviews, while readers rely more on the subgenre of the book to make their decision to purchase or read a self-published romantic fiction title. Readers are also more price-sensitive when making their decision.

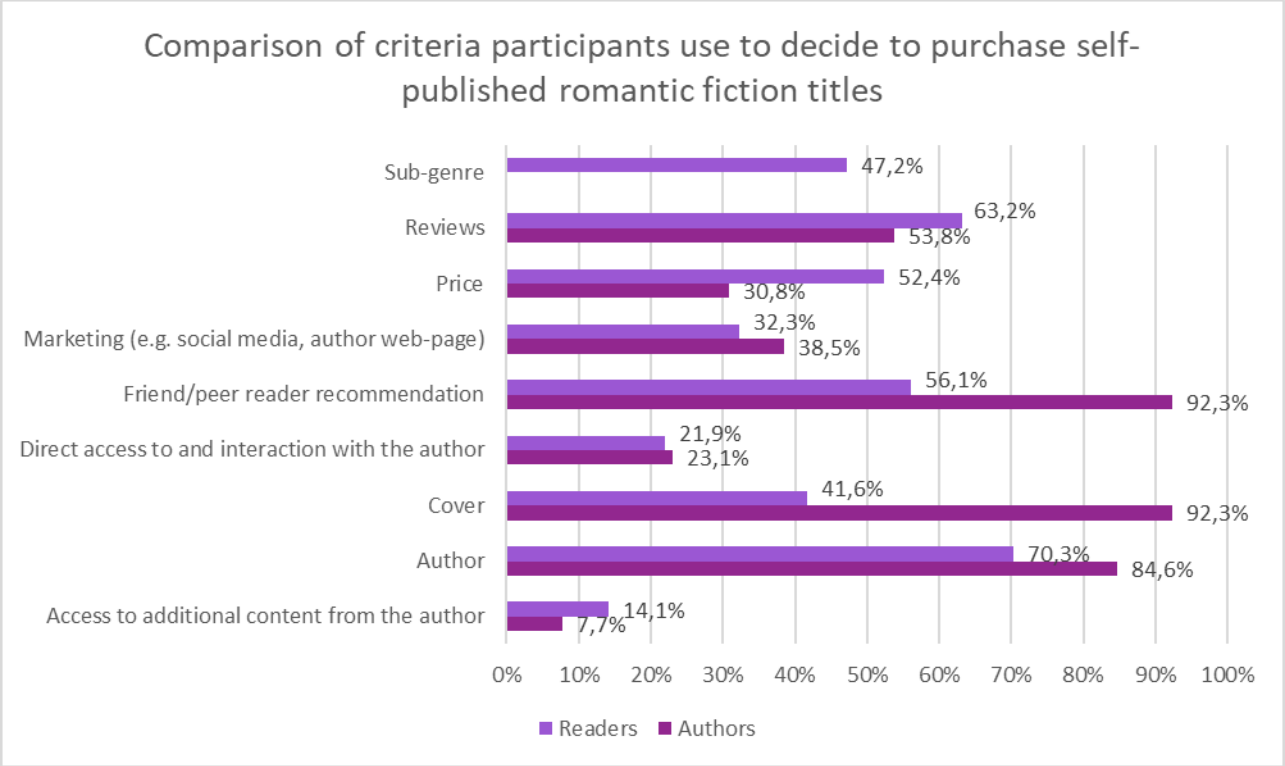


Figure 5.65: Comparison of participants' purchase decision criteria

5.3.33 Have authors ever published through a commercial publisher?

As depicted below, this question had a 100% response rate, with 78,6% (11) of the authors stating that they had never published through a commercial publisher, while the remaining 21,4% (3) said that they had.

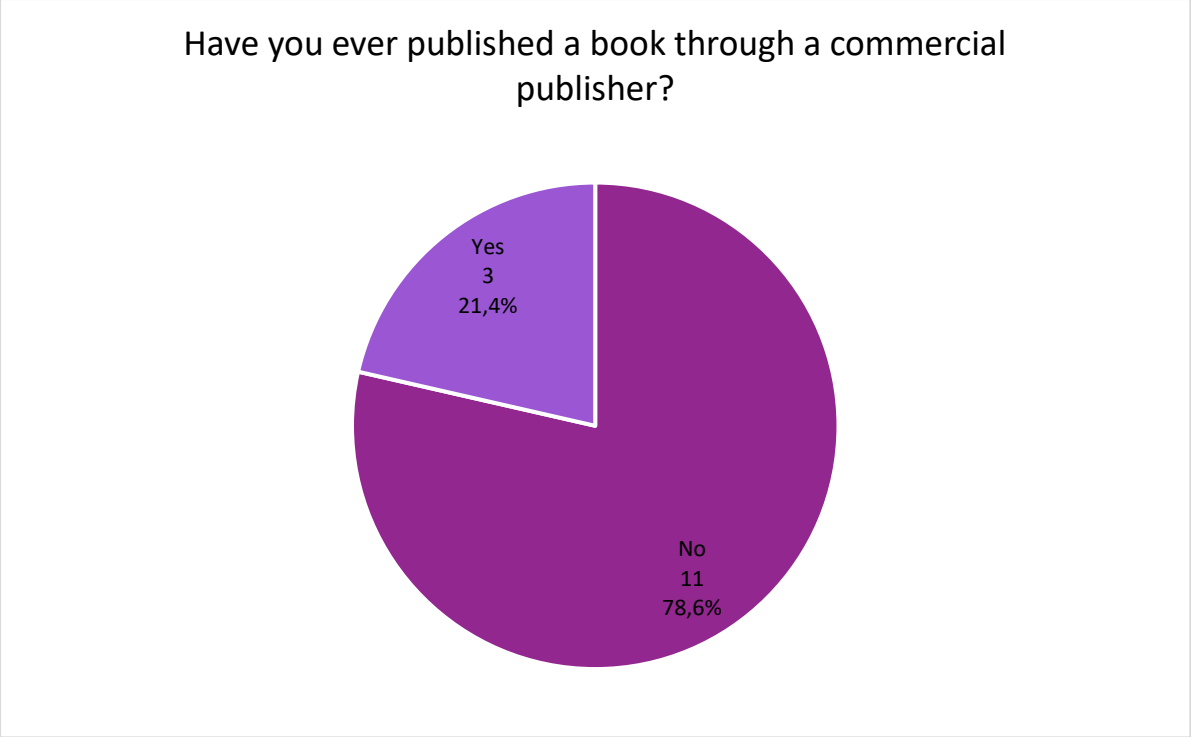


Figure 5.66: Number of authors who have published through commercial publishers

The purpose of questioning whether authors had ever published through commercial publishing houses was to identify whether digital publishing, in all of its forms, has allowed authors to create a new value chain by exploring opportunities they may never have had with a commercial or traditional publisher. The explanations and comparisons for these answers are below.

5.3.34 If no, why not?

Of the 78,6% (11) of authors who answered 'No' to the previous question, 71,4% (10) provided explanations as to why they had chosen not to publish through commercial publishing houses. Through a thematic analysis of these responses, the following main themes were identified (in the order of frequency each theme arose):

- Authors prefer to maintain all control over their work and the entire publishing process.
  "I like to have complete control over the creative process. I wouldn't like the idea of a publisher having more control over my final product than I do. From choices in the

story, to the decision on the cover and editors, I like knowing the finished product is something I made those choices on. That makes it something I'm happy to put my name on." Cece Rose

- Authors do not want publishers to control what they write or to deal with their demands.

  "I honestly don't want to deal with the demands that a publisher put on you. I want to write at my pace and set my own goals." Darcy Ray

  "I might in the future, but I got started with self-publishing and I did it at the right time. I'm happy where I'm at. I've also heard MANY horror stories from previously commercially published authors. I'm not completely comfortable with the complete control an agency or publishing house would have over my work. At that point, I worry it might cease to become something I created and more like something I was forced to create to satisfy someone else." Lucy Smoke

- Authors have experienced success as self-published authors.

  "I've just never had the need to go that route. I've had success as an indie author and I'm quite happy to keep doing what I'm doing." Ivy Asher

- Authors prefer to maintain all royalties earned from their work.

  "I've never had the desire to earn less money." AC Wilds

- Authors have negative experiences with publishing houses or have heard about negative experiences from peers.

  "Bad experience with a small publisher." Author 1

- Authors prefer to maintain all rights to their work.

  "I made the decision to self-publish early on and have not pursued traditional publishing. I like the creative and monetary control self-publishing provides. I like having the rights to my own work." Kaydence Snow

- No identifiable benefit of publishing through a commercial publishing house.

  "Because there was no benefit for me." Author 3

Although the two main themes may seem similar, distinctions were made when authors specifically mentioned not wanting publishing houses to dictate any of their choices or not wanting to bend to publishing demands.

This supports Youngsuk (2014), who states that one of the main reasons authors choose to self-publish their romantic fiction is their unwillingness to relinquish control of their content to publishing houses.

In the literature review for this research paper, four possible reasons authors choose to self-publish were identified. These were:

- Authors have full control over what they publish (Youngsuk, 2014)
- Higher revenue percentages (Odendaal, 2008)
- Technological advances (Turner, 2014)
- Authors can self-promote their publications (Odendaal, 2008)

The above reasons that were identified in the literature review support the responses and explanations given by the author participants.

5.3.35 Comparison of experiences of self-publishing and publishing through a commercial publishing house

Of the three authors who said that they had previously published through commercial publishing houses, the following explanations were given (all of the authors mentioned below consented to being identified in this research paper):

- *"I've learned a lot from both. I enjoy being able to leave cover and editing to my publisher, but in both, active marketing is vital." Elizabeth Ellen Carter*
- *"I see little difference in recent years. I could tell the difference 10 years ago, but indie publishing has come a long way since then." G. Bailey*
- *"Self-publishing is more empowering and rewarding." Tiegan Clyne*

From the above, it is clear that authors appreciate the services that publishing houses provide (such as editing and cover design) but that these benefits are not enough to keep the authors publishing with a publishing house. This is important as it proves that there are still valuable services to be provided by publishing houses, but that a less strict value chain needs to be implemented which keeps more control and royalties with the author.

5.3.36 If social media did not exist, do these authors believe that they would be as successful as they are now, and why?

This question is aimed at the second objective of this research paper – to describe the effects of social media on the self-publishing process and identify whether the connections and engagement between authors and readers positively impact the creation and consumption of content.

Of the 14 respondents, 100% answered this question, with 85,7% (12) of the authors stating that they do not believe they would be as successful as they are now if social media did not exist.

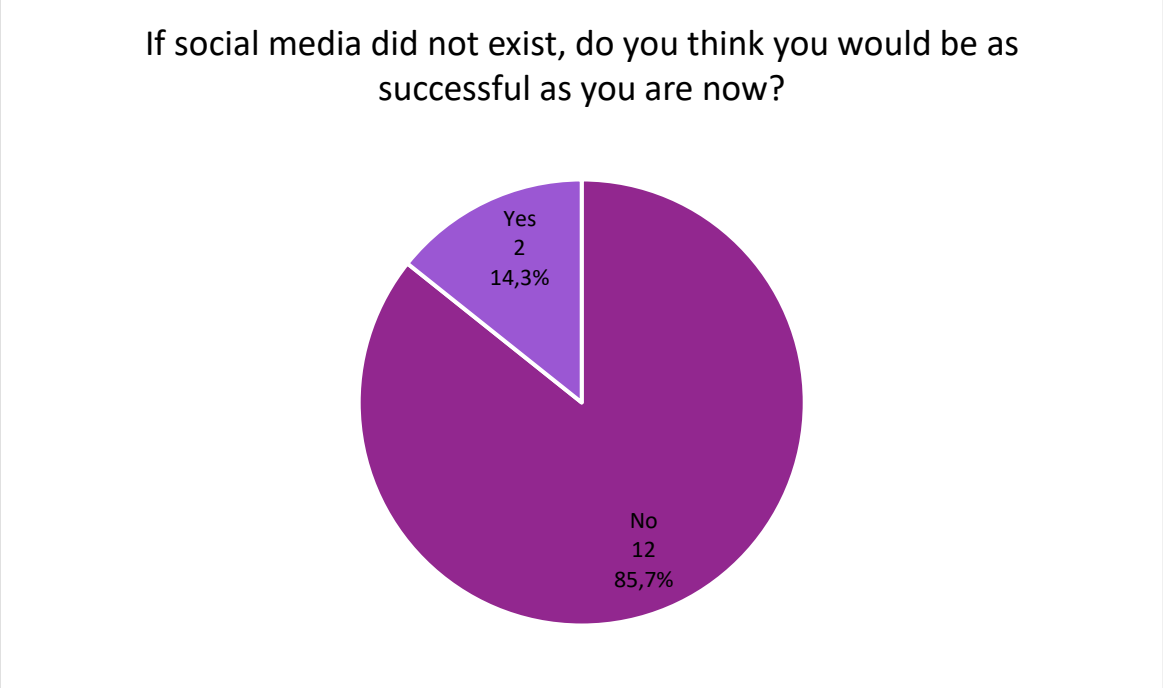


Figure 5.67: Importance of social media for authors' success

Through a thematic analysis of the explanations given, the following themes were identified:

- Without social media, it would be much harder for authors to find and engage with readers and target markets, decreasing the number of readers exposed to their content, and ultimately, decreasing the number of people buying their content.

"Without social media to promo and get the word out about a book, it would be way harder to get people to see it or be willing to give it a try. Social media makes successful indie publishing possible." Ivy Asher

- Without social media, readers could not personally connect with authors, decreasing engagement with the authors – decreasing positive engagement and familiarity, which has been identified as one of the reasons readers support authors.
  "Without social media, it would be very difficult to reach my target audience." Tiegan Clyne
- Traditional advertising and marketing would not be effective due to the high costs, limitations on genres companies are willing to publish, and ease of use for authors with no marketing experience. Without social media, authors could not effectively promote their work, leading to a decrease in consumption.
  "Social media has made it possible for people to find like-minded people – in this case, other readers – and recommend books and authors to each other, discuss these titles and generally become more exposed to independently published books. Without social media, self-published authors would be reliant on traditional modes of book marketing – namely reviews and advertising in mainstream magazines and newspapers. These traditional modes of marketing are monopolised by traditional publishers and the costs associated are prohibitive for most indies." Kaydence Snow
  "Amazon discourages certain genres from being advertised ('poly' romance). The majority of poly romance ('reverse harem') readers find their reads on social media. Other advertisers are iffy (like Bookbub) to allow RH to advertise." Sariah Skye

The remaining two authors said they would still be as successful if social media did not exist, with only one author providing an explanation. The explanation provided by Author 1 was: "While social media helps, if it didn't exist, the readers would be elsewhere in order to find out about books."

The above response indicates that Author 1 appreciates the services that social media provides and acknowledges how useful social media platforms are as marketing and engagement tools. However, she believes that without social media, readers would still find and discuss content. According to Friedman (2017), authors can be successful without using

social media, as long as they remain visible to their readers. Friedman lists a number of activities that authors can do to remain present without social media, including:

- Write guest posts or articles for websites or blogs.
- Be a guest on podcasts of vlogs.
- Organise in-person events or signings.
- Be a guest at book clubs.
- Reach out directly to readers through a mailing list.

Authors who use social media use many of these activities in addition to their social media platforms, so authors who choose not to use social media will need to dedicate more time towards these activities.

5.3.37 General comments

The overall aim of this research is to analyse social media's influence on the consumption of self-published romantic fiction from 2010-2019. The goal of sending a questionnaire to the authors of self-published romantic fiction was to gather information on their social media habits and preferences (their personal and professional accounts), their opinions regarding whether engagement and interaction between authors and readers on social media have an influence on the consumption and creation of their content, and the authors' opinions regarding whether the sense of community that readers gain from social media influences their romantic fiction consumption.

The questionnaire was sent to 40 authors of self-published romantic fiction, 95% (38) women, and 5% (2) men. A total of 14 authors' responses to the questionnaire were collected and analysed.

All 14 of the respondents were female, with 64,3% of the respondents between the ages of 16-35, with English as the majority's home language, as well as being the preferred language to publish and consume self-published romantic fiction.

One hundred percent of the respondents said that they are regular social media users, with 85,7% stating that they visit egocentric social media sites (such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter) more than three times per day, and 92,9% stating that they prefer to access these sites during the day. The trend of when authors visited social media matched the trend of when readers preferred to access the same sites.

Contradictory to the general trend of post preferences, 71,4% of the respondents indicated that they prefer posts with images and the remaining 28,6% indicated that they prefer textual posts.

Some 85,7% of the respondents indicated that they have separate professional social media accounts, while the remaining 14,3% use their personal social media accounts for professional purposes. The top three social media platforms which authors use to promote their content and interact with the readers are Facebook (92,9%), Instagram (85,7%), and Twitter (57,1%).

Some 92,9% of the respondents indicated that they created social media community pages, and that they use these pages to interact and communicate with readers, advertise and promote their content, promote two-way interaction between the authors and their readers, and reach new audiences.

The most popular posts that authors post on their social media pages are additional character backstories or bonus content. The trend also indicated that readers want more video content than the authors are currently providing.

One hundred percent of the respondents indicated that they believe social media engagement influences their readers' purchase decisions. The authors indicated that they believe social media engagement assists them with building lasting relationships with their readers, engaging with their readers in a more personal way, building excitement for new content, allowing readers to become part of the writing process, and providing an effective platform for advertising directly to their readers.

Some 64,3% of the authors responded that engagement with readers on social media influence the content they create and publish, and the remaining 35,7% responded that it does not.

One hundred percent of the authors view social media as a valuable marketing tool, and indicated that they use social media to establish connections with their authors, have direct contact with their readers, reach new target markets, legitimise their brand, and as a promotional platform.

Some 57,1% of the authors indicated that they spend between one to four hours on social media per day, while the remaining indicated that they spend longer than that on social media per day. This indicates that authors use social media more than 'regular' people, who spend an average of two hours and 24 minutes on social media per day.

Some 57,1% of the authors responded that they form personal relationships with the members of their social media pages, while the remaining 42,9% indicated that they only sometimes form personal relationships. Seventy-seven percent of the readers agreed that they can create personal relationships with the other members of the social media pages.

One hundred percent of the authors and 96,7% of the readers agreed that social media creates an enabling environment where they can freely discuss the content of the romantic fiction they read without fear of judgement or criticism.

On average, the authors spend double the amount of time on writing content than they did on social media. From this, it was clear that the authors believed that successful social media engagement contributes towards their success.

Some 92,9% of the authors said that they prefer to consume romantic fiction in ebook format, while the remaining 7,1% said that they prefer audiobooks. One hundred percent of the authors indicated that they publish printed books and ebooks, while 71,4% said that they publish audiobooks. There was a slight trend among readers and authors moving towards audiobooks and away from printed books.

When selecting the criteria which authors use to make a decision to purchase content, the top three criteria are friend and peer reader recommendations, the cover of the novel, and the author of the novel.

Some 78,6% of the authors who responded to this questionnaire had not previously published through a commercial publishing house, while the remaining 21,4% indicated that they had. The main reason why authors choose not to publish through a commercial publishing house is because the authors prefer to maintain all control of their content.

Some 85,7% of the authors said that if social media did not exist, they would not be as successful as they are now, while the remaining 14,3% said that they would still be as successful without social media.

5.4 Conclusion

Both questionnaires provide valuable insight in the aim and objectives of this of this research paper. From the research, some general perceptions and information described in the literature review were proved and supported; however, some new and contradictory findings were also recorded. Chapter 6 will report on whether the original research aim was met and what recommendations for future research were derived.

CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of the research findings

The self-publishing industry has grown rapidly over the past 10 years, with more authors choosing to self-publish their novels rather than publish through a commercial publishing house. Technology and the internet have made it increasingly easy for authors to self-publish and authors are preferring to maintain control of the entire publishing and marketing process.

Another factor which has made it easier and more attractive for authors to self-publish their content is the rise of social media. Social media has become an effective marketing tool, but authors are also using it as a platform for engaging directly with their readers, building relationships with the members of their social media pages, and creating a loyal readership which is more likely to support an author with whom they have positively engaged.

The aim of this research was to analyse social media's influence on the consumption of self-published romantic fiction from 2010-2019. This was analysed through three objectives:

1. To understand how and why authors are using social media and the benefits thereof.
2. To describe the effects of social media on the self-publishing process and identify whether the connections and engagement between authors and readers positively impact the creation and consumption of content.
3. To analyse the effects of the sense of community that social media provides readers and the impact of this on the consumption of criticised romantic fiction.

By using quantitative and qualitative research principles, the researcher was able to identify the social media habits of the authors and readers of self-published romantic fiction and the perceived benefits from each group, establish both subgroups' opinions regarding whether social media connections and engagement positively impact the consumption and creation of content, and establish whether the sense of community that social media provides readers with impacted the consumption of, and conversation around, content that readers would feel criticised reading and discussing in public.

Each objective and its research results are described below, followed by analysis of whether this research achieved its main aim.

6.2 Addressing the objectives from the research aim

In Chapter 1 of the study, various objectives were identified that would help in identifying and researching the main research aim. These objectives have all been addressed and will be individually discussed in terms of its related findings to the aim.

6.2.1 Biographical information, general preferences, and social media habits

General biographical information, preferences, and social media habits were identified from both questionnaires to better understand the target population of this research project and their preferences, to ensure authors can effectively target their existing readers and identify new readers.

For each questionnaire there was a brief biographical information and general social media use section (i.e. social media use not specifically with readers or authors of self-published romantic fiction). The purpose of this was to gather information on whether both subgroups used the same social media sites for interacting with readers and authors as the ones used for general communication practices.

From the data collected from both subgroups, it is clear that the self-published romantic fiction market is dominated by female readers and authors, mostly between the ages of 16-45, who prefer to consume and publish content in English irrespective of whether English is their first language. From the research it was unclear why this occurred, but according to secondary research gathered it could be due to the market being dominated by English home-language authors, or because authors choose to publish in English, believing their content will be more popular if it is in English.

The majority of the readers and authors agreed on “internet-based technologies that facilitate conversations and offer users a platform for content creation, content upload, networking, conversing, media sharing and bookmarking” as their preferred definition of social media. This definition highlighted the aspects of social media that both groups found the most

important. From this definition, it is clear that the uses of social media go far beyond communicating; and that it, if used correctly, offer a target rich platform for engagement and promotion.

Social media has become ingratiated in society in a very short amount of time, with 100% of the authors and 82,6% of the readers stating that they visit egocentric social media sites three or more times a day. Both groups also agreed that they visit egocentric social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter most often, and that during the day is when they are most active online. This provides near endless opportunities for authors to engage with their readers and promote their content in an organic and personal manner; and when using social media analytics tools, authors can target very specific audiences at the times where they are most likely to engage.

Contrary to the secondary data collected in Chapter 2, video content was the least popular post type among the readers and authors who participated in this study. However, a growing need for video content among readers was identified. While the readers preferred text over images and the authors preferred images over text, this could be due to the fact that both of these groups read more than the average person, with 39,4% of the readers consuming more than 10 books per month and 92,9% of the authors reading up to six books per month.

Both groups were also asked to choose their most preferred definition of romantic fiction. The definition that the majority of both groups agreed on was: “A novel which primary focus is the romantic relationship between characters, with a fictional supporting storyline and sexual interaction.” This definition was purposefully less restrictive on romantic relationship, not including the number of people involved in the relationship or the gender of the characters. This shows a growing trend for less conventional male-female romantic relationships in self-published romantic fiction.

The authors and readers were asked to define the term ‘self-published’. The definition that arose from the thematic analysis of both groups answers is: “An independent author who controls and pays for the entire publishing process without the aid of a publishing house, mostly on online platforms such as Kindle Unlimited, and retains all right to, and royalties from, their published content.” One of main reasons many of the authors identified as to why they choose to self-publish their content is that they prefer to retain all the control in the

publishing and marketing process for their content. This stipulation is evident in this definition; however, the authors did recognise the usefulness of some of the traditional publishing houses services, indicating their willingness to work with more traditional publishing houses, provided they retain control over the publishing and marketing process.

The overwhelming majority of both readers and authors (91,5% and 92,9%, respectively) stated that they prefer to consume self-published romantic fiction in ebook format. There was also a small but noticeable trend moving towards audiobooks and away from print books. One hundred percent of the participating authors stated that they publish their content in ebook and printed book formats, while only 71,4% said that they publish audiobook versions of their novels. To take advantage of this trend, authors should reconsider the publishing habits and ensure that they are catering to their readers' preferences.

Despite the obvious differences between the two subgroups analysed in this research (authors and readers), they displayed homogenous characteristics and preferences.

6.2.2 Social media use for engaging with readers and authors, and the benefits thereof

Chapter 2 addressed the definition of social media, the benefits of social media marketing, how authors are using social media to interact and engage with their readers, the layers of identity that authors need to portray online for successful social media engagement, and how readers are interacting with authors on social media. The first objective of this research was to understand how and why authors are using social media and its benefits. The results are discussed below.

The readers identified Facebook (97%), Instagram (2,6%) and Twitter (0,4%) as their most preferred egocentric social media sites on which to engage with authors. When asked the same question, the trend for authors' preferences was the same, with first Facebook (92,9%), then Instagram (85,7%) and thirdly Twitter (57,1%) as their most preferred sites to interact and engage with readers.

When interacting with authors on the above egocentric social media sites, the kind of content that readers prefer to access, see, and engage with are additional character backstories or bonus content, author-reader conversations and interactions, and reader-reader conversations.

The content which authors share the most on the social media pages or reader community pages and groups comprise additional character backstories or bonus content, updates on new releases, competitions, and insight into their personal lives.

From this, it is clear that both groups find additional character backstories or bonus content to be important, but there is a discrepancy between what the authors are providing and what the readers want.

An analysis showed that readers would like to see more video content of authors discussing their content and sharing new insights than what authors are currently providing. Also, despite the large difference of 85,7% of the authors saying that they share competitions, only 33,8% of the readers stated that they enjoyed engaging with these posts.

When the authors were asked what they believe the most valuable benefits of social media are, the following five benefits were identified (all of which were supported by secondary data in the literature review):

- Social media allows authors to establish connections with their readers, potential readers, or other like-minded people.
- Authors can make direct contact with their readers at any time.
- Authors can identify and reach new target markets.
- Authors can use social media to legitimise their brand and increase their relationship capital with their readers.
- Authors can use social media as an effective promotional platform for new content.

From the research it is evident that authors are using social media as a tool to communicate and engage with their audience of readers, and identify and engage with new audiences. Social media is not only a valuable marketing tool, but also a product research tool that aids authors in understanding first-hand who their readers are, as well as what they like and dislike. In a similar way, readers have leveraged the power of social media to directly communicate and engage with their favourite authors. The benefits include a community of

like-minded people who enjoy similar content, platforms where they can discuss the content they enjoy without fear of judgement, insights into the authors who created their favourite stories, and bonus content on stories they love.

6.2.3 Does engagement between authors and readers influence the consumption and creation of content?

The purpose of this objective was to identify whether author and reader connections and engagement on social media influence the amount of content that readers consume and the creation of the content by the authors.

In the literature review, the concept of layers of identity was discussed. This concept refers to the different personas that people share on different social media sites and in person. For example, the persona that most people share on a professional platform such as LinkedIn will often differ from a persona that same person shares on a site such as Facebook or Instagram. This is an important concept because one of the requirements for successful social media engagement that influences the consumption of content is author familiarity and 'genuineness' or authenticity. The readers need to feel like they are engaging with the authors' true personality in order to get to know them in a more personal way. Therefore, despite the difference of 71,4% of the authors sharing insights into their personal lives and only 37,2% of the readers stating that they preferred to engage with this kind of content, the researcher does not encourage minimising the amount of personal information which the authors choose to share with readers. Instead, authors should try to make these posts more engaging to their audiences so that the readers can become more familiar with the authors' true personality.

One hundred percent of the participating authors view social media as a valuable marketing tool, not only to promote new content but also to conduct ongoing market analyses of their readers' needs.

Some 79,6% of the readers stated that interacting and connecting with authors on a more personal level influences their decision to purchase, read, and engage with content written by those authors. From the readers' explanations, readers become more emotionally invested in authors with whom they interact; they like to support the authors in whom they are

emotionally invested; they are more likely to purchase a book written by an author with whom they have personally interacted and are more likely to support an author if they have seen the hard work and dedication the author put into the project.

When asked the same question, 100% of the authors stated that they believed personal engagement with their readers on social media platforms influences their readers' decisions to purchase their content. From the authors' points of view, engaging with readers helps to build lasting relationships that make readers want to support the authors with whom they engage. The readers can get to know the authors on a more personal level which encourages support; it builds excitement for new content which influences readers' decision to purchase content; it allows readers to become part of the writing process which builds reader excitement; and social media engagement provides an effective platform for advertising directly to the readers.

The next part of Objective 2 is to identify whether engagement with readers on social media influences the authors' decisions on content creation. Some 64,3% of the participating authors stated that engagement with readers on social media influences the content they create, while the remaining 35,7% said that their work was not influenced by reader engagement.

Most of the changes to the content created were superficial, such as naming characters after readers, adding jokes from readers, or changing the amount of sexual interactions based on readers' preferences. The authors also indicated that social media provided a valuable platform for market analyses, to identify the need for a certain book or to identify popular reading trends. However, some authors stated that they create stories that are written to market – specifically designed to sell in high volumes.

So, although not all of the authors said that they are influenced by their readers' opinions, the majority stated that social media engagement with their readers have in some way altered their published content.

If social media did not exist, 85,7% of the authors agreed that they would not be as successful as they are now. From an analysis of their explanations, the authors agreed that without social media it would be much harder for authors to find and engage with readers and target

markets, decreasing the number of readers exposed to their content and therefore the amount of people buying their content. It would also decrease positive engagement and familiarity with authors, which was identified as one of the reasons readers support authors. Authors would further be limited to traditional advertising and marketing techniques which are less effective, more expensive, less accommodating towards highly sexualised content, and are more difficult for authors with no marketing experience to use.

In short, the answer to the above question is yes – readers are more likely to purchase, read, and engage with content written by authors with whom they have positively interacted before – therefore, connections and engagement between readers and authors increases the consumption of content consumed by readers from the authors with whom they engage. Although most authors do not publish a novel based entirely on readers' social media engagement, many of the authors who participated in this study stated that they alter their content to fit the needs of their readers and that it influences their content on a superficial level, such as naming characters after readers or changing the amount of sexual interactions in novels according to reader preferences.

6.2.4 The effects of a sense of community on the consumption of criticised romantic fiction

In the literature review, the criticism of romantic fiction in public was discussed. The data from this research supported this conclusion, with many of the readers stating that they often feel uncomfortable and criticised reading highly sexualised content in public and discussing this content with their friends and family. One of the main reasons identified as to why readers preferred ebooks is because it minimises the risk of people viewing and judging the novels they are reading.

One of the main benefits of social media identified in this research and supported by secondary research is the sense of community. A sense of community is defined as a sense of belonging, an emotional connection, a feeling of mattering to others within the community and a belief that the group members can meet each other's needs (Laing, 2017).

When asked, 96,7% of the readers stated that they belong to social media reader community pages and one of the main reasons identified for this is that these groups provide free, open spaces of like-minded individuals who enjoy similar content.

Some 96,7% of the readers stated that they find it more enjoyable to discuss the content of self-published romantic fiction with readers on social media reader community pages. Some 85,2% of the readers stated that they find interacting with other readers of the same content important to them. This leaves a large percent of this market open to interaction and engagement with each other on these platforms, where these interactions and engagements can influence readers' decisions to purchase content through other members' recommendations, opinions, and insights.

Some 62,6% of the readers stated that connections or friendships made on social media, specifically in social media reader community pages, influence their decision to purchase or read the content discussed in the groups.

Some 92,9% of the authors stated that they have created reader community pages. The three main reasons why authors decided to create social media reader community pages was because they believed these groups provide the best platform to engage with readers in a more relaxed, personal, and authentic manner; they provide platforms for advertising and promoting new content; and they wanted to create a safe space for their readers where they could interact with like-minded people.

When asked specifically, 100% of the authors said that they believe these social media reader community pages create enabling environments for readers to openly discuss the content found in their novels without fear of criticism.

In essence, readers and authors find a sense of community in the social media reader community pages; and the connections, discussions, and opinions in these groups influence their decision to purchase the content discussed in the groups. But beyond that, these groups provide an added value to the readers because they offer a community of people with similar interests, and the people in these communities can, in part, fulfil their emotional needs in direct relation to the content they otherwise feel criticised for reading.

6.3 Conclusion

The main aim of this research was: **To analyse social media's influence on the consumption of self-published romantic fiction from 2010-2019.** By addressing the objectives of the research, it became clear that social media had an intense influence on the consumption of self-published romantic fiction.

The three main ways that social media influenced the consumption of self-published romantic fiction identified in this research are:

1. Social media provided authors with a valuable marketing platform that allowed them to have direct contact with their readers, identify new target markets, and identify emerging trends in readers' preferences. This led to an increase in the consumption of romantic fiction, as more people were exposed to the content and readers were happier with the content being provided. This also positively influenced the content that authors published, making it more aligned with their readers' needs.
2. Social media provided authors and readers with a platform for effective two-way engagement between authors and readers, and among readers. The data gathered in this research proved that the relationships formed between readers and authors positively influenced the consumption of self-published romantic fiction.
3. Social media provided readers and authors with a sense of community that met their emotional need to discuss the content they enjoyed without the fear of criticism. The data gathered proved that both readers and authors often felt criticised for the content they read, specifically highly sexualised content, and that these communities provided them with a safe space to discuss the content without fear of judgement. The connections made in these communities were proven to positively influence the consumption of self-published romantic fiction.

One of a self-published romantic fiction author's most valuable tools to positively influence the consumption of their content is their social media engagement. Effective social media engagement through genuine personas can grow an author's loyal readership and the audience they reach.

6.4 Recommendations for further research opportunities

The following opportunities for further research were identified throughout this research paper:

- The data that was collected for this research indicated that the self-published romantic fiction market was dominated by authors and readers whose first language is English. However, even those authors and readers whose first language is not English preferred to publish and consume romantic fiction in English. The possible reason for this that the researcher identified was that authors felt their content would be more popular, and thus be better sellers, if it is published in English, and that the readers had difficulty finding a broad range of content written in their home language. However, despite some secondary sources, this hypothesis was not proven. Thus, the opportunity to research why non-first language English authors and readers choose to publish and consume romantic fiction in English was identified.
- According to Hines (2010), the average age of authors at the time they sold their first professional novel is 36.2 years old. However, 64,3% of the authors who participated in this study were under the age of 35, all of whom had successfully published more than one novel. Thus, the opportunity to research why the age of the self-publishing author is younger than the traditionally published author due to lower barriers to entry, advanced technology, and self-organising communities was identified.
- According to the definition of self-published authors identified through this research, it is clear that self-published authors conduct the publishing process themselves, without the aid of a publishing house. However, according to the Self-Publishing Hub (2020), traditionally published authors publish one to two books every three to five years, while 92,9% of the self-published authors who participated in this study indicated that they publish two or more novels per year. Thus, the opportunity to further research why self-published authors publish more novels per year when they spend time on the publishing process that traditionally published authors do not, was identified.
- The social media sites on which readers prefer most to interact and engage with authors were identified as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. However, readers were only given the opportunity to select one site. Further research could be conducted into

the emerging social media platforms that can be used for author and reader engagement, especially among younger readers.

- Although it was identified that the sense of community which social media provides to readers and authors positively influences the consumption of self-published romantic fiction, the characteristics of effective groups that provided this sense of community were not identified. Further research could be conducted into the characteristics of pages which successfully provide members with a sense of community and how to create a social media page which provides members with a sense of community.
- The data collected in this research indicated that readers preferred to engage with, and consume or buy content written by, self-published authors. However, due to the fact that these readers were specifically approached because they consume content written by self-published romantic fiction authors, this data could be biased. Therefore, further research could be conducted to determine general reader preferences and how traditionally published authors and companies can learn from self-published authors that have displaced the traditional publishing chain.
- One of the main reasons identified through this research and supported by secondary sources that authors choose to self-publish their work is because they prefer to maintain all control over the publishing process. However, the data collected also suggested that authors still appreciated some of the services that traditional publishing houses provide. Therefore, a new publishing model where authors retain control of the process and the finished product while using services provided by a publishing house could be investigated.
- The authors who participated in this study reported that they spent 1-4 hours on social media and an average of 7,5 hours on the novel writing process per day. The majority also said that they published more than two books per year. An opportunity for future research presented itself in this analysis – is writing and self-publishing romantic fiction novels a realistic full-time job and revenue stream?

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Appendix A: Authors of Self-Published Romantic Fiction Questionnaire

Authors of Self-Published Romantic Fiction Questionnaire

Dear Sir / Madam,

My name is Michelle Saffy and I am a Masters student in Publishing Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. As part of the fulfillment of my degree, a full research report is required, and I am analyzing social media's influence on the consumption of self-published romantic fiction. The aim of this research project is to find out whether the increase in interaction and connection between authors and readers via social media is influencing what content is created and consumed.

As part of this project, I would like to invite you to take part in this questionnaire as a reader of self-published romantic fiction. This activity will involve answering this questionnaire and will take around 10 minutes.

You will not receive any direct benefits from participating in this research, and there are no disadvantages or penalties for not participating. You may withdraw at any time or not answer any question if you do not want to. The information gathered through this questionnaire will be completely confidential and anonymous, if requested by the author, as I will not be asking for your name or any identifying information, and the information you give to me will be held securely and not disclosed to anyone else. Please see the Anonymity Clause below.

If you have any questions, during or after the questionnaire, about this research, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. This study will be written up as a research report which will be available online through the university library website. If you wish to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email Shaun.Schoeman@wits.ac.za

Thank you for your contribution towards the increased knowledge in this field.

Yours sincerely,
Michelle Saffy
msaffy@gmail.com
+27 72 644 2019

Research Supervisor:
Ms. Rhode Odendaal
rodendaal@icloud.com
*Required

Anonymity Clause

By selecting 'yes' you allow me to identify you as one of the approached authors for this research document and to connect your questionnaire results with your work. If yo

If you select 'no', you will not be identified as an author approached for this research document and no connections will be made on the results of this questionnaire and your work. If you prefer to remain anonymous, you will be addressed by a pseudonym or as Author A, for example.

1. By citing you as an author, I believe this research would gain much more depth. The possibility of connecting your questionnaire results with your work would add richness for potential readers of this research. If you consent to being identified in this research, please select 'yes' below. If you select 'no', you will not be identifiable through my research document or any information you provide. *

   Mark only one oval.

   - ◯ Yes, I consent to be identifiable in this research
   - ◯ No, I prefer to remain anonymous

2. If you consent being identifiable in this research, please provide your name and surname under which you publish your books. Please note that this information will only be used for the purposes of this research.

   _____

3. I have read and understood the information provided above and consent to participating in this research project *

   Mark only one oval.

   - ◯ Yes
   - ◯ No

Biographical Information

This section will gather basic, non-identifying information about you.

4. What gender do you primarily identify as?

Mark only one oval.

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say
- Other: _____

5. How old are you?

Mark only one oval.

- 16-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- 56-65
- 65+

6. What is your first language?

Mark only one oval.

- English
- Other: _____

7. What language do you primarily publish self-published romantic fiction in?

Mark only one oval.

- English
- Other: _____

Social Media Use

The information gathered in this section is related to social media sites and the sites you use most often for your personal and professional accounts

8. From the list below, choose the definition of social media that you feel is most accurate

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Virtual platforms that allow users to construct profiles of themselves that facilitate connections
- ◯ Platforms that allow users to connect based on interests and hobbies
- ◯ Platforms that allow users to share rich media with each other
- ◯ Internet-based technologies that facilitate conversations and offer users a platform to for content creation, content upload, networking, conversing, media sharing and bookmarking

9. Are you a regular user of social media?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

10. Based on the table below, what category of social media platforms do you visit most often?

Categories of social media	Appeal	Examples of sites
Egocentric sites	Allow users to construct profiles of themselves on virtual platforms facilitating identity construction and connections.	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
Community sites	Imitate real-world communities, allowing groups to form around like beliefs.	BigWaveDave.com, BlackPlanet.com
Opportunistic sites	Allow for different social organization of users and facilitate business connections. Often defined vertically.	LinkedIn, Academia.edu
Passion-centric sites	Allow users to connect based on interests and hobbies. Often defined horizontally.	Goodreads, Pinterest
Media sharing sites	Allow users to share rich media with eachother. Defined by content, not users.	YouTube, Flickr, SlideShare

Source: Adapted from Fraser and Dutta (2008)

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Egocentric sites
- ◯ Community sites
- ◯ Opportunistic sites
- ◯ Passion-centric sites
- ◯ Media sharing sites

11. How often do you visit egocentric sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ More than thrice a day
- ◯ 3 times a day
- ◯ Once a day
- ◯ Once a week
- ◯ Less than once a week
- ◯ Almost never

12. What times of the day do you prefer to visit the above egocentric sites?

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] In the morning before you get out of bed
- [ ] During the course of the day
- [ ] During the evening
- [ ] At night before you fall asleep

13. What kind of content do you prefer to access on the above egocentric sites?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Mostly videos
- ◯ Mostly images
- ◯ Mostly text

Engagement with Readers

This section aims to understand your specific professional social media use and engagement with your readers.

14. Do you have a separate professional social media account specifically dedicated to promoting your content and interacting with your readers?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

15. Which social media sites are you currently using to promote your content and interact with your readers on?

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Facebook
- [ ] Instagram
- [ ] Twitter
- [ ] Other: _____

16. Have you created any social media reader community pages?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

17. Please explain why you chose to, or decided against, creating a social media reader community page

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

18. If applicable, please select which of the following egocentric sites you have used to create social media reader community pages?

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ Twitter

Other: ☐ _____

19. When posting on your professional social media pages of reader community pages, what type of content do you share?

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Insight into your personal life
- ☐ Additional character backstories or bonus content
- ☐ Videos discussing your content and sharing new insights
- ☐ Competitions
- ☐ Updates on new releases

20. Do you think personal engagement with your readers on social media platforms influences your readers decisions to purchase your content?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

21. Please give reasons for your above answer

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

22. Does engagement with your readers on social media influence the content you create and publish?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

23. Please substantiate your above answer

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

24. Do you think social media is a valuable marketing tool for your content?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

25. In your opinion, what do you think is the most valuable benefit of social media?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

26. How many hours per day do you spend on social media, reader engagement and content creation (specifically for your social media pages)?

_____

27. Do you establish personal relationships with members of your social media reader community pages?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Sometimes

28. Do you believe that social media reader community pages create an enabling environment for your readers to openly discuss your content without fear of criticism?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Reading and Writing Habits

This section gathers basic information about your reading and writing habits

29. From the descriptions below, choose the description that you feel best describes the term 'romantic fiction'

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ A novel that's primary focus is the romantic love between two people, and must have an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending
- ◯ Novels with strong, explicit sexual interactions that are inherent to the story, character growth and/or relationship development
- ◯ A novel that's primary focus is the romantic relationship between characters, with a fictional supporting storyline and sexual interaction.
- ◯ Other: _____

30. Please describe the term 'self-published'

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

31. How many romantic fiction novels do you self-publish per year

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ 0-1
- ◯ 1-2
- ◯ 2 or more

32. How many hours per day do you spend on the writing process of your novel (from conception to after publishing activities)?

_____

33. Do you read self-published romantic fiction?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

34. How many self-published romantic fiction titles do you read per month?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ 0-3
- ◯ 4-6
- ◯ 7-10
- ◯ 10+

35. What format do you prefer to consume romantic fiction titles in?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Printed book
- ◯ Ebook
- ◯ Audiobook

36. What formats do you self-publish romantic fiction titles in?

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Printed book
- ☐ Ebook
- ☐ Audio book

37. Based on which of the following criteria do you decide to purchase/read a self-published romantic fiction title?

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Price
- [ ] Friend/peer reader recommendation
- [ ] Reviews
- [ ] Cover
- [ ] Author
- [ ] Marketing (e.g. social media, author web-page)
- [ ] Access to additional content from the author
- [ ] Direct access to and interaction with the author

Interaction with Commercial Publishers

This section investigates your interaction with commercial publishing houses

38. Have you ever published a book through a commercial publisher?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

39. If no, why not?

40. If yes, please compare the experience of self-publishing and publishing through a commercial publishing house

41. If social media did not exist, do you think you would be as successful as you are now?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

42. Please explain your above answer

Additional Voluntary Information

Thank you for participating in this research and contributing towards the knowledge in this field.

If there is any other information that you feel was not sufficiently collected in this questionnaire, please select yes below, and I will contact you for a follow up call.

43. Would you like to be contacted by the researcher to provide any other information that would contribute to the research?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

44. If yes, please provide your Skype details so that I may contact you. This information will purely be used for the purpose of this information.

Appendix B: Readers of self-published romantic fiction questionnaire

Readers of Self-Published Romantic Fiction Questionnaire

Dear Sir / Madam,

My name is Michelle Saffy and I am a Masters student in Publishing Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. As part of the fulfillment of my degree, a full research report is required, and I am analyzing social media's influence on the consumption of self-published romantic fiction. The aim of this research project is to find out whether the increase in interaction and connection between authors and readers via social media is influencing what content is created and consumed.

As part of this project, I would like to invite you to take part in this questionnaire as a reader of self-published romantic fiction. This activity will involve answering this questionnaire and will take around 10 minutes.

You will not receive any direct benefits from participating in this research, and there are no disadvantages or penalties for not participating. You may withdraw at any time or not answer any question if you do not want to. The information gathered through this questionnaire will be completely confidential and anonymous as I will not be asking for your name or any identifying information, and the information you give to me will be held securely and not disclosed to anyone else.

If you have any questions, during or after the questionnaire, about this research, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. This study will be written up as a research report which will be available online through the university library website. If you wish to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email Shaun.Schoeman@wits.ac.za

Thank you for your contribution towards the increased knowledge in this field.

Yours sincerely,
Michelle Saffy
msaffy@gmail.com
+27 72 644 2019

Research Supervisor:
Ms. Rhode Odendaal
rodendaal@icloud.com
*Required

1. I have read and understood the information provided above and consent to participating in this research project *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Biographical Information

This section will gather basic, non-identifying information about you.

2. What gender do you primarily identify as?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Female
- ◯ Male
- ◯ Prefer not to say
- ◯ Other: _____

3. How old are you?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ 16-25
- ◯ 26-35
- ◯ 36-45
- ◯ 46-55
- ◯ 56-65
- ◯ 65+

4. What is your first language?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ English
- ◯ Other: _____

5. What language do you primarily use to consume romantic fiction?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ English
- ◯ Other: _____

Social Media Use

The information gathered in this section is related to social media and the sites you use most often.

6. From the list below, choose one definition of social media that you feel is most accurate

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Virtual platforms that allow users to construct profiles of themselves that facilitate connections
- ◯ Platforms that allow users to connect based on interests and hobbies
- ◯ Platforms that allow users to share rich media with each other
- ◯ Internet -based technologies that facilitate conversations and offer users a platform for content creation, content upload, networking, conversing, media sharing and bookmarking

7. Are you a regular user of social media?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

8. Based on the table below, what category of social media platforms do you visit most often?

Categories of social media	Appeal	Examples of sites
Egocentric sites	Allow users to construct profiles of themselves on virtual platforms facilitating identity construction and connections.	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
Community sites	Imitate real-world communities, allowing groups to form around like beliefs.	BigWaveDave.com, BlackPlanet.com
Opportunistic sites	Allow for different social organization of users and facilitate business connections. Often defined vertically.	LinkedIn, Academia.edu
Passion-centric sites	Allow users to connect based on interests and hobbies. Often defined horizontally.	Goodreads, Pinterest
Media sharing sites	Allow users to share rich media with eachother. Defined by content, not users.	YouTube, Flickr, SlideShare

Source: Adapted from Fraser and Dutta (2008)

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Egocentric sites
- ◯ Community sites
- ◯ Opportunistic sites
- ◯ Passion-centric sites
- ◯ Media sharing sites

9. How often do you visit egocentric sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ More than 3 times a day
- ◯ 3 times a day
- ◯ Once a day
- ◯ Once a week
- ◯ Less than once a week
- ◯ Almost never

10. What times of the day do you prefer to visit the above egocentric sites?

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] In the morning before you get out of bed
- [ ] During the course of the day
- [ ] During the evening
- [ ] At night before you fall asleep

11. What kind of content do you prefer to access on the above egocentric sites?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Mostly videos
- ◯ Mostly images
- ◯ Mostly text
- ◯ Other: _____

Reading Habits

This section investigates your reading habits

12. From the descriptions below, choose the description that you feel best describes the term 'romantic fiction'

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ A novel that's primary focus is the romantic love between two people, and must have an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending
- ◯ Novels with strong, explicit sexual interactions that are inherent to the story, character growth and/or relationship development
- ◯ A novel that's primary focus is the romantic relationship between characters, with a fictional supporting storyline and sexual interaction.
- ◯ Other: _____

13. Please describe the term 'self-published'

_____

14. Do you read self-published romantic fiction?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

15. How many self-published romantic fiction titles do you read per month?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ 0-3
- ◯ 4-6
- ◯ 7-10
- ◯ 10+

16. What format do you prefer to consume romantic fiction titles in?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Printed book
- ◯ Ebook
- ◯ Audiobook
- ◯ Other: _____

17. Please explain why you prefer to consume romantic fiction titles in your above mentioned preferred format

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

18. Based on which of the following criteria do you decide to purchase/read a self-published romantic fiction title?

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Price
- [ ] Friend/peer reader recommendation
- [ ] Reviews
- [ ] Cover
- [ ] Author
- [ ] Sub-genre
- [ ] Marketing (e.g. social media, author web-page)
- [ ] Access to additional content from the author
- [ ] Direct access to and interaction with the author

Reader and Author Engagement

The section aims to understand your specific social media use related to the self-published romantic fiction you read

19. Do you follow any authors of self-published romantic fiction on social media?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

20. Which egocentric social media site do you prefer to interact with these authors on?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Facebook
- ◯ Instagram
- ◯ Twitter

21. Do you belong to any digital book clubs or reader communities for self-published romantic fiction?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

22. Please explain why you choose or choose not to belong digital book clubs or reader communities for self-published romantic fiction

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

23. Does interacting, connecting and engaging with the authors on a personal level on social media influence your decision to purchase their content?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No
- ◯ Maybe

24. When interacting with authors on these sites, what type of content do you like to access, see and engage with?

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Text only
- [ ] Videos of authors discussing their content and sharing new insights
- [ ] Competitions
- [ ] Additional character backstories or bonus content
- [ ] Author-reader conversations
- [ ] Reader-reader conversations
- [ ] Insight into the authors personal life

Other: [ ] _____

Sense of Community on Reader Communities

This section investigates the sense of community that social media reader communities provides to readers

25. Are you part of any fan pages for self published romantic fiction authors/series/novels?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

26. Why are you a part of these fan pages or social media reader communities?

Tick all that apply.

- [ ] Updates on new author releases
- [ ] Interaction with the author
- [ ] Interaction with other readers
- [ ] Book recommendations
- [ ] Free open space of like-minded individuals who enjoy similar content as you

Other: [ ] _____

27. Do you find discussing the content of self-published romantic fiction more enjoyable with readers on the social media reader communities?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

28. Is interacting with other readers of the same content important to you?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

29. Please explain why you do or do not find interacting with other readers of the same content important

30. Do you establish relationships with readers or authors on the social media reader communities or fan pages?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

31. Do the above connections or friendships influence your decision to purchase or read content discussed in the groups?

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

32. Please explain how these connections or friendships influence your decision

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Interaction with Commercial Publishers

This section investigates you interaction with commercial publishing houses

33. Which commercial publishing houses do you engage with?

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Penguin Random House
- ☐ HarperCollins
- ☐ Macmillan
- ☐ Simon & Schuster
- ☐ Hachette

34. How do you prefer to engage with commercial publishing houses?

Mark only one oval.

- Publishers website
- Publishers social media pages
- Promotions
- Author events and signings
- Book fairs

35. Do you prefer self-published or commercially published content?

Mark only one oval.

- Self-published content
- Commercially published content

36. Please explain your above answer

Appendix C: Ethics Clearance Certificate

SCHOOL OF Literature, Language and Media RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: SLLM/M19/11**
PROJECT TITLE	An analysis of social media's influence on the consumption of self-published romantic fiction from 2010-2019
INVESTIGATOR **SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT**	**Michelle Rose Saffy** SLLM/ Publishing
DATE CONSIDERED	8 November 2019
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved

This ethical clearance is valid for 1 year and may be renewed upon application.

EXPIRY DATE December 2020

ISSUE DATE OF CERTIFICATE November 2019 **CHAIRPERSON**

cc: Supervisor(s) : Colleen Dawson

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Chairperson of the School/Department ethics committee.

I fully understand the conditions under which I am are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to resubmit the protocol to the Committee.

Signature **Date** 12 / 3 / 2020