Self-publishing trade books in South Africa: opportunities, challenges, and implications

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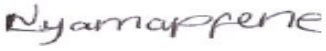
Signature:  Date: 12 March 2025

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Abstract

This study explores the self-publishing landscape in South Africa, focusing on author motivations, experiences, and implications for key stakeholders, including authors, traditional publishers, booksellers, publishing service providers, and readers. Employing qualitative methods, such as questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, the research addresses a gap in empirical evidence about self-publishing within the South African trade sector. Findings reveal that authors are driven to self-publish for interconnected reasons, including rejection by traditional publishers, potential financial benefits, a desire for creative control, and publishing prestige. The satisfactions authors derive align closely with these motivations, with creative control emerging as a paramount benefit. Authors highly value their autonomy over copyright, production, distribution, and profits, making many reluctant to pursue traditional publishing. While financial rewards represent another significant advantage, substantial monetary success remains limited to a select few. The quality of self-published books varies widely, with most failing to meet professional standards, although some match the quality of traditionally published books. Authors face persistent challenges, including stigma and distribution barriers, yet self-publishing remains a vital alternative in South Africa's constrained traditional publishing market. The study highlights how self-publishing amplifies diverse voices and genres, with publishing service providers playing a crucial role in maintaining quality standards. However, the reach of self-published works is often limited by barriers within the traditional publishing landscape. These findings offer practical insights for authors, publishers, and service providers navigating the evolving self-publishing ecosystem, underscoring its potential to democratize publishing while highlighting areas for improvement.

Keywords: self-publishing, gatekeeping, author motivations, creative control, literary diversity, stigma, discoverability, South Africa

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Acronyms

ABC	African Books Collective
ABET	Adult Basic Education and Training
CBD	Central Business District
CNA	Central News Agency
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
DSAC	Department of Sports, Arts and Culture
E-book	Electronic Book
FEP	Federation of European Publishers
FET	Further Education and Training
IP	Intellectual Property
IPA	International Publishers Association
ISBN	International Standard Book Number
KDP	Kindle Direct Publishing
KU	Kindle Unlimited
NLSA	National Library of South Africa
NRF	National Research Foundation
PASA	Publishers Association of South Africa
POD	Print-on-demand
RRP	Recommended Retail Price
SABDC	South African Book Development Council
SEO	Search Engine Optimization
SMMEs	Small to Medium and Micro Enterprises
SOR	Sale or Return
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
VAT	Value Added Tax

Chapter 1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the study by providing pertinent background information, outlining its aim, overarching thesis, and research methodology. The chapter describes the field to establish the study's parameters and gives a chapter breakdown that outlines the thesis structure and content. This thesis investigates the motivations and experiences of self-published trade authors in South Africa; identifies and explores factors that may contribute to successful self-publishing; and discusses the implications of self-publishing for the various participants in the publishing value chain, such as authors, traditional publishers, booksellers, and publishing service companies.

1.1 Background information

1.1.1 Publishing landscape in South Africa

The South African publishing industry has three broad sectors: educational, academic and scholarly, and the trade sector (PASA, 2023). The educational publishing sector publishes textbooks, teacher support material and supplementary books for educational use from pre-school to Grade 12, TVET and ABET books. The academic publishing sector publishes textbooks for tertiary students, professional training, and scholarly books (Smith & Bold, 2018). The trade publishing sector, also known as the general or consumer publishing sector, produces books for the general reader (fiction, non-fiction and children's books) that are read for pleasure, leisure, personal edification or self-enrichment (van Rooyen, 2010; Clark & Phillips, 2019; Smith & Bold, 2018). Most publishers in South Africa operate with a mixed publishing model, working across two or three sectors. This pragmatic approach, informed by market realities, enables them to manage risk and maintain business sustainability.

South Africa has 11 official languages, but English and Afrikaans dominate the South African publishing industry. In the 2021/2022 financial year, English accounted for 81% of

total revenue, Afrikaans 10% and the other nine languages 9% (PASA, 2023). This reveals a significant linguistic inequality in South Africa's publishing industry, reflecting broader historical and socioeconomic patterns. Print books are the most preferred format by book buyers in South Africa, but digital book sales in the 2021/2022 period rose by 8% (PASA, 2023). This reflects the prevailing appeal of print books and the gradual digital transformation in South Africa's reading market. The preference for printed books persists due to infrastructure gaps: only 65% of urban and 48% of rural households have internet access (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Widespread load-shedding further disrupts digital and library access, reinforcing reliance on physical books.

The educational sector dominates South Africa's publishing industry, followed by the trade and academic sectors (PASA, 2023; Molapo, 2020). In the 2021/2022 financial year (April to March), educational publishing generated 61% of total revenue, trade publishing 32%, and academic publishing 7% (PASA, 2023). This revenue distribution reflects the impact of government textbook purchasing and consistent demand from schools, while also highlighting a reasonably healthy commercial book market and a relatively small academic publishing sector. These market dynamics help explain why many South African publishers maintain mixed publishing models, often including an educational component to ensure financial stability. In contrast, publishing industries in high-income countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) generate approximately 50% of their revenue from the trade sector (Smith & Bold, 2018). This suggests more developed leisure reading cultures, higher disposable incomes for book purchases, and larger consumer markets for general interest books than in South Africa, a developing market.

Nielsen BookScan South Africa tracks book sales from subscribed bookshops, providing valuable market insights. However, the system has limitations: not all bookshop sales are

captured, as participation requires an expensive annual membership fee. This cost prohibits many independent bookshops from subscribing, meaning their sales are not reflected in the data. Despite these constraints, Nielsen BookScan remains a crucial source for understanding publishing market trends and performance. The 2022 market review by Nielsen BookScan South Africa (2022) showed that the South African book market was recovering from the slump in sales in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Volume sales increased by 2.3% from 2021 sales and the market value increased by 9.9%. These figures showed signs of recovery. The 2023 market review by Nielsen BookScan South Africa (2023) showed a 1.2% growth in market value but a 7.7% decline in volume sales due to inflation and decreased consumers' disposable income. This suggests that price increases, rather than market growth, drove the value increase. The book market is thus contracting as volume sales are declining. This raises concerns about book affordability and access to reading materials in South Africa, particularly as economic pressures force consumers to prioritize essential spending over books. This decline has led to publishers publishing fewer trade books to avert risk.

1.1.2 Trade publishing in South Africa

Trade publishers publish books for the general reader. The books range from children's books to adult books. The sector has two broad genres: fiction and non-fiction. The trade sector in South Africa is dominated by large multinational publishers that have local offices and some local imprints alongside a few small to medium publishers (van Rooyen, 2010; Molapo, 2020; PASA, 2023). An analysis of the African Small Publishers Catalogues from 2010, 2013, and 2016 highlights the high turnover rate of small publishing companies in sub-Saharan Africa, with many emerging and closing quickly (Harris, 2019). This trend suggests that the trade sector is highly exclusive. Despite facing intense competition from large multinational corporations, independent publishers are gradually growing. They play a crucial

role in the industry by focusing on niche themes and amplifying emerging voices, thereby contributing to the diversification of publishing (Molapo, 2020). The South African trade sector remains highly competitive, as imported books vie for market share alongside locally published works (PASA, 2024).

The big trade publishers in South Africa are Jonathan Ball, Penguin Random House, Pan Macmillan and NB Publishers (Willis, 2016). These big publishers dominate the market because of their huge economies of scale and wide distribution networks (Molapo, 2020). In the financial year 2021/2022 the trade sector brought in a revenue of R1 060 462 000 out of a total revenue of R3 360 790 000 (PASA, 2023). This represents 32% of the total revenue. This is an increase of 40% in revenue from the 2020/2021 year against a backdrop of a rise in total revenue of 10%. Trade sector revenue is increasing, which could signal increased readership in South Africa because the report did not provide volume sales. This underscores the importance of the trade sector within the broader publishing industry. The 40% growth in revenue from the previous year is particularly striking if compared to the overall industry growth of just 10%. This suggests that the trade sector is outperforming other sectors of the publishing industry, such as educational or academic publishing, which may have experienced slower growth or stagnation. However, according to Nielsen BookScan South Africa (2023), as previously discussed, while revenue has increased, sales volume is declining, indicating that the overall market is contracting.

The trade book sector is risky as books compete for time and money with other forms of literature, such as newspapers and magazines, and other forms of entertainment and media such as the internet, social media, gaming, music, radio and television (SABDC, 2016; Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse & Huston, 2023). In addition, South Africa generally has an underdeveloped book-buying and book-reading culture, so book sales are low (Odendaal &

Galloway, 2008; Moller, 2014; SABDC, 2016; Molapo, 2020). Furthermore, Molapo (2020) argues that high publishing costs and risks lead to declining book production figures. The sector also faces competition from imported books (van Rooyen, 2010; Molapo, 2020). Furthermore, trade discounts are high and range from 13% to 43% (PASA, 2023). This further eats into the profits of the sector.

Trade books typically have a short commercial lifespan, with publishers relying primarily on frontlist[1] titles for revenue (van Rooyen, 2010). However, a select few achieve backlist[2] status, providing publishers with long-term stability despite the industry's frontlist-driven model. Trends, marketing campaigns, and immediate consumer interest heavily drive book sales. This reliance on frontlist titles reflects the industry's need to constantly refresh its offerings to capture reader attention in a competitive market. To manage risks associated with trade publishing, local publishers publish limited lists with authors, genres and topics with proven track records (Molapo, 2020). Rejection rates are thus high and debut authors and unpopular genres or topics are rarely published. This indicates that self-publishing is important in South Africa as it offers an alternative way of publishing.

1.1.3 Distribution of trade books

Trade books are sold mostly through physical bookshops, airports, and supermarkets (Smith & Bold, 2018). The major book distribution channels in South Africa are bookseller chains, independent booksellers, non-traditional channels like supermarkets, department stores and online retailers, book clubs and libraries (PASA, 2023). Book chains are the biggest distribution channel. Discounts differ per sales channel and range from 19% to 43%, with bookseller and non-retail chains getting the highest discount (PASA, 2023).

[1] Frontlist refers to newly published titles or books that are about to be published.
[2] Backlist refers to a publisher's catalogue of previously published books that are still in print and available for sale.

South Africa's major book retailers are Exclusive Books and Bargain Books, which operate as book chains (van Rooyen, 2010). In the past ten years, many bookstores closed in South Africa due to the global economic downturn (Willis, 2016). Central News Agency (CNA) was a one-stop shop for various products, including books, stationery, magazines, newspapers, toys, and electronics. CNA went into business rescue in 2021, and only about 50 of the 124 stores remained open (Madubela, 2021). All CNA stores are now closed. In 2020, during the Level 5 lockdown due to COVID-19, bookstores closed for five weeks as books were not regarded as essential goods. This negatively impacted booksellers as they could not even courier books to those who ordered online, as books were not on the essential goods list (Hlalethwa, 2020). Some bookshops, such as the Methodist Christian Connexion Book Store closed their doors permanently at the end of April 2021 after 127 years in operation (Nkosi, 2021). This situation is not unique to South Africa but is a global phenomenon (Pampalone, 2012; Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez, Weidner, 2013; Murray & Squires, 2013). Bookstore closures in recent years replicate shifts in the retail and publishing industries, driven by technological advancements, changing consumer behaviours, and economic challenges. The trade sector relies mostly on exposure in bookshops; the fewer bookshops, the less exposure the books get. Most bookshops are located in malls or busy shopping centres with high foot traffic. This promotes exposure to potential book customers.

1.1.4 Publishing models

Three publishing models that are pertinent to this study will be discussed in this section – traditional, self-publishing and hybrid publishing. Traditional publishing, also known as mainstream or conventional publishing, is a model in which a commercial publisher assumes the cost and risk of publishing a book. The publisher handles the production, marketing, and distribution of the book, while the author receives royalties in exchange for their intellectual

property (van Rooyen, 2010). The traditional publishing model is highly structured, with an established sequence of roles that include authors, literary agents, publishers, distributors, bookstores, and readers (Hviid, Izquierdo-Sanchez, & Jacques, 2019). In South Africa, literary agents are few and not particularly active, leading authors to communicate and negotiate directly with publishers.

Traditional publishers carry the risk as they bear the costs to produce the book, use their publishing expertise in assessing manuscripts, and edit, design, print, warehouse, publicise and market the title without being assured of any sales (van Rooyen, 2010; Ho, Wang, & Cheng, 2011; Hviid, Izquierdo-Sanchez, & Jacques, 2019). Furthermore, publishers act as gatekeepers or filters in deciding what gets published, according to their decisions on quality and marketability (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011; Hviid, Izquierdo-Sanchez, & Jacques, 2019; Smith & Bold, 2018). The traditional publishing model is very competitive, with high rejection rates of manuscripts (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011). Traditional publishers are in control and are the link between authors and readers. Authors have limited control after signing over publication rights and authors receive a small royalty percentage on sales (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011; Hviid, Izquierdo-Sanchez, & Jacques, 2019). In South Africa, royalties in the trade sector vary from 2% to 21% depending on the author and book genre (PASA, 2023).

In contrast to traditional publishing, self-publishing is when an author funds and makes decisions on the production process, sales and marketing of their book, without going through traditional publishing houses (Van Rooyen 2010; Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a). Authors have full control and rights over their works (Ho, Wang, & Cheng, 2011) but also bear the full costs, responsibilities and risks of the publishing process (Clark & Phillips, 2019; Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011). Self-publishing is also called ‘independent

publishing or indie publishing; although independent publishing also includes traditional publishers not owned by big corporations' (Smith & Bold, 2018, p.91). It is also called 'private publishing' or 'author publishing' (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a). Hybrid authors self-publish some titles and publish other titles through traditional publishers (Clark & Phillips, 2019). Self-publishing enables anyone to become an author and publisher more easily by eliminating the barriers to entry associated with traditional publishing (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011).

Hybrid publishing combines elements of both traditional and self-publishing. The author funds some publishing processes, while the traditional publisher funds certain stages or takes on other processes (Friedman, 2023). For example, the author pays for some production costs and the publisher provides services such as editing, distribution and marketing. The hybrid model uses the services and infrastructure of traditional publishers while empowering authors with more independence. The growth of hybrid models shows that the publishing landscape is changing as traditional and self-publishing models are no longer distinct. This gives authors more choices in publishing and contracting necessary services such as editing and distribution (Hviid, Izquierdo-Sanchez, & Jacques, 2019).

The intermediaries in traditional publishing are the publisher, printer, distributor and retailer, and each intermediary plays a specific role (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a). Self-publishing cuts out some intermediaries in the publishing supply chain such as publishers and sometimes physical bookstores and their roles are performed by the author and author service companies like CreateSpace, Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), AuthorHouse and Lulu (Clark & Phillips, 2019). Publishing services companies like Porcupine Press and Book Lingo have emerged in South Africa, reflecting the growing demand for self-publishing support. To capitalize on this trend, several traditional trade publishers have launched self-publishing

imprints. For instance, Jacana Media established Stagecoach, Bookstorm Publishers introduced Rainbird, and Modjaji adopted a hybrid model where authors sometimes contribute financially to the publishing process. These initiatives demonstrate how traditional publishers adapt to the evolving publishing landscape by embracing self-publishing and hybrid models to diversify their offerings and revenue streams. This is a mutually beneficial setup as authors get expert services from these companies and publishers have another income stream.

The income from publishing services offered to third parties by traditional publishers such as consulting; editorial and or production; marketing and sales; and warehousing and distribution has been included in the Publishers Association of South Africa (PASA) surveys from the 2019-2021 publishing survey until now (PASA, 2022; PASA, 2024). This inclusion shows that this is a growing revenue stream for traditional publishers as they are leveraging their expertise and infrastructure to generate additional income. This highlights the adaptability of traditional publishers in a rapidly changing industry. However, this also underscores the pressure on traditional publishers to innovate and remain competitive in a market where self-publishing platforms are gaining traction.

Traditional publishing centres on major publishing houses accepting or commissioning manuscripts, editing, printing, marketing, and distributing books from signed authors in exchange for publication rights. In contrast, self-publishing centres on the author as both a creator and an entrepreneur because they take on responsibilities that extend beyond writing to include the business aspects of publishing (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011). Traditional publishing presents numerous barriers to entry for authors, such as stringent submission processes, gatekeeping by publishers, and limited opportunities for new writers. In contrast, self-publishing eliminates many of these barriers, enabling anyone to become an author and

publisher with relative ease (Ho, Wang, & Cheng, 2011). Self-publishing offers authors direct and flexible access to publishing and selling their works, though it places greater responsibility on authors for quality control, including editing, design, and marketing. The rise of self-publishing, fuelled by advancements in digital technologies and innovative business models, is significantly disrupting traditional publishing frameworks (Ho, Wang, & Cheng, 2011). This shift is reshaping the industry by democratizing access to publishing while challenging established norms and practices.

1.2 Purpose of study

There is a dearth of research on publishing worldwide (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2014), which is more pronounced in Africa (Galloway, 2002; Galloway & Venter, 2006; Zell, 2019). Baverstock and Steinitz (2014) argue that publishing is under-researched because it is an emerging interdisciplinary field that is not fully integrated, so it is marginalized and seldom supported by institutions. Statistics and information on South African publishing are scarce. This is mainly because Publishing Studies is not an established academic discipline, and academics or graduate students conduct very little systematic research (Hofmeyr & Kriel, 2006).

This study investigates and documents the motivations and experiences of self-published trade authors in South Africa; identifies and explores factors that contribute to successful self-publishing; and discusses the implications of self-publishing for the various participants in the publishing value chain: authors, traditional trade publishers, booksellers, publishing service providers and readers. Self-publishing is poorly understood and often stigmatized (van Rooyen, 2010; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a; Maneta, 2018). A primary concern of those opposed to self-publishing is that the quality of self-published books is inferior to that of traditionally published books because there are no gatekeepers in the process (Dilevko &

Dali, 2006; Thomlison & Bélanger, 2015). This study adds empirical evidence to the existing descriptions and characterizations of self-publishing. This documentation will enable authors, publishers and service providers to understand self-publishing and its implications on the book value chain.

Self-publishing has grown exponentially in recent years due to the proliferation of digital publishing technologies and print-on-demand (POD) services (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011). There are a few traditional trade publishers in South Africa and these publishers publish limited lists, so self-publishing is fast becoming a key alternative. Self-publishing is important because it can enable the publishing of diverse voices, genres and themes. Still, there is little empirical evidence on the subject in South Africa. Prior studies mostly discuss author motivations for self-publishing and compare self-publishing and traditional publishing (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013b; Banda, 2014). Studies of the self-publishing process from the perspective of various participants in the publishing process are sparse, especially on the issue of opportunities, challenges and implications to the publishing value chain. Getting both self-publishing authors' direct perspectives and that of various intermediaries helps provide a 360 view of motivations, behaviours, and perceived challenges. Comparing the alignments and disconnects between these viewpoints reveals useful insights.

I have over twenty years of publishing experience as an editor and publisher or commissioning editor, in general and educational publishing. I lectured a module on publishing environment and context for two years (2020-2021), and self-publishing was always on the trends list. However, in my efforts to better understand this phenomenon within the South African context, I discovered a notable gap in the literature, particularly concerning the trade publishing sector. This lack of research highlights the need for a deeper exploration

of self-publishing in South Africa. South Africa's unique socioeconomic, cultural, and technological environment presents distinct challenges and opportunities for self-publishing authors, which remain underexplored. Research in this area will fill a critical knowledge gap and provide valuable insights for authors, publishers, and industry stakeholders.

1.3 Research question

This study investigates and documents the motivations and experiences of self-published authors; identifies and explores factors that contribute to successful self-publishing; and discusses the implications of self-publishing for the various participants in the publishing value chain. The study is guided by one main research question and four subsidiary questions.

Main research question: What are the motivations and experiences of trade authors who have self-published in South Africa?

Subsidiary questions:

1. What is the state of self-publishing in the trade sector?
2. Why are authors self-publishing and what satisfaction do authors gain from the process?
3. What factors contribute to successful self-publishing in South Africa (production, distribution, marketing and selling)?
4. What implications does self-publishing have for authors, traditional publishers, publishing service providers, and readers?

1.4 Intended contribution to the field

Research on publishing in Africa is scarce (Zell, 2019). This study adds to the publishing literature and potentially benefits academics and students in publishing studies, other

disciplines, and the publishing industry. Ongoing research keeps teaching, skills, and partnership opportunities fresh, meaningful, and advancing in an evolving industry.

A survey of the available literature on self-publishing in South Africa reveals that self-publishing is growing in South Africa, but there is little empirical research on the topic. This study on self-publishing from the perspective of various participants in the publishing process will add empirical evidence regarding the opportunities, challenges and implications on the publishing value chain. Self-publishing is not well understood, as shown by previous research (Banda, 2014; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013b; Odendaal, 2007). This study will enable authors, publishers and service providers to understand self-publishing and its implications on the book value chain. This study will also promote possibilities in self-publishing, as it might enlighten traditional publishers on the services they can offer to self-publishers. Various publishing stakeholders can also learn more about self-publishers and tailor their services to better support self-publishers. This study also contributes to the processes of self-publishing as it discusses success factors.

1.5 Research methods

This study investigated and documented the motivations and experiences of self-published authors; identified and explored the factors contributing to successful self-publishing; and highlighted the implications of self-publishing for the various participants in the publishing value chain. The authors were the major participants in the study because their experiences are critical to understanding self-publishing, as the whole publication process is centred on the author. Role players involved in the publishing process were part of the study because they triangulate and augment the author's experiences. I used a qualitative approach for this study because I wanted respondents to discuss their experiences and opinions of self-publishing so that I could understand the self-publishing process and its implications. I used

questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and document analysis to collect my data. I then used content analysis to identify common themes, concerns and preoccupations in the documents and interview transcripts. I then interpreted the state of self-publishing in South Africa; outcomes of self-publishing for authors; different factors that lead to the success or failure of self-publishing and the implications of self-publishing – cultural, readership, book circulation, economic and political. Research methods are covered in detail in Chapter 3.

1.6 Definition of key terms

Book publishing value chain: the different steps and parties involved in taking a written work from the author to the final published book in the hands of the reader (Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez & Weidner, 2013)

Disintermediation: the removal of certain traditional intermediaries between the author and reader in the publishing value chain. It is often discussed in the context of the digital disruption of book publishing (Murray & Squires, 2013).

Gatekeeping: the selection process that traditional publishers use to decide which manuscripts and authors to publish based on their quality and market potential. It involves reviewing proposals, manuscripts and editing to improve quality. Traditional publishers thus control access to publishing (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011; Thomlison & Bélanger, 2015; Elliot, 2016)

Hybrid publishing: a publishing model that combines elements of traditional and self-publishing. The author funds some of the publishing processes, while the traditional publisher funds others or is responsible for other processes (Friedman, 2023)

Print-on-demand (POD): a printing service that allows publishers to print books only when ordered. There is no high upfront printing costs required, and it enables the printing of low quantities of books (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011)

Trade publishing: publishing books for the general reader (fiction, non-fiction and children's books) that are read for pleasure, leisure, personal edification, or self-enrichment (van Rooyen, 2010; Clark & Phillips, 2019; Smith & Bold, 2018)

Traditional publishing: publishing model with established roles – authors, literary agents, publishers, distributors, bookstores, and readers. Publishers select manuscripts to publish based on their quality and sales potential. Publishers bear the production, printing, and marketing costs and risk of publishing a book (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011)

Self-publishing: authors publish and sell their written works directly to readers, without going through traditional publishing houses. Authors bear full costs, responsibilities, and risks of publishing but have full control and rights over their books (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011)

Vanity publishing: a publishing model in which authors pay upfront to have their books published rather than having a publisher take on the financial risk of publishing and distributing the book. Vanity publishers are only interested in profits and not the quality of the published book. There is no vetting or curation of the manuscript (Laquintano, 2016; Poland, 2018)

1.7 Thesis structure

This thesis will be structured into eleven chapters as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter introduces the study, offering background on South Africa's publishing landscape, including trade publishing, marketing, distribution, and publishing models. It outlines the study's aim to explore the motivations and experiences of self-published trade

authors in South Africa. The research questions guiding the study are presented, highlighting its contribution to expanding self-publishing literature and benefiting academics, students, and the publishing industry. The methodology is briefly described, involving a qualitative approach using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and document analysis for data collection, with content analysis for interpretation. Key terms are defined, and a chapter breakdown outlines the thesis structure.

Chapter 2: Literature review

This chapter reviews literature on self-publishing, primarily from the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK), due to the limited research on South African publishing. It establishes a foundation for understanding self-publishing dynamics and its implications, exploring key themes such as book history, which provides context for changes in the publishing industry; motivations for self-publishing, including creative control, sharing work, rejection by traditional publishers, financial incentives, and experimentation; and challenges like stigma, gatekeeping, and difficulties with visibility and discoverability. The chapter also introduces Darnton's communications circuit (1982) as a conceptual framework to analyse the roles and responsibilities of self-publishing authors.

Chapter 3: Research methods

This chapter outlines the qualitative research approach used in the study, selected for its effectiveness in exploring participants' experiences. Guided by an interpretative phenomenological framework, participants were chosen through purposeful sampling, a non-probability method targeting individuals relevant to the research. Data collection included questionnaires, in-depth interviews, one focus group, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes, concerns, and patterns in the data. The

chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's ethics, reliability, and validity, detailing steps taken to ensure ethical practices and the credibility of the findings.

Chapter 4: Self-publishing in the trade sector

This chapter examines the demographics of the eleven participating authors, their chosen genres, and formats within the trade sector. It explores the key motivations behind their decision to self-publish, including rejection by traditional publishers, the desire for creative independence, experimentation, dissatisfaction with traditional publishing practices, and financial incentives.

Chapter 5: Self-publishing workflow: research to pricing

This chapter explores the self-publishing experiences of eleven authors, focusing on their workflows and decision-making processes. It outlines the key steps of self-publishing, from initial research and manuscript preparation to printing and pricing. Authors adopted varying approaches – some managed the process independently, while others hired publishing services companies – depending on their expertise and financial resources. Key topics include information gathering, funding, workflow management, editing, design, production decisions, and cost considerations for different book formats.

Chapter 6: Book distribution, marketing and sales in self-publishing

This chapter examines distribution, marketing, and sales strategies in self-publishing, based on insights from eleven self-published authors. Distribution methods vary depending on authors' goals, target readers, and logistical capacity. Authors use social media, book events, mailing lists, paid Amazon advertisements, permafree promotions, and mainstream media coverage for marketing and promotion. Sales outcomes vary widely, with most authors achieving modest results and only a few experiencing significant success.

Chapter 7: Traditional publishers' perspectives on self-publishing

This chapter examines the perspectives of two multinational and five independent publishers on trade publishing and self-publishing in South Africa, focusing on the cultural, economic, and technological factors influencing the industry. Key topics include publishing focus, book formats, language preferences, genres, funding models, book selection processes, initial print runs, pricing considerations, and marketing strategies such as events, social media, newsletters, and book reviews, tailored to each publisher's size and resources. It also explores distribution strategies, book sales trends, the state of the trade sector, challenges, opportunities, and perceptions of self-publishing, along with its implications for the trade sector.

Chapter 8: Insights from publishing services companies

This chapter explores the perspectives of eight publishing services companies working with self-published authors in South Africa. These companies provide modular services, such as author mentoring, marketing, and distribution, and advise on optimal print runs, often recommending small initial runs to test the market. Key topics include costs for publishing services, author control over the publishing process, the South African book market, and the state and implications of self-publishing on the industry.

Chapter 9: Self-published books in retail: Bookshop perspectives

This chapter examines the perspectives of three independent bookshop owners and one bookshop chain employee on self-publishing, highlighting differences between independent and chain models. Key topics include the state of South Africa's book market, factors influencing stocking decisions, the state of self-publishing, payment models (firm-order, sale-or-return, and consignment), discounts, and sales data for self-published books.

Chapter 10: Reader interactions with self-published books

This chapter examines reader interactions with self-published books in South Africa, focusing on two Black female avid readers who run book clubs and serve as book influencers. Key topics include reading preferences shaped by publisher promotions, Bookstagram challenges, and recommendations, the state of South Africa's book market, and the role of self-publishing in the country's literary landscape.

Chapter 11: Findings, recommendations and conclusion

This chapter concludes the study by synthesizing research findings on self-publishing in the South African trade sector. It proposes best practices for self-publishing and offers recommendations for further research based on the findings. This final chapter reflects on the significance of the results and considers their broader implications for the publishing industry.

Chapter 2 Literature review

2.1 Introduction

Research on publishing in Africa is limited (Zell, 2019), with particularly sparse coverage of South Africa's publishing landscape (Galloway, 2002; Galloway & Venter, 2006). Statistics and information on South African publishing are scarce. This knowledge gap stems largely from Publishing Studies' status as an emerging rather than established academic discipline, resulting in limited systematic research from scholars and graduate students (Hofmeyr & Kriel, 2006; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2014). The only reliable statistics in South Africa are from the annual surveys conducted by the Publishers Association of South Africa (PASA). However, these surveys are not comprehensive and do not address all the industry trends, specifically self-publishing. Nielsen BookScan also generates annual summaries and reports on book sales from mainstream retail channels. However, most self-published books are not sold through mainstream channels, so their sales figures are not captured. PASA annual reports and Nielsen BookScan summaries are valuable because they provide insights into the general state of the book industry in South Africa and future directions, however, they do not specifically discuss self-publishing as they are mostly limited to mainstream trade publishing data.

This literature review primarily draws from the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK) because the literature is available and relevant to my research. The publishing industries in these two countries are very significant in the anglophone global publishing landscape, as they are the largest and most established, hence their trends set the pace for publishing industries worldwide, including in South Africa. This literature can be a yardstick for the opportunities, challenges and implications of self-publishing in

South Africa. The publishing industries in the USA and the UK are more advanced and vibrant than the South African industry, which is depressed and largely dependent on the educational sector (PASA, 2023). The significant differences between the South African publishing context and those of the USA and the UK underscore the urgent need for research focused specifically on the South African experiences and practices. This is one such study.

This study investigates and documents the motivations and experiences of self-published authors in South Africa; identifies and explores factors contributing to successful self-publishing; and examines how self-publishing impacts and potentially reconstructs the traditional publishing value chain. Although self-publishing has grown in South Africa (Tyilo, 2020), empirical studies on it are still lacking. Existing research on self-publishing has largely focused on author motivations and comparisons with traditional publishing, predominantly through quantitative studies based in the UK and USA (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a, 2013b; Carolan & Evain, 2013) and South Africa (Odendaal, 2007; Odendaal & Galloway, 2008), the latter of which examine academic self-publishing. While these provide foundational insights, critical scholarship on Nigerian self-publishing, such as Umezurike's (2020) analysis of its role as cultural resistance during military rule (1985–1999) and Afolabi and Zolkepli's (2023) exploration of its democratizing potential in the digital era, reframes self-publishing as a decolonial practice. However, qualitative studies examining the perspectives of diverse stakeholders in the publishing value chain, particularly on the opportunities, challenges, and broader implications of self-publishing, remain scarce. This thesis seeks to address that gap.

This literature review examines self-publishing scholarship in both global and South African contexts, identifies current research gaps, and establishes the conceptual framework that guides this study.

2.2 Studies on book history

Darnton (1982) wrote a seminal article on book history entitled, 'What is the history of books?' He contends that book history is important because it shows how publishing has evolved and can help role players anticipate future directions in the field. Book history provides essential context and insight, enabling stakeholders to anticipate change and respond proactively.

Darnton (1982) in his 'communications circuit' model argues that all printed books go through a similar production cycle. Darnton (1982) analyses the book value chain (communications circuit) by looking at the roles of six important participants that facilitate book publishing, distribution and reading: authors, publishers, printers, shippers or wholesalers, booksellers, and readers. The publishing value chain operates within and is shaped by specific intellectual, political, legal, economic, and social contexts. Darnton explores the communications circuit in the context of 18th-century France. The communications circuit is shown in Figure 2.1.

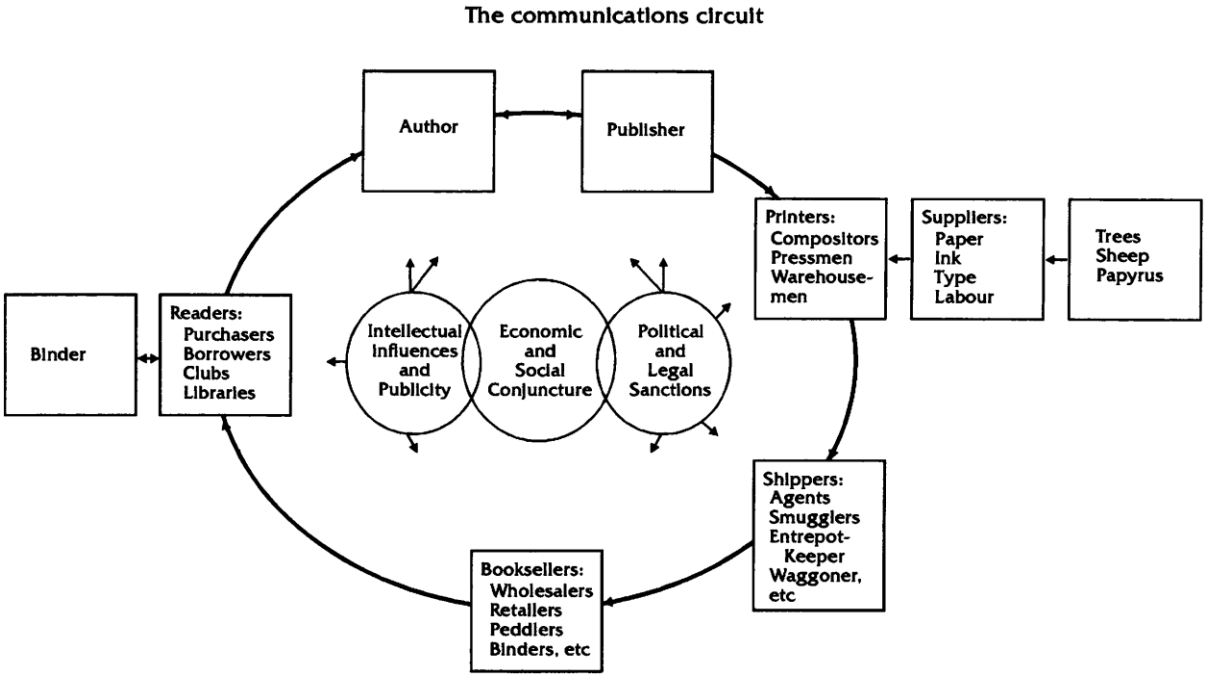


Figure 2.1: Darnton's communications circuit model (Source: Darnton, 1982, p.68)

Figure 2.1 shows that activities in the publishing value chain occur in a multi-stage repetitive cycle as the reader's feedback and demand impact author and publisher activities. The circuit focuses on business transactions, physical logistics and circulation of ideas. Binders are included in the circuit because, in the 18th century, publishers sold books as unbound sheets or collections.

The communications circuit model (Darnton, 1982) established a solid foundation for further interpretation as it showed that publishing is an interconnected and interdependent system. This model is still relevant and valuable in the study of contemporary publishing. Various researchers have revised and used Darnton's model (1982) to analyse book publishing in different contexts (Darnton, 1990; Adams & Barker, 1993; Darnton, 2007; Murray & Squires, 2013). Darnton (1990) expanded on book history by exploring the publishing and reading ecosystem. Darnton (2007) revisited and revised the communications model (Darnton, 1982) because of the advances in publishing. Besides the communications circuit, Darnton proposes three questions that can be used to approach book history:

- 'How do books come into being?
- How do they reach readers?
- What do readers make of them?' (Darnton, 2007, p.495)

These three questions, pertaining as they do to publishing, book distribution and reader reception, continue to be pertinent to any study of the publishing value chain. In 2007, Darnton also added a series of factors that are still relevant to the contemporary publishing process: smuggling, distribution and sales, literary agents, piracy, swapping, as well as demand and politics (Darnton, 2007). This shows that publishing evolves, and publishing models must keep abreast of the changes in the publishing ecosystem.

In addition, Adams and Barker (1993) discuss the value of Darnton's model (1982) in the study of modern publishing and book culture. Figure 2.2 below shows their revised model.

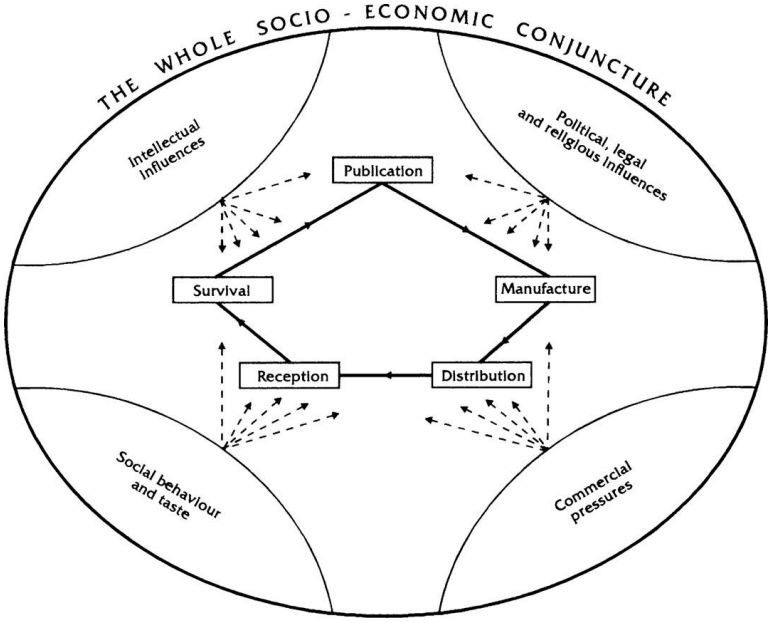


Figure 2.2: Adams and Barker's communications circuit (Adams & Barker, 1993)

In contrast to Darnton's model (1982), which focuses on the six role players in the communications circuit that produce, distribute and read books, Adams and Barker (1993) focus on five activities in the publishing process: publication, manufacture, distribution, reception, and survival. These activities are located within a socioeconomic context that influences publishing. Darnton (1982) and Adams and Barker's (1993) models complement each other as the role players in Darnton's model cannot be separated from their roles and the processes in Adams and Barker's model cannot be separated from who performs the processes. Adams and Barker (1993) include survival in their model. Bradley and Vokac (2008) call this viability, which is a good addition to Darnton's circuit (1982) as it includes what happens to the backlist after publication, which ensures survival on the market – that is, revision of books, rejacketing of books and new editions and translations. In today's context,

this can also include new formats, such as e-books and audiobooks, to accommodate technological advances and changing market needs.

Bradley and Vokac (2008), in a study that examines incipient book publishing practices on the internet, use Adams and Barker's (1993) definition of publishing that focuses on the 'initial decision to multiply texts or images for distribution' as a theoretical framework. This definition is wide and accommodates changes in the publishing ecosystem. Bradley and Vokac (2008) suggest a modification to the definition of a book publisher to 'an individual or collective that makes the initial decisions and arrangements for multiple copies of books to be publicly available for distribution'. This new definition accommodates self-publishing, a shift in publishing practices from traditional publishing to authors taking on the role and functions previously performed or controlled by traditional publishers. Their study raises questions concerning the changing business models, explores different ways that authors are self-publishing and details the rapid growth of new book formats. This contrasts with Darnton's (1982) model, which only accommodates print book production, distribution, readership and reception.

In addition to Bradley and Vokac's (2008) study, Murray and Squires (2013) examine changes in the publishing ecosystem and propose a 'digital communications circuit' based on Darnton's (1982) communications circuit. They do this to take account of the technological changes in twenty-first-century publishing. The publishing process is still fundamentally the same, but the context is changing significantly due to digital advances and changes in modes of reader engagement. Roles in the publishing value chain are changing and overlapping in important instances, making the value chain complex and decentralized. The traditional publishing value chain is being disrupted and disintermediated by digital technologies. The proposed digital communications circuit includes publishing models such as self-publishing,

marketing channels such as online retail, and book formats such as e-books, social media and devices such as tablets and e-readers. This digital circuit is important to my study because it encompasses self-publishing, as shown in Figure 2.3.

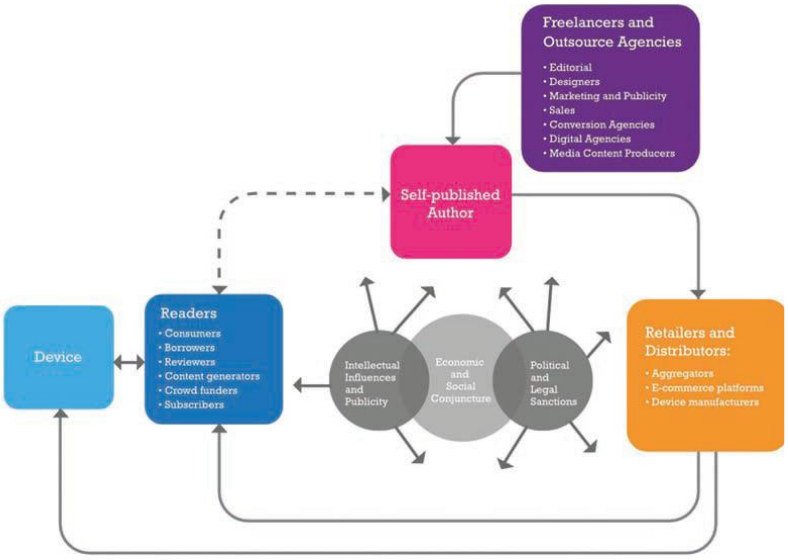


Figure 2.3: Self-publishing communications circuit (Murray & Squires, 2013)

Figure 2.3 by Murray and Squires (2013) highlights the self-publishing ecosystem, centring on the author, who coordinates editing, design, marketing, and distribution with support from freelancers and digital platforms. Readers play an active role as reviewers and content creators. The circuit emphasizes digital technology's impact and, like earlier models (Darnton, 1982, 2007; Bradley & Vokac, 2008; Adams & Barker, 1993), is shaped by political, legal, and societal factors, requiring authors to navigate intellectual property laws and content regulations.

Furthermore, although they make no mention of Darnton's communication circuit (1982); Ho, Wang and Cheng (2011) and Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez and Weidner (2013) analyse how the traditional publishing supply chain is changing due to the advent of digital technologies. The findings of these studies show that technology has improved efficiency in

the publishing value chain but has not necessarily changed the order of roles and supply-demand relationships. Roles are, however, becoming fluid as authors take centre stage in the publishing process. In addition, Poland (2018) argues that self-publishing does not eliminate intermediaries in the publishing value chain but reconfigures the roles of intermediaries. Amazon is a new intermediary that acts as a gatekeeper by using its algorithms. This represents the emergence of one of several new gatekeepers in the publishing value chain. These emerging gatekeepers will be discussed further in Section 2.4.2, which covers gatekeepers in the self-publishing landscape. Despite and because of its subsequent elaborations, Darnton's (1982) communications circuit remains a significant conceptual model for investigating the publishing value chain as an interconnected system. It still provides a conceptual template for analysing relationships, dependencies and information flows linking book authorship, production, distribution and consumption. In Section 2.5 of this study, I use the model to investigate the ecosystem of self-publishing.

Several South African researchers such as Hofmeyer and Kriel (2006), le Roux (2012), Dick (2006), Galloway (2002) and Galloway and Venter (2006) have published important monographs and articles on the history of the book and reading cultures in South Africa. These are relevant to my study as they provide the basis to analyse self-publishing, circulation and readerships in South Africa. Galloway (2002) documents some statistical trends regarding the number of books published in South Africa during the 1990s. In addition, Galloway and Venter (2006) provide a framework for conducting research in book history by focusing on quantitative statistics of book production of Afrikaans fiction in the years 1990–2003. These studies are dated but still shed light on the political, economic and technological contexts that impacted book production during that period.

A study that examines self-publishing in South Africa is important because it is imperative to consider alternative and incipient ways of producing, distributing and marketing books. Since 2002, PASA has published annual surveys of the South African book trade and continues this practice (PASA, 2024). PASA surveys include valuable information on the changes and developments in the publishing sector (PASA, 2024). However, the surveys are not detailed and do not specifically document data on self-published titles. A comprehensive qualitative study focusing on the factors that impact self-publishing production processes, distribution and consumption will add significantly to the body of scholarly literature on South African publishing.

2.3 Motivations for self-publishing

Several studies have been undertaken globally on different aspects of self-publishing (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Odendaal, 2007; Laquintano, 2010; Bradley, Fulton & Helm, 2012; Thomlison & Bélanger, 2015; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a; Baverstock and Steinitz, 2013b; Umezurike, 2020). Some of these studies focus on authors' motivations for self-publishing. The common perception is that authors self-publish as a last resort because they cannot find a traditional publisher to publish their books (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; van Rooyen, 2010; Thomlison & Bélanger, 2015; Umezurike, 2020). Furthermore, Baverstock and Steinitz (2013b) argue that the publishing industry lacks a full understanding of why authors choose self-publishing, often assuming financial incentives are the primary motivation. A clear understanding of all the motives could create more opportunities for authors and the publishing industry.

Some examples of global articles that explore author motivations for self-publishing are Dilevko and Dali (2006), who examine why academic authors are self-publishing. In addition, Baverstock and Steinitz (2013a; 2013b) examine the motivations, demographics,

processes, and outcomes of 120 self-published authors in the UK through a mixed study that combined quantitative research methods – author surveys and qualitative research methods – author interviews. These two studies integrated qualitative and quantitative data; thus, they provide a comprehensive and holistic understanding of self-publishing. Furthermore, Hartiningtyas (2023) analyses author motivations for self-publishing in Indonesia through semi-structured interviews with five authors. While the findings of these articles are informative, they do not cover the motivations for self-publishing in South Africa.

In contrast to global studies of self-publishing, there is very little academic research on self-publishing in South Africa, although it is a growing trend. Odendaal (2007), in an MA study, investigates the state of self-publishing in the academic publishing sector in South Africa. In an article based on this MA study, Odendaal and Galloway (2008) explore the nature and motivations for self-publishing academic textbooks in South Africa. Odendaal's studies (2007, 2008) are quantitative and focus on the academic sector, which has a ready market. Salamon (2016), in a literary article, and Maneta (2018), in a newspaper article, examine the reasons trade authors are self-publishing in South Africa. The sample sizes for these articles are small – the first article is based on four authors and the second on five authors and the studies were neither in-depth nor empirical. My study focuses on the trade sector, which is marked by intense competition, a low reading culture, and a small market size (Molapo, 2020). Salamon (2016) and Maneta (2018) investigate pertinent themes of self-publishing, but there is a gap in in-depth empirical studies on the motivations of self-publishing trade books in South Africa. The findings of international and local studies discussed in this section show that authors are self-publishing for various reasons such as independence, desire to write and share their work, rejection of manuscripts, financial incentives and experimenting with self-publishing. These reasons will be discussed further in sections 2.3.1 to 2.3.5 below.

2.3.1 Control

One of the main reasons cited in the literature for self-publishing is because authors want to control all aspects of the book production process – publication schedule, book publishing processes such as writing, editing, design, production, distribution, and marketing (Knowles, 1981; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013b; Tondi, 2017).

Pacer (2013), Umezurike (2020) and Hartiningtyas (2023) agree that authors self-publish because they want artistic control and freedom, which allows them to write on niche topics or topics that do not fit in traditional publishers' lists. Authors can also decide on publishing processes such as format, editing, design, printing and price. Creative control allows authors to publish the book they envisaged from the outset rather than change their manuscript to the publisher's expectations or demands (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Pacer, 2013). In addition, Odendaal and Galloway (2008) and Umezurike (2020) argue that self-publishing empowers authors to keep full copyright control and creative autonomy, unlike traditional publishing, which often requires transferring rights to publishers. In addition, authors can price their books independently (Hartiningtyas, 2023).

Authors also self-publish because they want full control of the publication schedule. Authors can follow their timelines to publish a book and do not have to follow traditional publishers' timelines (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Odendaal & Galloway, 2008; Pacer, 2013; Umezurike, 2020). Authors can thus publish their books quickly without the long traditional publishing process that can take longer than a year, which allows authors to receive revenue faster. Moreover, Pacer (2013) argues that this fast production process can enable authors to capitalise on trends and publish their books in line with peak reader demand.

Although self-publishing circumvents traditional publishers and gives authors full control, Hartiningtyas (2023) notes that this full control comes with increased responsibilities as authors must manage and finance the publishing process. The lack of external gatekeepers can compromise the quality of self-published books as authors are responsible for quality control (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Carolan & Evain, 2013; Thomlison & Bélanger, 2015). However, researchers such as Banda (2014), Shumake (2017) and Mangen and Kuiken (2021) contest the assumption that self-published books are of inferior quality. The quality of self-published books will be further discussed in Section 2.4.1, which discusses social stigmas against self-publishing. This study will interrogate self-publishing processes to ascertain the motivations and quality control mechanisms and review self-published books to determine the quality of self-published books.

2.3.2 Desire to write and share their work

One of the major reasons why authors self-publish is their passion for writing and their desire to share their work (Knowles, 1981; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013b; Odendaal, 2007; Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Odendaal & Galloway, 2008; Pacer, 2013; Hartiningtyas, 2023). Authors commonly self-publish on niche topics and in genres with narrow, specialized readerships, which traditional publishers may ignore or not publish because they focus on mass market appeal (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013b). Authors that publish in these niche genres do not anticipate selling many copies or making a profit – their underlying motivation is to write, publish and share their work (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013b; Pacer, 2013; Hartiningtyas, 2023; Umezurike, 2020). Furthermore, Hartiningtyas (2023) argues that authors value having a physical printed book that they can keep or share with others because it gives them a sense of achievement. This suggests that the romanticism of print books continues regardless of the rise of digital books.

In addition, academics self-publish to disseminate the results of their research and provide affordable versions of their work to students (Odendaal, 2007; Odendaal & Galloway, 2008). In this way, researchers make substantive contributions to the collective knowledge of their field. For previously traditionally published authors, self-publishing provides a platform for them to continue publishing and expand into new areas that their publishers are not interested in (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013b; Salamon, 2016; Smith & Bold, 2018).

This thesis explores how genres that are entirely unprofitable (poetry, autobiographies and others) can be kept alive by self-publishing, which would then serve a particularly persuasive cultural purpose. My study will also consider whether self-publishing is democratising publishing in South Africa through diversity and inclusion of different voices.

2.3.3 Rejection by traditional publishers

A key factor driving authors to self-publish is the failure to find a traditional publisher to publish their books because they cover niche topics or genres that do not fit traditional publishers' lists. There is significant competition to find publishers; acceptance levels are very low. Commonly, authors' manuscripts or proposals are rejected by traditional publishers and authors ultimately settle on self-publishing (van Rooyen, 2010; Odendaal, 2007; Odendaal & Galloway, 2008; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013b; Pacer, 2013; Salamon, 2016).

Umezurike (2020), whose article covers the main motivations for Nigerian authors to self-publish trade books, particularly during the military rule period, argues that authors are self-publishing to fill a void in the industry. In Nigeria, this gap emerged as traditional publishers scaled back on trade publishing due to economic challenges, shifting their focus primarily to

textbooks. In addition, authors also self-published to criticize military regimes because traditional publishers did not accept such manuscripts to avoid adverse reactions to their publications. This suggests that self-publishing motivations cannot be generalized but depend on the period and social context. South Africa transitioned to democracy in 1994, but the publishing industry still grapples with the racial and socioeconomic inequalities inherited from the apartheid era (Moller, 2014). The industry has not fully transformed in demographic representation, Black ownership and participation, language and cultural diversity (Moller, 2014; Gibixego, 2021; PASA, 2022). This lack of transformation means that traditional publishing may still reflect previous hierarchies of control, resulting in limited representation of diverse authors and genres. This study will explore whether self-publishing in South Africa's trade sector enables the publication of marginalized voices, genres, and themes, contributing to the limited existing literature on self-publishing.

2.3.4 Financial incentives

One of the reasons cited for self-publishing in literature is the financial returns that authors receive from their self-published books (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013b). Self-publishing requires authors to make upfront investments, but it gives entrepreneurial authors more control over potential revenue and allows them to harness their books' money-making potential. Knowles (1981), in a study interviewing academic self-publishers, found that financial incentives were their primary motivation, a conclusion supported by Odendaal's (2007) quantitative research on academic self-published authors in South Africa. It is worth noting that the academic sector has a well-defined target market, with authors often focusing on high-enrolment courses, ensuring consistent sales (Odendaal, 2007; Odendaal & Galloway, 2008). This contrasts with the trade sector, where sales are far less predictable.

Self-published authors, on average, earn much higher royalties on their books than traditionally published authors (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Pacer, 2013; Hartiningtyas, 2023). Self-published authors can get up to 70% royalties on Amazon (Hartiningtyas, 2023). However, empirical evidence indicates that self-published titles typically achieve lower sales volumes compared to their traditionally published counterparts (Dilevko & Dali, 2006). In addition, Hartiningtyas (2023) asserts that self-publishing is lucrative for authors with a strong fan base, as the authors earn a higher cut from the proceeds of their books. This study investigates whether self-publishing trade books in South Africa offers any financial benefits.

2.3.5 Experimenting with self-publishing to pursue new opportunities

Several researchers argue that one of the reasons that authors self-publish is because they want to experiment with this model of publishing (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Pacer, 2013; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013b; Salamon, 2016; Smith & Bold, 2018). According to Pacer (2013) and Dilevko and Dali (2006), bestselling self-published authors who secured traditional publishing deals inspire new authors to experiment with self-publishing. They view it as a legitimate pathway to exposure and potential contracts with traditional publishers, which offer broader reach and distribution. Baverstock & Steinitz (2013a) agree with this view and assert that a growing trend is that self-published authors find traditional publishers through self-publishing their books (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a). Researchers have not explored whether authors are self-publishing to test market reception so that traditional publishers can identify promising self-published books and republish them for a bigger market. An example is Amanda Hocking, an American author who self-published over ten novels as e-books and later signed a four-book deal with Pan Macmillan in 2011 (Smith & Bold, 2018). This could mean that self-publishing is a pathway to getting traditionally published and that traditional publishers are researching the market by monitoring the

performance and popularity of self-published titles to identify talented authors and gauge reader interests and preferences.

Established authors who have previously published with traditional publishers are, in several instances, self-publishing because they want to continue publishing books that are outside existing contracts or to expand into new areas or other formats without compromising their traditional publishing arrangements (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013b; Salamon, 2016; Smith & Bold, 2018). In addition, the availability of publishing services companies makes it easy for established authors to self-publish (Dilevko & Dali, 2006). Another reason cited by previously traditionally published authors who have moved to self-publishing is bad author-publisher relationships (Odendaal, 2007; Odendaal & Galloway, 2008; Baverstock, 2011).

Several international studies investigate how advances in digital technologies and platforms promote the growth of self-publishing because they make it easy for authors to create, market and distribute their books. Important research contributions on self-publishing include a book: *Mass Authorship and the Rise of Self-Publishing* by Laquintano (2016), which examines the impact of e-books on making self-publishing a more viable option for publishing for niche markets. The book influenced new notions of self-publishing as it describes the historical context of self-publishing and shows how self-publishing and digital publishing platforms are changing notions of authorship, intermediaries, and professional publishing practices. Examples of other studies that explore how digital technologies such as e-book publishing, print-on-demand, and companies such as Lulu, Wattpad, Substack and Amazon are motivating authors to self-publish because they have lowered barriers to publishing and aided more authors to self-publish include Pacer (2013); Hviid, Izquierdo-Sanchez and Jacques (2019); Tondi (2017); Ho, Wang and Cheng (2011); Bradley, Fulton,

Helm and Pittner (2011); Laing (2017) and Poland (2018); Carolan and Evain (2013). All these studies are international, with no local research exploring how digital technologies and platforms have impacted self-publishing in South Africa's trade sector. This study will examine whether technological affordances motivate authors to self-publish, particularly in a context where the South African book market remains predominantly print-based, with low e-book adoption (PASA, 2024).

The above discussion shows that the reasons why both debut and experienced authors self-publish are diverse and complex. The key motivations for self-publishing discussed in this section are the desire to write, publish and share their creative work; financial incentives; rejection of manuscripts by traditional publishers; control and autonomy of the publishing process, distribution and marketing; experimenting with new topics, genres or formats and technological advances that lower barriers to publishing, distribution and marketing. The studies of self-publishing discussed in this section mostly relate to international trends, except for two by Odendaal (2007) and Odendaal and Galloway (2008), which look at South African academic self-publishers. It is important to document the experiences of self-published trade South African authors. This will add to empirical evidence as to what motivates South African authors to self-publish, as the publishing industry and the public do not fully understand why authors self-publish and assume that the main motivation is finances. Awareness of other motivations could lead to new opportunities such as hybrid publishing and offering self-publishing services (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013b).

2.4 Challenges of self-publishing

Unlike traditional publishing, where authors must go through a rigorous selection process to get published, self-publishing is accessible to anyone; thus, it has enabled many authors denied space and legitimacy in traditional publishing to get published (Carolan & Evain,

2013). Still, self-publishing comes with challenges, mainly because although authors have full control and rights over their works, they also bear full costs, have additional responsibilities, and carry the risks of the publishing process (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011). Significant global literature (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011; Carolan & Evain, 2013; Hviid, Izquierdo-Sanchez & Jacques, 2019) explores the key challenges associated with self-publishing. Two studies (Carolan & Evain, 2013; Hviid, Izquierdo-Sanchez & Jacques, 2019) explore challenges posed by the increased production and availability of books enabled by self-publishing to readers and authors. These studies are not specific to the South African publishing ecosystem, focusing solely on implications for authors and readers without considering the broader impact of self-publishing on the entire publishing chain.

In South Africa, there is only one in-depth study by Odendaal (2007), which I referred to earlier in Section 2.3, that explores the challenges of self-publishing in the academic sector. The findings of this study are specific to the academic sector and might not apply to the trade sector. In addition, the PASA survey of the 2021/22 financial year lists challenges faced by Small to Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) in South Africa such as lack of funding and institutional support; gatekeeping; high discounts; 90-day sale or return policies, and late returns from bookstores; reluctance of bookshops to stock books from self-publishers; lack of distribution avenues outside of traditional bookstores; high distribution costs; low sales; lack of capacity; and piracy (PASA, 2023). Thirteen SMMEs participated in the survey. Seven are active in the trade sector and five are self-publishing services companies. SMMEs are classified as companies with less than R5m revenue per year. Most of the respondents make less than R1m a year. Self-publishers are classified under SMMEs, but this survey had input from companies and not self-publishers, so it is important to interrogate challenges that specifically apply to self-publishers.

No empirical studies have explored the challenges self-publishers face in South Africa's trade sector. However, a few South African newspaper articles by Maneta (2018), Tyilo (2020), and Gibixego (2021) address these challenges by interviewing successful self-published authors, traditional publishers, bookstores, and industry experts. These articles give insights into self-publishing and show that self-publishing is a topical issue, but do not cover the challenges in depth. In addition, the authors who were interviewed are well-known, experienced and successful. My study includes experienced and inexperienced authors, which is important because inexperienced authors face the most challenges as they are unfamiliar with the publishing process. The learning curve for new self-publishers is steep, as they must gain expertise in various aspects of the publishing process, including editing, book design, marketing, distribution, and legal matters. These challenges will be explored in greater detail in sections 2.4.1–2.4.3.

2.4.1 Social stigmas surrounding self-publishing

Self-publishing is often linked to 'vanity publishing' due to three key factors: it is seen as a fallback option to traditional publishing, authors bear the financial costs, and the absence of traditional gatekeepers to oversee production and editorial decisions (van Rooyen, 2010; Carolan & Evain, 2013; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a; Thomlison & Bélanger, 2015; Maneta, 2018; Afolabi & Zolkepli, 2023). The absence of traditional gatekeepers is frequently associated with a lack of credibility and perceived inferior quality, as self-publishing often lacks the rigorous production and editorial quality control of traditional publishing. As a result, self-publishing is generally viewed as less prestigious (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Carolan & Evain, 2013; Thomlison & Bélanger, 2015).

However, Banda (2014), Shumake (2017) and Mangen and Kuiken (2021) contest perceptions that self-publishing equates to inferior book quality because their findings show

that most self-published books conform to traditional publishing quality standards. Public perceptions of self-publishing are slowly changing, and stigma has diminished as self-publishing is now popular and more accepted (Thomlison & Bélanger, 2015; Poland, 2018). This demonstrates that self-publishing is evolving and remains a dynamic sphere. Poland (2018) argues that self-publishing, to some extent, is still looked down upon because it is associated with vanity publishing. This suggests that self-publishing has not been completely accepted, even for well-written books with excellent production and editorial quality. The findings of all these studies contest traditionally held notions about self-publishing, which suggests that self-publishing is not well understood and that the book quality of self-published books cannot be generalized because it varies depending on the production processes, which makes this qualitative study in the South African context significant.

2.4.2 Gatekeeping in the publishing landscape

Self-publishers circumvent traditional publishers, who are gatekeepers in the publishing ecosystem because they control access to publishing by filtering and choosing manuscripts to publish based on their quality and market potential (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011; Thomlison & Bélanger, 2015; Elliot, 2016). However, self-published books still face obstacles because they do not have access to marketing backing, mainstream book distribution, reviews, and awards, which limits their reach (Haugland, 2006; Miller, 2013; Pacer, 2013; Salamon, 2016; Elliot, 2016; Poland, 2018; Gibixego, 2021).

Book distribution, securing orders, and placement in online and physical bookstores are major challenges for self-published authors because they do not have any institutional backing or contacts (Odendaal & Galloway, 2008; Umezurike, 2020; Afolabi & Zolkepli, 2023). Digital technologies are presenting opportunities for self-publishers to circumvent

distribution challenges. Carolan and Evain (2013) observe that digital platforms make it easy for authors to market and distribute their books. Furthermore, Salamon (2016) and Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez and Weidner (2013) argue that Amazon has made it easy for self-published authors to distribute e-books and print books as POD is available globally. However, Schroff (2024), in an article examining the position of self-published authors in the UK trade book publishing industry, argues that while Amazon serves as an alternative distributor for self-publishers due to traditional bookshops' reluctance to stock their works, it has become a new gatekeeper. Amazon's restrictive practices limit the independence and bargaining power of self-published authors. New gatekeepers are emerging, so self-publishing is evolving, and in turn, self-publishers must evolve.

In addition, Gibixego (2021) argues that the exclusion of self-publishers in South Africa is due to a lack of transformation in the trade sector. Furthermore, Tyilo (2020) contends that South Africa still faces challenges such as limited production and printing access for self-publishers. This prevents self-publishers from reaching a wider market compared to their global counterparts. While self-publishers avoid the editorial gatekeeping of traditional publishers, they must still go through distribution gatekeepers to make their works accessible to readers. This study explores traditional and emerging gatekeepers that self-publishers face in South Africa and how they can circumvent these gatekeepers to reach a wider market and thrive.

2.4.3 Visibility and discoverability

According to Carolan and Evain (2013), self-publishing has led to an influx of self-published books. These self-published books compete with traditionally published books on the market. In addition, there are now fewer physical bookstores, which makes competition stiffer

(Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez & Weidner, 2013). Lack of visibility hampers the discoverability of self-published books by readers. In today's oversaturated book market, readers struggle to discern quality titles while publishers face growing challenges in making their publications stand out (Carolan & Evain, 2013; Miller, 2013; Pacer, 2013; Umezurike, 2020; Afolabi & Zolkepli, 2023).

In addition, the influx of books has resulted in shorter shelf-lives of books of six months to six weeks, except for classics such as the *Harry Potter* series (Carolan & Evain, 2013). Institutions such as bookstores, reviews, and award adjudication panels play an important role in curating books for the reader. As mainstream institutions have mostly ignored self-published books, this exacerbates the visibility challenge for self-publishers. In addition, Elliot (2016) argues that barriers that impede visibility for self-published authors are exclusion from mainstream reviews, little or no access to distribution channels and unavailability of stock in libraries due to acquisition policies.

Book marketing and promotion are crucial, as many trade books compete for a small market, which is further eroded by numerous leisure activities and media alternatives (Carolan & Evain, 2013; SABDC, 2016). Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez, and Weidner (2013) and Poland (2018) argue that as physical bookstores decline, online discoverability has grown in significance. Amazon's algorithms determine what surfaces in searches or is suggested to readers. These Amazon selection criteria are opaque because they are automated, which makes it difficult for self-publishers to be discovered (Voyles, 2021). Self-publishers are solely responsible for marketing and promoting their books, which can be formidable for inexperienced authors and those who do not have resources and industry connections (Miller, 2013). This challenge can lead to low book sales for self-publishers (Carolan & Evain, 2013; Umezurike, 2020). This makes it challenging for authors to achieve a return on investment

for the funds they spend on book production, promotion, marketing, and distribution (Miller, 2013).

The discussion in this section highlights the key challenges that self-publishers face in the publishing environment, such as the stigma of self-publishing, gatekeeping by traditional institutions and structures and discoverability and visibility challenges. The available literature is mostly based on the UK and USA markets and focuses mostly on challenges and does not explore how these challenges can be circumvented. This study examines the opportunities and challenges self-publishers face in South Africa and explores strategies to overcome these hurdles, enabling self-publishing to thrive. It also aims to guide industry stakeholders on how they can support self-publishers to ensure their success.

2.5 Conceptual framework

Darnton's communications circuit (1982) discussed in Section 2.2 provides a framework for evaluating the roles and responsibilities of self-publishing authors because it emphasizes crucial interconnected activities such as authorship, editing, design, printing, distribution, sales and consumption. Self-publishing authors take on the combined functions of being a publisher, printer and bookseller within this system. This model raises questions about how self-publishing authors effectively address intermediary publishing functions and highlights the need for a comprehensive evaluation of the author-publisher's navigation through the publishing value chain. By applying Darnton's model as a lens, we can gain valuable insights into the dynamics of self-publishing and strategies employed by author-publishers to fulfil these essential functions.

The importance of the communications circuit can only be realised if all elements of the circuit are considered as they are interdependent and interconnected.

1. **Authors:** The conditions of authorship are unclear in book history (Darnton, 1982). This suggests that book history, at that time, had not yet fully explored or shed light on aspects related to authorship such as the experiences, motivations and challenges of authors in different historical contexts. In my study these questions are explored to get an understanding of self-publishers: who is self-publishing, what is the author's responsibility, full-time authors or part-time, motivations for self-publishing, how do authors relate to the other role players in the circuit (traditional publishers, printers, readers, editors, proofreaders, designers, distributors, booksellers, reviewers, and other authors), how did they publish their works, what are authors' experiences, how is authorship evolving as traditional publishers are bypassed? This will give an up-to-date account of authorship by self-publishers.
2. **Publishers:** What is the role of publishers in the communications circuit? How is this role changing? How do they decide what to publish, negotiate contracts with authors, build relationships with booksellers, handle finances, suppliers, distributors, and publicity? This will provide answers to the social and economic aspects of book publishing.
3. **Printers:** Their role in book production and how this has evolved. How do current digital technologies such as digital books and POD enable self-publishing?
4. **Shippers:** These can be equated to book distributors as they are the bridge for books from the printers to the booksellers. How do books get from the printers to the bookshops? There is disintermediation in self-publishing as authors take over the role. What are the opportunities and the challenges of book distribution for self-publishers?
5. **Booksellers:** The bookseller is a cultural agent who is the point of contact between demand and supply. What drives booksellers? What informs their stocking decisions? There is disintermediation in self-publishing as authors take over the role.

6. **Readers:** Reading is mysterious (Darnton, 1982). How do readers relate to what they read? How do they choose what to buy or read? Is reading evolving? Who reads what?

2.6 Conclusion

This literature review has explored self-publishing literature relevant to this study. The chapter began by contextualizing publishing models through a discussion of book history. It then examined the motivations for self-publishing, emphasizing that these motivations are diverse, complex, and cannot be generalized. Additionally, the challenges of self-publishing were outlined, and a conceptual framework was introduced to serve as an analytical lens. Notably, the literature reviewed predominantly originates from the UK and the USA, underscoring the need for a local study to address the unique dynamics of self-publishing in the South African context.

Chapter 3 Research methods

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research design, strategies for gathering data, and how data was analysed for this study. This study investigated and documented the motivations and experiences of self-published trade authors in South Africa to identify and explore opportunities and challenges for self-publishers and the implications of self-publishing for the various participants in the publishing value chain.

3.2 Research design

There are two broad types of research methodology: qualitative and quantitative. Myers (1997, p. 241) describes qualitative research as 'the use of qualitative data such as interviews, documents, and participant observation data, to understand and explain social phenomena'. In addition, Hollstein (2011) defines qualitative research as an interpretative paradigm that methodically studies social phenomena by reconstructing meanings, through an approach that depends on the context. Qualitative research focuses on qualities and processes in a descriptive and interpretative way. In contrast, quantitative research measures and analyses phenomena using numbers and statistics (Harper, 2011).

I used a qualitative approach for this study because I wanted to develop a detailed description of self-publishing that captures its nuances, complexities, and contradictions. The emphasis of this study was a thick description and understanding of self-publishing rather than quantification (Harper, 2011). A qualitative research approach was best suited for this study because I wanted respondents to discuss their opinions and experiences of self-publishing so that I could understand the self-publishing production chain and its implications on the publishing value chain (Hammarberg, Kirkman & De Lacey, 2016). A quantitative study

would be less appropriate and informative for this study because a huge sample is required to gather meaningful statistics. Although self-publishing is widespread in South Africa, it does not yet constitute something that can be mapped and surveyed statistically.

The research design is 'an action plan for getting from here to there, where "here" is an initial set of questions to be answered, and "there" is some set of (conclusions) answers' (Yin, 2002, p.19). To answer my research questions, I used a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological study aims to describe and understand the meaning of phenomena or lived experiences of research participants (Worthington, 2013; Dodgson, 2017; Tomaszewski, Zarestky & Gonzalez, 2020). According to Harper (2011) and Dodgson (2017) there are two types of phenomenological approaches – descriptive and interpretative. Descriptive phenomenology concentrates on research participants' subjective experiences, without imposing the researcher's interpretation. On the other hand, interpretative phenomenology goes beyond describing research participants' subjective experiences as the researcher interprets the meaning of these experiences by situating them in a social, cultural and theoretical context.

I used the interpretative phenomenological approach because I investigated self-publishers' experiences in self-publishing and then interpreted how different factors have led to the success or failure of self-published projects and the implications for the various participants in the publishing value chain. I focussed on the shared subjective experiences of self-published authors, who were the main research participants. The main objective of the approach was to arrive at a detailed description and explanation of a specific phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; Harper, 2011; Worthington, 2013; Creswell & Porth, 2016) – in this case, self-publishing. The phenomenological approach offers unique insights into authors' self-publishing experiences, capturing nuances that cannot be reduced to numerical indices. While

quantitative methods can identify broad trends, they cannot fully illuminate the complex perceptions and immersive processes involved in self-publishing. Additionally, the diverse and dispersed nature of self-published authors makes meaningful statistical analysis challenging, further supporting the choice of a phenomenological methodology.

The key characteristics of a phenomenological study as identified by Worthington (2013) and Tomaszewski, Zarestky and Gonzalez (2020) are:

1. **Focus on a particular phenomenon or lived experience:** This research aims to understand the self-publishing of trade books in South Africa from the perspective of self-publishers and other stakeholders involved in the publishing process.
2. **Essence of the phenomenon:** The objective is to describe and understand self-publishing through the lived experiences of those involved in the process to understand the phenomenon.
3. **Selection of research participants:** Only participants who have directly experienced self-publishing were part of this study and data was mainly collected through in-depth, unstructured interviews with research participants. As a researcher, I had to set aside my views of self-publishing to gain an unbiased understanding of the research participants' views.
4. **Data collection methods:** Data was mainly collected through interviews with research participants who have been directly involved in self-publishing, one focus group and document analysis of documents related to self-publishing were also used. Author questionnaires were used to determine the suitability of authors for the study.
5. **Data analysis:** Data analysis was done by identifying significant statements from interview transcripts and documents and these were grouped into themes to describe self-publishing.

6. **Description of the phenomenon:** The aim was to produce a detailed description of the shared experience – self-publishing – that captures its core meaning as experienced by research participants, while also noting opposing perspectives.

The phenomenological approach was the most suitable approach for my study as the objective of this study was to understand the challenges, opportunities and implications of self-publishing from the perspective of those who have self-published or those who have been involved in the process, rather than measuring or explaining it from outside perspectives.

3.3 Research participants

This study incorporated questionnaires, in-depth interviews, one focus group and document analysis. The different information forms helped me gather a 'well-rounded collection of information for analyses' (Turner III, 2010, p.754). I used purposeful sampling, a non-probability sampling technique where the researcher selects participants deliberately and non-randomly based on a specific purpose or criteria (Alvi, 2016; Sharma, 2017). I identified the most informative and diverse participants for my study with the requisite knowledge and experience so that I could get different perspectives and comprehensive data to answer my research questions (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Creswell & Porth, 2016; Whitehead & Whitehead, 2016; Alvi, 2016; Taherdoost, 2016). Purposeful sampling 'involves studying information-rich cases in depth and detail. The focus is on understanding and illuminating important cases rather than on generalising from a sample to a population' (Patton, 1999, p.1197). The selection of participants in the study was thus very deliberate and aimed at including information-rich cases that can provide in-depth understanding rather than being statistically representative of the entire population (Taherdoost, 2016; Hammarberg, Kirkman & De Lacey, 2016).

I used Taherdoost's (2016) six key stages of sampling:

1. **Define the target population:** My target population was authors who self-published at least one trade book between the years 2010–2020 and various participants in the publishing value chain. Trade self-published books are a broad category that includes different genres such as children's books, fiction, non-fiction, poetry, polemics and religious books. Self-publishing has different dynamics depending on the genre of the book. Research participants were encouraged to consider which type of self-published titles they were sharing information about. In my thesis, I was conscious of these distinctions in the broad category, as an author's experience might be influenced by the type of genre that they have published.

2. **Select the sampling frame**: I researched and listed authors whom I could get the most information on and about their books online.

3. **Choose the sampling technique**: I used purposive sampling based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives. I chose participants who could give valuable insights or information-rich cases related to self-publishing. The criteria used to select research participants were varied experience in traditional or self-publishing; specific roles or positions relevant to self-publishing and diverse demographics, perspectives or varied contexts (Alvi, 2016).

4. **Determine the sample size:** I determined the sample size by looking at the ideal number of participants in a phenomenological study and the roles played by participants in the publishing value chain.

5. **Collect data:** I collected data through questionnaires, interviews, a focus group and document analysis. See detailed description in Section 3.4.

6. **Assess the response rate:** I assessed whether the sample size would yield meaningful data by evaluating the number of participants who agreed to take part in the study.

According to Alvi (2016), the main advantage of purposive sampling is that it allows the researcher to select information-rich cases that can provide in-depth insights into the phenomenon being studied. The disadvantages are potential researcher bias and difficulty defending representativeness as the researcher relies on their judgement when selecting the research participants (Alvi, 2016; Sharma, 2017). Purposive sampling aims for depth over breadth, therefore large samples are not required for generalizability, as qualitative studies aim for analytic generalization rather than statistical generalization (Hammarberg, Kirkman & De Lacey, 2016).

I surveyed and identified participants for the interviews based on their experience in self-publishing. Participants in the study represented all parties involved in the publishing value chain: trade self-published authors, traditional trade publishers, booksellers, publishing service companies, library services experts and readers. The authors were the major participants in the study because their experiences are critical to understanding self-publishing as the whole publishing process is centred on the author. Role players involved in the publishing process were part of the study because they triangulate and augment the authors' experiences. These research participant groups gave multiple views of self-publishing.

Eleven self-published authors who published trade books between 2010 and 2020 were interviewed. The ten-year period enabled me to track changes and developments in self-publishing. Authors were also able to recall their self-publishing experiences. I selected authors who have published in different genres and formats so that I could get varied views. Seven traditional trade publishers were included in the study because their experiences and practices are the reference point to ascertain how self-publishing differs from established and

hitherto conventional practices. Four booksellers were included in the study because they are the outlets selling trade books, and they shared their experiences of working with self-published authors. Six publishing services companies were included in the study due to their close collaboration with self-published authors throughout the book production process and their extensive experience working with self-publishers.

I planned to interview a library services expert to explore their experiences with self-published books as part of my research on readership and distribution. Public libraries are key distribution channels, purchasing books from publishers and creating market opportunities. By offering free access, they support community members who cannot afford to buy books, which is especially important in South Africa's economic context. Libraries also serve as discovery platforms, helping readers explore new authors and receive recommendations, thereby promoting literacy and democratizing access beyond commercial markets. However, the expert recommended a focus group with five participants to provide a more holistic understanding of libraries' role in supporting self-publishers. This approach offered several benefits: I gained diverse perspectives, enriching my understanding of operational experiences within libraries. However, it also posed potential challenges, such as participants influencing each other's responses or hesitating to speak openly in front of colleagues.

Two readers were included in the study because readers are the ones who make buying and reading decisions. The total number of research participants was thirty-five. The research participants were diverse and provided comprehensive information on their practices, experiences and opinions. The different groups of participants enabled me to triangulate participant responses to ensure validity. Table 3.1 explains the importance of the different interview participants.

Table 3.1: Interview participants and their importance for the study

Interview Participant	Importance to the study
Self-published authors (11)	Authors' varied experiences and views on self-publishing different book genres and formats
	Motives behind decisions and processes in self-publishing
Trade publishers (multinationals and independent) (7)	Information on trade publishing in South Africa
	Information on self-publishing and implications on the trade sector
Booksellers (Book chain and independent) (4)	Information on the book trade in South Africa
	Varied experiences and views on trade self-published titles
Publishing services companies (including some who are traditional publishers) (6)	Information on self-publishing in South Africa
	Varied experiences and views on working with self-published authors
Library services experts (5)	Observations on whether libraries stock self-published books to give insight into readership and distribution of self-published books
Readers (2)	Experiences and perceptions of self-published books in comparison to traditionally published books

Further details on research participants will be detailed in the discussion chapters.

3.4 Procedure for data collection

Information was collected using questionnaires, in-depth interviews, one focus group, and document analysis. Bowen (2009:1) defines document analysis as a 'systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents'. The documents that were analysed are both printed and digital. Research tools used to gather information are documents (published and unpublished on the selected authors, publishers and self-published books), questionnaires and interview guides/topics for a focus group and in-depth interviews. Questionnaires gathered biographical data and publication details from all eleven participating authors. The different information sources complemented each other, for example, the documents established facts and interviews allowed me to probe the facts.

3.4.1 Interviews

Interviews were the main source of collecting information because they enabled me to 'access people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words' (Reinharz & Davidman,

1992, p.19). This gave me insight into participants' experiences with self-publishing. I conducted in-depth interviews with self-published authors, booksellers, traditional publishers, publishing services companies and readers. In-depth interviews enabled me to collect in-depth information on participants' experiences and perspectives (Turner III, 2010; Oun & Bach, 2014).

Due to COVID-19 social distancing protocols, interviews were conducted via video conferencing (Microsoft Teams or Google Meet) in 2022. Participants selected their preferred platform to ensure their comfort with the interview medium. The interview participants were in their comfortable spaces, which allowed them to relax and be open. Video communication also enabled me to observe body language (Opdenakker, 2006). Body language can convey non-verbal cues that can provide additional meaning or context to the verbal responses given by the research participant. One-on-one interviews also promoted in-depth discussions, allowing me to probe the interviewees (Fraenkal, Wallen & Hyun, 2011).

Interview guides were used for the interviews. An interview guide is 'a set of topical areas and questions that the interviewer brings to the interview' (Leavy & Hesse-Biber, 2006, p.126). The interview guides helped to keep the interviews focused, but I was also flexible and allowed participants to talk about issues that were relevant to the topic, and I also probed the interviewees. Different interview guides were used for different groups of participants to cater to different roles and perspectives. Questions for the authors investigated different aspects of self-publishing: motivations, book production processes, platforms for publication, editorial interventions, marketing, distribution and market reception of self-published books. The interview guide for traditional publishers investigated manuscript review and selection for publication, book production processes, book marketing and distribution and perceptions of self-publishing. Questions for booksellers established their attitudes to stocking self-

published books and their experiences working with self-published authors. The interview guide for publishing services companies established the services they offer self-publishers and their experiences working with self-publishers. Questions for readers established their book buying and reading decisions and their attitudes to self-published books. Interviews were recorded to capture everything for accuracy. Observation notes were also taken during the interviews. Interview recordings were transcribed after the interviews and queries in the transcripts were followed up telephonically and via e-mail with the participants.

3.4.2 Focus group

Hughes and DuMont (1993, p.776) describe focus groups as 'in-depth group interviews employing relatively homogenous groups to provide information around topics specified by the researchers'. I intended to interview one library services expert who suggested that the interview be held with five experts so that I could get detailed information on the role of libraries in supporting and distributing self-published books. Questions for the library services expert established if libraries stock self-published books because libraries are an important distribution channel.

3.4.3 Document analysis

Published and unpublished documents concerning and by the selected authors, publishers, and booksellers were analysed. Documents used for the analysis are self-published books, newspaper articles, book commentaries, book reviews, repertoires, comments on self-published books, and author and company websites. The different types of documents helped me to understand self-publishing and enabled me to discover new insights (Merriam, 1988). I selected and collected documents that were important to the study and summarised each document to make the information manageable. The documents provided background information and enabled me to check the validity of information from interview participants

(Bowen, 2009). Self-published books were analysed as material and designed objects. The following aspects were evaluated: design (text pages and cover design), editorial quality, paper and binding quality (see Appendix B). These aspects of self-published books were evaluated comparatively with equivalent traditionally published books.

3.5 Data analysis and interpretation

According to De Vos (2002, p.340) data analysis entails bringing 'order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data'. I used content analysis to analyse documents and interview transcripts because I was analysing text data. 'Content analysis is the process of organising information into categories related to the central questions of the research' (Bowen, 2009, p.32). Content analysis was used to identify common themes, concerns and preoccupations in the documents and interview transcripts. I analysed data as I collected it so that I would not get overwhelmed. Data analysis is not a linear process (Cresswell & Poth, 2016). Dey (2003, p.287) describes it as 'a series of spirals as we loop back and forth through various phases within the broader progress of the analysis'.

I transcribed all the interview recordings. First, I suspended my biases and preconceptions of self-publishing, permitting a fresh approach to data analysis. I then closely read and re-read all the transcripts and documents to familiarise myself with the contents and get a holistic understanding (Tomaszewski, Zarestky & Gonzalez, 2020). I then identified significant statements, concerns and preoccupations from the interview transcripts and documents and grouped them into categories. I then grouped the categories into emerging themes. I then revised my themes and finalised them (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I then interpreted the state of self-publishing in South Africa; outcomes of self-publishing for authors; different factors that lead to success or failure of self-publishing and the implications of self-publishing – cultural,

readership, book circulation, economic and political. Throughout the data analysis, I repeatedly revisited the data to ensure I did not leave out anything important.

3.6 Validity and reliability

Validity is 'the degree to which the research conclusions are sound' (Terre'Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2009, p.90). Reliability is the degree to which similar findings can be achieved if the study is repeated in similar conditions (Silverman, 2013). In qualitative research, words that encompass validity and reliability, such as 'credibility, transferability and trustworthiness' (Golafshani, 2003, p.600) are usually used. To ensure credibility in my study, I incorporated three data collection methods – interviews, focus groups and document analysis. The three methods promote the trustworthiness of evidence as they corroborate each other (Patton, 1990; Bowen, 2009; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009; Coleman, 2022). I interviewed diverse participants and data was triangulated against each other and against documents to ensure its validity (Nigar, 2020; Coleman, 2022). To ensure the validity of the documents, I determined 'the authenticity, credibility, accuracy, and representativeness of the selected documents' (Bowen, 2009, p.32). I recorded and transcribed transcripts verbatim. The transcribed data was shared with the participants for validation to confirm that their responses were accurately represented and captured (Coleman, 2022).

3.7 Ethics requirements

I applied for ethics clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand before commencing my study (see Appendix C). I informed my participants about the purpose of my study and why I chose them to be part of the study. I requested formal consent from all interview participants in the study. I also requested permission from participants to record the interviews and to use their responses in my research project. I treated all participants in the study with respect, and I kept them anonymous in my final thesis by using job titles and

pseudonyms. I informed self-publishers that self-publishing is not an inferior practice, but a dynamic way of publishing, and my investigation would give it greater credence and understanding. The data gathered in the study was kept confidential by keeping it in password-encrypted files on a password-protected computer.

3.8 Limitations and delimitations

A key limitation of this study was the difficulty in obtaining comprehensive and accurate data on self-publishing in South Africa, due to the absence of a centralized repository or database tracking self-published works. South Africa would benefit from establishing a centralized self-publishing database, like Bowker's statistical reports in the United States. As the official ISBN agency, Bowker provides comprehensive bibliographic data, publishing industry analytics, and valuable tools for authors, publishers, and libraries – a model that could significantly enhance visibility and organization within South Africa's self-publishing ecosystem. This can be a joint effort between authors, publishers, booksellers and other industry role players. The study relied on a small sample of eleven self-published authors, so it is not representative of all self-published authors in South Africa. However, the focus of this study was not on the generalizability of the entire population of self-publishing but on arriving at a detailed description and explanation of self-publishing.

Self-publishing is evolving, with new platforms, technologies, and trends emerging, making it difficult to accurately describe the current state of self-publishing in South Africa. There is thus a need for continuous research to keep track of changes in the field. Some of the self-published authors who were part of the study were reluctant to share sensitive information such as sales figures or marketing strategies, which limits the depth and breadth of the data. Data in this study was supplemented with sales figures from Nielsen BookScan and

booksellers, although the two sources do not capture sales figures for all books, they will indicate the sales figures for some self-published books.

The scope of this study was limited to the self-publishing of trade books specifically within South Africa, excluding other book sectors such as academic or educational publishing, as well as self-publishing practices in other countries. The study was delimited to include only books self-published between 2010–2020. The language focus of the self-published books was English, thus, self-published books in other South African languages were excluded from the study, which limits the scope of the findings. These delimitations made the scope of the study more manageable.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter provides the research approach for this study and gives motivations for choosing a qualitative approach. The data collection methods of semi-structured interviews, focus groups and document analysis are explained and how the data was analysed through thematic analysis. The study's ethics, reliability and validity are briefly discussed to show what was done to ensure that the study was conducted ethically, is reliable and valid.

Chapter 4 Self-publishing in the trade sector

4.1 Introduction

Self-publishing has emerged as a significant force in South Africa's publishing landscape. This chapter examines the demographics of participating authors and analyses their chosen genres and formats in the trade sector. It explores the factors driving authors toward self-publishing, including traditional publisher rejection, creative independence, and financial considerations.

4.2 Research participants

Eleven authors were interviewed for this study. All eleven authors self-published at least one trade book between 2010–2020. Authors 2, 4 and 11 used the terms 'self-publishing' and 'independent publishing' interchangeably. Authors 1 and 5 defined self-publishing because they felt it was important to have a common understanding.

> *Author 1:*
> In 2019, I published my short story collection ... And this is where I was totally independent … I'm saying it's self-publishing because I had the decision-making powers to publish it.

> *Author 5:*
> I understood about self-publishing which a lot of people don't necessarily understand is that self-publishing doesn't mean you do it all yourself. It just means that you control the process yourself.

These excerpts illustrate that self-publishing involves the author funding and controlling the entire publishing process. However, as Author 5 points out, there is a common misconception among some authors that self-publishing requires them to perform all tasks involved personally. This misunderstanding aligns with Baverstock and Steinitz's (2013a) observation about the frequent misinterpretation of self-publishing processes. While self-publishing authors have decision-making powers and full control, they can and often outsource various

aspects of the process, maintaining oversight without necessarily executing every task themselves.

The excerpts by Authors 1 and 5 highlight key features of self-publishing, such as independence from traditional publishers, control over the publishing process, and the ability to subcontract specialist services. These aspects align with findings from researchers such as Baverstock and Steinitz (2013b) and Hartiningtyas (2023). In the self-publishing model, the author is central, making key decisions as a creator and entrepreneur. Authors can access professional services for editing, design, printing, marketing, and distribution.

4.2.1 Author demographics

The author demographics are presented in Table 4.1 below. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned to all authors.

Table 4.1: Author demographics

Author pseudonym	Age	Race	Gender	Highest level of education	Profession
Author 1	47	Black	Male	PhD	Government employee
Author 2	44	White	Female	Honours	Marketing and communication consultant
Author 3	31	Black	Female	PhD candidate	Author, PhD student
Author 4	36	White	Female	Honours	Author
Author 5	37	Black	Female	MA	Healer, poet, publisher, freelance wordsmith
Author 6	33	Black	Female	BA	Author, entrepreneur
Author 7	41	Coloured	Male	Diploma	Author, entrepreneur
Author 8	53	Indian (Muslim)	Female	Honours	Copywriter
Author 9	53	Coloured	Male	PhD	Psychologist
Author 10	69	White	Female	PhD	Psychologist
Author 11	43	White	Female	Higher Diploma	Author

The participating authors ranged in age from 31 to 69 years (Table 4.1). Four authors were in their thirties, four in their forties, two in their fifties, and one over sixty. However, the eldest participant had written her book a decade earlier, while in her fifties. All races in South Africa are represented – four authors are Black, four are White, two are Coloured and one is Indian. Authors' highest educational qualifications range from a diploma to three doctorates, showing a highly educated population. Three authors are male, while eight are female; this study population is skewed towards females. These demographics reflect that self-publishing in South Africa is inclusive and is not confined to one age group, race, gender or class.

Author 5 who self-published a poetry collection in 2014, later established a hybrid publishing company in 2018. This company is a traditional publisher and offers publishing services to authors and organisations. Author 5 commented on the demographics of self-publishers in South Africa:

> *Author 5:*
> There's a huge self-publishing market in the country across racial lines and class groups.

The demographics of my research participants were intentionally selected to represent diverse races and classes among self-publishing authors in South Africa. While this suggests inclusivity within the sample, it does not imply generalizability to the broader population. This is supported by the findings of a study by Baverstock and Steinitz (2013a), which showed that self-publishers spanned all demographics but were mostly well educated, as 76% had a university education, spanned all ages but were mostly middle-aged (40+ years) and female authors predominate. My research participants were also a mix of debut and experienced authors; only two of the eleven authors were debut authors. This is consistent with the study by Baverstock and Steinitz (2013a) in which only 27% of the research participants were debut authors, as most were experienced authors. This also corroborates

Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez and Weidner (2013) and Salamon (2016) whose studies show that both debut authors and established authors are self-publishing. Including first-time authors in this study is significant as these are the authors who experience the most challenges in publishing, as the learning curve is pronounced.

4.2.2 Full-time authoring versus part-time authoring

Of the eleven authors, only three (Authors 4, 6 and 11) are full-time authors. This suggests that authors who regularly publish in popular genres and invest in marketing their work can generate sustainable income through self-publishing. However, the predominance of authors maintaining other full-time employment suggests the challenges of establishing a financially viable writing career in South Africa. Authors 2 and 8 maintained that both self-published and traditionally published authors face significant challenges in sustaining themselves solely through their book earnings:

> *Author 2:*
> It's not financially viable ... I would need to earn significantly more to give up my day job and even a lot of South African published authors, friends of mine that I know that are only published through big publishing houses aren't even full-time authors. I think it's not very lucrative unless you are like Deon Meyer.

> *Author 8:*
> You don't make money out of novels … even traditionally published authors almost all have a day job. So writing is their passion, and it's something that they do on the side. And yes, a lot of them will make a lot of money, but there are few that you can count that get their sole income from writing.

It is crucial to note that neither author has attempted full-time authoring; they have only tried it as a part-time venture, which could be why they do not get a lot of income as they are not fully committed to the process. Author 2 acknowledged that an author can live off the proceeds from their books, but it is very demanding:

Author 2:

… has been self-publishing on Amazon. 15 years plus, she writes paranormal romance. She lives off her books, that's amazing and she publishes a book every six weeks on Amazon only ... 10–12 books a year and it makes lots of money. It's amazing.

Author 2 kept repeating that 'it is amazing', which shows that it is an exceptional achievement and not the norm for an author to live off the proceeds from their writing. It is also demanding; one must produce 10–12 books annually. This author has 15 years of experience and writes full-time for an international audience in a popular genre, allowing her to make a living solely from her writing.

Authors 4, 6, and 11, who transitioned from part-time to full-time authors, concurred with Author 2 regarding the requirements for full-time authoring. They agreed that full-time authors must be committed, publish books regularly (at least four per year), and treat self-publishing as a business. Authors must carefully select their genre and allocate sufficient time to self-publishing, promotion, and marketing to succeed financially in their writing, as it requires full-time dedication. This highlights that although it is difficult to be a full-time author, commitment and writing popular genres that sell high volumes and series pay off. Authors must write regularly over a sustained period to live off the income of their books. This suggests that authors use different approaches depending on whether they are full-time or part-time.

It is important to highlight that Authors 6 and 11 have other revenue streams to supplement their income from self-published books. This was particularly helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic when they could not publish as many books as they wished to. Author 11 is a hybrid author who works with a digital publisher in the USA that publishes post-apocalyptic

and urban fantasy books. They co-publish – she writes, and the company pays for the editing and the cover design. Both parties market the books, and they then share the royalties.

It is significant to note that two of the three full-time authors (Authors 4 and 11) primarily publish e-books on Amazon. Their primary target market is young adults and adult readers in the international audience – Canada, USA, and the UK – but their books also appeal to a small SA market. Author 11 is described as a best-selling American author on Amazon. This means that her books are the top-selling in their category on Amazon.

> *Author 4:*
> There are readers like me who also enjoy fantasy in South Africa, so I have readers here. But the market is much larger in the USA, UK and Canada. For example, I made a conscious decision to use US spelling instead of UK or South African spelling.
>
> *Author 11:*
> It's [SA market] tiny. I don't market to South Africa at all. My main markets are the US and the UK.

These observations suggest that the international book market has a larger customer base than its South African counterpart. If an author wants to make substantial money from self-publishing in South Africa, they must aim their books at both the international and South African markets and not exclusively at the latter. This explains why Authors 4 and 11 deliberately chose their target market because the SA market is too small to be lucrative.

South African studies by Odendaal and Galloway (2008), Moller (2014), SABDC (2016), and Molapo (2020) confirm that South Africa has a relatively underdeveloped culture of purchasing and reading books, which contributes to generally low sales volumes in the trade book market. Consequently, only a few self-published authors in South Africa, such as Jackie Phamotse and Dudu Busani-Dube, are successful, indicating that self-publishing is viable for only a select few (Maneta, 2018). Successful self-publishing is characterized by critical

acclaim and positive reception, high demand and sales, filling a gap in the market, and reaching target readers (Maneta, 2018).

Odendaal (2007) further supports the notion that self-publishing is lucrative for only a few authors, arguing that it typically brings in only supplementary income, making it difficult to earn a sustainable and adequate living from self-publishing in South Africa. This trend is not unique to South Africa; international studies by Baverstock and Steinitz (2013a), Shumake (2017), and Carolan and Evain (2013) show that sales volumes of self-published books vary widely, from a few copies to thousands. This indicates that while some authors make very little, others achieve significant sales from self-publishing. This disparity suggests that earning a living from self-publishing is challenging, with authors with large reader followings and high visibility more likely to achieve high sales.

While this study found few authors earning a sustainable income through self-publishing, it is important to note that this mirrors patterns in traditional publishing, where only a small percentage of authors achieve financial viability. This parallel suggests systemic challenges in authorship as a profession, rather than limitations specific to any single publishing model.

4.2.3 Authors who have started publishing services companies

Three participants (Authors 1, 5, and 7) identified a gap in the publishing industry and established their own companies to provide publishing services to other self-publishers. These companies offer optional services for set fees, including manuscript review, editorial and production work, marketing and sales support, and warehousing and distribution, thus making self-publishing more accessible. Baverstock and Steinitz (2013a) identify this trend as an implication of the growth in self-publishing.

Author 1, recognizing aspiring authors' challenges, founded a publishing services company to assist other authors in their publishing journey. The company aims to provide support and services to self-publishers, leveraging Author 1's experience in the field. However, due to significant time constraints, likely stemming from his writing commitments and other professional obligations, Author 1 has not been able to offer publishing services to clients. Despite these limitations, Author 1's company has successfully published an academic journal, demonstrating the company's ability to produce scholarly works.

In 2018, Author 5 founded a hybrid publishing house, four years after self-publishing her poetry collection. The company is a traditional publisher and a service provider for self-publishers and organizations. This dual approach allows the company to serve diverse authors and publishing needs. Author 5's goals were twofold: to help self-publishers produce high-quality books, address challenges she faced herself, and provide a platform for stories by Black women often overlooked by traditional publishers, thus amplifying underrepresented voices.

Author 7 established a publishing services company based on his struggles with self-publishing. Lacking mentorship and guidance, he identified a need for accessible, affordable assistance for new authors. The company aims to help self-publishers produce quality books through education and empowerment. The company focuses on teaching authors the necessary skills and knowledge for successful self-publishing. By offering affordable services and emphasizing skill transfer, the company strives to make self-publishing more accessible to a wider range of authors.

Authors 1, 5, and 7's ventures exemplify a growing trend: experienced self-published authors leveraging their expertise to guide newcomers. Their companies offer diverse models for

addressing self-publishers' needs, aligning with Dilevko and Dali's (2006) assertion that author service companies provide professional publishing services outside traditional channels, thus improving self-publishing's reputation. This trend of self-publishers launching their own publishing companies extends to two publishing services companies interviewed as part of this study, whose founders shared similar motivations: disseminating publishing expertise and producing quality books. These self-published authors are applying their entrepreneurial skills to establish these supportive businesses. This aligns with Ho, Wang and Cheng (2011) who contend that self-publishing can multiply to form a long tail of publishers helping other authors self-publish.

The South African publishing industry is experiencing a transformation, blurring the lines between traditional and self-publishing. Traditional publishers such as Modjaji Books are evolving into hybrid models, offering publishing services for self-publishers and organizations. This shift creates a middle ground between independent self-publishing and traditional publishing contracts. The Publishers Association of South Africa (PASA) has recognized this trend and has included revenue from third-party publishing services in its annual surveys since 2019 (PASA, 2022, 2023, 2024). These services encompass consulting, editing, production, marketing, sales, warehousing, and distribution. The integration of third-party services into PASA surveys highlights their growing significance as a major revenue stream for traditional publishers, underscoring the industry's shift toward diversifying business models beyond conventional book publishing. This evolution allows traditional publishers to diversify their income sources, tapping into the self-publishing market for greater financial stability. It fosters a more collaborative relationship between traditional and self-publishers. It reflects a global trend towards more flexible publishing models that meet diverse author and reader needs in a changing literary landscape.

4.3 Description of self-published works

The authors I interviewed for this study have published in different genres and formats. The sampling technique was described in the methods chapter. All eleven authors were acutely aware of their books' target market, which determined their writing, production, marketing and distribution strategies. The target markets ranged from children to adults, the general reader to the specialist reader, and local South African readers to international readers. The most common target market was young adults and adult readers in South Africa (Authors 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11).

4.3.1 Book genres

Table 4.2 lists authors' publication volumes, genres, and formats.

Table 4.2: Genres and formats of self-published works

Author	No. of self-published books	Genres of self-published books	Formats
Author 1	5	1 drama, 1 short story collection, literary journal issues 1-3	print and e-book
Author 2	5	2 novels (women's literature), 3 young adult novels	print and e-book for all, one audiobook
Author 3	1	1 children's book (picture book, fiction)	print
Author 4	20	17 novels, 2 novellas, 1 short story collection (16 fantasy, 4 contemporary romance)	16 in three formats – print, e-book and audiobook, 4 print and e-book
Author 5	1	1 poetry collection	print
Author 6	9	4 novels (women's contemporary fiction), 1 social media handbook (self-help), 1 psychological crime thriller, 3 children's books	print and e-books for 6 adult books print books for 3 children's books
Author 7	3	1 self-help, *2 children's books comprising of reader, activity book, adult companion	print and e-book for self-help book, print for children's books
Author 8	5	1 poetry, 1 short story, 3 novels (women's contemporary fiction)	poetry only available as an e-book, 4 books available as print and e-book
Author 9	3	non-fiction – 1 business, 1 sport, 1 self-help	print books
Author 10	1	1 self-help (positive ageing)	first edition published in 2013 – print and e-book, second edition published

			in 2020 available only as e-book
Author 11	20	13 novels, 1 non-fiction, 6 short story collections (2 thrillers, 1 memoir, 4 sci-fiction, 6 short story collections, 7 urban fantasy)	17 available in print, e-book and audiobooks, 3 are available in print and e-book

* The children's book is a reading system sold as a box set that has a book, colouring book, parent guide and colouring pencils in a branded box.

The eleven authors have collectively published a diverse range of works, with individual publication counts varying from one to twenty books per author. Their combined publications span fiction and non-fiction, encompassing multiple genres including drama, poetry, short stories, literary journals, novels, children's books and self-help books. Among the authors, novels represent the predominant genre, with fantasy being the most common category (written by Authors 2, 4, and 11), followed by science fiction, women's contemporary fiction, and romance. These genres are widely considered popular and often translate into strong sales. This popularity is reflected in recent market data, with Nielsen BookScan (2024) reporting that both fantasy and romance genres experienced double-digit value growth in 2023.

Women's contemporary fiction, authored by female writers, addresses topics primarily affecting women that have historically been considered taboo, uncomfortable, or too controversial for traditional publishers. These authors give voice to marginalized women's issues and experiences. The themes explored include health issues, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and body image. The SABDC report (2016) indicates that women constitute most readers in South Africa, making them a key target market for these books. By addressing sensitive topics through fiction, authors create relatable characters and compelling narratives that resonate with readers. This approach allows for a nuanced, empathetic

exploration of complex issues, fostering greater understanding and awareness among a wider audience.

Three authors (Authors 7, 8 and 10) published self-help books, and three authors (Authors 3, 6 and 7) published children's books. Of the eleven authors, four have published short story collections, one has published a drama, and two have published poetry collections. Traditional publishers often avoid poetry, short stories, and drama, claiming there is no market for such works. This highlights how self-publishing fosters diversity in the industry by enabling niche genres, often deemed unprofitable by traditional publishers, to reach readers and amplify underrepresented author voices.

Self-publishing lowers entry barriers, allows creative freedom, and gives voice to marginalized authors. This publishing model supports unconventional themes and styles, underrepresented perspectives, rapid response to current trends and direct author-reader engagement. This is consistent with findings by several researchers (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Miller, 2013; Baverstock & Steinitz 2013a; Pacer, 2013 & Umezurike, 2020) who argue that self-publishing makes it economically feasible for authors to target very narrow, specialized readers that traditional publishers may ignore. In addition, Baverstock and Steinitz (2013a) and Umezurike (2020) contend that for some self-publishers, profitability is not the main objective but rather the desire to write and provide a platform for important, often marginalized literary voices.

Authors strategically choose genres to fill market gaps (Umezurike, 2020). For instance, Author 2 created fantastical stories for South African young adults in African settings, addressing a niche unserved by traditional publishers. These publishers often avoid perceived unprofitable genres due to risk aversion, leading to a lack of diversity in published books.

This failure to accommodate diverse publications and authors leaves readers' demand for representative content unmet. Consequently, self-published authors like Dudu Busani-Dube, Lebohang Masango, Phumlani Pikoli, and Buhle Ngaba have gained popularity by providing content readers desire but cannot find in traditional publishing (Maneta, 2018).

Table 4.2 illustrates that while this study's self-publishers publish fiction and non-fiction books, fiction titles predominate. This finding aligns with Baverstock and Steinitz's (2013a) research, which reported that approximately three-quarters of their participants were self-publishing fiction. In addition, Milliot (2023), drawing on Bowker statistics for self-publishing in the USA, contends that fiction remains the most popular category among self-published works. The dominance of fiction among my research participants is contrary to the South African adult book bestseller lists that are dominated by non-fiction, especially political books (SABDC, 2016; le Roux, 2019; PASA, 2023; Nielsen BookScan, 2022, 2023 & Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse & Huston, 2023). Nielsen BookScan (2024) data for South Africa's top 1 000 books (2010–2020) shows non-fiction outsold fiction significantly, with the best-selling non-fiction title reaching 546 904 copies compared to 47 714 for the top fiction title – a more than eleven-fold difference. The dominance of non-fiction in South Africa contrasts with international trends where fiction books outsell non-fiction books (le Roux, 2019). Several trade publishers in South Africa, such as Jonathan Ball and Bookstorm, publish exclusively non-fiction books, proving the genre's popularity and profitability.

Nielsen BookScan (2023) attributes this popularity of non-fiction to the fact that it caters to diverse interests and addresses topical issues. In addition, le Roux (2019) attributes this preference for non-fiction over fiction to the country's political and social context and readers' desire for information and understanding in a complex and changing environment. The predominance of fiction in Table 4.2 suggests that some self-publishers in this study may

be responding to perceived market gaps. However, this observation is limited to the selected participants and cannot be generalized to all self-publishing authors without further research. In addition, authors also choose popular subcategories within fiction to ensure viability. Among the research participants, novels were the most frequently self-published category. This trend aligns with Nielsen BookScan (2022) statistics, which indicate that the most popular fiction subcategories are general and literary fiction, crime and thriller, adventure and romance.

The non-fiction market appears saturated due to trade publishers' persistent focus on this genre to secure high sales and ensure profitability. As established in Chapter 1, the contracting book market and competition from imported titles have led traditional publishers to produce more limited lists and fewer books to mitigate risk. This situation has reduced the diversity of authors and genres in traditional publishing (Molapo, 2020). In response, self-publishers are publishing strategically and creating space for new readerships by accommodating new voices, new topics and niche genres. Self-publishers are not relying on market trends like traditional publishers but are creating a market for their books.

The success of self-published works like the *Hlomu* series by Dudu Busani-Dube suggests that traditional publishers may be overlooking content that readers actively seek. This disconnect is supported by a 2023 reader survey showing that many individuals struggle to find books that match their preferences or resonate with them, despite having a strong desire to read (Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse & Huston, 2023). While traditional publishers may be conducting insufficient market research, self-publishers appear more attuned to reader preferences and are capitalizing on these unmet needs.

Self-publishing has thus emerged as a vital component of South Africa's publishing landscape, empowering authors from diverse backgrounds to share their stories and experiences, which in turn promotes the publication of diverse voices, genres, and themes (Gibixego, 2021). As Elliot (2016) argues, self-published stories can reflect authentic concerns, values, history, and interests of communities, rather than external assumptions about market demand. Author 8's self-published novels – exploring Muslim identity in post-apartheid SA through familial sagas – illustrate how the model empowers marginalized voices to circumvent industry gatekeeping, filling gaps left by traditional publishers.

4.3.2 Book formats

Table 4.2 reveals that print is the most prevalent format among the eleven authors, followed by e-books, with audiobooks being the least common. The dominance of print format aligns with the broader trend in South Africa's book market, which is primarily print-oriented (SABDC, 2016; Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse & Huston, 2023; PASA, 2023). All the children's books are only available as print books. Author 3, who published a children's book, pointed out that the print format is more popular than the e-book format among children. This could be because there's a strong cultural tradition of printing children's books, and many parents prefer the familiar format they grew up with. Researchers assert that children's books are predominantly available in print format for several reasons. Firstly, they offer a tangible, interactive experience crucial for children's cognitive and sensory development (Kucirkova, 2019). Print books also facilitate shared reading experiences between parents and children, fostering bonding and language development – an interaction less effectively replicated with digital formats (Munzer et al., 2019). Moreover, the large, colourful illustrations in children's print books are more visually appealing and easier to appreciate in a physical format (Sargeant, 2015). Additionally, Clinton (2019) indicates that young children often demonstrate better reading comprehension and information retention

when reading physical books compared to digital formats. Book formats are thus largely determined by target market preferences.

Author 1, when comparing the sales of his print books and e-books said:

> *Author 1:*
> In South Africa, e-book sales are still very low. Those who bought e-book versions are largely people based in the US. It's so low that it was not even worth it. I sold via Amazon, and I never even claimed that money.

Author 7, commenting on his e-book sales, stated that the sales of the book are poor because the book is targeted at a local market and is sold predominantly directly to the target market at events. It is also interesting to note that he does not put much effort into and does not pay for any marketing of the e-book, which could explain the low e-book sales. The international purchases without active marketing suggest untapped potential for broader appeal.

> *Author 7:*
> Not very well because I don't have an aggressive marketing strategy for the online space, it is available online on Amazon. I've had purchases from countries like India and China and whereabouts in the world, but I don't market it aggressively simply because my strategy has always been to reach a local audience more, especially because my book serves a South African audience much better.

In contrast to the other authors, Authors 4 and 11 sell more books in the e-book format than in the print format.

> *Author 4:*
> E-books sell the most. My print is tiny. I haven't checked recently, but mostly in the past when I've checked, it's been about 5-6% print.

> *Author 11:*
> The e-books sell the most. The audiobooks bring in a higher percentage of royalties because they are more expensive to buy. E-books are very cheap, but we sell more of them, but audiobooks are very expensive, and we sell less of them.

It is important to highlight that the primary target markets for Authors 4 and 11 are the USA and the UK and their main form of publishing is e-books on Amazon. E-books are popular in these markets (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a; Milliot, 2023). Their books are also available on print-on-demand (POD) via Amazon. This shows that the target market determines the format a book is published in, and which format sells the most.

Of the eleven authors, three have released audiobooks: Author 2 has converted one of her five books, Author 4 has produced 16 audiobooks from her 20 fantasy titles, and Author 11 has recorded 17 of her 20 publications. Author 4's audiobooks were published by a traditional audiobook publisher who approached her. The publisher pays her royalties, but she intends to self-publish all her audiobooks in the future, as it is an increasingly popular format. Anderson (2023), based on a survey of 1 000 audiobook users in the USA, confirms the rising popularity of audiobooks. He attributes the popularity of audiobooks to several factors: the relaxation experienced when listening, the flexibility to enjoy them anywhere, and the ability to multitask while listening. Additionally, he notes that audiobooks can improve memory and keep users' minds active.

Most authors did not convert their books to audiobooks due to cost issues, as the conversion process is expensive. Authors 4 and 11 highlighted the value of audiobooks: while production costs are high, the format's growing popularity and substantial royalties make it an effective way to maximize a book's earning potential.

> *Author 4:*
> In the last few years, audio is growing quite rapidly and overtaking some of the e-book sales. I think when I looked everything up at the end of last year, audio was about a quarter or maybe 20%. So that has become quite substantial in the last few years ...

Author 11:

> One of the reasons I would say everyone should do an audiobook is because the royalties are good and it's taking advantage of your intellectual property. You put so much work into writing a book instead of just selling it once off as a paperback, you can sell it in as many different formats as you can. That's a big part of the indie publishing business, we call it slicing the pie.

Authors 2, 4 and 11 unanimously agree that audiobooks are expensive to produce. This expense is a common hurdle for self-published authors, often involving costs for professional narration, studio time, editing, and distribution. However, Authors 4 and 11 proposed different strategies for overcoming this challenge. Author 4 partnered with a traditional publisher for her audiobooks. This approach allowed her to leverage the publisher's resources and expertise in audiobook production while maintaining control over other formats of her work. This is a hybrid model that combines the benefits of self-publishing with the resources of traditional publishing. Author 11 suggested exploring innovative payment structures, such as offering narrators a percentage of royalties instead of an upfront fee. This method aligns the narrator's compensation with the book's success, potentially reducing initial costs and sharing the financial risk.

Author 11:

> They are very expensive to produce, but you can share the royalty with the narrator. You make a deal and say I'll provide the intellectual property. You do the voice-over, and then we'll share the profits, half, half.

These approaches highlight the crucial role of innovation and adaptability in successful self-publishing. Authors must creatively overcome challenges typically handled by traditional publishers. The strategies of Authors 4 and 11 illustrate the blurring lines between traditional and self-publishing, with self-publishers selectively engaging traditional services or adapting industry practices. This emphasizes the importance of networking and industry knowledge. Despite the high costs of audiobook production, these innovative solutions demonstrate that

creative self-publishers can make their work accessible in multiple formats, expanding their audience reach.

Table 4.2 shows that research participants are publishing in print, e-book and audiobook formats. This is consistent with findings by Baverstock and Steinitz (2013a). Print is the most popular format, which reflects buyer preferences, although digital sales are slowly increasing (SABDC, 2016; Salamon, 2016; PASA, 2023; Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse & Huston, 2023). In addition, Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse and Huston (2023) argue that digital publications complement rather than replace print reading. The popularity of print books in South Africa among self-publishers contrasts with the USA book market, where self-published e-books dominate (Milliot, 2023; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a). The USA e-book market is likely more developed due to fewer technological obstacles. American readers generally have better access to e-readers, compatible software, and reliable internet connections. In contrast, South Africa faces more barriers in these areas, which can limit widespread e-book adoption. It is worth noting that the electronic files provided for the e-book also enable print-on-demand (POD) production. Thomlison and Bélanger (2015) suggest that e-books are perceived as less prestigious than print books in Canada. This perception may influence authors' format choices, as publishing solely in e-book format is generally taken to imply lower quality. In addition, Hartiningtyas (2023) argues that for self-publishers to have a tangible publication is a great achievement. This suggests that print books are still highly regarded despite the rise of digital books.

While audiobooks have gained popularity globally, their adoption in South Africa has been comparatively slow. Despite the entry of international platforms like Audible increasing awareness and availability, local books on the platform remain limited. Audiobooks represent a small but growing segment of the South African book market, with increasing adoption

rates among younger, tech-savvy consumers (PASA, 2022). However, growth has been hampered by limited digital infrastructure and high data costs, making streaming or downloading challenging for many (Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse & Huston, 2023). Additionally, the predominantly print-oriented nature of the South African book market further impacts audiobook adoption rates (PASA, 2023).

4.4 Author motivations for self-publishing

The eleven authors' paths to self-publishing diverged into two groups. Five authors chose self-publishing without approaching traditional publishers, seeking complete control over their creative work, production, marketing, distribution, and revenue. These authors were confident in their books' market potential and wanted to maximize their earnings. The remaining six authors initially pursued traditional publishing but turned to self-publishing after the rejection of their manuscripts

4.4.1 Rejection by traditional publishers

In this study, six of the eleven authors self-published their first books because traditional publishers rejected them. This suggests that while self-publishing was their ultimate choice, it was not necessarily their first preference. Six authors (2, 5, 6, 8, 10 and 11) submitted their first manuscripts to traditional publishers, but these were rejected for various reasons that will be explored below. These authors found self-publishing so satisfactory after their initial traditional publishing rejections that they chose to continue self-publishing their subsequent works. This suggests that positive self-publishing experiences may lead some authors to adopt this model as their preferred long-term publishing strategy, rather than pursuing traditional publication routes. Authors recounted their rejection experiences:

Author 2:

I submitted my book to various publishing houses, but I didn't get any response. I then thought I'm going to self-publish… I am a middle-aged White woman ... you would have to have a phenomenal story. Publishers look at the whole package, are you young, do you have an interesting story?

Author 5:

I tried to contact publishing houses; I think I got two responses that said the same thing. They said that they wouldn't publish someone unknown.

Author 6:

I approached a couple of traditional publishing houses … my book was rejected. They said the book was not marketable … no former history of publishing, and I was fairly young, and I was Black ... I just got to a point where I said, I believe in the story, I will publish it myself.

Author 8:

I tried to go the traditional publishing route, so I submitted my manuscript in the early stages to traditional publishers, but it had no takers. I knew that this book needed to be published, and I decided to go the self-publishing route.

Author 10:

I submitted my book to traditional publishers, but they all rejected it. They all said books in the health genre were not doing well at the time and they weren't keen to take on an unknown author.

Author 11:

I've always been a writer and I tried to be published traditionally in the beginning. I didn't have much luck …

Author 2 never received a response from publishers and believes her demographics and story were not an ideal fit, as publishers consider the entire package when evaluating manuscripts. Traditional publishers consider several factors before accepting a manuscript. The key elements are the fit with the publisher's list, quality of the manuscript, commercial viability of the book, author's credentials and existing audience, social media presence, and ability to market the book. Three authors (5, 6, and 8) were rejected due to being debut writers,

suggesting limited opportunities for new authors in traditional publishing. However, Angela Makholwa's success demonstrates that traditional publishers remain interested in exceptional stories.

Traditional publishers increasingly favour established authors because they are risk averse. This trend is driven by decreasing volume sales (PASA, 2023) and competition from imported books and other media (Molapo, 2020). Consequently, publishers are reducing their annual output, limiting the number of authors and books published (Nielsen BookScan, 2024; PASA, 2024). This approach potentially diminishes diversity in publishing, as established authors dominate unless newcomers opt for self-publishing.

Two authors' manuscripts (Authors 6 and 10) were rejected due to perceived lack of market potential. Ironically, these books later achieved significant sales (15 000 and 7 000 copies respectively), suggesting that traditional publishers may be overly cautious in their market assessments. This implies that publishers are focusing on limited lists of demonstrably profitable titles and established authors to minimize risk. Several researchers support this view, citing rejection by traditional publishers as a primary driver for self-publishing. Authors turn to self-publishing when their books target niche markets or when they lack an established track record (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a; Pacer, 2013; Hartiningtyas, 2023). This aligns with the current South African publishing landscape, where trade book sales volumes are declining (PASA, 2024; Nielsen BookScan, 2024), leading publishers to reduce their annual output and limit the number of published authors.

However, the success of self-published authors such as Dudu Busani-Dube and Jackie Phamotse (Maneta, 2018) demonstrates that traditional publishers may sometimes misjudge market potential and readership preferences. This underscores the importance of

representation and suggests that publishers may be overlooking certain market segments that self-publishers successfully identify and serve. A recent reading survey confirms this gap, indicating that some readers struggle to find books that match their preferences (Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse & Huston, 2023). Self-publishing has become an established publishing route, contributing to changes in the publishing industry by offering authors more options. It creates opportunities for authors to publish works that might not fit traditional publishing criteria, potentially expanding the variety of voices, themes, and genres available to readers.

Authors 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 9 contend that traditional publishers maintain highly selective criteria for authors and content. While traditional publishers' selectivity creates opportunities for self-published authors to reach readers, questions remain about their ability to significantly impact the industry given current distribution and market reach limitations.

> *Author 3:*
> Perhaps publishers are not ready for their kind of stories or publishers don't see the value of their stories, but eventually they can become the catalysts for a very big change in the narrative direction of our country.

> *Author 5:*
> I think that it's [self-publishing] important, particularly for Black people, and particularly for Black women, and particularly for intersectional feminist voices to be heard.

According to Authors 5 and 7, self-publishing is important because it is a channel that disseminates a variety of stories and levels the publishing field, as almost anyone can self-publish.

> *Author 5:*
> I think self-publishing is very important because otherwise, we would lose so many stories. I feel like stories should not be reserved for the elite or who deems them important or who deems them successful, who deems them sell worthy… I think that the

> existence of self-publishing is hugely important because it allows for a variety of stories to be told.
>
> *Author 7:*
> Self-publishing gives so many more people the opportunity for their voices to be heard, and for their stories to be told, it gives everybody a platform and levels the playing field.

Self-publishing has expanded access to publishing opportunities and provides a platform for underrepresented voices to share their stories without traditional gatekeepers. However, claiming it 'levels the playing field' oversimplifies the reality. While authors gain creative control and can publish niche content, they still face significant barriers, including marketing costs, the need for professional services like editing and design, and challenges with discoverability in a saturated market. Self-publishing success often requires substantial resources, digital marketing expertise, and business acumen that not all authors possess equally. Rather than fostering true equality in publishing, self-publishing has primarily reduced the initial barriers to entry while leaving significant challenges in place for reaching and cultivating an audience.

The statistics that mainstream publishers rely on may be incomplete, as they often focus primarily on book sales through retail bookshops and may overlook direct sales channels. As a result, traditional publishers might not fully grasp the impact of self-publishing, particularly if they do not conduct comprehensive market research that includes these alternative distribution methods.

> *Author 5:*
> The general South African publishing industry follows the White woman reader and so they assume that if something would not be interesting to the White woman who is seen as the largest book buying demographic by major bookstores, because it completely disregards independent bookstores and out of pocket sales…

Author 11, a successful self-published author, has yet to be approached by traditional publishers. She highlights several key points about the dynamics between traditional publishers and independent (indie) authors, particularly within the South African context.

> *Author 11:*
> I don't know if South African publishers are aware of the opportunities out there. I think that's one of the reasons if I was a publisher, it would be a no-brainer for me to approach the most successful indie authors and say let's do something together. But they don't seem interested at all, and I think that in South Africa we are still a bit backward. I think some traditional publishers still see indie publishing as not as good as traditional publishing because there are no gatekeepers or not enough gatekeepers … if you go to nations that have more digital citizens … e-books are completely acceptable ...

Author 11 critiqued the South African publishing industry for its perceived reluctance to engage with self-published authors and adapt to digital trends, calling for a shift in mindset. She urged traditional publishers to recognize the value of self-publishing and explore collaborative opportunities. However, as demonstrated by Author 3, whose initially self-published book was later published by a traditional publisher, some publishers are beginning to take note of successful self-published works. Despite this progress, the stigma that self-published books are of inferior quality remains a persistent issue in the industry.

4.4.2 Control/Independence

Five authors (1, 3, 4, 7, and 9) opted to self-publish without submitting their work to traditional publishers. The primary motivation for this decision was the desire for complete control of all aspects of the book production process – creative control, all rights, publication timelines, book publishing processes, marketing and distribution strategies, and profits.

> *Author 1:*
> The intention was very clear that I was taking full control. The means of production were now within my powers.

Author 3:

I didn't want a publishing house that perhaps would have said can't this happen, how about this? Can you please add this? Can you please remove this?... I didn't want to wait for a submission date seven months away.

Author 4:

I enjoyed the control of everything because with self-publishing you can be the boss of all the decisions.

Author 6:

They [traditional publishers] want to control the book; it means you sign your rights away. And then also they control what you write about.

Author 7:

You can decide when you want your book to get done and you control the entire process. You have complete control over the creative process … all the profits. You determine your strategy, you implement and roll out your strategy and you determine how good or how bad your book does.

Author 9:

I did it autonomously. I do my things as I like, when I like, on my terms. I don't want to work under a publisher or anybody else for that matter. I like to be in control of the processes, my distribution and my marketing.

Author 10:

I wanted the book ready for an expo that was going to happen and a publisher that I spoke to said that the book could only be available in a year or two, which would have been pretty much beside the point … I needed the product much sooner.

Although the five authors cited control as their primary reason for self-publishing, they also chose this route because they anticipated rejection from traditional publishers. They believed their manuscripts would not be accepted in their original form by publishing houses. For instance, Author 1, who had been traditionally published in the past, decided to self-publish without approaching any traditional publishers. He knew that the short story genre he wanted to publish would likely be dismissed as unprofitable by traditional publishing houses. This

confirms Dilevko and Dali's (2006) findings that self-publishing provides continuity for already published authors as authors can publish outside their existing contracts and expand into new areas.

All eleven authors agreed that self-publishing grants them full control over the creative process, production, marketing, distribution strategies, and book proceeds. Authors receive higher royalties with faster and more frequent payments, which will be further discussed in Section 4.4.4. Authors perceive traditional publishers as exerting excessive control over creative and production processes and copyright, potentially infringing on authors' creative freedom. This observation points to a broader trend among some self-publishing authors: a potential underestimation of the services and value provided by traditional publishers. This trend aligns with findings from several studies conducted in South Africa (Odendaal, 2007; Odendaal & Galloway, 2008; Maneta, 2018 & Tyilo, 2020). These studies suggest that the decision to self-publish is often made without a full appreciation of the multifaceted role traditional publishers play in the book industry. Authors may focus on publishing itself without considering the additional value provided in quality control, professional editing, design, marketing expertise, and established distribution channels. This could have implications for the quality of self-published books and their market reach. It also raises questions about the need for better education and resources for authors considering self-publishing, to ensure they make informed decisions about their publishing route.

Author 3 initially self-published her book, which was later republished by a small independent publisher. This aligns with the argument by Dilevko and Dali (2006) that self-publishing can serve as a pathway for new authors to gain recognition and eventually secure deals with larger mainstream publishers, which offer greater reach and distribution opportunities. Notably, Author 3's perception of traditional publishers as overly controlling

has shifted since working with the small independent publisher, where she maintains control through consultation on all processes. This experience highlights a potential misconception about loss of control in traditional publishing, though experiences may differ with larger multinational publishers.

After the success of Author 6's first self-published book, traditional publishers approached her, but she declined, believing they were too controlling, lacked transparency and honesty, and exploited authors. Similarly, Dudu Busani-Dube rejected traditional publishers' offers to republish her books, prioritizing creative control (Maneta, 2018). Authors' mistrust of publishers often stems from real and perceived issues, particularly among authors who have not experienced traditional publishing. Key reasons for this mistrust noted by researchers include:

1. Low royalty rates and lack of financial transparency (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013b)
2. Loss of creative control (Carolan & Evain, 2013)
3. Perceived elitism and gatekeeping (Squires, 2017)
4. Inadequate marketing support, especially for mid-list titles (Clark & Phillips, 2019)
5. Perception of bias towards potential bestsellers or established authors (Squires, 2017)

Gibixego (2021) suggests that building linkages between self-publishers and traditional publishers could foster understanding and trust between these two groups.

Authors desire full control over their stories' presentation, including aspects such as page layout, cover design, and production timelines. They often perceive traditional publishing timelines as unnecessarily prolonged due to bureaucratic processes, while self-publishing provides them with greater autonomy and the ability to publish more quickly. This aligns with findings from several researchers (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Pacer, 2013; Miller, 2013; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a & Umezurike, 2020) who note that self-publishers can produce

books quickly, bypassing lengthy publisher acquisition and production processes. These shorter timelines allow self-publishers to capitalize on trends (Pacer, 2013). However, Baverstock and Steinitz (2013b) assert that while most authors realistically estimate the time required to publish a book (averaging seven months), some underestimate the process and struggle with self-regulation to maintain consistent writing time.

Author 6 believes that traditional publishing requires authors to sign away their copyright to the publisher, which is a misconception. Publishers only hold the copyright for the book in its published form. Additionally, authors often feel that traditional publishing involves lengthy timelines and offers insufficient royalties. These factors lead many to choose self-publishing, as it aligns more closely with their goals. Self-publishing gives authors independence over their work, including creative control, design choices, pricing, and publication timelines. However, it also places significant responsibilities on authors, such as editing, design, distribution, and marketing, tasks typically managed by traditional publishers. These duties often demand specialized skills and considerable time, which many authors struggle to manage effectively due to limited expertise or time constraints. This can affect the quality and success of their self-published work. Moreover, while authors have control over what to publish, gatekeepers still influence access to readers post-publication, limiting the full extent of their autonomy.

4.4.3 Experimenting with self-publishing

Authors 1, 4, and 11 ventured into self-publishing for experimental purposes. Author 1, having published a novel through a traditional publisher in 2011 and short stories in 2014, leveraged this experience to explore self-publishing. This aligns with Baverstock and Steinitz (2013b), Salamon (2016) and Smith and Bold (2018), who posit that traditionally published authors often experiment with self-publishing in different formats and genres without

jeopardizing their existing traditional publishing arrangements. The low barriers to entry in self-publishing, as highlighted by Miller (2013), broaden publishing opportunities by removing the necessity for industry approval, which is a prerequisite in traditional publishing arrangements.

Commenting on his first self-publishing project, Author 1 said:

> *Author 1:*
> It was an experimental project. It was drama and mainstream publishers hardly ever publish it unless the objective is to sell it for the school market.

Author 4 experimented with self-publishing after helping someone self-publish on Amazon and because she likes doing things herself instead of hiring professionals because she wants full control.

> *Author 4:*
> I haven't submitted anything ever… I helped somebody who wanted to self-publish and she wasn't very technologically savvy ... After that, I thought I wanted to try this out for myself. I'm a DIY kind of person … by the time I launched that and probably a few months after that, I was kind of addicted.

Author 11's expertise and personal preferences made her experiment with self-publishing.

> *Author 11:*
> I love graphic design of the covers. I love writing. I love editing, so it suits my personality. It suits my skill set. I just love it and I'm going to keep doing it.

The three authors who ventured into self-publishing show that knowledge and expertise in publishing processes can spur authors to self-publish. This concurs with findings by Baverstock and Steinitz (2013a), which showed that 73% of the self-publishers had publishing experience. This demonstrates that knowledge of the publishing process can give authors confidence to self-publish.

4.4.4 Financial incentives

All eleven authors concurred that traditional publishers' royalties of 10-12% are unfairly low. In contrast, Amazon offers up to 70% royalties on e-book sales, allowing authors to retain most proceeds with quicker returns. Most traditional publishers in South Africa pay royalties twice a year, while Amazon pays royalties monthly. This aligns with findings by several researchers who identify financial benefits as a motivation for self-publishing (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Pacer, 2013; Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013a; Tondi, 2017 & Hartiningtyas, 2023). However, Author 3, who now has a traditional publishing contract, pointed out that while traditionally published authors may earn less, they benefit from the publisher's expertise in managing publication, distribution, and marketing. This demonstrates the value that publishers bring to the process. It also underscores the importance of authors carefully weighing the advantages and disadvantages of different publishing models to determine which best aligns with their goals and resources.

Author 3 prefers traditional publishing despite the lower earnings, emphasizing the reduced stress and time investment it entails. Schroff (2024) argues that the high royalty rates advertised by self-publishing platforms can be misleading. These models often come with opaque payment structures, unfavourable terms for authors, restrictive exclusivity clauses, and rigid pricing policies. Schroff (2024) further asserts that major distributors like Amazon are the primary beneficiaries of the online book market, as they gain greater control over pricing and distribution while offering limited benefits to self-published authors. Additionally, Hartiningtyas (2023) notes that self-publishing tends to be lucrative only for authors with established fan bases, as their ability to sell more copies directly translates to higher earnings.

While self-publishing is often perceived as an easy and profitable venture, the reality can be quite different. Although the authors were generally reticent about their earnings, most shared information on their sales volumes. A search on Nielsen BookScan (2023) for the debut self-published works of the study participants yielded results for only six books, as illustrated in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Lifetime book sales figures from Nielsen BookScan

Author of book	Publication year	Book sales
Author 2	2018	199
Author 3	2017	*2 473
Author 4	2016	6
Author 6	2017	5 316
Author 10	2013	509
Book 11	2017	46

* This book was republished by a traditional publisher in 2018

Table 4.3 reveals that sales figures are generally low, with only Authors 3 and 6 standing out as exceptions. Notably, Author 3's book was picked up by a traditional publisher in 2018, just a year after its initial self-publication. This likely contributed to its strong sales performance, as traditional publishers benefit from established distribution channels. However, Nielsen BookScan, which provides insights into South Africa's book industry, only tracks sales through formal bookshops. Kelso (2019) points out that many independent bookshops do not subscribe to the service due to its high costs. Since these independent bookshops often stock self-published books, this could explain why works by Authors 1, 5, 7, 8 and 9 were not recorded on Nielsen BookScan.

While Nielsen BookScan does not capture informal sales channels, its data still offers valuable insights into market performance. According to Nielsen BookScan (2024), self-published works accounted for just 3% of fiction and 3.3% of non-fiction titles among the top 1 000 books from 2010 to 2020. The overwhelming dominance of traditionally published

books suggests that self-publishing is profitable for only a few authors. This aligns with Dilevko and Dali (2006), who note that self-published books typically achieve lower sales volumes than traditionally published ones. Similarly, Maneta (2018) and Baverstock and Steinitz (2013a) observe that self-published book sales often range from a few hundred to a few thousand copies, further underscoring the challenges faced by self-publishers in achieving significant market success.

Authors 2, 6, and 8 acknowledged low book sales but emphasized non-monetary rewards. They believe their books impact readers' lives by addressing taboo topics often avoided by traditional publishers, such as male suicide, human trafficking, rape, female genital mutilation, the 'blesser' (an older, wealthy man who provides financial support or expensive gifts to a younger woman or man in exchange for companionship or sexual favours) phenomenon, mental health, and homosexuality. This perspective echoes Baverstock and Steinitz (2013a) and Umezurike (2020), who argue that for some self-publishers, profitability is secondary to the desire to write and provide a platform for important literary voices. The authors' focus on tackling sensitive social issues may also contribute to building social capital.

Authors focusing on sensitive social issues can significantly build social capital by raising awareness, fostering dialogue, and developing empathy within communities (Putnam, 2000). This can contribute to stronger social bonds and a potentially more cohesive society (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Self-publishing offers a platform for marginalized voices, providing opportunities to amplify traditionally underrepresented perspectives and fostering greater cultural understanding (Couldry, 2012). This can result in more inclusive social dialogue and strengthen connections within and between marginalized communities (Jenkins, 2011). In self-publishing, authors can address sensitive issues that traditional publishers might avoid,

potentially building social capital. However, self-published authors may face challenges in reaching wide readerships, limiting their social capital-building potential. Successful self-published authors often need to develop their platforms and communities, a form of social capital building (Bourdieu, 1986).

Authors 7 and 9 opted for self-publishing without approaching traditional publishers, viewing their books primarily as marketing tools for their businesses. Their goal extended beyond commercial gains from book sales to establishing their positions in their respective fields.

> *Author 7:*
> I needed to find some way to turn my profits around ... When I got my book idea, I realized that it was something that could change my life, change my business … I wanted my book to position me as a speaker... I wanted my book to help build my brand and to be profitable, so the best way to do that was to self-publish.

> *Author 9:*
> I didn't bother approaching a traditional publisher. My focus was primarily on marketing purposes. I publish because I want to market and position my business … I'm distributing to sell my consulting services and not distributing commercially or even to make money from the book.

According to Authors 7 and 10, some authors also write because they want the credibility of being an author in their fields.

> *Author 7:*
> Some people are just writing the book because they want the credibility of being an author so they don't need to sell a hundred books, they just need to have a book that is available so that they can say they have written a book.

Author 10, a psychologist, self-published a book on positive ageing that enhances her credibility and serves as a reference for her workshops. This publication has led to opportunities to write articles for various organizations on the subject. Authors 7, 9, and 10 chose self-publishing primarily to establish credibility in their fields and use their books as

marketing tools for their businesses. Their primary focus was not on commercial gain from book sales, but on positioning themselves in their respective fields. This approach aligns with Odendaal's (2007) study, which found that academic authors self-publish for esteem and professional advancement. It underscores that authors can benefit indirectly from their books, highlighting the importance of diverse income streams beyond direct sales.

Authors who self-publish to establish credibility in their fields and use books as marketing tools are primarily building cultural capital, as defined by Bourdieu (1986). The book serves as objectified cultural capital, demonstrating the author's expertise. This strategy also builds symbolic capital, enhancing the author's prestige and recognition (Bourdieu, 1989), and social capital by expanding professional networks (Lin, 2017). While the focus is not on commercial gain from book sales, the interplay of cultural, symbolic, and social capital can be leveraged for business success.

4.4.5 Disgruntlement with traditional publishers

A key factor that motivated authors to opt for self-publishing was their dissatisfaction with the treatment they received from traditional publishers in several aspects. The extracts below explore authors' views of traditional publishers.

> *Author 9:*
> You don't have an option because publishers aren't particularly helpful, and they choose to publish works that are aligned with their business. You either get a publisher or do it yourself… I haven't found the industry particularly useful.

Author 9 sees traditional publishers as gatekeepers, suggesting that their selectivity often compels authors who do not align with their lists to turn to self-publishing. This implies that, for some authors, self-publishing may be a necessity rather than a choice. He also criticizes traditional publishers for failing to provide self-publishers with valuable industry

information, which could help them navigate the publishing landscape more effectively. Similarly, Author 7 shares this perspective, arguing that publishers prioritize profitability over flexibility in their processes and the diversity of their lists.

After the success of her first self-published book, Author 6 was approached by traditional publishers who wanted to publish her books, but she has chosen to continue self-publishing and has just self-published her ninth book because she has a negative view of traditional publishers.

> *Author 6:*
> My response has been no, because the minute they want to control the book, it means you sign your rights away. And then also they control what you write about. I need to be in control of what I write about and to make sure that my copyright stays within my family trust. I don't want anybody ever using my books for anything that I'm not involved with. They can easily take your copyright and create a movie out of it, and you will not get any proceeds from it because they own it.

Author 6 argued that traditional publishers lack transparency and honesty, accusing them of exploiting authors and fostering mistrust. This perspective raises the question: Is such mistrust justified? While concerns about publishers profiting from film rights without benefiting the author are often cited, this claim is unfounded, as author contracts typically include clauses for subsidiary and adaptation rights, ensuring that revenue from such rights is shared between the publisher and the author. However, Odendaal and Galloway (2008) and Baverstock and Steinitz (2013a) lend some credibility to Author 6's viewpoint, highlighting issues like poorly drafted contracts and conflicts between authors and publishers as key reasons why some authors turn to self-publishing. Authors' mistrust of publishers often arises from a combination of real and perceived grievances, particularly among those who have not

experienced traditional publishing firsthand. These reasons for mistrust were explored in greater detail earlier in Section 4.4.2.

Authors 1, 5, and 6 highlighted the necessity for change within the publishing industry, which is predominantly controlled by multinational corporations that heavily influence publication decisions. In post-apartheid South Africa, the trade publishing sector has made progress in diversifying its range of authors, genres, and themes, reflecting a move toward greater inclusivity. However, the industry has not fully transformed in demographic representation, Black ownership and participation, and language and cultural diversity (Moller, 2014; Gibixego, 2021; PASA, 2022). To some extent, publishing in South Africa still reflects previous hierarchies of control.

As a result, certain authors and genres that represent diverse perspectives may face challenges in being published through traditional channels. In response, self-publishers are creating their own spaces rather than conforming to what they perceive as an exclusionary system. To some extent, self-publishing plays a significant role in democratizing the industry by amplifying voices, genres, and themes that might otherwise be overlooked due to profitability concerns or misalignment with traditional publishers' established lists. Gibixego (2021) suggests that further transformation could be achieved by decentralizing the publishing value chain and fostering stronger collaborations between small publishers, self-published authors, distributors, and booksellers.

Author 5 called on those who feel excluded to rethink transformation and create space for themselves in the industry and not try to fit in the space created by others.

Author 1:

The topical issue that we never won was the question of transformation in the publishing industry. You might know that many of the big publishers are foreign-owned or are multinationals.

Author 6:

I was also fairly young, and I was Black. We all know that 80% or even 95% of the major publishing houses in South Africa are owned by White Afrikaans people, which makes it very difficult ...

Author 5:

When we think transformation, we want a place at a table that is prepared to exclude us by nature of the design of the table, it is made so that it cannot include us, and if it has us it will make us uncomfortable so that we are unable to eat or we choke on the food.

Author 5 critiqued systemic structures that exclude marginalized groups, often reducing inclusion to tokenism or discomfort. Six authors emphasized that traditional publishers prioritize profitability and rigid criteria, sidelining works that do not align with their commercial goals. This selectivity forces many authors to turn to self-publishing. Couldry (2012) and Gibixego and Masola (2021) argue that traditional systems favour dominant narratives, marginalizing diverse voices, while Ahmed (2012) notes that such inclusion often results in assimilation rather than empowerment. Odendaal and Galloway (2008) and Baverstock (2011) further highlight how inflexible industry practices drive excluded authors toward self-publishing. For meaningful change, the industry must decentralize power and foster collaboration to ensure equitable inclusion.

The PASA transformation report (2022) identifies skills development as a barrier to transformation in South Africa's publishing sector. Author 9 noted that traditional publishers do not empower self-publishers by sharing industry information. Publishing processes often remain mysterious to the public, with most self-publishers only gaining insight through their

own experiences. This aligns with Gibixego's (2021) argument that the industry is not inclusive of self-publishers.

All eleven authors expressed the view that the royalties paid by traditional publishers are too low, as discussed in Section 4.4.4. Author 1, who has three traditionally published books reinforced this sentiment:

> *Author 1:*
> You might be familiar with royalty rates, you know, I was getting between 10% and 12%. And I felt like that's unfair for me as the author… They take their share and gave me change.

As previously noted, Author 3 acknowledged that traditional publishing, despite lower financial returns, offers peace of mind by handling publication, distribution, and marketing. She stressed the importance of weighing the pros and cons of each model, ultimately preferring traditional publishing for its time-saving and stress-reducing benefits over the higher earning potential of self-publishing. This underscores the complexity of publishing decisions and the value of alternative options when approached strategically.

> *Author 3:*
> The disadvantage of traditional publishing is less money, but also less stress. So, you must decide which way you will go. If you want more money and more stress, then you self-publish. Less money, and less stress, then you go for traditional publishing … I love that process of being involved without having to be stressed about paying people and invoicing and things like that.

Author 11, whose first book was published by a small digital publisher said:

> *Author 11:*
> I didn't necessarily need them, so I could do it myself and get the whole payment instead of sharing it with the publisher. Amazon pays 70% royalties on sales, even though e-

> books are quite reasonably priced and quite affordable; if you're getting 70% of the royalty, it can add up if you make good sales. So, I started seeing it as a business opportunity more than a hobby.

Author 11's view shows the growing appeal of self-publishing as a financially viable and empowering alternative to traditional publishing. It underscores the importance of financial incentives, control, and accessibility in authors' decision-making processes, while also signalling a shift toward a more entrepreneurial approach to writing and publishing. For traditional publishers, this trend highlights the need to adapt to changing author expectations and market dynamics.

Contrary to other authors who are disgruntled with traditional publishers, Author 8's manuscript was rejected, but she was happy that she received valuable feedback from two traditional publishers that helped her to improve her manuscript and thus the quality of her finished book. This shows that publishers contribute significantly to the editorial development of books by shaping ideas, providing feedback to improve manuscripts, and guiding authors (Miller, 2013). Self-published books often lack this level of expert development. However, Author 8 strongly felt that submitting to traditional publishers is time-consuming, as all publishers have different submission requirements – timing, format, and chapters.

> *Author 8:*
> I was lucky that I got some good feedback from one or two of the publishers, and so I thought, let me incorporate some of these suggestions and changes into my novel, which I did. And that led me to practically rewrite it…

Author 8 says she 'was lucky', which shows that getting valuable feedback from traditional publishers is not a common occurrence. She will only consider traditional publishing for

future books if it will be worth her while. Although traditional publishers do the distribution and marketing, authors must still market their books, especially on social media.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter highlights that a growing number of diverse authors in South Africa's trade sector are self-publishing across various genres and formats. Their motivations are multifaceted, ranging from rejection by traditional publishers to a desire for greater control over production processes, marketing, distribution, and financial proceeds. Some authors are also drawn to self-publishing to experiment with new publishing models or due to dissatisfaction with traditional publishing practices. While self-publishing was once seen primarily as an alternative to traditional publishing, it is increasingly becoming the preferred choice for many South African authors, as evidenced by the rise of repeat self-publishers and those who bypass traditional publishing altogether. These insights into self-publishing trends and author motivations offer valuable information for industry stakeholders and aspiring authors navigating the evolving publishing landscape.

Chapter 5 Self-publishing workflow: research to pricing

5.1 Introduction

This chapter compares the self-publishing processes used by the eleven authors in this study with traditional publishing methods. Both processes are guided by Darnton's (1982, 2007) communications circuit that breaks the life cycle of a book into six stages: authorship, publishing, printing, distribution/shipment, retail sales, and reading. Understanding publishing processes is crucial for authors to make informed decisions, as it is essential to consider alternative and emerging ways of producing, distributing, and marketing books. This knowledge is also vital for industry stakeholders to better support self-publishers in expanding their reach.

5.2 Information gathering on self-publishing

Author 1 had publishing experience as two of his books had been traditionally published. He was the Head of Books and Publishing at the National Department of Arts and Culture for ten years and regularly interacted with publishers and service providers. He followed standard publishing processes like those used for his traditionally published books. Baverstock, Blackburn and Iskandarova (2015) argue that there is a learning curve in publishing for authors and with experience comes greater clarity about the publishing process and roles. This aligns with Author 1's journey, as his experience in the industry provided him with a deep understanding of the publishing landscape. In addition, Salamon (2016) interviewed three self-published authors who had previously published books with traditional publishers. These authors leveraged their publishing experience and contacts in the publishing industry to self-publish their books to avoid lengthy traditional publishers' schedules. This demonstrates that knowledge of the publishing processes and service providers is key, and being traditionally published can spur authors to self-publish.

Of the remaining ten authors (2–11), only Author 3 had basic knowledge about children's books from being an avid reader. This echoes Darnton's (1982) view that authors are also readers, consequently influencing their writing. The other nine authors were completely new to book publishing. Ten authors (2–11) researched the publishing process as they had varying levels of understanding. All eleven authors agreed that knowledge of the book publishing process is essential to navigating self-publishing, as authors are responsible for processes traditionally managed by traditional publishers. This reveals that understanding the publishing process is a prerequisite to successful self-publishing. Tyilo (2020) confirms this by arguing that debut self-publishers must study the book publishing value chain and understand the roles of different players in the value chain to make informed decisions. This also shows that publishing is not well understood. Traditional publishers add value as they use their publishing expertise in assessing manuscripts, and edit, design, print, warehouse, distribute, publicise and market the title (van Rooyen, 2010; Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011; Hviid, Izquierdo-Sanchez & Jacques, 2019).

The ten authors (2–11) who had never published began their publishing journey through online research, including YouTube videos, podcasts, and Facebook author groups. Several sought additional training: Author 2 studied self-publishing books, while Authors 5 and 7 attended writing workshops. Hands-on experience proved valuable for some participants – Author 4 gained practical knowledge by assisting another self-publisher, Author 5 combined internships and freelance work with traditional publishers, and Author 11 learned directly from her digital publisher. The wealth of freely available online resources like author guides, Amazon KDP for self-publishing, and Facebook author groups proved particularly valuable for first-time authors.

Authors 6, 7, 8 and 10 consulted other authors who had self-published on the publishing processes and the selection of service providers. The success stories of self-published authors and the sharing of information within author communities are important motivators for aspiring writers to pursue self-publishing. Author 7 found it difficult to find authors to mentor him, but he used the imprint pages of self-published books to identify service providers.

> *Author 7:*
> It was very hard to find a self-published author willing to sit down with me, and show me the ropes … I just looked at the front of people's books that had self-published and I found, this was done by so and so and I contacted that publishing company.

This highlights that authors can use diverse research methods, including unconventional sources such as imprint pages. An imprint page lists the publisher's details and credits contributors. By studying these pages, self-publishers can learn industry standards and identify potential service providers. Debut self-publishers can benefit from the support of experienced authors and industry experts, particularly in South Africa, where publishing industry challenges persist. The Publishers Association of South Africa (PASA, 2022) identifies insufficient training and development as the primary barrier to industry transformation. Despite South Africa's democratic transition in 1994, the publishing industry continues to reflect apartheid-era inequalities (Moller, 2014). While some progress has been made, the industry still lacks full transformation, especially in demographic representation, Black ownership, and linguistic and cultural diversity (Moller, 2014; Gibixego, 2021; PASA, 2022). These ongoing disparities result in limited representation of diverse authors and genres in traditional publishing.

Author 8 highlighted the importance of researching the publishing services company you will be working with to ensure you get value for your money, as there are vanity publishing houses.

> *Author 8:*
> The vanity publishing houses will publish your book, charge you a lot and then leave you to get it out there and market it. And they're not worried about you... And there are a few that are known to do that.

The rise of self-publishing has led to an increase in publishing services companies. While some provide valuable assistance, others have questionable intentions, primarily seeking to profit from aspiring authors by charging fees without offering substantial value in return. Shrestha (2022) and Hartiningtyas (2023) support Author 8's perspective that vanity publishers often exploit authors by charging them to publish their works without providing essential professional services such as editing and proofreading. These vanity publishers prioritize profit over quality control. To avoid falling victim to such practices, Shrestha (2022) recommends that authors: conduct thorough background checks on potential publishers; fully understand all fees and services offered before making any commitments; ensure they retain ownership of their rights; and consult with mentors or industry experts when uncertain. By following these guidelines, authors can better protect themselves and make informed decisions in self-publishing.

From the above discussion, research on the publishing process and access to mentorship emerge as key factors contributing to the success of authors considering self-publishing. Baverstock, Blackburn, and Iskandarova (2015) highlight first-time self-publishers' learning curve, emphasizing the importance of thorough research. This suggests that information on the publishing process can significantly benefit authors exploring self-publishing options.

The author's understanding of the process directly impacts their overall experience. In contrast, traditional publishers already have the publishing expertise and focus on market analysis and project viability to recoup a return on their investment.

Salamon (2016) and Tyilo (2020) argue that a comprehensive understanding of the book publishing industry, its value chain and different players' roles are crucial for making informed decisions. Hartiningtyas (2023) further emphasizes the vital role of support networks and access to information in navigating the various publishing options and avoiding potential scams associated with vanity publishing. Successful self-publishing hinges on several key elements: thorough research and education about the publishing process, access to mentorship and support networks, a clear understanding of the industry's structure and key players and their roles and making informed decisions based on this knowledge. By focusing on these areas, authors can better position themselves for success in the self-publishing landscape.

5.3 Sources of funding for the self-publishing process

Nine out of the eleven authors self-funded the publication of their books from their savings. Author 6 also secured a loan from family members as her savings were insufficient. This self-funding concurs with Poland (2018) that self-published authors pay all publication expenses upfront, including editing, design, and printing costs. The Centre for the Book partially funded Author 1's first book. This division of the National Library of South Africa (NLSA) promotes reading, writing and publishing in South Africa. Each year, they offer a publishing grant to qualifying self-publishers. The grant aims to help self-publishers improve the quality and appeal of their books by providing resources for editing, proofreading, and design. This aligns with Pacer's (2013) call for libraries to launch self-publishing support programmes. More information on how the NLSA supports self-publishers is in Appendix A.

Author 1:

> For that initial publication, I got funding from The Centre for the Book ... I applied for funding, and they paid for the printing, but they didn't give me hard cash.

Author 1 had total control of the publishing process, and the condition of the funding was to acknowledge the funder, insert their logo on the back cover of the book, and give them 10 copies of the published book for their archive. The Centre for the Book does not assist authors with marketing their books. However, in some instances, they hold book launches for the authors. This demonstrates that funding options are available for self-published authors, with various packages tailored to different author needs. Author 1 also publishes a journal funded by the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences.

Despite NLSA's efforts to promote the community publishing grant through multiple channels – including their website, literary events, legal deposit roadshows, facility posters, and past recipients' testimonials as shared in Appendix A – awareness remains low. Of the eleven self-publishers interviewed, only two knew the grant existed, with just one having received funding. Author 5, one of the aware participants, emphasized the importance of authors researching available funding options. The limited awareness suggests a need to strengthen the grant's promotion and outreach strategies to reach more potential applicants.

Author 5:

> The National Library offers funding for self-publishing which is something a lot of people don't know... the National Arts Council also offers funding, so different structures offer funding or support for writers to publish their work.

Author 3 won a Standard Bank competition that challenged South Africans to stop procrastinating and act to make their dreams come true. The funding paid for illustrations, page and cover design, typesetting, editing, and partially covered printing costs. Her mother

funded the second print run, which signals that she did not make a profit from the first print run.

Author 4 wanted to keep her costs low, so she traded her designing skills for editing and had beta readers proofread her books free of charge. Self-publishers often use beta readers to get feedback on their manuscripts before publication. Beta readers are unpaid volunteers familiar with the genre and provide overall feedback on the plot, characters, and consistency. Beta readers offer insights from the target market, helping improve the manuscript without replacing professional editors (Lowrey, 2023). They are valuable for self-publishers who lack a traditional publisher's guidance and have limited financial resources for market research. While beta readers might identify inconsistencies and typos, they are not proofreaders, as the manuscript draft they read is still at an early stage.

Author 4 designed her page layout and cover because she had the expertise and only paid the printing costs for her book. She is still trading services.

> *Author 4:*
> I was trying to keep costs as low as possible ... For editing, I traded services … I did some design work, cover work for somebody else and then she did the editing... And the cover I did myself because I knew how to use Photoshop… I am still trading services with people.

In addition, Author 5 worked with people in the publishing industry who volunteered their services. She only paid for the initial edit and printing.

> *Author 5:*
> The only thing I paid for was the printing. [Designer] volunteered her services. [Editor] also volunteered her services. I had gotten a previous editor [popular poet] before I went to [editor] and paid for her services. And then I paid for printing… It's so sad because we don't consider how we can exchange services.

This shows that there are different funding options available for authors besides self-financing and there are ways to trade services with other industry people instead of paying for services. This accentuates the financial constraints that self-publishers face and the innovative ways they use to circumvent this challenge. It is significant to note that this can compromise book quality because the pool of service providers is limited. Author 5, who runs a hybrid publishing company, commented on how the socioeconomic circumstances of self-publishers can impact the quality of the books.

> *Author 5:*
> There's a huge self-publishing market across racial lines and class groups in the country. I think the difference in self-publishing is the quality, which can be a class issue. I think people with more money and connections would probably have better-quality books.

This signals that socioeconomic disparities are evident in self-publishing. Authors with more resources can afford professional editing, layout, and cover design, resulting in higher-quality books. This suggests self-publishing does not entirely level the playing field across all socioeconomic classes, as financial resources still influence book quality and reader approval or adoption. In addition to socioeconomic disparities, inadequate knowledge of the publishing process and standards in the publishing industry contribute to the low production quality of books.

The preceding discussion reveals that in self-publishing, authors retain full control and rights over their works, but they also shoulder the entire burden of costs, responsibilities, and risks associated with the publishing process (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011; Poland, 2018). In contrast, traditional publishing offers a different model where accepted authors sometimes receive advances, publishers cover the publication, marketing, and distribution costs and assume most of the risk (van Rooyen, 2010; Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011; Hviid, Izquierdo-Sanchez & Jacques, 2019; Poland, 2018). Of the eleven authors, only Author 6 budgeted to calculate

how much she would need before starting the publication process. None of the authors did a cost-benefit analysis. This shows a lack of financial planning and preparation. This is in stark contrast to traditional publishers who are more rigorous and budget to assess the viability of a book before accepting it for publication.

The differing approaches underscore the trade-offs authors must consider when choosing between self-publishing and traditional publishing paths. While self-publishing offers greater control and potentially higher royalties, it also requires a significant upfront investment and a wider range of skills from the author including financial planning expertise. Traditional publishing, on the other hand, provides professional support and financial backing but offers the author less control and lower royalty rates.

5.4 Self-publishing workflow

Three authors (5, 6, and 8) characterized their self-publishing experience as a long journey. All authors concurred that publishing their first books took longer than subsequent ones, indicating that the process becomes more manageable with experience. This challenges the misconception that self-publishing is a quick process; it can take years. This finding aligns with Baverstock and Steinitz's (2013a) assertion that many authors, before embarking on self-publishing, underestimate the production time, costs, and marketing effort required. The multifaceted approach in self-publishing necessitates a broader skill set and significant time investment from authors. This reinforces the importance of proper planning, realistic expectations, and a willingness to develop diverse skills for authors considering self-publishing.

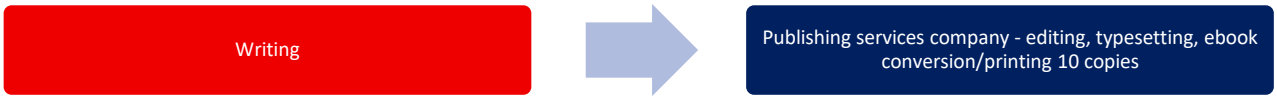
The eleven authors were variously informed about the book publishing process, which informed their book publishing workflow. Six authors (1, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 11) did not use

publishing services companies and managed the publication process as they were knowledgeable about the book publication process. Five authors (2, 3, 8, 9 and 10) used self-publishing companies to help publish their first books but Author 2 is now managing and handling the process herself because she now has the expertise. The services offered by the selected companies differed as seen in the graphics below.

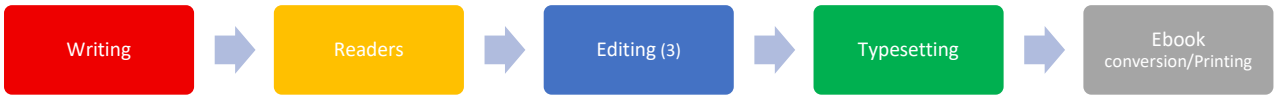
The publishing workflows that the eleven authors followed are shown below.

Author 1

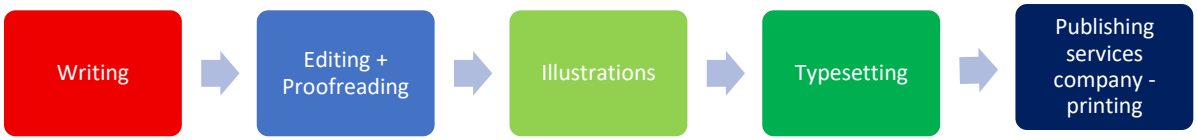
Author 2 first book



Author 2 other books



Author 3



Author 4

Author 5

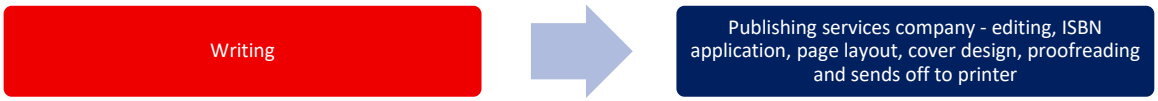
Author 6

Author 7

Author 8

Author 9

Author 10



Author 11

Traditional publishing model

To give additional context, here is an overview of a traditional publishing workflow. The processes in this workflow do not necessarily happen in a linear order, as some stages can occur concurrently.

Authoring → Submission → Acquisition → Editing → Design → Typesetting → Proofreading → Printing → Marketing and promotion → Distribution → Sales and royalties

5.4.1 Authors who managed their self-publishing process

Six authors (1, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 11) did not use publishing services companies to publish their first books. Author 1 had extensive knowledge of the book publication process because two of his books had been published by traditional publishers. He had contacts with service providers in the publishing industry and followed the traditional publishing process.

Authors 4 and 11 primarily publish e-books on Amazon and manage the self-publishing process themselves. They use service providers for processes in which they lack expertise. Author 5 only published a print book and used a publishing team of an editor and a book

designer. She then found a printer because she was familiar with the publishing processes, as she had interned for a publishing house.

> *Author 5:*
> I figured if I'm going to do this myself, then I need to find out what it takes. So, what kind of teams do publishing houses have? What happens from the manuscript through to how it lands on the shelf? And in doing that, I got an idea of what it would take for me to self-publish. So, I put together a team.

Author 5 assembled a team, recognizing publishing as a process of interdependent roles. This aligns with Darnton's communication circuit (1982, 2007), which portrays the book trade as an interconnected system with complex relationships among authorship, publishing, printing, distribution, sales, and reading. However, Umezurike (2020) and Murray and Squires (2013) argue that self-publishing challenges Darnton's communications circuit by merging the author and publisher roles. In self-publishing, authors take on many responsibilities typically managed by publishers, such as editing, design, marketing, and distribution. Roles that were once clearly defined are now overlapping and shifting. This shift has led to a more complex and decentralized publishing value chain, with overlapping and evolving responsibilities. The linear process has transformed into a networked system, creating new challenges and opportunities in book production and distribution. Self-publishing empowers authors but requires them to develop a broader skill set or collaborate with different service providers.

Author 6 has been self-publishing since 2017 and is extremely knowledgeable about the book production processes. She stands out among the eleven authors for trademarking her series name because she believed in its potential for high sales and brand building. She also budgeted before embarking on self-publishing, consulted a lawyer to check for offensive language or defamation, possibly due to the controversial nature of her books, and negotiated with suppliers to get the best rates. Author 6 claimed she managed the publishing process for

all her books independently. However, there is a discrepancy between Author 6's account and information from two publishing services companies I interviewed for this study that helped her publish her first and subsequent books. This raises questions about her motivations for this claim and the accuracy of her other statements. Did Author 6 claim self-management due to a belief that self-publishing requires complete control of the process? Was she concerned that admitting to using self-publishing services might diminish her perceived accomplishments?

In contrast to Authors 1, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 11, who were knowledgeable about the publishing process by the time they self-published, Author 7 was not very knowledgeable about the publishing process but managed the publishing process because he could not afford the services of a self-publishing company. This shows that socioeconomic class can impact authors' decisions and the quality of self-published books.

5.4.2 Authors who used publishing services companies to manage the publishing process

Five authors (2, 3, 8, 9 and 10) used self-publishing companies to publish their first books. Publishing services companies offer paid services to assist self-publishing authors. Common pricing models for publishing services are package-based pricing, depending on the services offered, a la carte pricing where authors choose specific services they need, word count-based pricing and flat rate pricing. Services offered by publishing services companies include editing, proofreading, layout, design, printing, distribution, and marketing support (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Shrestha, 2022). The services offered to authors by these companies differed. Author 2 was unfamiliar with the book publishing process, so she used an American company to publish her first book. The company offered editing, typesetting, cover design,

10 printed copies and uploading the e-book on various platforms. For her subsequent books, the author managed the process independently and published them on Amazon.

In contrast, Author 3 managed most of the publishing process independently, using a self-publishing company only for printing. She managed editing, illustrations, proofreading, layout, and cover design, providing print-ready files. Later, a traditional publisher republished the book, making minimal edits and retaining the original font, layout, and illustrations, demonstrating the book's high production quality.

Author 8 managed the editing process because the self-publishing company she chose to work with did not offer editing services. Author 8 is the only author who scheduled her book production processes before embarking on self-publishing, as it saves time and money. Scheduling in book publishing is crucial for the timely completion of production phases (Thompson, 2010); efficient resource management (Clark & Phillips, 2019); alignment with marketing and sales strategies (Woll, 2010; Squires, 2017); managing author expectations (Greco, 2013); financial planning (Bhaskar, 2013); and ensuring quality through adequate editing and production time (Luey, 2002). Publication timing is integral for certain books: relevance to current events or trends, seasonal demand, market competition, alignment with industry and events, cultural moments, sales cycles, and production schedules. Proper timing can significantly impact a book's success, visibility, and sales potential by ensuring it reaches its audience when it is most relevant and in demand, while strategically positioning it within the market.

Authors 8, 9 and 10 chose to work with publishing services companies. They selected the companies based on research and peer recommendations. Despite the high cost, Author 8 was satisfied with the company's services, which included typesetting, ISBN application, e-book

conversion, and printing coordination. She noted that while self-publishing allows authors to manage all aspects, it is crucial to recognize one's strengths and weaknesses. Self-publishing offers autonomy but does not require doing everything alone. This dispels the misconception that self-publishing means complete independence. Authors should assess their skills and outsource professional services when necessary (Salamon, 2016; Carolan & Evain, 2013; Tyilo, 2020). This approach can lead to higher-quality books and potential success.

The company that Author 9 used managed editing, page layout, cover design, and printing. He described the collaboration as an 'informal project', emphasizing that while the company provides services, the author retains final decision-making authority. Author 10, who was initially unfamiliar with book production, learned throughout the process, aided by a helpful publishing services company. The process was consultative, allowing the author input on the book's appearance. The company provided editing, design, proofreading, ISBN application and facilitated printing.

The above discussion shows that authors can successfully navigate publishing without prior experience. Publishing services companies can play a crucial educational and supportive role for the author (Baverstock, 2015). The range of services offered shows how self-publishing companies can provide end-to-end solutions for authors (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Shrestha, 2022). Authors can network with other authors and rely on peer recommendations to select service providers, underlining the importance of author communities (Laquintano, 2016). The consultative nature of the process with publishing services companies reflects authors' control in self-publishing. This aligns with trends in self-publishing where authors can maintain creative control while leveraging professional services to produce high-quality books (Carolan & Evain, 2013). Publishing services companies are crucial in providing comprehensive support and fostering a collaborative environment.

5.4.3 Readers/Manuscript review

Six authors (1, 2, 3, 4, 8 and 9) sent their manuscripts to readers to review. The readers reviewed the manuscripts and gave feedback to the authors, who implemented their input. These readers provided some quality assurance for the content. Five authors (5, 7, 10 and 11) did not send their manuscripts to readers before editing. However, Author 5 had two editors work on her book and the first editor was a developmental editor who gave her critical feedback that took her over a year to implement.

In self-publishing, authors decide which books they want to publish. While they may ask readers to review their manuscripts, they have already committed to publishing them. Self-publishers mostly use beta readers due to financial constraints. The beta readers are usually friends, relatives, or readers from the author's fan base. The manuscript review is a quality control step, with reviewers often providing valuable feedback that helps authors enhance their work. However, these readers are rarely professionals, so their input is not as extensive as developmental editors' input.

In contrast, traditional publishers decide what gets published based on their assessments of quality and marketability. Publishers control the process and serve as the link between authors and readers, managing the review process. Miller (2013) argues that self-published books often lack in-depth editorial input from content experts during the formative stages. The quality control process of reviewing, selecting, and refining manuscripts before publication, common in traditional publishing, helps produce better-quality books. Traditional publishers provide readers with quality assurance, signalling that books meet certain standards. Self-published books often lack these indicators of quality, which can make it more challenging for readers to assess their standard or credibility. The absence of these

elements in self-publishing can contribute to quality concerns and stigma due to a lack of curation.

5.4.4 Editing

All eleven authors had their books edited before page layout, recognizing the importance of editing in the publication process. This aligns with Baverstock, Blackburn and Iskandarova (2015) who note that experienced self-publishers value editors. The selection of editors was based on various factors. Author 1, satisfied with the quality of their work, retained the editor from his traditionally published books. Authors 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7 relied on recommendations from other authors or industry professionals. This underscores the importance of author communities. Author 8 requested sample edits from three editors before selecting one. Author 11 experimented with different editors until she found the right fit in personality, understanding, affordability, and language expertise. Author 8 and 11's approach to assessing the editors' skills and fit for the projects demonstrates their understanding that editing is crucial to the quality of a self-published book. This selection approach is a best practice that other self-publishing authors can emulate. Authors 9 and 10 used editors selected by their publishing services company. This attention to editing demonstrates that quality control mechanisms are in place in self-publishing, despite any stigma attached to the practice.

Author 2 used three types of editors for each book, each focusing on different aspects.

> *Author 2:*
> I use three different editors depending on what I need, so I've got an editor who will help me massage the story correctly. And then I've got another editor who's like a grammar Nazi … And then I use another for my American books...

This shows that Author 2 is thorough in her editing process and understands the role of different editors in the publishing process: developmental editing, copy-editing, and language

editing. In addition, Author 5 also used two editors. The first editor critically edited the book (developmental editing), and after making the corrections, the book was copy-edited.

Authors 2 and 5 demonstrated a thorough understanding of the editing process as they used different types of editors as defined by Baverstock, Blackburn and Iskandarova (2015):

1. **Developmental/structural editing:** improving overall manuscript structure and flow
2. **Copy-editing:** editing for clarity, consistency, and grammar
3. **Language editing:** refining the language used in the manuscript.

This approach reflects a comprehensive editing process, incorporating multiple stages to ensure quality. For most self-publishers, copy-editing is the core service provided by editors. However, editing encompasses broad issues such as overall structure and project management, down to fine details such as correcting typos.

Author 7 did not use a professional editor due to financial constraints. He did an initial edit of his manuscript and then gave it to a student journalist to edit. The book had to be re-edited later as there were errors because editing is a specialised skill developed through training and experience (Miller, 2013).

> *Author 7:*
> When it comes to professional editing, different skills are required. Editing is a skill. The book had to be re-edited because people spotted a few errors, and the e-book converter suggested that the book be edited for style and language.

Author 7's experience highlights the importance of professional editing and serves as a reminder that self-publishers should invest in professional editors who can address all levels of editing. Mackenzie (2011) agrees that professional editing requires specialized knowledge and expertise because it is a complex process requiring a range of skills, including language mastery, attention to detail, and understanding of various style guides.

Authors 5, 8 and 11 also emphasised the importance of professional editing:

> *Author 5:*
> People don't realize that editing and proofreading are paramount... no matter how compelling your story is, if it's riddled with silly grammatical errors, or if it's not told tightly and concisely. Then you will sell two books, but these two people who read the books will tell everyone else not to buy your book…
>
> *Author 8:*
> I would never consider sending anything out unless it's been edited…editing is a very interesting skill. You must have a lot of knowledge to understand that and get different kinds of editing. You get line editing and sort of proofreading, but you also get substantive editing, which is very important... It's not just checking your work, ticking it off, and saying your spelling; and grammar are fine.
>
> *Author 11:*
> I outsource editing and every indie author must get their book professionally edited.

Professional editing is important because it ensures the published book is high quality. According to Butcher, Drake and Leach (2006), thorough editing can significantly improve a manuscript's clarity, coherence, and overall readability. While traditional publishers provide editing and proofreading services, self-publishers must secure their editors or publish with errors (Poland, 2018). If self-publishers select the wrong person for the task, this results in poor editorial quality. Publishing services companies can help authors choose the best editor for the job as they offer different tiers of editorial review to help polish a manuscript into a professionally published book (Dilevko & Dali, 2006). Self-publishers must choose reliable and skilled service providers to ensure the production of high-quality books.

5.4.5 Page and cover design

Page and cover design are important elements in the book publishing process that impact a book's appeal and marketability. Carolan and Evain (2013) assert that both quality content

and presentation: ensuring a book is well-edited and professionally presented (good page and cover design) are crucial for a book's success. Page design or typesetting involves a book's layout of text, images, and other elements. It includes font choices, spacing, margins, chapter headings, and other visual elements that affect readability and aesthetic appeal (Lupton, 2024). Cover design involves creating a visual representation of the book on its exterior. This includes the front cover, back cover, and spine. Covers include imagery, typography, and other graphic elements to convey the book's genre, tone, and content (Clark & Phillips, 2019).

The eleven authors used different approaches to source page and cover design for their books. Authors 1, 3, 5, 6 and 7 used professional specialists for page layout and cover design. Author 1 used the same typesetter from his traditionally published books. Author 2's page layout was done by a friend who is a designer. Authors 1 and 2 highlight the importance of personal contacts in navigating the publishing process. Author 2's page layout and cover design were informed by researching books she wanted to compete with. Market analysis is important as it ensures the viability of a book. Traditional publishers do an extensive market analysis before signing a book.

Authors 4 and 11 oversaw their page layout, cover design and e-book and print formatting. This could be because they publish on the Amazon platform. Authors can handle page layout and cover design on Amazon's platform primarily through Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), Amazon's self-publishing service. KDP has user-friendly templates, tools and guidelines for book formatting and cover design. Authors can save money by doing it themselves, however, professional designers can still add significant value, especially for complex layouts or cover designs.

Author 11 designs most of her covers due to her advertising and graphic design background but outsources special covers. She knows when to do it herself and when to outsource. Authors with relevant skills may choose to do their page and cover design themselves but those without expertise must outsource cover design. Book covers are an important marketing tool that impacts discoverability and ultimately sales of books because they are an advertisement of the book. Book covers attract the target market by signalling the contents, sparking interest, targeting readers, shaping expectations and driving important in-the-moment decisions at the bookstore or online (Iwana, Rizvi, Ahmed, Dengel & Uchida, 2016).

Authors 8, 9 and 10 used publishing services companies to manage the book page layout and cover design. Author 9 experienced quality issues when he switched companies. This shows that quality can vary among service providers, emphasizing the need for author involvement and supervision. Author 10 compromised on font size due to financial constraints, as it would have resulted in a longer book. Author 10 wanted a bigger font size because she was aware of the needs of her target market. Financial constraints can impact design decisions. Although a publishing services company managed the processes for her, Author 8 provided comprehensive cover briefs, reviewed multiple samples, and consulted potential readers, emphasizing the importance of research. There was a consultative process between the cover designer and the author until they agreed on the best cover.

The above discussion shows that in self-publishing, authors are responsible for arranging design services. They may hire professional designers or do it themselves. Authors have full control over design decisions but may lack expertise (Poynter, 2000). This lack of expertise can lead to variable quality in self-published books. In contrast, traditional publishing houses have in-house designers or freelance professional designers. Designs are often created with

input from marketing teams to align with market trends. Authors usually have limited input on design decisions (Clark & Phillips, 2019).

5.4.6 Proofreading

Proofreading is the final quality check in the publishing process post-page layout. Proofreading focuses on identifying and correcting errors in text, such as grammar, spelling, punctuation, formatting, and design before publication (Butcher, Drake & Leach, 2006; Baverstock, Blackburn & Iskandarova, 2015). Six authors (1, 3, 6, 9, 10 and 11) had their books proofread after page layout. Author 1 used the same proofreader as his traditional publishers because he was satisfied with the quality of the proofreading. Authors 6 and 11 emphasised that proofreading is separate from editing and must be done after the pages have been laid out. However, Author 6 said 'it's not mandatory' while Author 11 asserted that edited manuscripts must be proofread to identify and correct typos. Author 3 used the same person for both editing and proofreading. This could compromise the proofreading as the editor will now be familiar with the book and might not spot mistakes.

Five authors (2, 4, 5, 7 and 8) did not include proofreading in their publishing process. This shows that not all authors consider proofreading essential. Authors 2 and 4 relied on beta readers to proofread their manuscripts. Beta readers are not professional proofreaders and might miss errors as they do not have proofreading expertise. This aligns with Baverstock's (2011) assertion that some authors rely on non-professional proofreaders due to financial constraints. It is recommended that proofreading be done after page layout so that all errors, including formatting, can be corrected. Author 5 used two editors but no proofreader. However, editing does not replace proofreading, as these are two different processes.

The proofreading practices among the eleven authors show that not all authors value proofreading. Proofreading is important in the book publishing process because it ensures professional quality. In self-publishing, the author is responsible for arranging and paying for proofreading. Proofreading may be skipped due to cost, time constraints or not appreciating its importance in the process. The quality of proofreading among self-published books varies widely depending on who does it and at what stage it is done. In contrast, in traditional publishing, proofreading is standardised and done by professional proofreaders and there are often multiple rounds of proofreading, and the publisher covers the cost.

5.4.7 Printing

In self-publishing, authors make printing decisions that traditional publishers normally make (Umezurike, 2020). Authors 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7 sent their books to the printers. Author 2 only prints books targeted at her South African market; all her other books are e-books. Publishing services companies sent Authors 3, 8, 9, and 10's books to print. According to Author 6, book printing is expensive in South Africa because the creamy bulky paper or book paper used for novels is imported. The paper is thick and uncoated with a matte finish. It is usually cream or off-white. This paper is popular for novels because it provides an enjoyable reading experience and reduces eye strain. Author 6's perspective resonates with the South African Book Development Council's (SABDC, 2007) findings regarding book pricing determinants, particularly the reliance on imported paper for some trade publications – a key factor driving production costs. Printing costs depend on the book's extent, design, type of paper, colour, and print run (SABDC, 2007). High printing costs are a barrier to self-published authors as it is an upfront cost (Poland, 2018).

Author 8 is the only author who checks the printer's proofs to catch any unseen mistakes before signing off the book for print. A final check is crucial in both traditional and self-

publishing. It is a standard process in traditional publishing. However, this does not replace proofreading, which should be done earlier in the book production process. Authors 2, 4, and 11 formatted their manuscripts for e-publication and uploaded them to Amazon. They simultaneously created paperback versions. These authors also uploaded the cover, blurb, categories, keywords, and metadata to Amazon to improve discoverability. After completing these steps, they published their books. Their books are available via print-on-demand (POD) on Amazon for customers who prefer print copies.

> *Author 11:*
> That's another great thing for indies because we don't have to pay a lot upfront and have a whole storeroom of books that don't get sold or maybe get sold or damaged. Print-on-demand is so wonderful because it only ever gets printed, on-demand and it gets delivered.

POD allows books to be printed in response to orders, eliminating high upfront costs and the need for speculative stock (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011; Elliot, 2016). This reduces business risk and capital tie-ups while meeting all sales, as publishers can print as few as one copy (Gallagher, 2014). Print-on-demand is a big opportunity for self-publishers as they do not have to cover printing costs, storage of printed books and delivery. This means that self-publishers do not need a big financial outlay to publish their books, thus leading to more books being self-published. The increase in selling platforms in different countries presents an opportunity to reach readers anywhere globally at no cost to the author. This widens the readership base and could lead to more book sales.

For self-publishers in South Africa, POD lowers barriers to entry by reducing upfront costs, financial risks, and logistical challenges. It removes the need for warehousing, inventory management, and traditional distribution networks. Haugland (2006) argues that POD has democratized publishing by eliminating the barrier of large upfront investments. POD keeps books 'in print' indefinitely and has created new distribution opportunities for self-publishers,

allowing them to reach readers without relying on traditional publishing houses. This accessibility has unlocked opportunities previously limited to works selected by major publishers. However, the self-publishing ecosystem still needs supportive institutions to help readers discover POD titles as authors drive their marketing and distribution without traditional publisher backing.

Book print runs

Table 5.1 shows print runs of self-published books as stated by the authors. This offers significant insight into the printing methods and practices adopted by self-publishers within the South African context.

Table 5.1: Book print runs

Author	Publication year	1st print run	Reprint	Current print run in 2022
Author 1	2019	1 000	2 000	Still on the second print run
Author 2	2018	100	100	300–500
Author 3	2017	250	250	Book signed up by a traditional publisher
*Author 4	2016	150	50	50
Author 5	2015	100	200	The book is out of print
Author 6	2017	200	3 000	2 000–5 000
Author 7	2014	150	500	500–1 000
Author 8	2018	100	50	25–50, prints on demand
Author 9	2020	1 000	1 000	1 000
Author 10	2013	500	1500	No longer reprinting. Only available as an e-book
Author 11	2017	*POD	*POD	*POD

* Author 4 primarily publishes in e-book format. Books are also available via POD.
* Author 11's print books are only available via POD; she does not print any stock.

Table 5.1 shows that book print runs ranged from 50 copies to 5 000 copies. This reflects the diversity of self-publishing projects. Authors can tailor their print runs to their specific needs and resources. These print runs are primarily guided by the available capital for printing costs. Capital is a significant barrier to entry for many aspiring authors. Authors also base the print runs on the number of copies they anticipate selling within a specific timeframe. This shows that they want to avoid overproduction and unsold stock, demonstrating an

understanding of the risks associated with traditional publishing models. This underscores the potential benefits of POD for self-publishers. POD could address many of these concerns by eliminating the need for large upfront capital, reducing inventory risk, and allowing for more flexible market testing.

Initial print runs are small for debut authors (100–500) because of capital constraints and authors are cautious because the market for the book is not established. The smaller initial print runs (100–500) for new authors demonstrate a risk-averse strategy. This allows authors to test the market without overcommitting resources, as future print runs can be adjusted based on actual demand. This is supported by Crocker and Hichens, who were interviewed by Salamon (2016), who advocate for a moderate initial print run to avoid sitting with stock.

Authors 1 and 9 had the highest initial print runs of 1 000 copies. Author 1 was previously traditionally published, so he anticipated high sales. His prediction proved accurate, with the first print run selling out in six weeks. Author 9 prints 1 000 copies per book because he is not distributing his books primarily for profit. He uses the books as marketing tools for his business, selling some while giving many to clients. These two cases highlight how an author's experience and intended use for the books can significantly influence printing decisions.

Authors adjust their print runs based on experience. For example, Author 6 initially printed 200 copies because the book targeted primarily family and friends. She is currently printing initial print runs of 5 000 copies because she knows that her books are in demand. Author 2 argued that it is better to underprint than to overprint because it is better for customers to wait while you print than to invest your capital in book stocks that may not sell.

Author 2:

I print 300 or 500, depending on how much money I've got, the print cost, and how I feel about the book. I got very cocky with my kids' books, and I overprinted [700]. I didn't realize how hard it was to sell kids' books.

This demonstrates how authors learn to balance demand with inventory risk as they gain market experience.

The target market also determines print runs. For example, Author 4's print runs are small because her primary target market is the international market, and her primary format is e-books. Her print books are available internationally via POD on Amazon and IngramSpark. She currently prints 50 copies because her readership in South Africa is quite small, and she does not want to invest her money in stock that may not sell. In addition, Author 11's print books are only available through POD on Amazon, so she does not print any stock. POD is convenient for authors because once they upload book files onto Amazon, they do not have to do anything else as Amazon handles printing and delivery. The advantages of POD are that authors do not have to pay for printing costs upfront or have a whole storeroom of books that might not be sold or get damaged, and the books also get delivered fast (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Haugland, 2006; Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez & Weidner, 2013; Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011).

5.4.8 Book costing process

Authors used different strategies to price their books depending on the genre, format and target market.

Print book costing

Eight authors (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10) factored the production costs of their print books into their pricing and added a markup to profit from sales. Author 2 also considered distribution

costs and bookshop discounts for her print books, as she used a book distributor. In contrast, Author 1 eliminated the distributor fee by self-distributing and avoided bookshop discounts for books sold directly to readers, aiming to offer more affordable prices. This disintermediation, that is removing or reducing the role of intermediaries between authors and readers in the book value chain can result in lower prices for consumers due to lower overhead costs, however, the overall cost-effectiveness may vary when factoring in potential courier fees for direct sales.

> *Author 1:*
> I took production costs into account... I sold far cheaper than the standard. And part of the reason is that I cut out the elements that I believed were unnecessary. I cut out the distributor ... the bookstore for the direct sales...

A comparison of prices between self-published and traditionally published books reveals that the latter are generally less expensive. This can be attributed to economies of scale because traditional publishers typically have larger print runs, which can reduce per-unit production costs (Thompson, 2013). In addition, traditionally published books are usually readily available in bookshops, eliminating additional courier fees for customers.

According to Authors 2, 7, 8, 9, and 10, authors must price their books competitively to avoid pricing themselves out of the market. Author 2 consulted her book distributor on the optimal price for each book. Authors 7 and 9 conducted market research by examining prices of similar books and considering their target market's willingness to pay, ensuring competitive pricing. Authors 8 and 10 received assistance from publishing services companies in setting competitive prices to enhance sales potential.

The excerpts below explain some of the pricing strategies that authors used.

> *Author 8:*
> R250 is my standard price for novels, and that's if I'm selling individually… it covers the cost of the printing and probably the cost of the distribution. It doesn't include the cost of editing and all of that. There's no cost strategy. Your publisher will also give you a guideline and base it on what similar books are being sold in stores, so you peg it around there. If it's very expensive, it won't sell.

> *Author 9:*
> Just my gut feeling. I look at other books on the market and try to determine what the market would pay for the book.

> *Author 10:*
> [Publishing services company] helped and it was to get a small margin. So, it was the printing costs plus a small percentage that was added to that. We wanted to keep it relatively cheap because you don't want to price yourself out of the market.

These excerpts show that authors must be strategic about their book pricing and price their books competitively to remain viable in the market.

Authors 3, 8, and 9, in addition to other book costing strategies, also relied on their intuition to price their books. Author 3, while considering production costs, primarily used her intuition for pricing as she did not use a specific profit markup strategy. Despite bookshops' concerns about her 32-page book being overpriced at R250, she maintained her price, and the book sold well. This suggests that readers may be willing to pay high prices for desired books. When a traditional publisher acquired Author 3's book, the price was reduced by more than 50% to R120. This significant reduction can be attributed to economies of scale from larger print runs. However, traditional publishers often do not break even on the first print run for most books, a factor self-publishers must consider in their pricing strategies.

Author 3:

I added how much it cost to have the book illustrated, laid out, and edited plus the cost to print. All of that brought me to a cost per book being R106.88, so to cost it at R250 means that my profit was R143.12. I was working off intuition.

While intuition can be useful, a more systematic approach might include researching comparable books in the market to ensure competitive pricing, factoring in marketing, distribution, and bookstore discounts, calculating break-even points at different price levels, and planning for multiple sales channels with varying profit margins.

Author 9 combined market research with intuition, examining prices of similar books and relying on 'gut feel' to price his books. Author 8 adopted a simpler approach, using a flat rate of R250 for all her books, which she considers the average book price in South Africa. This price accounts for printing and distribution costs but excludes some production costs, such as editing, to keep the book competitively priced. This pricing strategy implies that authors sometimes price their initial print runs below cost to encourage sales. The goal is often to establish the book in the market, potentially reaching the backlist status where consistent sales over time can lead to profitability. It is worth noting that R250 appears to be a common price point for many self-published books in South Africa, regardless of the book's length or production costs. This standardized pricing approach may simplify decision-making for self-publishers but could potentially undervalue some works while overpricing others.

Authors 2, 4 and 11 used Amazon's print-on-demand for their print books. This eliminates the need for authors to manage inventory or fund initial print runs.

Author 11:

You must price paperbacks so that it pays for the actual printing of the book and then make sure you also add a little bit there so that you make a profit.

Amazon sets a minimum price below which authors cannot sell their books. Profit margins for authors of print-on-demand books are modest. Authors using Amazon's print-on-demand service have limited control over pricing strategy. This supports Schroff's (2024) argument that Amazon's models are opaque and unfavourable to authors. While appearing to enable self-publishing, Amazon's dominant market position and restrictive practices make it an emerging gatekeeper in the book publishing market. This limits the independence and bargaining power of self-published authors, with major distributors like Amazon being the main beneficiaries of the online book market through increased control over pricing and distribution. However, print-on-demand offers advantages such as reduced upfront costs and inventory management, which benefits some self-published authors.

E-books costing

Authors 2, 4 and 11 primarily publish e-books on Amazon and their costing strategies for e-books are the same as for their print books. The authors do not consider the production costs because they do not spend much to publish e-books as there are no printing costs. They research the market for prices of similar books to price their books competitively. Authors cannot price their books too high because the e-book market does not allow for that, as the price can determine sales. E-book pricing is flexible as authors can change the prices at any time and run specials when they want.

> *Author 2:*
> With the e-book that is very much, what's selling at what price point in that genre? So, I'll look up within the genre that I'm working in. What sort of prices are there, how much I'm prepared to sell mine for...

> *Author 4:*
> I looked at the markets and what other people are pricing their books at and that's where I took it from. On Amazon, the way that their royalties work is if it's priced between $2.99 and $9.99 you get 70% and if it's below $2.99 or over $9.99 then you only get

> 35%. So, there's a sweet spot, that gap in which you want to keep your books to get maximum royalties.
>
> *Author 11:*
> We look at similar books on Amazon to see what they are selling for and then follow. Non-fiction is always a little bit more expensive than fiction, but it's a price between $3.99 and $4.99. Promotions and sales go down to $0.99 or free to try and get new readers so that they'll go on to read the rest of your backlist.

Authors 4 and 11 highlighted that the royalty structures on Amazon contribute to authors' pricing strategy as authors want to make the highest royalties from their books. This aligns with Schroff's (2024) view that Amazon has more control over pricing and distribution than self-published authors. Amazon leverages its control over e-book formats and device ecosystems to lock consumers in, giving it power over pricing and access to content.

Author 4 pointed out that the book genre determines the book price range. This implies that different genres may have different reader expectations and willingness to pay, which authors and publishers must consider when setting prices. Another common strategy among self-publishers is to price their e-books lower than traditional publishers to increase overall revenue through higher sales volume, even at a lower per-unit price. Furthermore, Author 11 highlighted that traditional publishers make the mistake of pricing their e-books the same as print books, which leads to low e-book sales. E-books must be priced cheaper because there is no printing cost. There are different cost structures and consumer expectations between print and digital formats. Carolan and Evain (2013) contend that strategic pricing can help attract readers, particularly for e-books, so authors must price their books strategically to appeal to new readers.

Audiobook costing

According to Author 11, authors do not have flexibility in pricing audiobooks because the price is primarily determined by the audio length, with longer books generally being more expensive.

The discussion on book pricing shows that when pricing a book, authors set a price that covers expenses, reflects the book's value, aligns with market expectations, and allows for profit while remaining competitive.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter explored key self-publishing processes, including research, management, manuscript review, editing, page and cover design, proofreading, printing, and pricing strategies. It highlighted that producing a quality book that resonates with readers and stands out in the market requires both knowledge and skill. Understanding the publishing process and value chain is crucial, as quality in editing, design, and proofreading directly impacts reader perception and book success. Printing and pricing strategies significantly influence a book's accessibility and profitability. To succeed, self-publishers must stay informed about industry trends and technologies, master publishing processes, and remain adaptable. These practices enable authors to harness self-publishing's full potential, reach their target audience, and achieve their publishing goals.

Chapter 6 Book distribution, marketing and sales in self-publishing

6.1 Introduction

This chapter examines how the eleven self-publishers in this study approached book distribution, marketing, promotion, and sales. In self-publishing, creating a great book is only half the battle – getting it into readers' hands presents significant challenges. Self-publishers must think like entrepreneurs to ensure their books stand out in a competitive market. The chapter analyses their strategies for reaching target readers and presents sales data from their publishing ventures.

6.2 Book distribution

Trade books are sold through traditional bookshops (book chains and independent), non-traditional channels such as supermarkets, department stores, online retailers, book clubs and direct sales (Smith & Bold, 2018; PASA, 2023). In South Africa, distribution companies are intermediaries between publishers and booksellers. Bookshops are intermediaries that connect readers with books from various publishers. Book chains such as Exclusive Books and Bargain Books are the biggest distribution chains in South Africa, followed by independent bookshops. Additionally, there are various online platforms, including Amazon, Takealot, Makro, Game, and Loot, that facilitate the sale of books.

All eleven authors initially self-distributed their first self-published books. Seven authors (1, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11) are still self-distributing. Authors 8 and 10 also used publishing service companies that offer distribution services. Two authors (2 and 6) switched to distribution companies due to time and logistical constraints. Author 3's book was republished by a traditional publisher in 2018 that now handles the distribution. Author 5's book is now out of print. In self-publishing, authors make distribution decisions that traditional publishers

normally manage. Authors can self-distribute or outsource the service depending on their goals and circumstances (Tyilo, 2020; Umezurike, 2020).

6.2.1 Methods of self-distribution

Six authors (1, 2, 3, 4, 7 and 11) sell their books directly to bookshops and individual customers and use courier services to deliver books across South Africa. This method gives authors control over their sales and secures higher profit margins, but authors must spend more time and effort managing relationships and logistics. Author 9 mostly distributes his books by giving them to his clients and on Takealot. Takealot is the largest online shopping platform in South Africa, competing with both local and international online retailers. Takealot sells a variety of products including books. Author 9 has not tried to sell through bookshops because the books serve to market his consulting services and not to get direct income from the books. This shows that broader business goals can influence distribution choices.

Authors 4 and 11 mostly distribute their books to their international readers via Amazon. This will be discussed in detail below. For local readers, Author 11 sells some of her books directly to customers. Her books are also available on Loot, but she hardly sells any on that platform. Author 4 also sells print books through her Shopify store. The two authors leverage Amazon's global platform to reach the international market but use different strategies for local distribution, showing that the target market can influence distribution choices.

Describing their self-distribution processes, Authors 3 and 7 said:

> *Author 3:*
> You could order it by emailing me. I'll send you back my bank details and then you can choose if you wanted to go through the South African post office or if I could do it via Postnet ... I was able to get people's orders out quickly…

Author 7:

I distribute directly myself. People will reach out to me. We will then courier directly from our offices to anywhere in the country. Online people can order and download it right away, but I have had it in one or two smaller independent bookshops in the past…

It is significant to note that if a customer buys directly from the author, the courier fees, can make the book expensive compared to buying it at an event or a bookshop. Author 1 reduces customer costs by bundling his books with those of other authors, allowing multiple books to ship in a single package for one courier fee. This collaborative approach aligns with Shumake's (2017) findings that authors can increase visibility by working together, such as creating box sets that leverage each author's follower base. Author 1 also identified an affordable courier service through the recommendation of another author. Authors are networking to share information, highlighting the importance of author communities, innovation and cost-cutting measures to overcome distribution challenges to ensure their books remain competitively priced and accessible.

Ten authors (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, and 11) have successfully placed their books in physical bookstores, benefiting from the increased exposure these venues offer due to their strategic locations in high-traffic areas such as shopping malls and airports. Authors 1, 3, and 7 are stocked in independent bookshops including Book Lounge, Bridge Books, Love Books, and Book Circle Capital. Author 1's books were also stocked by major retail chains like CNA and Exclusive Books. CNA, formerly one of South Africa's largest book and stationery retailers, used a centralized ordering system where the main branch distributed books nationwide. However, the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the chain, leading to business rescue in 2021 (Madubela, 2021) and the eventual closure of all stores. In contrast, Exclusive Books operates with autonomous branches that place their orders, except for special head office promotions. Online retailers have also proved valuable, with Ethnikids, an online children's

bookstore, significantly boosting Author 3's sales through their support. Despite these various retail channels, all authors prefer direct customer sales for faster financial returns.

Five authors (2, 5, 6, 8 and 10) use distribution companies to distribute their print books in South Africa. In addition, Authors 5, 8 and 10 also self-distribute their books. Three authors (2, 5, 6) distribute their books through Protea Books. This suggests that Protea Books is supportive of self-publishers. Author 2 uses a distribution company because bookstores are reluctant to stock individual authors' books due to the administrative burden. She pays the distributor a percentage of the sales. Her books are available in book chains such as Exclusive Books, Bargain Books, and independent bookstores such as Wordsworth Books.

Author 6 initially self-distributed her first book. This is a common starting point for self-publishers as they test the market and build relationships. Independent bookshops stocked her book, and she only managed to get her book stocked by Exclusive Books after she created demand for her books by promoting them. This shows the importance of marketing and building an audience for self-published books. She hired a distributor after four months of self-distributing because, as the sales grew, it was not sustainable for her to distribute the book to different bookshops due to logistics challenges and time constraints. Exclusive Books recommended that she get a distributor to meet the demand for her book nationally. Author 6's experiences highlight how guidance from industry experts can provide valuable support. Her interaction with the book chain suggests that many retailers prefer working with distributors for operational efficiency.

Author 6 chose Protea Books as a distributor because it has bookstores near or at universities; young adults are her biggest target market. Her choice demonstrates the importance of selecting a distributor that aligns with one's target market and objectives. The distributor gets

10% of the book price. This is a concrete example of the costs of distribution services and authors must weigh the benefits against the cost. According to Author 6, the role of the distribution company is to receive books from the printer, warehouse them, receive orders from customers, and distribute stock, which alleviates the logistical burden for the author. A distributor enabled the author to meet the demand for her books, highlighting how outsourcing distribution can support self-publishers.

Of the eleven authors studied, six had their books available only in independent bookstores, while two achieved placements in major book chains. This distribution pattern illustrates a common challenge for self-publishers. While independent bookshops are more likely to stock self-published works, serving as supportive community hubs (Salamon, 2016; Kelso, 2019), their small, localized nature limits book discoverability. The restricted access to major retail chains significantly impacts potential sales, as trade books traditionally rely on in-store visibility to reach customers. This suggests that self-publishers must either develop strategies to secure placement in major book chains or establish alternative distribution channels to achieve wider market reach.

I purchased and analysed books from ten of the eleven self-published authors in this study to examine them as material and designed objects (see Appendix B for the book review). Author 9's book was unavailable for analysis due to being out of stock, with no second-hand copies found online. The analysed books showed limited retail presence compared to traditionally published works. Six were available only in independent bookstores, which demonstrated consistent support for self-published authors. Among chain bookstores, just one book maintained regular shelf presence, while two others had been stocked previously when demand warranted. Acquiring these books often required direct author contact or extensive online searching – a marked contrast to the straightforward purchase process for traditionally

published works. Five of the books incurred additional courier fees, further complicating the purchasing process. This limited availability and accessibility highlight the distribution challenges self-published authors face in reaching broader readerships.

6.2.2 Distributing via Amazon

Eight authors (1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10 and 11) published their books in e-book format and distributed them via Amazon. Authors 3, 5 and 9 only have their books in print format. Authors 2, 4, 6, and 11's print books are also available through print-on-demand via Amazon. According to Author 2, several selling platforms are available for e-books such as Google, Apple, IngramSpark, Barnes & Noble, Kobo and Scribd, but Amazon is the biggest and most accessible.

> *Author 2:*
> You can sell on other platforms, not just Amazon, Apple, Google and Kobo. You can go as wide as you want, but you can't publish wide if you are on Amazon Kindle Select... But Amazon is the biggest platform … not many people will have Kobo or Apple Books or Google Books.

All eight authors who offer e-books distributed through Amazon, supporting Author 2's assessment of it as the dominant platform. Schroff (2024) explains that while alternatives like Apple Books and Google Play exist, Amazon remains the largest distributor for self-published works. This dominance stems partly from physical bookstores' reluctance to stock self-published titles, which lack traditional vetting and marketing support. Multiple researchers have documented online retail's growing influence on book distribution, with Amazon gaining significant control over both distribution and sales (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011; Murray & Squires, 2013; Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez & Weidner, 2013; Pacer, 2013). The rise of self-publishing technologies and distribution platforms has increased accessibility for authors (Carolan & Evain, 2013). Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), for instance, offers authors global distribution for both e-books and print-on-demand books

(Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez & Weidner, 2013; Salamon, 2016), disrupting traditional brick-and-mortar retail channels. However, the South African market presents a different picture, with most trade book sales still occurring through physical book chains (PASA, 2023), possibly due to the digital divide and infrastructure challenges.

Amazon is a key distributor for self-publishers due to the reluctance of traditional bookshops to stock self-published titles. However, with Amazon controlling over 81% of the e-book distribution market, authors face significant challenges bypassing the platform (Schroff, 2024). Both Noorda and Marsden (2019) and Schroff (2024) contend that Amazon and other tech giants have become the new gatekeepers in the book distribution ecosystem, imposing restrictions that limit self-published authors' independence and bargaining power. As these new gatekeepers continue to emerge, self-publishers must adapt and evolve to navigate this shifting landscape.

In addition, the influx of self-published books on Amazon has created new challenges in visibility and discoverability (Noorda & Marsden, 2019). Algorithms determine visibility on platforms like Amazon (Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez & Weidner, 2013; Poland, 2018). Self-publishers can mitigate their dependence on a single platform, such as Amazon, and increase their chances of reaching a wider audience by using alternative platforms such as Apple Books, Barnes & Noble's Nook, Kobo, and Google Play Books. However, this diversification requires more time and effort to manage the multiple channels, so authors should consider their capacity and goals when choosing distribution strategies.

Authors 4 and 11 primarily distribute their books through Amazon, providing both e-books and print-on-demand (POD) options. Author 4 also utilizes additional platforms such as

IngramSpark, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and Scribd. Amazon offers two key distribution models:

1. **Kindle Unlimited (KU):** A subscription service with approximately three million subscribers, which requires exclusive distribution through Amazon.
2. **Wide Distribution:** This option allows authors to sell their books on Amazon as well as other platforms like Apple Books, Google Play, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and Scribd.

Author 4 opts for wide distribution on Amazon to maximize sales and reach readers on other platforms. In contrast, Author 11 distributes exclusively through Amazon, participating in KU.

> *Author 11:*
> I'm exclusive with Amazon ... the main benefit is Kindle Unlimited (KU) and the reader can borrow as many KU books, as they like – there's a 10 or 15 book limit and read them for free if you are paying the KU membership. It's cheaper for those readers who go through a book a day or every two days, they can't afford to buy a new book all the time…It works well for authors because we get paid per page read. It's a tiny amount, but it all adds up and if you have a six-book series and one of those whale readers plough through your whole series, you can make good money.

This excerpt shows the mutual benefits of the KU programme to authors and readers. Authors can earn more based on pages read, especially for authors with series or multiple books. It also benefits high-volume readers as it is cost-effective since they can access many books for a fixed subscription fee. Author 11 prices her books low but earns significantly more through KU's pay-per-page model than individual book sales, as most of her readers are KU subscribers.

However, Schroff (2024) argues that Amazon is a gatekeeper in the book publishing market, especially for self-published authors, because it incentivizes exclusivity through programs such as KDP Select, where authors get better royalty rates but are

locked into Amazon's Kindle ecosystem exclusively. The choice between publishing wide, selling your books on Amazon and other platforms and enrolling in KU usually depends on genre, target audience, marketing strategy, and publishing objectives. Authors must weigh the pros and cons and choose a plan that best benefits them.

Authors 2, 4, 6, and 11 utilize print-on-demand (POD) services through Amazon for their print books. As noted earlier, POD is a cost-efficient solution because it allows books to be printed only when ordered, eliminating the need for high upfront costs associated with printing, warehousing, and distribution (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011). This significantly reduces the financial risk of unsold inventory. Additionally, POD enables authors to access the global marketplace more easily (Gallagher, 2014). It has also expanded distribution opportunities for self-publishers, as their books can now reach mainstream channels such as Amazon and book databases (Haugland, 2006). This technology allows authors to publish specialized content for niche readerships, fostering greater diversity in publishing (Miller, 2013). By lowering barriers to entry, POD has empowered self-publishers to compete more effectively in the traditional book market.

6.2.3 Reasons for self-distribution

Authors opted for self-distribution for a variety of reasons, with the most frequently cited being the ability to earn more immediate returns by bypassing distributors. Authors 1, 4, and 7 chose self-distribution because traditional distributors typically demanded a significant percentage of the retail price, ranging from 25% to 40%. In contrast, Author 6 paid only 10% in distribution fees. The disparity in distribution fees highlights the varying terms and conditions imposed by different distributors, which can significantly impact an author's earnings. This discrepancy underscores the importance of authors carefully evaluating distribution agreements and exploring alternatives, such as self-distribution or negotiating

better terms, to maximize their income. It also reflects the uneven landscape of the publishing industry, where some authors may have access to more favourable arrangements than others. Most authors felt that the traditional book distribution model undervalues their work, as they receive only a small portion of the proceeds from their books.

Direct sales were the most rewarding for authors, as they received immediate payment and retained 100% of the book price. In contrast, bookshops often take between one to six months to pay, making direct sales a more financially appealing and efficient option. Author 4 explained how she ended up self-distributing:

> *Author 4:*
> I looked into getting a distributor and the numbers didn't make it worth it for me because I would have to price the book quite high and then get R10 or R20 a copy so it was a loss because I would hardly get any money and the customer at the other end would have to pay double what I will charge and maybe only sell a handful of copies so the effort to get all of that organized didn't seem worth it to me …

Author 4's experience underscores the difficulties self-published authors encounter in navigating traditional distribution channels, which often prioritize established publishers and offer limited returns for independent creators. Author 4 shifted her focus away from bookstores, reflecting a common trend among self-publishers who prioritize more direct and profitable sales strategies, such as online platforms or direct sales. Her experience illustrates the need for self-publishers to carefully assess the financial viability of different distribution models and adapt their strategies accordingly.

Authors 7 and 8 preferred selling their books directly to customers as they got better financial returns.

> *Author 7:*
> I prefer to distribute myself simply because financially, it benefits me more to sell my book directly. I believe that the traditional publishing model and the traditional

> distribution model are designed to benefit the bookstores and distributors much more than the author, and so often the author ends up with the smallest piece of the pie.
>
> *Author 8:*
> If you give it to Exclusive Books, you get nothing back from them ... They will probably give you something like R40 a book a year after they've returned so many…

Both authors express dissatisfaction with the financial returns from traditional channels, arguing that these models disproportionately benefit bookstores and distributors over authors. Their perspectives highlight a growing trend among self-publishers to explore alternative distribution methods, such as direct sales or online platforms, which offer greater control over pricing and higher profit retention. These experiences reveal systemic challenges in traditional publishing, where authors often feel marginalized and undervalued in profit-sharing structures. This aligns with the broader mistrust of traditional publishers, as discussed in Section 4.4.2, and underscores the importance of authors carefully evaluating distribution options to align with their financial and creative goals.

6.2.4 Distribution challenges

Ten authors (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, and 11) agreed that distribution is the most challenging stage of self-publishing. In contrast, Author 9 finds distribution less difficult as he primarily distributes his books free of charge to clients. Common challenges cited by the authors include convincing bookshops to stock self-published books, time constraints in managing distribution effectively, bookshops ordering small quantities on consignment, and high courier costs due to weight-based pricing.

Getting books into bookshops

There was consensus among all eleven authors that convincing bookshops to stock self-published books is a significant challenge for self-publishers because bookshops only stock titles with proven demand. Author 6 stated:

> *Author 6:*
> This is where it gets tricky; if your book is not popular, the bookshops will not list it, especially if you are an unknown author. You will have trouble listing the book … as a self-published author, you don't have a track record of successful sales.

This statement highlights a significant barrier self-published authors face when trying to distribute their books through traditional bookshops. Bookshops often prioritize well-known authors or titles with proven sales records, making it difficult for unknown or self-published authors to gain shelf space. Without a track record of successful sales, self-published authors are at a disadvantage, as bookshops perceive their works as higher-risk investments. This underscores the challenges of breaking into traditional retail channels and reinforces the need for self-published authors to explore alternative distribution methods, such as online platforms or direct sales, where they can build their audience and establish a sales history independently.

It also reflects the broader issue of gatekeeping in the publishing industry, where visibility and access are often tied to an author's reputation or marketability. Several researchers (Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez & Weidner, 2013; Elliot, 2016; Tyilo, 2020; PASA, 2023; Schroff, 2024) agree that self-published books face significant challenges in being stocked by physical bookstores due to the lack of traditional vetting and validation. While self-publishers bypass the editorial gatekeeping of traditional publishers, they still encounter distribution gatekeepers who control access to readers (Schroff, 2024). This dual-layer gatekeeping

highlights the systemic barriers self-published authors must navigate to achieve visibility and success.

Gatekeeping in the publishing landscape was discussed in Section 2.4.2. Although self-published authors bypass traditional publishers, who act as gatekeepers in the publishing ecosystem (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011; Thomlison & Bélanger, 2015; Elliot, 2016), they still face challenges due to limited access to mainstream book distribution, which restricts their reach (Haugland, 2006; Miller, 2013; Pacer, 2013; Salamon, 2016; Elliot, 2016; Poland, 2018; Gibixego, 2021). As a result, self-published authors must focus on building an audience through alternative channels and explore online distribution methods to circumvent traditional bookstores.

Authors had varied experiences with bookshops. Authors 1, 3, 6 and 8 emphasised that building good relationships with bookstores is important as the relationships determine if your book will be stocked. Author 6 stated that the advantage of getting a distribution company is that they already have established relationships with various bookshops, as they are already listed with them. Author 3 concurred with this view and noted that it is difficult for self-publishers to get into bookshop chains compared to traditional publishers, primarily because of the lack of established connections with bookstores. This aligns with several researchers (Miller, 2013; Pacer, 2013; Poland, 2018 & PASA, 2023) who argue that self-published authors struggle to access traditional distribution channels.

The issue of professional relationships is crucial. Authors 6 and 8 argued that self-published authors often have no choice but to rely on distribution companies to achieve wide distribution. In contrast, Author 5 reported no difficulty engaging a book distributor, crediting this success to a strong relationship with the company. This

highlights the importance of building and maintaining professional connections in navigating the distribution challenges of self-publishing.

> *Author 5:*
> I had a good relationship with [Distributor]. In conjunction with working with publishing houses, I also organized poetry shows. So, I had a relationship with different venues and different people who had spaces that sold books and hosted poetry shows.

Established industry relationships served the author well. This supports Author 3's sentiments about the importance of professional connections. Similarly, Author 1's experience and networks in the publishing industry made it easy for him to access bookshops.

> *Author 1:*
> It's been very easy for me to deal with these bookshops. I think the advantage is that I've been in this industry for long. I know these people, I know the standards, the norm in the publishing industry.

Contacts in the publishing industry are crucial, and their absence can significantly hinder a book's distribution. This aligns with findings by Salamon (2016) and Maneta (2018), who emphasize that an author's track record and industry connections are key to success. Self-published authors often face major challenges in distribution, securing orders, and gaining placement in both online and physical bookstores, largely due to a lack of institutional support or established contacts (Odendaal & Galloway, 2008; Umezurike, 2020; Afolabi & Zolkepli, 2023). These distribution barriers limit the reach of self-published books, effectively acting as a form of market gatekeeping. This raises a critical question: What is the purpose of publishing if books cannot reach their intended readers?

Interestingly, Author 3, a debut author with no industry connections, found it easy to place her book into independent bookshops. However, they ordered small quantities, ranging from three to ten copies on consignment and requested a 25% discount. In contrast, Author 10

struggled to place her books in bookstores and maintain stock in the bookstores. Inventory management is challenging for self-publishers as it is demanding and time-consuming.

> *Author 10:*
> It was incredibly difficult to get the book into bookstores, and most of the time now I just sell them out of hand because there isn't anybody who is constantly making sure that they stay in the bookstores.

A common strategy among authors, such as Authors 1 and 6, involves creating demand for their books, which prompts bookstores to approach the author and stock the title. Author 1 generated media buzz through newspapers, radio, and television, leading to customer inquiries at bookstores until they decided to stock the book. Similarly, customers requested Author 6's books at Exclusive Books, eventually prompting the store to contact the author and place orders through their head office.

This proactive and effective approach shifts the dynamic, making bookstores more likely to seek out and stock the book rather than the author having to pitch it. By demonstrating their ability to build an audience, authors reduce the perceived risk for bookstores, as demand is already established. This strategy underscores the importance of audience engagement and marketing in self-publishing, showing that authors who invest in creating visibility for their work can successfully navigate traditional distribution barriers. This approach aligns with the broader trend of self-published authors taking control of their publishing journey and leveraging entrepreneurial skills to achieve success. As Author 1 noted, when bookshops approach an author to place orders, it strengthens the author's bargaining power, further empowering them in the publishing process.

Authors 4 and 8 thought that Exclusive Books only stocks self-published books through distribution companies, as it is a logistical nightmare for the bookshop to deal with many suppliers. They commented on their experiences:

> *Author 4:*
> I went to a few independent bookstores because a large chain like Exclusive Books only deals with distributors, but I went through a few independent ones.

> *Author 8:*
> You must go through a distribution company unless you're going through independent bookstores…Stores like Exclusive Books won't work with independent authors...

Author 8 believes that self-publishers need distribution companies to successfully distribute their books, which may explain why she is now working with her third distributor. However, contrary to the views of Authors 4 and 8, the product controller at Exclusive Books states that they stock self-published books directly from authors but prefer working through registered distributors for more efficient administration (Tyilo, 2020). This disparity highlights a disconnect between self-published authors and traditional retail systems, often exacerbated by a lack of accurate information, which can deter authors from approaching book chains directly.

This difference in perspective underscores the need for better communication and understanding between self-publishers and retailers. Bookstore chains, which serve as the primary distribution channel for trade books in South Africa (PASA, 2024), are often situated in high-traffic locations such as shopping malls and airports, significantly boosting the visibility of books. Exclusive Books, the largest book chain in the country, exemplifies this model. However, their preference for working with established distributors creates a form of gatekeeping, adding complexity for authors who lack the resources or connections to engage with intermediaries. This situation reflects the broader challenge self-published authors face

in balancing creative independence with the logistical demands of traditional retail systems. Bridging this gap – through improved outreach, education, or streamlined processes – could foster greater inclusivity in the book market, benefiting both authors and retailers.

Authors 1 and 6 successfully had their self-published books listed by book chains without distributor assistance by generating demand for their books. In contrast, Author 3's book was not stocked in CNA and Exclusive Books due to her inability to complete the required paperwork. These experiences highlight the challenges self-published authors face in getting their books into bookstores, as they must compete with traditional publishers' economies of scale and well-established distribution networks (Molapo, 2020). This disparity underscores the additional hurdles self-publishers encounter in navigating the retail landscape.

Time constraints

After four months of self-distribution, Author 6 opted to work with a distributor, as self-distributing proved unsustainable due to logistical challenges. These included using a small car, covering long distances between bookshops, which was tiring and time-consuming, high transportation costs (fuel, car wear and tear, and courier fees), delays in delivering orders to customers, and time constraints from her full-time job. This experience aligns with Salamon's (2016) observation that stocking books in local bookshops can be prohibitively expensive for self-publishers, highlighting the practical difficulties of managing distribution independently. Author 6 summarised the distribution challenges that self-publishers face:

> *Author 6:*
> As a small individual, delivering to 50 stores a week, it's a lot when you don't have the capital to be moving around like that … You just can't do that…

Author 1 has ceased direct sales due to time constraints from his full-time job. Similarly, Author 3 managed to deliver customer orders on time but could not complete the paperwork

required by CNA and Exclusive Books. Author 8 also struggled to monitor stock levels in bookshops to ensure consistent availability. These experiences support Author 6's claim that self-distribution is highly time-consuming. In contrast, traditional publishers benefit from established infrastructure and dedicated staff to manage distribution efficiently (Miller, 2013) highlighting the logistical advantages they hold over self-published authors.

Book order quantities and buying terms

Bookshops typically order small quantities, often on consignment, meaning authors are only paid after their books are sold. While authors have little choice but to accept these terms to secure shelf space, Exclusive Books avoids consignment due to the administrative burden it creates. Additionally, bookshops can take up to a year to return unsold books, and authors receive limited proceeds, as most bookshops operate on a 25%-35% discount margin. This aligns with Schroff's (2024) observation that self-published authors are structurally weaker and have less bargaining power compared to traditional publishers. These conditions place self-publishers at a disadvantage, as service providers hold the upper hand and impose non-negotiable terms that authors are forced to accept.

The excerpts below show that bookshops order small quantities of self-published books.

> *Author 3:*
> For instance, [independent bookshop] always works with very small quantities, so they were working with three copies. I think [independent bookshop] worked with under five copies and then [independent bookshop] worked with 10.

> *Author 8:*
> They [independent bookshops] will probably take your books, and then it's three, four, or five at a time. It's almost always on a consignment basis and you don't get a lot percentage-wise through bookstores…They can also keep the books for much longer. They can keep them for a year. And if they don't sell them, they'll just return them, so you lose a lot of money ...

The high discounts demanded by bookstores and 90-day sale or return policies from bookstores are not sustainable for self-publishers (PASA, 2023).

Author 8 highlighted the challenges of selling to public libraries, noting that the process is lengthy and often relies on the slow tender system. Elliot (2016) argues that public libraries face institutional barriers in acquiring self-published books, such as traditional acquisition processes favouring established publishers, limited budgets prioritizing known authors or publishers, a lack of reviews or professional recommendations for self-published works, concerns about quality or durability, and cataloguing challenges for books without standard publishing information. However, Author 8's experience suggests that public libraries in South Africa are open to acquiring self-published books – a contrast to Elliot's (2016) findings on pervasive institutional barriers in the US library system.

According to the National Library of South Africa (NLSA) (see Appendix A), all provinces purchase self-published books, but authors must register with approved NLSA vendors in each province. While this system ensures quality control and administrative efficiency, it may exclude valuable works from authors unable to establish vendor partnerships, meet selection deadlines, or afford intermediary costs. Although librarian expertise enhances collection development, their preferences influence which self-published works reach library collections. Acquisition largely depends on author registration and librarian decisions at events. Each province receives a grant with autonomy in fund allocation. Without requirements to prioritize book purchases, provinces may focus more on infrastructure than on acquiring books, highlighting inconsistencies in how self-published works are accessed and valued within public library systems.

The description of the acquisition process of self-published books by NLSA (see Appendix A) indicates that self-published authors face significant distribution barriers to library acquisition. South African libraries, functioning as gatekeepers, often exclude these works through restrictive policies (Elliot, 2016; Poland, 2018; Afolabi & Zolkepli, 2023). Traditional review-based selection methods struggle to evaluate the volume of self-published titles, limiting their circulation (Pacer, 2013). Both Pacer (2013) and Elliot (2016) advocate for libraries to reform acquisition policies to improve representation despite logistical challenges. However, South African libraries operate under considerable resource and infrastructure constraints (Harris, 2019).

Author 8 also bemoaned that the book sector always gets the first cut in the budget, implying that it is not considered an important sector by the government.

> *Author 8:*
> But to go through traditional libraries ... there is a whole tender process and then the government red tape process and it's 50% discount if they do get in and that's a long process that takes two, three, four years because especially recently with budgets being cut and every time government is out of money, the first department that gets budget cuts is arts and culture... government takes long and then you think okay now you are going to get an order from this province and they'll ask for 30 books or 60 books.

This excerpt highlights the significant challenges self-published authors face when distributing their books through traditional public libraries. Systemic inefficiencies and chronic underfunding of arts and culture within government systems disproportionately impact self-publishers, creating barriers to accessibility for diverse voices and independent works. The high discounts demanded by public libraries, coupled with lengthy purchasing processes and small order quantities, make this distribution channel unsustainable for many self-published authors. These challenges underscore the need for self-publishers to explore

alternative distribution methods or advocate for more streamlined and supportive systems to ensure their works reach readers effectively.

Financial risk

Self-distribution carries financial risk as authors are not always guaranteed financial proceeds from their books when bookshops stock them, as bookshops sometimes go into liquidation. CNA stocked Author 1's books. The book chain was under administration, but the author had no difficulty getting his payments as he renegotiated terms to accommodate the situation.

> *Author 1:*
> CNA was doing very well in the distribution of my books. They were unfortunately in the red. They've been under business rescue since 2020. We had to revisit the terms; they had to send me monthly sales. After which I issue them with an invoice, and they pay me. So, they pay me monthly, given their current circumstance.

Author 3's experience contrasted sharply with Author 1's success when African Flavour Books, a bookshop she had supplied, went into liquidation owing her payment for 40 books. The bookshop had ordered books in batches of 10, and she continued supplying them despite not receiving payment. Without proper monitoring systems in place, the author was unable to prevent the mounting losses. This setback highlights the financial risks self-published authors face when relying on traditional retail channels, particularly when bookshops fail to meet their obligations. Such experiences underscore the precarious nature of self-publishing and the importance of carefully evaluating distribution partnerships to mitigate potential losses. This aligns with Tyilo's (2020) findings that self-published authors often struggle to track invoices and secure payments when distributing directly to bookstores, unlike distributors who have established systems for managing orders and payments.

The financial loss was compounded by emotional distress as Author 3 pursued legal action to recover her money. Despite winning her case, she has yet to receive any payment. This

experience led her to conclude she could not manage bookshop relationships effectively, ultimately influencing her decision to sign with a traditional publishing company. Her case exemplifies the distribution challenges for SMEs identified by PASA (2023): insufficient funding and institutional support, low sales volumes, and limited operational capacity.

Bookshop closures

In the past ten years, many bookstores have closed in South Africa due to the global economic downturn (Willis, 2016). Recent bookstore closures in South Africa highlight the challenges facing booksellers. African Flavour Books, which specialized exclusively in African-authored titles and prominently featured self-published works, was forced to close due to unsustainable losses (Dlomo, 2019). This derailed many self-publishers, such as Author 3. The closure of bookshops is not confined to South Africa, as it reflects a broader global trend affecting the retail book industry (Pampalone, 2012; Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez & Weidner, 2013; Murray & Squires, 2013). The trade sector relies mostly on exposure in bookshops; the fewer the bookshops, the less exposure the books get. With fewer physical bookshops, discoverability becomes a challenge, which slows book sales (Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez & Weidner, 2013).

The above discussion shows that authors' distribution strategies can be influenced by the desired level of control, target market, objectives, and willingness to manage various aspects of the distribution process. Self-publishing is important because it is a channel that disseminates a variety of voices and stories, as almost anyone can self-publish. Traditional publishers often publish limited lists because they are risk-averse, possibly overlooking unique or niche voices, stories and genres. Self-publishing enables authors from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and experiences to share their stories because of the low barriers to entry for aspiring authors. However, the ease of self-publishing also presents challenges, such

as ensuring quality control and helping readers discover worthwhile books among numerous options.

It is possible to distribute directly as a self-published author, but the lack of existing industry relationships, nationwide logistics capabilities, marketing resources and transaction management systems makes widespread distribution incredibly challenging without going through a third-party distributor. Distributors have greater marketing resources and capabilities to promote books to bookstores in ways that individual self-published authors would struggle to afford or execute on their own (Tyilo, 2020). Three self-published authors interviewed by Salamon (2016) argue that distribution is a long learning curve and encourage self-publishers who want to be successful to outsource distribution. In addition, authors must leverage technology such as blogs, social media, and e-book distribution channels (Carolan & Evain, 2013).

6.3 Book promotion and marketing

Authors actively promote and market their books to ensure their target audience is aware of their availability. Effective book marketing and promotion are crucial, as trade books compete for a limited market share, which is further eroded by the abundance of alternative leisure activities and media (Carolan & Evain, 2013; SABDC, 2016). This highlights the need for authors to strategically engage their audience in a crowded and competitive landscape.

According to Author 2, book marketing and promotion are the most difficult things to do.

> *Author 2:*
> Getting the book done feels like you have done 20% even if it takes you more than a year to write. To get that book in front of people for them to love it, for them to tell someone else to read it. That is hard work when you are self-publishing…

Author 6 concurred with Author 2 that book promotion and marketing are the most important processes for a self-publisher.

> *Author 6:*
> One of the biggest parts is marketing and engagement. You can have the greatest book, and nobody will know about it if your marketing is not done.

Authors 1, 8 and 10 commenting on the challenges of book marketing said:

> *Author 1:*
> One needs more time. In 2020, my book was selling like hotcakes. And the moment I stopped marketing and distributing, the sales stopped. So, if I were doing this on a full-time basis, I can see what potentially I can do.

> *Author 8:*
> I've tried, but it hasn't been very successful for me. You need to do a lot of work and commit to it. Look after your database, have your email lists, and send out regular newsletters. Some people do it very well and very successfully. I will talk about my books. I love talking about my books, but I'm a quiet person. I don't want to talk about myself, and that's what you must do.

> *Author 10:*
> The biggest challenge is to promote the book. It's constant, so one must do workshops or talks or write articles. The biggest challenge is in getting people to know about it… But I think the biggest thing is to keep promoting it, which is a huge amount of work. And then the price margin is so small that if one employs somebody to promote it for you or to get it into the bookstores, you might be cutting a loss unless you have a massive audience.

These quotations highlight that book marketing and promotion are crucial to making self-publishing financially sustainable. Authors must dedicate significant time and effort and develop a broad skill set for effective marketing and promotion (Carolan & Evain, 2013; Tyilo, 2020). For self-published authors, this promotional phase requires wearing multiple hats (marketer, publicist, event coordinator) and demands sustained effort and resources beyond the writing process.

The success of a book can depend on an author's personality, with introverts such as Author 8 potentially struggling with marketing. Author 1 alluded that the marketing effort correlates with sales; the more you market, the more sales you make. Author 6 underpinned the importance of an author being involved in their marketing as it gives the author control of the marketing narrative. Tyilo (2020) supports author involvement in book promotion, arguing that authors are best positioned to sell their books by actively engaging in public speaking, reader interactions, and promotional activities.

Self-publishers bear the full financial burden of publishing and marketing (Miller, 2013; Elliot, 2016; Tyilo, 2020; Afolabi & Zolkepli, 2023). While outsourcing promotion can reduce profit margins, as noted by Author 10, it can also yield significant benefits. However, due to financial constraints, most authors handle all aspects of promotion independently (Dilevko & Dali, 2006). Authors have various options for marketing their work, including hiring professional services for publicity, reviews, and sales facilitation (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Bradley & Vokac, 2008; Salamon, 2016). Ultimately, authors should recognize their limitations and view outsourcing professional services as a worthwhile investment (Salamon, 2016; Carolan & Evain, 2013; Tyilo, 2020). This strategic approach can help balance the demands of effective book promotion with an author's resources and capabilities, ensuring a more sustainable and impactful marketing effort.

Authors 1 and 6 emphasized that success requires both a pre-publication marketing strategy and effective execution. They stressed the importance of ongoing, innovative promotion after publication to continuously attract new readers.

> *Author 1:*
> I had a well-structured, well-defined marketing plan. Once the book is published, the next thing is how to get it to the audience. I had a multi-pronged approach…

Author 6:

> Your marketing plan must be one of the greatest because some authors only market the book for two weeks…So you must be consistent with your marketing for at least six months until the book automatically sells itself because of word of mouth.

A multi-pronged and consistent marketing plan is important to maximise audience reach and convince buyers to buy your books. Short-term marketing is not effective. Extensive marketing leads to higher sales as people recommend your book by word of mouth. This aligns with Tyilo (2020), who contends that an effective marketing strategy is a key success factor for self-publishers.

Author 8's inconsistent approach to book marketing appears to have hindered her success, underscoring the importance of sustained promotion efforts.

Author 8:

> I'm not very good at it. Around the time of the launch, I'll try and do what I can. I'll send out emails to my list to say that this is launching, this is what's happening. I will do the launch. I try and get the initial readers to do reviews, post them on Goodreads, which is an independent review site.

The mention of Goodreads aligns with researchers who argue that self-published books are often excluded from mainstream reviews. While low barriers to publishing and digital platforms have led to a surge in self-published titles (Elliot, 2016; Poland, 2018), these works still face significant challenges due to limited access to marketing support, mainstream distribution, and professional reviews, which restricts their visibility and reach (Haugland, 2006; Elliot, 2016; Poland, 2018; Noorda & Marsden, 2019).

In response, new gatekeepers are emerging in the self-publishing landscape to provide legitimacy and enhance visibility. Book bloggers, influencers, and online review platforms like Goodreads are increasingly playing a gatekeeping role by shaping perceptions of quality

and driving sales (Pacer, 2013; Thomlison & Bélanger, 2015; Voyles, 2021; Afolabi & Zolkepli, 2023). These platforms act as filters in the democratized publishing landscape, offering visibility and validation for promising self-published titles. This shift highlights the evolving nature of gatekeeping in the digital age, where alternative channels are helping to bridge the gap for self-published authors.

Author 5 thought traditional publishers do not market books to the same degree as the author does. She gave an example of a well-known South African poet who was published by a traditional publisher. The publisher did not market and distribute the book effectively until the author marketed her book through social media, book launches, book tours and poetry readings – then sales went through the roof.

> *Author 5:*
> [Poet] released her book through [Publisher], which did nothing for her book, and she went on a huge social media campaign… she was able to do a nationwide tour and she was able to read and sell her books … Once she became a household name and she completely broke the Internet and the bigger bookstores and the bigger people … started being interested in her and then she started blowing up internationally… It was because she went to these small poetry communities that apparently don't buy books, and she sold them books.

This quote underscores the power of grassroots marketing and social media in building an author's career, even in the absence of traditional publishing support. It emphasizes the importance of author-driven marketing, the potential of social media, and the value of engaging directly with niche readers. It also serves as a reminder that traditional publishing does not guarantee success and that authors can achieve remarkable results by taking initiative and leveraging available tools and communities.

The quote further suggests that if authors establish a strong personal brand, financial success will follow, highlighting the critical role of book marketing and promotion. Carolan and Evain (2016) reinforce this idea by describing John Grisham's journey. Despite being a bestselling traditionally published author, Grisham actively promotes his books through extensive marketing efforts. His hands-on approach is so thorough that some readers mistakenly believe he is self-published. This misconception illustrates the growing importance of author involvement in marketing, regardless of publishing method, and the blurring line between traditional and self-publishing in terms of author responsibilities and public engagement.

6.3.1 Social media as a marketing tool

Ten of the eleven authors used social media to promote their books, employing various platforms and strategies. They favour social media for its cost-effectiveness and broad reach, although it requires a significant time investment, as authors must post consistently and engage with their followers. Author 5 is the only exception, choosing not to use social media for promotion. The platforms utilized include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, TikTok, and book blogs. Author 1 also leveraged WhatsApp to distribute posters of book combinations featuring his works alongside those of other authors. This collaborative approach aligns with Shumake's (2017) argument that tactics like box sets and cross-promotion on social media, leveraging combined followings, demonstrate how community support enhances visibility. Without the marketing backing of traditional publishers, self-published authors often succeed through collective efforts within online and local writing networks. By banding together, they generate greater awareness for their books than they could achieve individually.

The excerpts below show how authors used social media to market their books.

> *Author 2:*
> I have pushed them as hard as I can on social media and getting people to go in-store and ask for the books… I try everything, I'm prepared to do anything to get my books out.

> *Author 3:*
> It was very much a social media situation. I have Instagram and Twitter. On Twitter, I had over 10 000 followers and on Instagram, I had about 5 000 followers. I have always had a blog … I always put things in these three places.

> *Author 6:*
> Thank God for social media. People started talking about this book online until the head office at Exclusive Books finally contacted me and said, we have people coming into our shop asking about your book. Can you print us this number of copies and we will list you in our store and we would be happy to sell your book.

> *Author 7:*
> A lot of my initial promoting and marketing was quite great in terms of organic reach on social media, so that was quite big.

> *Author 8:*
> I didn't even have any social media until I knew that I was going to be self-publishing. That's the only way to get out there. So that's when I started focusing a little bit on social media… And then ask them [readers] to post the links on their social media to say, I've read this book, a picture of the book, rate it, and do a review.

These excerpts highlight the importance of social media marketing for self-publishers, as it allows them to share and promote their works directly with the public, bypassing traditional book promotion channels (Nelson, 2006; Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011; Carolan & Evain, 2013; Johnson, 2017; Tyilo, 2020; Afolabi & Zolkepli, 2023). However, this strategy requires significant dedication, as it is both demanding and time-consuming to execute effectively. This aligns with Laing and Webb's (2017) and Tyilo's (2020) findings that social media promotion is time-consuming for the author. This indicates that success requires persistence and hard work, emphasizing the need for authors to be

patient, determined, and willing to invest significant effort into marketing and promoting their books. In addition, the effectiveness of social media marketing and promotion depends on the size of an author's following; the larger the audience, the wider the reach. However, not all authors have a strong social media presence. This aligns with Hartiningtyas' (2023) findings, which suggest that authors with substantial fan bases are more likely to achieve success through social media promotion.

However, the impact of social media marketing is not without its constraints. Criswell and Canty (2014) found that while it generates a strong short-term impact within existing fan circles, it often fails to drive sustained, widespread sales growth. Its influence on sales is typically secondary to factors like major awards or mainstream media attention. Social media excels at fostering reader engagement and building communities, encouraging word-of-mouth promotion, but it relies on complementary offline channels to achieve broader reach. Additionally, Carolan and Evain (2013) argue that successful self-published authors develop their profiles through a combination of blogging, social networking, and active reader engagement, cultivating loyal fan bases or communities around their work. This multi-faceted approach highlights that while social media is a valuable tool, it is most effective when integrated into a comprehensive marketing strategy.

Authors 4 and 7 noted that social media has evolved, requiring paid advertisements to reach a broader audience, unlike in the past when organic reach was more effective. Organic reach – the number of people who see content without paid promotion – has declined on many platforms in recent years, leading to increased reliance on paid promotions to ensure visibility. This aligns with Afolabi and Zolkepli's (2023) observation that social media

networks' content moderation policies and algorithmic curation have created a new layer of gatekeeping, further complicating authors' ability to connect with readers organically.

Author 11 is the only author who utilized TikTok, citing its large community of readers as a key advantage. Author 2 emphasized that even traditionally published authors must promote their books on social media, underscoring the importance of reader engagement in these spaces. In contrast, Author 9 relied solely on social media for marketing, avoiding marketing agencies due to budget constraints for book promotion. This highlights the varying approaches authors take based on their resources and the platforms they find most effective.

Dudu Busani-Dube and Buhle Ngaba, both successful South African self-published authors, initially self-published their books on social media platforms. Busani-Dube shared her *Hlomu* series on Facebook in 2014, while Ngaba used her website and Facebook in 2016. Their books have since gained significant popularity, selling thousands of copies (Maneta, 2018). This trend highlights the growing influence of social media in South Africa's literary landscape, shaping readers' choices and preferences. The national reading survey supports this finding, revealing that 17% of readers are influenced by social media personalities when selecting books (Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse & Huston, 2023). Both traditional and self-publishers are increasingly leveraging book influencers on social media to promote titles and shape reading habits. Readers themselves are emerging as gatekeepers, deciding what to purchase, read, and recommend (Pacer, 2013; Voyles, 2021).

Additionally, a 2023 reading survey (Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse & Huston, 2023) challenges the perception that social media use detracts from reading – instead, the two often coexist. Specifically, people who spend 11–20 hours weekly on social media are more than twice as likely to read long texts regularly. These findings underscore the pivotal role that

social media plays in promoting books and shaping reading trends within the South African context.

6.3.2 Book events

All eleven authors agreed that book events are an effective way to promote and sell books, often resulting in significant sales during the events themselves. Six authors (Authors 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, and 8) hosted in-person book launches, with Authors 2 and 4 also organizing online launches. Book launches serve as a key marketing tool, offering opportunities for media coverage in newspapers, radio, and television, as well as direct sales and word-of-mouth promotion.

Authors employed creative strategies to enhance their events: Author 2 combined her launch with a wine-tasting event, Author 4 promoted her books to schools, and Author 5 expanded her reach by hosting launches in multiple locations and participating in poetry festivals, book tours, and readings. Author 3 also used book readings to market her work. While Authors 7 and 10 did not host book launches, they engaged in book tours and workshops targeting specific readers. Author 10 further promoted her book by selling it to companies for their clients. These varied approaches highlight the importance of tailored, innovative event strategies in maximizing audience engagement and book sales.

The excerpts below show the importance of book events as a marketing tool.

> *Author 1:*
> I organized my launch, which got huge media coverage. And people started going to bookshops because they heard about the book. It's in the newspapers, on TV, in radio interviews and all of that.

> *Author 5:*
> The year that the book came out, the reason why I was able to sell quite a bit was

> because I did several festivals. 2014, 2015 were big years for me in terms of my poetry presence. I did several festivals, readings and launches in different places.
>
> *Author 7:*
> I also initiated a speaking tour where I would travel and speak, particularly in the education space, to teachers and principals at conferences ... And that gave me a lot of exposure for my book.
>
> *Author 10:*
> We had quite a few events where the book was introduced to people. There was a nice event here in Johannesburg, and there was another one in Cape Town… there was quite a nice spinoff with several aging or retirement events where the books were sold at the workshops. So, there was quite a nice word of mouth.

These excerpts highlight the importance of innovation in promoting books through events and public engagements, as they generate publicity and foster word-of-mouth promotion. The type of book events is tailored to the target market, with each author crafting strategies to suit their specific audience. For example, Author 7 secures annual funding from the City of Johannesburg to host a Book Fair, using part of the budget to purchase and distribute copies of his children's book. He also donates books on special occasions like Mandela Day and challenges corporations to match his donations. This approach not only generates goodwill but also creates a multiplier effect for book sales. By aligning his book with social responsibility, Author 7 attracts individual readers and corporate buyers, demonstrating how innovative, socially conscious marketing can enhance book promotion.

According to Author 8, book festivals are an effective way to promote books, but self-publishers often face challenges in gaining access to traditional festivals due to intense competition and the need for established professional relationships with organizers. As a result, self-publishers find it easier to participate in smaller festivals, which typically

have less stringent requirements. Each festival has its criteria, making it essential for authors to research and tailor their submissions accordingly.

> *Author 8:*
> … So nowadays independent authors do their festivals because otherwise, how else do you get out there? So, independent authors have their own small book fairs and book festivals.

This response highlights a growing trend among self-published authors to create opportunities in response to barriers in traditional publishing and distribution channels. By organizing independent book fairs and festivals, authors are finding innovative ways to promote their work, connect with readers, and build communities. This proactive, entrepreneurial approach reflects their resilience and resourcefulness in overcoming industry challenges. Self-publishers no longer rely on traditional gatekeepers but are instead carving out their own spaces to showcase their books, as mainstream events often exclude them. This aligns with Gibixego's (2021) assertion that self-publishers face exclusion from mainstream events, which limits book discoverability. To ensure visibility, self-publishers are creating their own platforms, redefining the literary landscape and fostering a more inclusive, collaborative environment.

6.3.3 Mailing lists

Five authors (1, 3, 4, 8 and 11) used mailing lists to market their books and they all agree that mailing lists are an important marketing tool. The excerpts below show how authors used mailing lists to market their books.

> *Author 3:*
> All those people are on my mailing list. I was able to say, hey, this is available. I was able to market in that way…

Author 4:

The other key thing is the newsletter, which took a while to get organized. I think I only really got that properly organized by my fourth book. I did have an email newsletter, but it was like an afterthought, … but now it's a key part of my strategy.

Author 8:

I'll send out emails to my list to say that this is launching, this is what's happening.

Mailing platforms such as BookBub, Mailchimp, and Substack make it easy for authors to manage their mailing lists and send emails, as explained by Authors 4 and 11. The platforms offer customizable marketing package services based on the author's needs and budgets.

Author 4:

BookBub is a newsletter promotion service, so every day they send out an email with a list of books that are discounted, and they have millions of subscribers …You can potentially get a lot of new readers, the way I had my first major success was by giving a feature on BookBub. They also have an advertising platform like a paper click advertising at the bottom of the email …

Author 11:

I've got a Substack account now. I used to use Mailchimp to email my mailing list once a month or so. A mailing list is extremely important for authors because once a reader finds an author that they like and subscribe to the mailing list, it means we've got that person's contact details. Every time I release a book or have a sale or a discount or something, you can let those people know and it's very powerful. Sometimes with social media, it's like shouting into the void and no one hears you, but someone's email address is very handy.

As previously mentioned, Author 1 promoted his books by sharing posters of book combinations – featuring his works alongside those of other authors – via email and WhatsApp. Mailing lists are a crucial component of authors' marketing strategies, enabling them to premarket books, inform customers about availability, and announce promotions. Author 11 emphasized that mailing lists are more effective than social media for marketing, as emails reach a targeted audience directly, unlike social media posts, which depend on

platform algorithms for visibility. This targeted approach ensures greater engagement and control over audience reach.

6.3.4 Book promotion and marketing on Amazon

Ten authors had their books available on Amazon, with eight relying on Amazon's algorithms to recommend their titles. As an emerging gatekeeper, Amazon plays a significant role in influencing readers' choices. However, Voyles (2021) notes that Amazon's algorithms are opaque, being automated and data-driven, which makes it difficult for self-publishers to achieve visibility.

Two authors, 4 and 11, took a more proactive approach to promoting their books on Amazon. Author 4 used a permafree strategy for her book series, offering the first book in the series permanently for free. This approach aims to attract new readers, increase visibility, and build a fan base, expecting readers who enjoy the free book to purchase subsequent books in the series, leading to increased sales. Author 4 accepted the short-term revenue loss from the free book, believing the long-term benefits would outweigh the initial sacrifice. Amazon's algorithms were solely responsible for recommending her work when she had only one book, as she had not yet utilized Amazon advertising. This highlights the challenges and opportunities self-publishers face in navigating Amazon's platform to maximize their reach and sales.

> *Author 4:*
> The promotional product that I use is permafree, so all my series, the first book of the series is free, which makes it super easy for people to get into the series and then if they like it, they can buy the rest of them.

Author 11, who also published primarily on Amazon, used paid advertising to promote her books. She had to cut down on advertising as it was getting too expensive.

Author 11:

I had American advertising and UK advertising. I stopped my US advertising because it was costing too much, and it was difficult to make a profit. So, my US sales have dropped considerably, but I've cancelled almost all my UK advertising too. But my UK sales have overtaken my US sales… It's very costly. It's very time-consuming because you are always tweaking the advert to make sure that you get a better return. And you cancel the ads that you're making a loss on, and you try and level up the ads that you're making a profit on...

This comment highlights the challenges of Amazon advertising for self-published authors, including high costs, difficulty in turning a profit, and the time-consuming nature of optimizing advertisements. The author stopped US advertising due to low returns and reduced UK advertisements, yet UK sales surpassed US sales, indicating varying market dynamics. This underscores the financial risks and effort involved in advertising, as well as the unpredictability of its impact on sales.

Authors publishing on Amazon can promote their books through paid advertising or rely on the platform's algorithms, which recommend books based on readers' past preferences. While paid advertising boosts visibility, it is costly and time-consuming. Algorithmic recommendations, although free, take time to yield results. This challenges the perception that self-publishing on Amazon is easy. According to Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez, and Weidner (2013) and Poland (2018), the decline of physical bookstores has made online discoverability crucial. However, Amazon's opaque, automated algorithms, which determine search results and recommendations, make it difficult for self-publishers to gain visibility (Voyles, 2021).

6.3.5 Mainstream media coverage

Six authors (1, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10) used mainstream media coverage to raise awareness of their books, a crucial aspect of book marketing. Author 1's book launch attracted radio, television, and print media coverage, while Author 5 promoted her book through radio and TV interviews. Author 6 employed a multi-pronged approach, leveraging TV interviews, radio appearances, podcasts, blogs, a YouTube series, and book reviews. This diverse strategy ensured that potential readers encountered varied content about her books, increasing their interest and likelihood of purchasing. Author 6 managed her marketing to maintain control over the narrative but is open to hiring a public relations professional in the future. This aligns with Shumake's (2017) argument that self-publishing authors must employ diverse promotional methods to achieve visibility and economic sustainability. These examples highlight the importance of a comprehensive marketing strategy in driving book sales and building an audience.

Author 6 commented on her contacts in media:

> *Author 6:*
> I was a model, and I was part of a radio station. So, I still have contacts in the radio space and the media space…

Author 6 leveraged established media contacts to promote her books, underscoring the significance of professional industry relationships. Miller (2013) and Elliot (2016) argue that a lack of such connections often hinders self-published authors from reaching wider readerships. These relationships are critical in achieving success, as they provide access to promotional opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable.

Authors 7, 8, and 10 hired publicists after publishing their books to secure media coverage, as they lacked professional contacts in the media industry. By paying public

relations companies, they demonstrated the need for financial investment in publicity and marketing. Author 7, for example, used a public relations firm to arrange print, television, and radio interviews. Importantly, he repurposed the media content to further promote his book across various platforms, emphasizing the value of a multi-pronged marketing strategy. This approach highlights the importance of leveraging media exposure to maximize reach and impact.

> *Author 7:*
> I also worked with a PR company for a short while in the initial stages of my book. I paid a PR company to get me a couple of interviews on television, print and radio and the great thing about that is you're able to repurpose all that content to create more marketing and you get a lot more spillovers from there.

Author 8 also used a publicist initially for some of her books to get book reviews in the newspapers and radio interviews.

> *Author 8:*
> I used a publicist for one or two of my novels initially to help get them out there. These are people who know all the book review people, the book sections in all the magazines and newspapers. They try and get people to interview you because that's the way that you will get known through those kinds of things. So, people who read and follow these may buy based on the recommendations.

Author 8 also got initial readers of her books to do reviews and post them on Goodreads, which is an independent review site. This concurs with Pacer (2013) and Voyles (2021), who identify independent review sites as emerging gatekeepers in the publishing landscape. This shows that self-publishers are constantly evolving and finding ways to circumvent traditional gatekeepers.

Author 10 had a publicist for the first three months after publication to help publicise her book and get it into local newspapers, and she got some radio interviews. However, a famous journalist and book reviewer refused to review her book because it was self-published.

> *Author 10:*
> [Journalist and book reviewer] refused to look at the book because she said self-published books are rubbish and she's not even going to waste her time with it. So, there were a lot of people stating that self-published books were of poor quality then.

This statement reflects the stigma self-published authors faced, with book reviewers dismissing their work as 'rubbish' due to assumptions about quality. Such bias created barriers to media coverage and recognition, although the landscape has since evolved. Many self-published authors now produce high-quality work, challenging outdated perceptions. However, remnants of this stigma persist, highlighting the ongoing challenges self-publishers face in gaining legitimacy.

The reluctance to review self-published books stems from a negative bias, often dismissing them as mere 'vanity publishing' efforts (Elliot, 2016; Noorda & Marsden, 2019; Schroff, 2024). This unequal treatment creates additional challenges for self-published authors in gaining visibility, acceptance, and credibility. Three authors in this study paid for publicity, aligning with Elliot's (2016) finding that major book review publications rarely review self-published titles unless authors pay a fee. This lack of visibility and endorsements significantly hampers book discovery.

6.4. Book sales

Authors were generally reluctant to disclose their earnings but shared the number of copies sold. Authors 4, 6, and 11 are full-time writers, suggesting they earn a sustainable income from their books. Their works have become part of the backlist – older titles (more than 6–12

months old) that remain in print and continue to generate steady sales. This underscores the importance of long-term sales, as backlist titles provide consistent revenue over time. For instance, Author 4's books continue to sell well, with some older titles being reprinted multiple times. To manage inventory effectively, she has created trilogy editions of her first series, which originally consisted of nine books published a decade ago. This strategy simplifies stock management and demonstrates the value of adapting older works to sustain sales and reduce complexity. This approach aligns with the 'survival' stage outlined in Adams and Barker's (1993) revised communications model, which examines how publishers take post-publication actions to ensure the longevity of their books. Author 4's ability to maintain the relevance and sales of her older works highlights the enduring appeal of her books and reinforces the significance of long-term strategies in the publishing industry.

Author 6 commented on her print runs and sales figures:

> *Author 6:*
> In total it was about 15 000 and I sold them all within that year… For the first print, I usually start with 5 000 copies. And then throughout the year, I add on maybe another 2 000 or another 3 000 … and then towards the end of the year, when we do a full stock count of all the books that were printed, that will then amount to the 15 000, 20 000 or even 13 000 copies annually… The [first book] is one of my highest-selling books of all time, every single year I print 5 000 copies and this book came out in 2017…. So, it will be around 35 000 copies to date.

This excerpt highlights that Author 6's books sell in high volumes compared to other self-published authors, likely enabling her to work as a full-time writer. The sales figures reflect her strong market presence and consistent demand, showcasing her success in navigating the self-publishing landscape. By combining strong initial sales with long-term sustainability, Author 6 is an inspiring example for other self-published authors striving for similar success.

Authors 6 and 7 have self-published both adult and children's books, while Author 3 focuses solely on children's books. Author 6 did not disclose specific print runs or sales figures for her children's books but noted they underperform compared to her adult books, attributing this to parents rarely purchasing books for children. Socioeconomic factors play a significant role, as only parents with disposable income tend to buy trade books, often prioritizing school textbooks. Author 7's sales figures support this view: over six years, he sold about 8 000 copies of his adult non-fiction book, while his children's book sets have sold 1 000 copies year-to-date, primarily through targeted marketing to organizations. This highlights the challenges of selling children's books and the need for creative marketing strategies to reach niche readers.

> *Author 7:*
> After that, I started printing in quantities of about 500, sometimes 1 000, and then obviously print-on-demand, but to date, I've sold just under 8 000 copies. It's about 7 600 somewhere there, and that's over the last six years.

Author 3's first print run of 250 copies sold out within two weeks, prompting a reprint of another 250 copies, which also sold quickly. The timing of the release, just before December, contributed to high sales as people purchased the book as Christmas gifts. Carolan and Evain (2013) support the idea that publication timing is a key factor in a book's success, especially in niche markets. In 2018, a traditional publisher acquired the book, enabling its publication in all 11 official languages. To date, the book has sold 3 793 copies in English, 1 441 in isiZulu, 1 073 in isiXhosa, 659 in Afrikaans, 7 in IsiNdebele, and none in SiSwati and Tshivenda. This raises the question of whether publishing in all eleven languages is worthwhile, given the low sales in some languages, and highlights the financial constraints self-publishers face compared to traditional publishers.

Author 3's second children's book, published two years ago (2019) and exclusively traditionally published, has sold 1 857 copies in English but has not matched the popularity of her first book. The author expressed concern that a deaf protagonist might have limited the book's market appeal, though this hypothesis remains unproven. Without audience research, attributing performance to disability representation risks perpetuating harmful publishing biases against marginalized voices. Despite her active involvement and use of the same promotion strategies as her first book, the second book's performance suggests that factors beyond marketing, such as content and timing, play a significant role in a book's success.

Authors 1 and 10 were happy with the sales of their books. Author 1's initial print run was 1 000 and sold fast, and he got a return on investment in six weeks.

> *Author 1:*
> My first print run was 1 000. And then the second run was 2 000 … I published the book in October 2019. I was on the second print run by April 2020. The 2 000 copies did not sell out. I still have some, but it is doing extremely well. I got my return on investment within six weeks.

The sales figures show a strong start, with the first 1 000 copies selling out quickly and a second run of 2 000 copies within six months. Although the second run has not sold out, the author recouped their investment in six weeks, reflecting a successful launch and effective marketing. This demonstrates a well-managed, financially sustainable self-publishing venture. Author 1's focus on return on investment highlights a business-like approach, setting an encouraging example for others.

Author 10 has achieved significant success and has sold over 6 000 copies and broken even financially. This success is partly due to the cost-effectiveness of subsequent print runs, which avoid initial origination costs like layout, cover design, editing, and proofreading.

After four print runs, the author has chosen not to reprint physical copies. Instead, she revised the book and released the updated version exclusively as an e-book.

Authors 2, 5, and 8 have achieved limited sales. Author 2 sells around 300 copies annually, while Author 5's lifetime sales total 500 copies, likely due to the book being out of print. Author 8 has sold approximately 200–300 copies of her first book, with fewer sales for her second and third books, as she admitted to minimal promotion. She stated:

> *Author 8:*
> The first novel, probably a couple of 100. I don't mean 600, 700. I mean about 200 to 300. The second novel is less than that, and the third novel is even less because promotion and marketing are not my thing. I do less and less of it each time.

Author 9 has distributed 1 500 copies of his first book year-to-date, although it is unclear how many were sold versus given away, as he does not track this distinction. These figures highlight the challenges of achieving consistent sales without active promotion and the importance of maintaining accurate sales records.

I cross-referenced the sales figures for the debut self-published works of the study participants using Nielsen BookScan (2023) to validate the authors' reported sales. While Nielsen BookScan does not capture informal sales channels, the data largely reflects the books' market performance. The search yielded results for only six books, as detailed in Table 4.3 in Chapter 4. Sales figures are generally low, with Authors 3 (2 473 copies) and 6 (5 316 copies) being notable exceptions. The remaining authors sold between 6 and 509 copies. This aligns with Carolan and Evain's (2013) and Shumake's (2017) findings that most self-published authors sell few copies due to intense competition and the challenge of standing out among various forms of media. It is worth noting that Author 3's book was

acquired by a traditional publisher in 2018, just a year after its self-publication. This likely contributed to its stronger sales, as traditional publishers have established distribution channels that enhance a book's visibility and reach.

The Nielsen BookScan (2024) chart of the top 1 000 books from 2010 to 2020 shows that self-published books make up 3% (30 out of 1 000) of fiction titles and 3.3% (33 out of 1 000) of non-fiction titles. Most top-performing books are traditionally published, and Nielsen sales data show that self-published titles generally achieve lower sales volumes overall. While this does not directly measure profitability, it suggests that self-publishing may be a sustainable path only for a smaller percentage of authors, as lower sales can make it harder to cover costs or generate significant income. This aligns with Dilevko and Dali's (2006) observation that self-published books generally have lower sales volumes than traditionally published ones. Maneta (2018) and Baverstock and Steinitz (2013a) further support this, noting that self-published sales figures can range from a few hundred to several thousand copies, highlighting the variability and challenges of achieving significant success in self-publishing.

On average, self-published authors earn significantly higher royalties than traditionally published authors, depending on the platform (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Pacer, 2013; Poland, 2019; Hartiningtyas, 2023). Authors publishing via Amazon also benefit from real-time sales tracking through the platform's dashboard (Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez & Weidner, 2013). However, self-published books typically have lower sales volumes compared to traditionally published ones (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Pacer, 2013), largely due to limited visibility and distribution challenges, as discussed in Section 6.2.4.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter explored key aspects of self-publishing: distribution, marketing, promotion, and sales. Distribution strategies depend on the authors' desired control, target market, objectives, and capacity to manage logistics. While direct distribution offers control, most self-publishers benefit from third-party distributors due to established industry relationships and resources. Consistent promotion and marketing are crucial. Social media, book events, and mailing lists are common tools for reader engagement. Sales figures for most self-published books are modest. High sales are the exception, not the rule, underscoring that self-publishing is not always profitable. Success in self-publishing demands adaptability, persistence, and continuous learning. Self-publishing offers significant opportunities but demands a clear understanding of its challenges and a commitment to balancing the creative and business sides of authorship.

Chapter 7 Traditional publishers' perspectives on self-publishing

7.1 Introduction

The South African publishing industry has three broad sectors: educational, academic and scholarly, and the trade sector (PASA, 2023). The trade sector, also known as the general or consumer publishing sector, produces books for the general reader (fiction, non-fiction and children's books) that are read for pleasure, leisure, personal edification or self-enrichment (van Rooyen, 2010; Clark & Phillips, 2019; Smith & Bold, 2018). This chapter will explore traditional publishers' perspectives on South African trade publishing and self-publishing.

7.2 Description of publishing houses

7.2.1 Research participants

Traditional publishers, often referred to as mainstream or conventional publishers, play a significant role in this study as they provide a counterpoint to self-publishing. Initially, I planned to interview three traditional trade publishers, comprising two multinational companies and one independent publisher, given that multinational publishers dominate the trade publishing landscape in South Africa (van Rooyen, 2010; Molapo, 2020; PASA, 2023). However, the scope of my interviews expanded, resulting in conversations with two multinational publishers and five independent publishers. This shift occurred because one self-published author I interviewed had established a hybrid publishing house, and the three self-publishing companies I engaged with operated as hybrid entities, combining both traditional and self-publishing services. Consequently, I will incorporate data from these four hybrid publishing companies, focusing specifically on their traditional publishing practices.

The research participants are detailed in Table 7.1, with pseudonyms used to ensure their anonymity.

Table 7.1: Traditional publishers research participants

Publisher	Publisher classification	Position of Interview Participant	Experience (years)
Publisher 1	Multinational publisher	Managing Director since 2005	26
Publisher 2	Multinational publisher	Publishing Director since 2007	26
Publisher 3	Independent publisher	Publishing Director since 2007	40
Publisher 4	Independent publisher Hybrid publisher	Owner and Publisher since 2007	15
Publisher 5	Independent publisher Hybrid publisher	Owner and Publisher since 2018	6
Publisher 6	Independent publisher Hybrid publisher	Owner, Director and Publisher since 2005	17
Publisher 7	Independent publisher Hybrid publisher	Publisher and CEO since 2010	33

The demographics of the research participants reflect a diverse group in gender, race, and professional experience. The group consisted of two male and five female participants, indicating gender diversity with a skew toward female representation. In terms of racial diversity, there were five White and two Black participants, showing some racial variation, though skewed toward White representation. Participants' experience in the publishing industry ranged from 6 to 40 years, highlighting their extensive knowledge and providing a mix of newer and seasoned perspectives. Their insights are invaluable to this study, as they offer a broad spectrum of industry viewpoints.

Four participants (Publishers 1, 2, 3, and 7) have held various roles across multiple publishing houses, showcasing their diverse professional backgrounds. Publisher 1, who has been in the industry since 1996, began in the sales department before rising to the position of Managing Director in 2005, a role they still hold today. Publisher 2 has worked in the publishing departments of three different South African publishing houses, including one educational and two trade publishers. Publisher 3, the most experienced participant with 40 years in the industry, has held managerial positions at their current publisher, another trade publisher, and an academic publisher. Publisher 7, with 33 years of experience since 1989,

has been the owner and CEO of their publishing house since 2010. They have also held various roles at three other publishing houses and one FET (Further Education and Training) publisher.

These four participants bring a wealth of experience from diverse sectors of the publishing industry, including trade, educational, and academic publishing. Their backgrounds, spanning 26 to 40 years, provide a deep historical perspective and a well-rounded understanding of the industry's evolution. This diversity in experience enriches the study by offering insights from multiple angles, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the publishing landscape.

Publisher 7 attributed the success of her publishing house to her expertise within big companies. This underscores the transfer of skills in the publishing industry. Experience in large publishing houses can provide valuable insights into business operations, marketing strategies, and industry trends that can be adapted for small publishing houses. The publisher likely benefits from networks built during her time at big companies, leveraging these connections for partnerships, talent acquisition, and distribution channels. However, an overreliance on strategies suited for large companies might cause her to overlook unique opportunities or spread her limited resources too thin. For instance, she could miss chances to engage directly with niche reader communities at small events. This approach could prevent her from capitalizing on her agility and personal touch, key advantages over larger competitors.

Three publishers (4, 5 and 6) own hybrid publishing houses and gained experience within these companies. As the publishing industry evolves, traditional publishers have adapted by incorporating hybrid models and additional services to either compete with or complement self-publishing options. Publisher 4 founded her company in 2007 and has 15 years of

experience as both owner and publisher, while Publisher 5 established her publishing house in 2018 and has six years of experience. In contrast, Publisher 6 brings extensive experience, having served as director and publisher of his publishing house since 2005, accumulating 17 years in the industry. This combination of newer and established perspectives provides valuable insight into the industry's changing landscape and dynamics.

7.2.2 Publishing focus

Table 7.2 outlines the publishing focus of the seven participants, all of whom maintain focused lists. A focused list refers to a carefully curated selection of titles that a publisher produces and promotes within a specific genre, subject area, or target audience. This strategic approach enables publishers to specialize, build expertise in particular niches, and create a cohesive and targeted publishing portfolio. Focused lists play a critical role in publishing strategy. By concentrating on specific genres or subject areas, publishers can leverage their strengths, leading to more effective promotion and marketing of their titles. This focused approach not only helps publishers establish a strong brand identity but also fosters expertise and cultivates a loyal readership.

Interestingly, the principle of selectivity and focus is not limited to traditional publishing; it also applies to self-publishing. Many successful self-publishers recognize the importance of developing a niche and building a reputation within specific genres or topics. In doing so, they mirror the strategies of traditional publishers, albeit on a smaller scale, demonstrating the universal value of a targeted approach in the publishing industry.

Table 7.2: Trade publishers' publishing focus

Publisher	Publishing focus
Publisher 1	• Children's books, adult fiction and non-fiction, teen and young adult books • Only publishes in English except for some children's books • 20-25% of their books are locally published, the rest are imported
Publisher 2	• Non-fiction books for the general adult market – current affairs, business, politics, biography, history, memoirs, food, lifestyle and wildlife • Only publishes in English and Afrikaans • Distributes books for international publishers
Publisher 3	• Children's books, fiction, poetry, non-fiction – arts, natural history, lifestyle, cookery, politics, self-help, South African history, current affairs, public health, memoir and biography • Only publishes in English except for some children's books that are available in all 11 official languages
Publisher 4	• Only publishes southern African women authors • Fiction – novels, collections of stories by a single author, poetry (only when submissions for poetry are called); non-fiction – memoir, letters and biography • Only publishes in English
Publisher 5	• Is a Pan Africanist, intersectional-feminist publishing house that only publishes women authors • Poetry, novellas and letters • Only publishes in English
Publisher 6	• Children's educational magazines, children's short stories, fiction and non-fiction adult books • Only publishes in English
Publisher 7	• Non-fiction books for adult readers – biography, business, cookery, self-help, sport and travel • Publishes in English but also co-publishes Afrikaans books with another publisher with strong Afrikaans publishing

Table 7.2 reveals that all seven publishers produce works in English. Publishers 2 and 7 focus exclusively on non-fiction and also publish in Afrikaans, while Publishers 1 and 3 primarily publish in English, except for a selection of children's books available in some of South Africa's 11 official languages. This indicates a limited but notable effort to accommodate linguistic diversity.

The data underscores that English remains the preferred language of publication, reflecting the expectations of the target market and broader societal trends where English dominates as the primary language of publication and consumption (PASA, 2023). While this aligns with market demands, it may pose challenges for authors and readers who do not primarily use

English. This presents an opportunity for publishers to further diversify their language offerings, addressing the linguistic needs and preferences of a wider demographic. Expanding beyond English could not only enhance inclusivity but also tap into underserved markets, fostering greater engagement with diverse readers.

Publisher 3 emphasized that a focused list is the key to success for all publishers.

> *Publisher 3:*
> I believe that good publishers who have a focused list will survive pretty much everything. People that are publishing a bit of this, a bit of that, they are all over the place. I think it is harder to sell or grow the audience...

This implies that a focused list makes it easy to be resilient, successful and grow a readership with particular interests, thus making it easy to market books. Lack of focus in a publisher's list can make it challenging to effectively market, distribute, and grow readership for their books. This is particularly true for small or self-publishers, who can benefit greatly from a targeted mailing list. A focused list allows publishers to build a dedicated audience, tailor their marketing efforts, and create more impactful email campaigns that resonate with their specific readership.

Publisher 1 does not publish illustrated adult books and Christian religious books and cited these reasons:

> *Publisher 1:*
> For illustrated publishing, you need a particular skill set. It's very expensive so the risks are much higher and it's not an area that we are hugely familiar with or published before … and the Christian books, we've never historically published in that sector and often the retail chains setup is a little bit different, and we don't have those very strong connections.

This underscores the importance of a focused list and carefully evaluating the technical, financial, and operational requirements when a publisher considers expanding into new

publishing areas to assess risk. Publishers must know their strengths and capitalize on these. The issue of connections in the publishing industry is key to success. Connections are the network of relationships a publisher cultivates with authors, booksellers, distributors, and other industry professionals. These connections can distinguish between a book's success or failure and the publisher's sustainability in a competitive market. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, building these connections is equally crucial for self-publishers, as they often lack the established networks of traditional publishers and must work diligently to create industry relationships to promote and distribute their books effectively.

Publishers 2 and 7 focus exclusively on non-fiction books targeted at the adult market. This strategic decision is driven by their expertise in this genre and the commercial realities of the South African book market, which shows a strong preference for non-fiction. The dominance of non-fiction in South Africa is well-documented and supported by multiple sources discussed in Chapter 4, including the South African Book Development Council (SABDC, 2016), le Roux (2019), the Publishers' Association of South Africa (PASA, 2023), Nielsen BookScan (2022, 2023), and Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse, and Huston (2023). This alignment with market trends underscores the commercial rationale behind their publishing focus.

> *Publisher 2:*
> From a commercial point of view, local non-fiction sells better than local fiction. We've dabbled in fiction but found it's a very difficult market to publish in because you compete with so many other works of fiction from around the world whereas with non-fiction, you can focus on subject matter that interests South Africans, whether it's a person or a historic event or current affairs or whatever it might be, which is commercially easier.

Publishers 1, 2, and 7 agreed that fiction is challenging to sell due to the influx of imported titles, whereas non-fiction books tend to perform better because they are contextualized to the South African market. They highlighted that local non-fiction books, such as those on finance or cookbooks, are more relevant and useful to South African readers compared to imported works. This preference for non-fiction is supported by Nielsen BookScan (2023) and le Roux (2019), who attribute its popularity to its ability to cater to diverse interests and address topical issues relevant to the local audience.

Local publishers often adopt a highly selective approach to their publishing decisions due to the significant risks associated with book production and distribution. This selectivity is influenced by several factors, including limited financial resources, market uncertainties, and the need to maintain a distinct brand identity in a competitive industry. While this cautious approach can mitigate certain risks, it may also restrict the diversity of publications if applied too rigidly. Balancing selectivity with inclusivity remains critical for publishers aiming to meet market demands while fostering a varied and representative literary landscape.

According to the Nielsen BookScan (2024) chart of fiction and non-fiction books in the top 1 000 books from 2010–2020, non-fiction books outsold fiction. The top seller in the fiction category sold 47 714 copies, while the top seller in the non-fiction category sold 546 904 copies. These figures reveal a striking disparity in sales performance between the two categories. The non-fiction bestseller sold more than eleven times the number of copies compared to the fiction bestseller, indicating a significantly larger market for non-fiction during this period. This substantial difference suggests that non-fiction titles, particularly those at the top of the bestseller lists, have the potential to reach a much wider audience and generate higher sales volumes than even the most popular fiction titles.

Publisher 1 noted a shift in the South African book market, with some fiction books performing very well.

> *Publisher 1:*
> I think we've seen a bit of a shift. If you look at Dudu Busani-Dube and some of our commercial fiction like Angela Makholwa, Sue Nyathi, Tony Park are outselling some of the non-fiction. But, as a genre, non-fiction still sells more. I think it's people who maybe are not avid readers, who are reading them because it's a story close to home, it's something they want to find out about; with fiction, you are up against all the great fiction and worlds that people have easy access to.

The statement reflects a nuanced understanding of the South African book market, where non-fiction remains the dominant force due to its practical relevance and accessibility. However, the rising success of certain commercial fiction authors signals a potential shift, highlighting the importance of locally resonant storytelling. For publishers, this presents an opportunity to balance their portfolios by supporting both non-fiction and fiction that speak to the lived experiences and interests of South African readers. At the same time, the competitive landscape for fiction underscores the need for strategic marketing and storytelling that can captivate readers amidst global competition.

Interestingly, Publisher 1 gave an example of a self-published author, Dudu Busani-Dube, whose fiction books have sold well. She attributed the popularity of the fiction books to the fact that people can relate to the stories. This implies that there is an unserved market that traditional publishers are overlooking. A scan of the Nielsen BookScan (2024) chart of fiction books in the top 1 000 books from 2010–2020 reveals that Dudu Busani-Dube's five books appear in the chart. The sales figures for her books are shown in Table 7.3.

Table 7.3: Dudu Busani-Dube's sales figures from 2010–2020

Number	Publication Year	Sales figures
39	2018	9 056
54	2020	8 273
82	2015	6 497
96	2015	5 925
872	2020	1 386

Source: Nielsen BookScan, 2024

These figures are particularly impressive given that Dudu Busani-Dube is a self-published author. Her ability to place multiple books in the top 1 000 chart, including three in the top 100, underscores her remarkable success as an independent author. Busani-Dube's popularity reflects her skill in cultivating a large readership and effectively marketing her books, overcoming the typical challenges faced by self-published authors (as discussed in Chapter 6).

However, Nielsen BookScan South Africa only tracks books sold through formal bookshops. Busani-Dube's books only became available in bookstores years after their initial publication, with most of her early sales occurring through informal channels. Since Nielsen BookScan does not capture data from informal sales channels, these statistics likely underrepresent her total sales. As a result, her actual readership and market impact may be even more significant than the figures suggest. Despite these limitations, the data provides valuable insights into market trends and publisher performance, highlighting Busani-Dube's exceptional achievement in breaking into formal retail spaces and solidifying her presence in the competitive South African book market.

Publisher 4 exclusively publishes works by southern African women authors, as the founder recognized a gap in the market for stories that focus on women's lives and experiences – stories that traditional publishers were largely overlooking. Similarly, Publisher 5 operates as

a feminist press and is highly intentional about the narratives it publishes, with a primary goal of archiving women's lives and experiences. Both publishers maintain focused lists and view their missions as contributing to the democratization of the publishing industry by amplifying the voices of women authors. Through their efforts, they aim to address historical imbalances and provide a platform for stories that might otherwise remain untold.

7.3 Funding

Publishers 1, 2, 6, and 7 operate entirely on self-funding, covering all costs associated with their publishing activities. In contrast, Publishers 3, 4, and 5 employ a mixed funding model: they self-fund some of their publications while seeking external financial support for specific books and overheads from individuals and private organizations. For instance, Publisher 3 secures funding for some titles from diverse sources. Academic books are often funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF) or the institutions and universities where the authors are affiliated, while democracy-related books receive support from pro-democracy organizations such as the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

This aligns with Molapo's (2020) findings, which highlight that most publishers adhere to the traditional publishing model, assuming full financial responsibility for the entire publishing process. However, this model is more viable for multinational companies, which often have access to capital from overseas parent companies (Smith Jr., 1995). The reliance on self-funding or mixed funding models among smaller or independent publishers underscores the financial challenges they face, while also demonstrating their resourcefulness in securing support to sustain their operations and diversify their offerings.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Publisher 3 launched a successful fundraising campaign to cover overhead costs, showcasing an innovative approach to sustaining operations during challenging times. Similarly, Publisher 4 relies on supporters who finance specific titles and volunteer their time and services, effectively employing crowdfunding strategies. Publisher 5, while primarily self-funded, receives additional support from organizations such as the French Institute of South Africa for certain projects.

The funding models adopted by Publishers 1 through 7 align with Molapo's (2020) observation that most publishers depend on private capital. However, the limited exploration of alternative funding options can be attributed to factors such as insufficient information, limited capacity, and a desire to maintain autonomy. These challenges highlight the need for greater awareness and support to help publishers diversify their funding strategies while preserving their independence.

7.4 Book production processes

7.4.1 Book selection for publication

All seven publishers employ a rigorous book selection process, as they invest significant capital into the publication, marketing, and distribution of each title and expect a return on their investment (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011; Hviid, Izquierdo-Sanchez & Jacques, 2019; Smith & Bold, 2018). Given the inherent risks in publishing, financial viability is a critical consideration for every book. Publishers prioritize titles with backlist potential, ensuring the book can generate sales over an extended period, typically five to ten years.

However, Publisher 2 highlighted an important nuance: traditional publishers sometimes select books they anticipate may not perform well initially, for strategic reasons. For instance, they might publish a debut author expecting that their second or subsequent work could

achieve greater success. This practice challenges the common perception among self-publishers that traditional publishers are solely profit-driven and unwilling to take risks on authors without established track records.

This observation underscores misconceptions about traditional publishers' selection criteria. While profitability is a major factor, it is not the only consideration. Publishers often balance immediate financial returns with long-term literary and commercial potential, demonstrating a willingness to invest in promising new talent and take calculated risks. This approach reflects a more nuanced and forward-thinking strategy than is often assumed.

All seven publishers have submission criteria on their websites that stipulate what manuscripts can be submitted, when to submit them, to whom they must be submitted and the required format. This aligns with Author 8 in Chapter 4 who highlighted that the submission process is time-consuming, as each publisher has specific criteria that authors must adhere to. This is a common practice across the publishing industry, as it helps publishers efficiently manage the high volume of unsolicited manuscripts they receive and ensures submissions are processed consistently. Adhering to these guidelines requires additional effort from authors, but it benefits both parties by streamlining the review and evaluation process. Understanding and following a publisher's stated submission requirements is an important first step for authors seeking publication.

Publisher 1 summarised their submission criteria:

> *Publisher 1:*
> It's quite a detailed process … we either accept submissions or have a submission period where those submissions come in or we are out there commissioning, networking, building relationships. Often, it'll be referrals, or we will approach people with ideas … if someone puts forward a proposal, we will consider it.

Publisher 1 acknowledged that the submission process has specific requirements that authors must follow. This helps the publisher to manage the high volume of incoming manuscripts efficiently. Publisher 1 described a multifaceted approach to acquiring manuscripts, involving passive (unsolicited manuscripts, proposals) and active strategies (commissioning). This comprehensive approach demonstrates that publishers are open to discovering new and diverse voices and ideas through multiple channels, including referrals and direct proposals, in addition to open submissions. Once a submission or proposal is received, the publisher reviews it, suggesting a thorough evaluation process. This corroborates Author 8's experience of receiving comprehensive feedback from the publisher, indicating a thoughtful and engaged approach to assessing new work.

Publishers 1, 2 and 3's book selection processes are thorough. They get manuscripts through submissions of proposals and a few chapters (acquisitions), commissioning, or referrals. Referrals refer to recommendations of potential authors or manuscripts by trusted contacts within the publisher's professional network. Referrals highlight the importance of networking in the publishing industry. Networking leverages industry connections to discover new talent, provides pre-screening for manuscript quality and helps publishers access works they might not otherwise encounter. This emphasis on referrals underscores the value of building and maintaining professional relationships within the literary and publishing communities.

Publishers' standard submission requirements are a synopsis, the author's biographical details and three chapters. This approach allows publishers to quickly assess a manuscript's potential without requiring authors to submit entire manuscripts upfront. Publishers respond to everyone but only give feedback on manuscripts that have potential. This shows respect for all authors while managing the publisher's time and resources effectively. Publisher 1 noted

that there are only a few small literary agents in South Africa, so there is no filter; thus publishers must be thorough in their selection process. This means that publishers receive a high volume of manuscript submissions, spend a lot of time reviewing manuscripts and have greater responsibility in discovering and nurturing new talent. In developed markets such as the USA and UK, literary agents act as initial quality filters for publishers and advocates for authors. This highlights an opportunity for literary agents in South Africa as the market is not saturated. However, the viability of more literary agents would depend on the overall size and health of the publishing market, the volume of aspiring authors seeking representation, the willingness of publishers to work with agents and the potential for international rights sales.

The three publishers' selection criteria for publication are comprehensive and include a detailed publishing proposal and a cost estimate for the project to determine the production costs of a book, print run, book price, description of the target market, sales forecast, deliberation of the fit of the book in the publishing list and swot analysis. A team that includes publishers and marketers decides on what gets published; in contrast in self-publishing, the author is the sole decision-maker. The traditional publishing selection is also influenced by the editorial team's tastes and preferences, which can sometimes be subjective or reflect certain biases. Traditional publishers are also highly active in researching new publications and market trends, drawing on extensive industry knowledge to inform their selection. Traditional publishing involves a collaborative, data-driven selection process, while self-publishing grants the author full autonomy over the work without the benefit of the publisher's market expertise and evaluation.

Publishers 1, 2 and 3 accentuated that publishers must be highly selective and limit the number of books they publish because of the significant financial outlay required, the small reading population and the limited book-buying population in South Africa (SABDC, 2016;

Molapo, 2020; Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse & Huston; 2023). As a result of this challenging publishing environment, not many debut authors get a chance to get published, and there is limited growth in the reading and book-buying population. Publisher 1 acknowledged that publishers sometimes make mistakes deciding what to publish and reject. If a book they rejected does well, they always re-evaluate their submission process to learn from their mistakes.

Publishers seek new voices through calls for book submissions to satisfy readers' desire for fresh stories, but they often view debut authors as risky investments due to their lack of a proven track record. This highlights the tension between innovation and financial risk in publishing. Publishers 2 and 3 actively seek new voices because proven authors eventually age and retire. This demonstrates a forward-thinking approach to ensuring the longevity of the publishing houses. Choosing between a debut author and an established author depends on the project specifics and the timeline to produce a book. In addition, Publisher 3 identifies new authors through different writing competitions in which independent judges judge. This is an innovative way to identify new authors, and this approach can identify promising authors who might not come through traditional submission channels. Some competitions are open to Africa, but sometimes the competitions do not always yield publishable manuscripts.

All seven publishers concurred that open submissions generate a high volume of manuscripts, but most are of poor quality. Publishers rarely publish books from unsolicited submissions; they primarily acquire books through referrals or by commissioning authors. This emphasizes the importance of professional networks and targeted acquisition in the publishing industry. Open submissions democratize access to publishing opportunities but also highlight the gap between aspiring authors' ambitions and the professional standards required for publication. This presents an opportunity for publishers, writing communities, and industry stakeholders

to guide and support emerging writers, helping them improve their work and navigate the submission process more effectively.

7.4.2 Book publishing processes

All seven publishers agreed that the book publication process, from when a manuscript is accepted to publication, takes four to nine months. The timeline depends on the extent of developmental editing required for each book. The traditional publishing process is developmental editing (there might be back and forth between the author and editor), copy-editing, typesetting, marketing and publicity, printing, and distribution. Marketing and publicity are not once-off processes but continue well after printing a book. The sales team markets and promotes books four to six months before release dates. Therefore, the production schedule must be carefully coordinated with the sales team's timeline. This shows the interrelationships within a publishing company and the importance of a publishing schedule and meeting deadlines. These interconnected processes and timelines are part of the larger framework described in Darnton's (1982) communications circuit, which illustrates the complex network of relationships and interactions involved in book production, distribution, and consumption.

7.4.3 Book formats

Table 7.4 shows the book formats that each publisher produces.

Table 7.4: Traditional publishers' book formats

Publisher	Print	E-book	Audiobook
Publisher 1	All books	All books	Selected books
Publisher 2	All books	All books except illustrated books	Few selected books
Publisher 3	All books	Most books	None
Publisher 4	All books	Most books	None
Publisher 5	All books	All books	None
Publisher 6	All books	None	None
Publisher 7	All books	Most books	None

Table 7.4 reveals that print is the most common format among all seven publishers, followed by e-books, with audiobooks being the least prevalent. This trend aligns with the formats observed in self-published books, as discussed in Chapter 4. The dominance of print format reflects the South African book market's strong preference for physical books, a pattern supported by sources such as the South African Book Development Council (SABDC, 2016), Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse, and Huston (2023), and the Publishers' Association of South Africa (PASA, 2023).

The choice of book format is heavily influenced by the target market. For instance, Publisher 2 noted that their illustrated books are exclusively available in print format, as there is little demand for illustrated e-books. Similarly, most children's books are published in print, a trend that mirrors the practices of self-published children's authors, as outlined in Chapter 4. This underscores how market demand and reader preferences shape publishers' decisions regarding formats, with print remaining the preferred choice for certain genres and readers.

Of the three formats, all seven publishers concurred that print books are their bestsellers and that e-book sales are low, but this depends on the book genre and the author. Fiction e-books perform better than non-fiction e-books. Publisher 1 highlighted that e-books performed better during the lockdown and international e-books performed better, at 25% compared to the local performance of 5–10%. This shows that the e-book market in South Africa is small. The audiobook market is even smaller than the e-book market, thus it is not a big revenue stream. Internationally, the audiobook market is growing fast but in South Africa, it is only increasing slowly (Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse & Huston, 2023).

The expenses associated with producing a book can differ greatly depending on the chosen format. E-books are the most affordable to produce among the three formats, while

audiobooks are the most expensive. E-books incur lower costs primarily because they eliminate printing expenses, which are one of the highest costs associated with print books (SABDC, 2007). In contrast, creating audiobooks requires substantial investment, including studio time, hiring voice artists, and using editing suites, all of which contribute to higher production costs.

To mitigate these expenses, Publishers 1 and 2, which produce audiobooks, have partnered with audio production companies. These collaborations help reduce costs while maintaining quality. Publisher 1 highlighted an additional advantage of e-books and audiobooks over print books: their ability to easily cross borders and be sold globally. This digital flexibility allows publishers to reach wider readerships without the logistical challenges and costs associated with physical distribution. The choice of format involves a trade-off between production costs and market reach, with digital formats offering unique advantages in terms of affordability and accessibility.

7.4.5 Print runs

Publishers' initial print runs vary widely, ranging from 200 to 2 500 copies. All seven publishers noted a general decline in the size of print runs over time. Publisher 3 emphasized that while print runs have decreased by approximately half, sales have not declined at the same rate. This is because publishers have become more cautious about initial print quantities and now opt to reprint more frequently as needed. Table 7.5 provides a detailed breakdown of the average initial print runs for the seven publishers, illustrating this trend toward smaller, more strategic print runs.

Table 7.5: Traditional publishers' average initial print runs

Publisher	Initial print run
Publisher 1	Non-fiction – 2 000 copies; fiction 1 200 copies
Publisher 2	2 000 copies (only publishes non-fiction) Debut authors – 500–750 copies
Publisher 3	2 500 copies
Publisher 4	Poetry – 200–300 copies; short stories – 300 copies; novels – 300–500 copies
Publisher 5	500–1 000 copies
Publisher 6	500–1 000 copies
Publisher 7	2 000 copies (only publishes non-fiction)

Initial print runs vary significantly depending on factors such as the genre of the book, potential sales performance, and the size of the publisher. Publishers 1, 2, and 7 produce higher print runs for non-fiction titles compared to fiction, reflecting the stronger sales performance of non-fiction in their markets. Author status also plays a critical role in these decisions. For example, Publisher 2 limits print runs for debut authors to 500–750 copies due to the higher risk associated with untested writers.

Smaller publishers, such as Publishers 4, 5, and 6, typically start with smaller print runs than their larger counterparts (Publishers 1, 2, and 3), largely due to capital constraints. To manage these limitations, smaller publishers often utilize print-on-demand (POD) services for their limited runs, which allows for more flexible inventory management. The advantages of POD are explored in detail in Chapter 5. Interestingly, Publisher 7, despite being a smaller publisher, maintains print runs comparable to larger publishers. This can likely be attributed to their exclusive focus on non-fiction titles, which tend to sell better than fiction in the South African market. These varying approaches demonstrate how publishers tailor their strategies based on genre, author reputation, company size, and market trends to strike a balance between risk and potential returns in the book production process. This adaptability underscores the dynamic nature of the publishing industry and the importance of aligning decisions with market realities.

Big publishers such as Publishers 1, 2, and 3 determine print runs through a collaborative process based on sales projections from their teams. Their decision-making process involves careful deliberation of potential sales and production costs. These publishers typically evaluate three different print run scenarios, comparing unit costs to identify the most cost-effective option. All research participants emphasized the critical importance of accurate print run estimation. Overestimating leads to tied-up capital in unsold inventory, while underestimating risks missing key sales opportunities, despite the possibility of reprinting. The publishers unanimously stressed that effective inventory management is fundamental to publishing success.

This discussion shows that traditional publishers adjust print runs based on the author's reputation, book genre, and publication timing. In contrast, self-publishers appear to often base their print run decisions primarily on printing costs, usually without access to extensive market research or sales projections (see Chapter 5). This suggests a more data-driven, strategic approach by traditional publishers in managing their inventory and financial risks. This comparison might indicate a key distinction between traditional and self-publishing models in production planning and risk management. Traditional publishers leverage their market expertise and sales data to optimize print runs, while self-publishers rely more on personal judgment and financial constraints.

7.4.6 Book pricing

As discussed in Chapter 5, most self-published authors price their books similarly, suggesting a lack of individual pricing strategies. In contrast, traditional publishers' book costing strategy considers production costs, which include pre-press costs (editing, design, cover design) and printing (biggest cost), 15% VAT, bookshop discount (45–50%), author royalty, profit, and the price of competitor copies. They also include a percentage mark-up to cover marketing, distribution, warehousing and overheads.

Publisher 2:

What we try and do is aim for a ballpark sort of percentage that we are going to get. And that percentage is needed for marketing, distribution, warehousing, to pay our bills, and salaries. And then you hope that at the end each book has a profit to plough back into the business. We follow a simple costing, and I think most publishers follow quite a similar formula.

Publisher 3 remarked that book pricing is an art, as publishers must price their books at a level acceptable to customers, neither too low nor too high. Book pricing is also genre-dependent; for example, children's book pricing is sensitive due to marked competition, thus requiring careful pricing strategies. For fiction in South Africa, there appears to be a consumer-acceptable price range of R240 to R280, varying slightly between local and imported titles. This may explain why many self-publishers price their books around R250 (see Chapter 5), aligning with market expectations.

However, Nielsen BookScan (2023) notes that sales patterns are evolving, with higher book prices but lower unit volumes. Consumers are becoming more selective in their purchases while showing a willingness to spend more per book, prompting publishers to adapt to this changing landscape. Traditional publishers strive to make a profit on every title, although profit margins vary significantly across books. They employ a cross-subsidization strategy, where profits from successful titles help offset losses from less successful ones – a practice that may be difficult for self-publishers with fewer titles to achieve. This cross-subsidization model is also widely observed in the international publishing industry (Clark & Phillips, 2019), highlighting its importance as a financial strategy for managing risk and sustaining operations.

7.4.7 Book promotion and marketing

All seven publishers use multi-pronged approaches to promote and market their books. They host online and in-person events (launches, festivals, discussions), use newsletters, mailing lists, social media (to inform, review, and share extracts), and send out books for book reviews. It is not given that their books will be reviewed, but they rely on media connections to get reviews, emphasizing the importance of connections in the industry. As discussed in Chapter 6, most self-publishers do not have established industry connections, which hampers the chances of their books being reviewed in mainstream media.

Marketing strategies reveal a distinct divide between publisher sizes. Smaller publishers (5 and 7) primarily rely on social media platforms – Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook – with Publisher 7 supplementing this approach by engaging a publicist for author interviews and book reviews. In contrast, major publishers (1, 2 and 3) employ a more comprehensive strategy, focusing on retailer relationships through structured pre-publication planning. Their approach involves collaborative meetings between publishing teams, sales departments, and authors months before publication to assess sales potential and marketing opportunities. This contrast highlights how resource availability influences marketing scope and sophistication, with larger publishers implementing extensive, multi-channel strategies while smaller publishers focus on cost-effective digital platforms.

Publisher 1 summarised the advantages of traditional publishers' established networks and how they promote the advance marketing of a book.

> *Publisher 1:*
> The benefit that a traditional publisher brings is that you have these long-standing relationships with the retailers. 9–10 months ahead of time you're trying to work on promotions with them and then the sales team goes out about four to five months ahead of publication selling the books to all the retailers either store by store or sometimes at

> office level ... setting up traditional print and coverage events, retail marketing. There are a lot of campaigns that'll happen pre-publication and then a lot of it happens just on publication and beyond. It's quite a long, lengthy planning process and a lot of teams are involved.

The extensive marketing process in traditional publishing demonstrates its distinct advantages: established industry relationships, strategic planning, and coordinated team efforts to optimize market potential. Traditional publishers' selective approach reflects the substantial investment required for each title's promotion and distribution – resources that self-published authors often struggle to replicate, especially with debut works. While self-publishing offers creative control and flexibility, traditional publishing provides market access and promotional infrastructure that typically exceeds what individual authors can achieve independently.

Publishers 3, 5, and 7 agreed that established networks with media personnel are important. These publishers can leverage their connections, resources, and expertise to create comprehensive, long-term marketing strategies for their books. Traditionally, this approach has led to wider distribution and increased visibility compared to self-publishers or newer, less established publishers. However, the digital age is challenging this conventional model. The rise of digital publishing, online retail, and alternative marketing strategies is changing the publishing landscape. Some authors and smaller publishers are finding success by adopting more agile, targeted approaches. These newer methods often do not rely heavily on long-standing industry relationships or extended marketing timelines. Instead, they utilize digital platforms, social media, and niche marketing to reach readers directly and quickly.

All publishers concurred that author involvement in book marketing is important. Authors promote their books even when they are traditionally published, but not as much as self-

publishers, as traditionally published authors have a marketing team supporting them. Publishers 1, 2, 3, and 7 reported that their marketing and publicity teams collaborate closely with authors to develop social media campaigns. This collaboration aims to help authors effectively utilize their online presence to promote their books.

Publishers 4 and 5's authors do most of the book promotion. They observed that authors have different capacities to promote their books. This ties in with Author 8's experience described in Chapter 6. Author 8 struggled to promote her books because she is an introvert.

> *Publisher 4:*
> Different people have different capacities to promote their books. Sometimes, they will do a lot of events like launches, readers, some have strong social media accounts, but this doesn't always translate into sales.

In addition, Publisher 4 commented that book promotion does not always translate to sales. This aligns with Criswell and Canty's (2014) findings that social media has a strong short-term impact within existing fan circles, but it does not drive sustained, widespread sales growth. This is discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

According to Publisher 2, while marketing and publicity are crucial for book sales, the timing of these efforts is equally important. The publisher identified a key selling period for trade books in South Africa, which runs from September to December, coinciding with the Christmas holiday season. This period is critical for maximizing sales, as many consumers purchase books as gifts or for holiday reading. Publisher 2 also emphasized the significance of retail space in book marketing strategies. Securing prominent placement within bookshops significantly increases a book's visibility and, consequently, its likelihood of selling. This underscores the importance of publishers' relationships with retailers and their ability to negotiate beneficial shelf space and displays. The emphasis on physical retail presence

suggests that, despite the growth of online book sales, traditional brick-and-mortar bookstores continue to play a vital role in the book industry's marketing ecosystem.

> *Publisher 2:*
> If you can just pile up the books in the bookstore, some people will buy it. It's like some people walk into a bookstore and look for the biggest pile and buy it. Obviously, there's marketing and publicity and you need to bring it to the public's attention.

A successful book marketing and promotion strategy requires careful planning, collaboration, and consistency. It must use multi-pronged approaches to reach different segments of the target audience. A focused list makes it easy for the publisher to promote books to the target audience.

7.4.8 Book distribution

Publishers 3, 4 and 7 outsource book distribution to distribution companies. The advantage of a distribution company is that a publisher becomes part of an extensive organization, so there is no danger of bookshops not paying the publisher. Publisher 5 self-distributes but faces significant challenges due to the time-consuming logistics and resource demands. Publisher 2's holding company owns a distribution company, so they do their own distribution. Their distribution company does not distribute books for self-publishers because they believe these books have no sales potential. This reflects a persistent bias in the traditional publishing industry against self-published books, from the assumption that they universally lack quality and sales potential. However, self-published works vary widely in quality, with some achieving significant commercial success, challenging these preconceptions. The ongoing stigma hinders independent authors from gaining recognition and reaching readers. Rather than generalizing, self-published books should be evaluated individually on their merits.

Publisher 2 pointed out that the more books a distributor distributes, the cheaper it is, so publishers who sell small volumes cannot afford to distribute their books. Self-distribution has the advantage that the publisher has ultimate control over the distribution.

> *Publisher 2:*
> It's great if you can afford your own distribution, it means you can control it, and it's much better for your customer satisfaction, i.e. for the retailers. They know we can lay our hands on the books and get them to them quickly if we need to.

Publisher 6 operates without a book distributor, opting not to sell through bookshops but instead marketing their books directly to consumers. They find retail outlets challenging for small publishers to profit from due to barriers to market entry. By selling directly to customers via Facebook and their website, Publisher 6 maximizes revenue, adopting a distribution strategy akin to self-publishing. In contrast, Publishers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7 distribute their books through company websites, bookshops, and Amazon. Additionally, Publisher 4's books are available internationally through the African Books Collective (ABC) – a nonprofit organization that distributes and promotes books published in Africa globally.

7.4.9 Sales figures

The concept of a 'bestseller' in the publishing industry is highly contested. Publishers 1, 2, and 3 noted that the term is used loosely as no formal criteria exist. In addition, Publisher 7 asserted that the lack of a specified timeframe for measuring sales complicates the classification of bestsellers. They suggest the term is often used as a marketing tool to promote books, rather than as a strictly defined sales benchmark. All publishers agreed that sales of 3 000 to 5 000 copies and above are a great achievement, as book sales are currently depressed. Some books, however, significantly outperform these numbers. Remarkably, certain titles can sell over 30 000 copies in their lifetime. This level of sales is considered

exceptional, especially in today's challenging market. Such high-performing books often benefit from the author's reputation, effective marketing, and positive word-of-mouth.

All seven publishers agreed that bestseller status varies significantly by genre, target audience, and distribution channels, highlighting how context and market access are critical in defining success. Publishers often rely on a few bestsellers to subsidize underperforming titles. For example, Publisher 2's most successful book sold over 20 000 copies, while Publisher 3's top title sold between 30 000 and 40 000 copies over its lifetime. The high sales for Publisher 3 can be attributed to the book being prescribed in schools and universities, which provides a stable and scalable market. In contrast, Publisher 4's bestseller has sold 2 000 copies over its lifetime, and Publisher 6's bestsellers sell between 500 and 1 000 copies annually. The lower sales figures for Publishers 4 and 6 reflect the challenges faced by smaller publishers operating without institutional support or extensive distribution networks.

The sales figures for small publishers are comparable to those of self-publishers, as discussed in Chapter 6. Both small publishers and self-publishers typically experience modest sales, often ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand copies per title. This comparison is particularly insightful, as it underscores the similarities in sales performance between the two groups. Both often operate with limited resources and rely on niche markets, resulting in similarly modest sales figures. The data reinforces the idea that success in publishing is highly contextual and that bestseller status is not a universal metric but a reflection of specific market dynamics, audience reach, and access to distribution channels.

7.5 State of trade publishing in South Africa

7.5.1 Current trends

According to Publishers 4 and 7, current trends in South African trade publishing include releasing fewer titles, prioritizing diversity among authors, and targeting new markets. The rise of successful self-publishing, exemplified by authors like Dudu Busani-Dube, has demonstrated the potential of relatable fiction, prompting traditional publishers to sign established self-published authors, such as Author 3, for their proven readership and market appeal. However, Publisher 4 noted that large mainstream publishers are increasingly encroaching on niche areas traditionally dominated by small publishers, such as collections of essays by women authors. While this brings greater visibility to underrepresented genres, it poses challenges for small publishers, especially when successful authors move to larger houses for subsequent books. These trends reflect a shifting industry, balancing innovation and inclusivity with the need to support smaller players who nurture emerging talent and diversify the literary landscape.

7.5.2 Challenges

All seven publishers agreed that the trade publishing sector in South Africa is facing immense challenges.

> *Publisher 2:*
> Our South African economy has not grown for some years. So, people's disposable income is not increasing, so the market has gotten smaller.

Publishers 1, 2, 3, 4 and 7 agreed that the trade sector has been negatively impacted by the low economic growth rate and the effects of COVID-19, which put consumers under pressure as they have little disposable income. This leads to a smaller market base, resulting in depressed book sales (Nielsen BookScan, 2022; PASA, 2023). The closing down of

bookshops, especially the decline and eventual demise of CNA, hit the sector badly as retail space is limited and trade books rely on exposure in bookshops.

In addition, Publisher 7 argued that the sector is getting inadequate institutional support from libraries, which should provide access to books for people without disposable income. However, libraries are buying small quantities inconsistently. This supports Author 8's complaint about budget cuts and the small number of library purchases. Publisher 2 also cited the lack of government support for the creative industry as a challenge; thus few authors can make a full-time living in South Africa because there are no incentives. Publishers 1 and 2 are both multinational companies with local publishing units. However, most of their books are imported, making their pricing particularly susceptible to currency fluctuations. As a result, when the South African Rand weakens against major currencies, it directly affects the affordability of books for local consumers. This dynamic creates a challenging environment where book prices may need to be adjusted to reflect exchange rate changes, potentially impacting sales and readership.

According to Publisher 2, the proliferation of online content has resulted in the decline or discontinuation of certain genres, particularly illustrated books such as tourism books, big picture books and maps. This reflects the shift in reader preferences towards digital resources for travel information, visual content, and navigation.

> *Publisher 2:*
> The threat might be a new business model for bringing content to readership. We're part of the traditional publishing outfits and don't have a monopoly on content now. There's content everywhere online and it doesn't all go through publishers so we must work harder and smarter.

The influx of online content is a challenge for publishers, as readers might opt for free online content. In addition, the trade book sector also competes for time and money with other forms

of literature, such as newspapers and magazines, and other forms of entertainment and media such as the internet, social media, gaming, music, radio and television (SABDC, 2016; Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse & Huston, 2023). This highlights the changing landscape in publishing, where content creation and distribution have been democratized by technology. Publishers must reassess their role and value proposition, increase their marketing and promotion strategies and ensure their content is unique.

All publishers agreed that books published during COVID-19 underperformed due to reduced disposable income, cancelled in-person book events, and significantly lower foot traffic in malls. These challenges have left the publishing industry struggling to fully recover, leading to increased consolidation and concentration within the sector. Multinational publishers have a distinct advantage in this environment, as they can offset losses in local publishing by selling international books and subsidizing their operations. In contrast, small local publishers, lacking the support of parent companies, face greater difficulties competing (Smith Jr., 1995; Molapo, 2020). This underscores the growing disparity between well-resourced multinationals and smaller, independent publishers in a post-pandemic landscape.

> *Publisher 3:*
> The trade publishing sector has been hard hit by COVID-19. We weren't one of those industries that have bounced back very quickly … the larger publishers, those who are multinational, have the parent body to help support them, whereas independent publishers like us have had to be on our toes, be awake 100% of the time.

In addition, Publisher 7 highlighted that cash flow and funding remain significant challenges for small independent publishers without external financial support. These publishers have had to devise innovative strategies to raise funds and sustain their operations. Similarly, self-publishers often face financial constraints, further underscoring the shared struggles of

independent and self-publishing ventures in navigating the financial complexities of the industry.

To address these challenges, Publisher 7 started a publishing services branch to supplement income because they have publishing expertise, which helps with overhead costs. This is an innovative way to raise money. Publisher 3 emphasized that challenging times have created opportunities for independent publishers to innovate and operate differently. Unlike multinational companies, independent publishers benefit from their autonomy, smaller size, and greater versatility, enabling them to respond quickly to emerging opportunities and adapt to changing market conditions. This agility allows them to experiment with new business models and capitalize on niche markets. Similarly, self-publishers share this adaptability, as both groups rely on resourcefulness and flexibility to navigate the competitive publishing landscape.

Trade books traditionally relied on discoverability in physical retail spaces, but the rise of online retailers has shifted the challenge to online visibility, discoverability, and curation. Unlike browsing in a bookstore, finding books online can be difficult unless readers already know what they are looking for, highlighting the need for effective digital marketing and curation strategies.

> *Publisher 7:*
> The growth of online retailers, particularly Takealot is very significant, but we have a challenge with discoverability. Trade books particularly used to rely on the visibility in a bookshop … the online experience is different. You can't browse books on Takealot because there are far too many unless you already know what you're looking for … that discoverability and curation that would happen in a bookshop is one of the biggest challenges facing trade publishers locally and globally.

Large, international authors are easier to market and sell online than small, niche local authors. As a result, locally published books often rely heavily on marketing through social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. However, publishers face a challenge in converting social media engagement into actual sales, as they often lose potential customers in the journey between seeing a post and completing a purchase at a retailer. This disruption in the book retail space is compounded by the declining number of physical bookshops, as discussed earlier in Chapter 6. Fewer brick-and-mortar stores pose significant discoverability challenges for books, particularly those by local authors, which slows overall book sales (Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez & Weidner, 2013; Poland, 2018).

7.5.3 Opportunities

The situation is not all doom and gloom for trade publishers in South Africa. Although the environment is challenging, the industry has shown resilience, contrary to predictions of its demise.

> *Publisher 2:*
> It's been tough in the publishing world, people are always predicting the imminent demise of the publishing industry but somehow we still keep going.

According to Nielsen BookScan (2023), the South African book market shows a mixed picture: market value grew by 1.2% and volume sales declined by 7.7%. This discrepancy is attributed to inflation and reduced consumer disposable income. The decline in volume sales indicates a contracting market, which leads publishers to reduce the number of books they publish to mitigate risk. However, the book market demonstrates resilience. Despite economic challenges, the industry still achieved value growth, showcasing its ability to adapt and maintain relevance.

All seven publishers agreed that selling rights on the global market presents a significant opportunity for local publishers. Freelance rights agents handle most rights sales, and publishers often attend book fairs to promote and sell rights. However, for publishers like Publisher 2, content focused primarily on local markets can limit their rights sales potential. This challenge is partly offset by strategies such as Publisher 2's holding company acquiring a British company, which expands the market for their books with world rights. Larger companies may extend their reach through acquisitions. For smaller publishers like Publisher 4, rights sales represent a crucial source of income. Additionally, e-book and audiobook formats offer further opportunities, as they are accessible globally. Publisher 3 also highlighted the potential of online sales, direct-to-consumer marketing, and hosting online events to build larger networks and connect with international readers. These insights underscore the diverse strategies publishers employ to balance local focus with global opportunities, adapting to the evolving industry landscape.

Print-on-demand (POD) has also opened the global market as books can be printed in any country (see Chapter 5). Publishers 2 and 3 use IngramSpark, an international printing and distribution platform.

> *Publisher 2:*
> We'll publish our book here and then we send our digital files off to Ingrams and they then take individual orders, so it's print-on-demand. So, if you are somewhere in the world and you want a South African book, you can order it and you will get it… is a big change from the past when we used to have to put them on a ship to get to the other side, unpack them, take them to a warehouse. Now it's 24 hours. It's instantaneous.

IngramSpark, an Amazon partner, offers several benefits to publishers. It guarantees the security of book files, pays the publisher upon receiving an order, and handles book delivery to the customer. Publisher 3 remarked that while IngramSpark takes time to set up initially, once established, it provides excellent service, enabling wide distribution. This adoption of

POD technology by both self-publishers and traditional publishers underscores its growing importance in the industry due to its numerous advantages.

Publisher 1 noted that there is an untapped market in schools, libraries, NGOs, non-traditional retailers, and local publishing, but it is risky as publishers can lose money if the books do not sell well.

> *Publisher 1:*
> There's an unserved market out there … schools and libraries and non-traditional retailers … NGOs, departments of education getting books into the hands of schools and kids … and there are also opportunities to publish more locally. A caveat there because it's expensive and you can lose a lot of profits from the books that don't do well.

Publisher 2 observed two positive trends in the South African book market: a growing interest in local stories, both fiction and non-fiction and an increase in Black readership.

> *Publisher 2:*
> A positive trend is a deepening interest in local stories, whether that's fiction or non-fiction. I think another positive development is the growth of a Black readership in South Africa, so when you look at the bestseller list compared to 10 years ago, you will see more Black authors and South African interest ...

This observation aligns with Nielsen BookScan data (2023), which shows that a wide range of local fiction and non-fiction genres performed well, indicating that publishers are successfully catering to diverse tastes through varied catalogues.

In addition, Publisher 2 also noted growth in vernacular publishing. Publishers have taken note of the shift and have responded by publishing in those areas of interest. Trade publishing has survived digitization in the past ten years because, unlike magazines and newspapers, the sector does not depend on advertising revenue.

Publisher 2:

I think what's helped us over the last 10 years is that we've never depended on advertising compared to the newspaper and magazine industry. We've survived the digitization of content better than magazines and newspapers because all advertising spend moved online.

There are unserved markets in the publishing industry, which can lead to new revenue streams, but publishers must balance the potential of local content with the associated financial risks. Success depends on accurately identifying and serving these unmet needs while mitigating the inherent risks.

Publishers 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 have established publishing services departments to supplement their income, leveraging their existing expertise and infrastructure. This additional revenue helps cover overhead costs. Custom publishing for organizations presents another opportunity, particularly when organizations have funding but lack the in-house expertise to professionally produce and distribute books, leading them to pay publishers for these services. The rise of self-publishing is reshaping the traditional publishing industry, compelling publishers to rethink their roles and adapt their strategies to remain competitive.

7.6 Views of self-publishing in South Africa

Publishers had varied views of self-publishing, indicating it is complex and nuanced. All seven publishers highlighted that it is difficult to generalize about self-publishing due to the wide range of outcomes, successful stories such as Dudu Busani-Dube and Jackie Phamotse that have motivated others to self-publish and unsuccessful self-publishers, highlighting the challenges and risks involved. This suggests that while self-publishing has opened new avenues for authors, it is not a guaranteed path to success. This is confirmed by most of the sales figures of self-publishers that were part of this study (see Chapter 6).

Publisher 1 highlighted that there are two types of self-publishing: self-publishing of the printed book that is sold by the author or through bookshops and e-books that are published online via Amazon or other platforms. She believes that authors can earn well through publishing on Amazon. Authors 4 and 11, who are full-time authors, corroborate this as they publish primarily on Amazon. Self-publishing on Amazon is difficult to monitor as there is no transparency, suggesting a challenge for industry analysis. Furthermore, there are two self-publishing methods: authors do everything themselves or contract a company to manage the process, known as assisted publishing. This aligns with the self-publishing processes explained in Chapter 4, where some authors managed the process themselves while others hired companies to handle it. The rise of publishing services companies indicates a growing industry around supporting self-publishers.

Publishers 1, 2, and 3 agreed that self-publishing does not compete with traditional publishing but rather complements it by promoting diverse book production and amplifying voices that might not otherwise be heard through traditional channels. This highlights self-publishing's value as a vital part of the publishing ecosystem, expanding opportunities for authors and enriching the literary landscape. Traditional publishers recognize this role and have adapted by opening publishing services departments to support self-publishers and by identifying successful self-published authors, such as Author 3, for potential collaboration. Self-publishing not only diversifies content and reaches new readers but also fosters growth in the reading market, ultimately enriching the industry.

> *Publisher 1:*
> I think there's a real place for self-publishing. It's important because it can grow a reading market, and self-publishers are operating in the space where SMEs would have published… I think self-publishing has always been there. It's always sat quite comfortably with traditional publishing.

Publisher 2:

I think self-publishing is part of the publishing ecosystem. Publishing is made up of many different parts. You've got academic, trade, education and kids and I think it's a component of it and they can feed each other in the same ways that some self-published authors find themselves published by commercial publishers.

This discussion suggests that traditional publishers are adapting their strategies to coexist with, and potentially benefit from, the rise of self-publishing, rather than viewing it as competition.

As we saw concerning authors' motivations in Chapter 4, Publishers 1, 2, 3, 4, and 7 acknowledged the diverse reasons for self-publishing. This recognition suggests that self-publishing is not a one-size-fits-all decision but is driven by various factors, including lack of traditional publishing opportunities, personal reasons (such as circulating copies to family members), and commercial aspirations. The varied self-publishing landscape indicates that it has become a viable alternative to traditional publishing for some authors. This nuanced understanding within the traditional publishing industry could inform strategies for author relationships, market positioning, and new service offerings.

Publishers observed that self-publishers rarely make a profit, with only a few exceptions of successful self-publishers in South Africa. This contrasts with international self-publishers, who often achieve greater success, primarily through platforms like Amazon (Milliot, 2023). Public speakers in South Africa have been successful with self-publishing; they sell their books at their talks and not through the retail market and thus find it unnecessary to publish through a publisher. Author 7's experience corroborates this. All publishers cited Dudu Busani-Dube as a successful self-publisher. This indicates that traditional publishers have taken note of the success of some self-publishers. Successful self-publishing has encouraged other authors to self-publish because authors have realised that there is an untapped book

market (Maneta, 2018). Successful authors often do not need traditional publishers and may benefit more from self-publishing, as it allows them greater control, higher royalties, and direct access to their audience. Publisher 2 linked the rise of self-publishing to advancements in digitization and the internet, which have simplified the process for authors to independently publish their works on platforms such as Amazon. He also strongly feels that publishing on Amazon is not South African but 'global mass proliferation of self-publishing'. However, Authors 4 and 11 show that South Africans also publish primarily on Amazon, although at a low rate.

Publisher 7 noted that a stigma still surrounds self-publishing, leading some authors to use a publishing services company's imprint to lend credibility to their work. This is evidenced by six of the ten self-published books reviewed in this study, which utilized such imprints (see Appendix B). When a book bears a publisher's imprint, readers cannot easily distinguish it from traditionally published works, allowing self-published authors to avoid the perceived stigma. Additionally, Publisher 6 initially held a negative view of self-publishing but has since developed a more positive perspective. This shift mirrors the experience of Author 1, who also changed their stance after engaging in self-publishing.

> *Publisher 6:*
> I must say that in the beginning, coming out of traditional publishing and coming out of a university publishing course I had a negative view of self-publishing but over the years of working with self-publishers, I realized that sometimes they're going to do the job even better than traditional publishers if they're the right person.

This underscores two key points: firstly, gaining firsthand experience is crucial for truly understanding self-publishing, and secondly, self-publishers represent a diverse group that defies broad generalizations. The changing perspectives of both Publisher 6 and Author 1 demonstrate how direct involvement can reshape preconceptions about self-publishing.

7.6.1 Who is self-publishing in South Africa?

All seven publishers agreed that the demographics of self-publishers are varied – individuals (range of ages, men, women, different racial and socioeconomic groups), organizations, government and NGOs. This suggests that self-publishing has a broad appeal and serves personal, professional, or organizational purposes.

> *Publisher 6:*
> I can say over the last 10 years it has been such a diverse group… Black, White, Coloured, Indian, absolutely every single possible demographic …We've had kids, teenagers and even nine-year-olds publishing books and then their parents would usually be quite well off. I've had teachers, academics.

> *Publisher 7:*
> I think the demographics are broad … it's individuals and organizations. It might be NGOs or businesses that have a publishing requirement, so it's individuals and organizations.

The mention of young authors indicates a trend of early engagement with writing and publishing. The reference to parents being 'quite well off' for child authors suggests that financial resources may play a role in some cases of self-publishing, especially for younger authors.

All publishers agreed that self-publishers are publishing works across fiction and non-fiction genres, with business, religious works, and memoirs being the most popular non-fiction categories. This contrasts with the eleven authors I interviewed, who predominantly published fiction. Self-publishing enables the production of genres often overlooked by traditional publishing houses, such as poetry, colouring books, novellas, and self-help books. This diversity suggests a democratization of publishing, as self-publishing lowers barriers to entry and empowers a wider range of voices across society. The growing adoption of self-

publishing could have significant implications for the traditional publishing industry, potentially reshaping approaches to author discovery, niche markets, and content diversity.

7.6.2 Challenges of self-publishing

Publishers 2, 5, and 7 highlighted that distribution remains a significant challenge for self-publishers, as bookshops are often reluctant to work directly with them due to the administrative burden involved. As a result, most self-publishers use self-publishing companies' imprints to gain better access to distribution channels. As was discussed in Chapter 6, when bookshops accept self-published books, it is often on consignment, meaning bookshops will only pay the self-publisher after selling the book, and any unsold stock can be returned after a certain period. This consignment model shifts much of the financial risk onto the self-publisher, making it a less favourable option than traditional publishing arrangements.

> *Publisher 7:*
> Originally the chains hate working with self-publishers and it's because self-publishers don't know how they work. So that's been a reason why it's so hard and authors must go through some other publisher. Retailers don't generally want to work with authors … It's just a nightmare for them from that logistical side.

Book chains stock self-published books, but as discussed in Chapter 6, some self-publishers think that Exclusive Books does not stock self-published books.

Publisher 4 highlighted several challenges faced by self-published authors, aligning with the concerns raised by authors in Chapter 6. These include exclusion from major book competitions and limited access to book reviews, which reflect ongoing gatekeeping in the industry. Publisher 4 also noted that successful self-publishing often depends on the author's existing industry connections or fame. The absence of professional editorial and production

feedback can compromise the quality of self-published books, emphasizing the need for authors to seek guidance from publishing experts. Publisher 2 added that while the internet has made self-publishing more accessible, it has also increased competition, making discoverability and standing out in a saturated market significant hurdles for self-publishers.

7.6.3 Quality of self-published books

All seven publishers concurred that the quality of self-published books varies significantly, with most being poor quality. They emphasized that the book's quality largely depends on the investment made in its production. This investment encompasses production consultation, selection of service providers for book production and cover design and the author's writing skills. This perspective on investment aligns with Author 5's observation discussed in Chapter 5 that an author's socioeconomic status can significantly influence the quality of their self-published work. The ability to afford professional services and invest in production often correlates with the final product's quality.

> *Publisher 1:*
> It's very varied, you get some books that are published a little bit better and maybe there's a little bit more investment that goes into it. Often, it's even just the paper that's used … bad covers. I guess self-published authors don't have a whole team looking at cover designs and who's the target market. Some are terribly published, but there are some good quality ones ... I've seen a mix of both.

Self-publishing offers authors creative freedom and accessibility, but it also comes with challenges, particularly quality control and resources. Traditional publishers have teams dedicated to editing, design, marketing, and market research. Self-published authors typically handle these tasks alone or hire freelancers, which can result in uneven quality. This is especially evident in cover design, where a lack of professional input can lead to unappealing or mismatched visuals. Publisher 1 captures the duality of self-publishing: it democratizes

access to publishing but also places the burden of quality on the author. While some self-published works are indistinguishable from traditionally published books, others may fall short due to limited resources or expertise.

Publishers 3 and 4 concurred with Publisher 1 that the quality of self-published books is varied, but it is mostly bad because they are not curated.

> *Publisher 3:*
> Self-publishing does not have the curated and critical eye that we as publishers would put to a project before we accept it for publication ... So, the quality of the book could be brilliant and they are often wonderful books that are published in the self-publishing division… So, we do see some great stuff, but there is also a lot of junk.

Publisher 3 emphasized the critical importance of good book production, asserting that poor covers, page layout, and editing can undermine a compelling storyline. Publisher 7 concurred, noting that many self-published books are of poor quality because authors often underestimate the complexity of the book production process. She raised an interesting question about whether the average reader notices these quality issues, given that it often takes a professional to identify them. This point invites consideration of readers' perspectives and their potential impact on the success of self-published works.

Publisher 7 particularly stressed the specialized nature of editing:

> *Publisher 7:*
> It's not the editing that is done by somebody who's just good at English, but it's the editing that is done by somebody who is trained to look for inconsistencies and things that don't tie up in a book.

This observation aligns with the experience of Author 7, discussed in Chapter 5, who had to re-edit his book after initially hiring a journalism student for the task. This highlights the importance of professional editing in ensuring the quality of self-published works and the

risks of underestimating the specialized skills required in book production. Publisher 5 further emphasized that editing and proofreading are crucial, regardless of how compelling the story is, as poor execution can lead to negative word-of-mouth and discredit the book. A notable example is the public backlash against Bonang Matheba's book, *From A to B*, published by Jacana Media in 2017, which was poorly edited, demonstrating that readers value editorial standards even if they do not explicitly acknowledge them (Thakurdin, 2017; Magwaza, 2017).

Similarly, in 2021, Gauteng Province launched a programme to support upcoming authors, inviting submissions from self-published writers (see Appendix A). The initiative attracted more than 400 submissions, but most fell short in quality, highlighting a notable disconnect between authors' eagerness and their capacity to adhere to professional publishing standards. Only 50 books were selected (12.5% acceptance rate), underscoring the challenges facing self-published works in South Africa. This low selection rate highlights the need for self-publishing authors to improve their editing, design, and production skills, while also suggesting that libraries must maintain strict criteria to ensure the quality of their collections.

Publisher 5 also highlighted that most self-publishers have the misconception that editing and proofreading are the same and that not all self-publishers are knowledgeable about book production processes. This underscores that understanding the book production process and choosing the right service providers are crucial for success.

Publishers' views on the importance of book production quality are divided. Publishers 3, 5, and 7 believe readers value good production quality, while Publishers 2 and 4 argue that publishers may overemphasize aspects readers do not prioritize if the content is engaging. To support this, Publishers 2 and 4 cited the example of one of South

Africa's most successful self-published authors, whose books have suboptimal layout and design, such as inconsistent margins, non-standard fonts, and awkward page breaks, yet still attract a large and loyal readership. In Chapter 10, readers echoed this sentiment, acknowledging the series' quality issues but continuing to purchase the books. This suggests that compelling content can sometimes outweigh production flaws in readers' minds.

> *Publisher 2:*
> If people want to read about that subject matter, they don't care that it's not written that well. So, one's weighing all these things up, what we think is good writing, doesn't necessarily mean if it's not good, it will put people off.

> *Publisher 4:*
> The phenomenon of Dudu Busani-Dube, as a publisher the production values of the books, …the layout is not great, but this hasn't affected readers. Maybe publishers care too much about the wrong things.

All publishers claimed they could easily identify a self-published book due to common flaws such as poor page layout, inappropriate font choices, unsuitable formats, unusual paper selection (e.g., bond paper instead of creamy bulk for trade books), bad cover and spine design, missing barcodes (preventing bookshops from stocking them), spelling errors, and low-quality binding due to poor printer choices. Additionally, Publishers 2, 3, and 4 advised self-publishers to study professionally produced books and consult experienced industry professionals to understand standard formats, paper types, typesetting, and cover designs to achieve better quality. They also warned that many vanity publishers produce subpar books, emphasizing the importance of researching service providers to ensure the right team is selected.

Publisher 6 highlighted some trenchant differences between traditional publishing and self-publishing: traditional publishers have dedicated teams and invest in projects expecting a return on investment, whereas self-publishing is a solo endeavour funded entirely by the author.

> *Publisher 6:*
> In traditional publishing, you have a team of people who've bought into this book. They know that this is a book that they are going to sell, that they're going to try and turn into a commercial success. And by investing in it, they're not investing the author's money into it, they're investing their own money into it.

All publishers highlighted that traditional publishers bring valuable market expertise to an increasingly crowded publishing landscape. Unlike many self-publishers, who create their book first and develop marketing strategies later, traditional publishers begin by analysing market needs and opportunities. Their industry experience helps them shape books to meet reader demands and establish optimal pricing strategies. While some self-publishers achieve success, they often lack the comprehensive market knowledge and industry connections that traditional publishers have developed over decades.

7.6.4 Response of traditional publishers to self-publishing

Of the seven traditional publishers interviewed, five independent publishers (Publishers 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7) have established publishing services departments to assist self-publishers. These departments offer a range of services, including manuscript evaluation, author coaching, production, printing, and distribution. The specific services provided by each company will be detailed in Chapter 8, which focuses on publishing services companies. These independent publishers view self-publishing as a revenue-generating opportunity, as innovation is essential for survival. With existing infrastructure and expertise, they are well-positioned to offer these services to self-publishers. In contrast, larger publishers have not pursued this

avenue, as it is not considered worthwhile for their scale. Publishing services companies simplify self-publishing, making it more accessible for authors.

Publishers 1 and 2 take a strategic approach to self-publishing by using it as a market research tool rather than offering publishing services. They actively monitor self-published works to identify emerging trends and market opportunities, allowing them to make more informed commercial decisions.

> *Publisher 1:*
> I think … being very aware of the self-publishing titles that are working because it's kind of like market research. What are people reading, what's working and what genres are we not publishing in that are doing well … It's a bit like how we would monitor competitors and see what's happening in the market … make sure that we view it as competitors and seeing the opportunities.

However, Publisher 1 noted the challenges of monitoring self-publishing on platforms like Amazon. Both Publishers 1 and 2 have republished books that were initially self-published to help them reach a wider audience. These books underwent significant revisions, including re-editing, proofreading, cutting text, re-typesetting, and redesigning covers. This process underscores that the quality of many self-published books often falls short of the standards set by traditional publishing.

Publishers 1 and 2 actively monitor self-published books for potential market successes, effectively treating the self-publishing space as an extended slush pile. This strategy implies that self-publishers inadvertently act as market testers, bearing the initial financial risks while potentially uncovering new market opportunities. This trend mirrors Author 3's experience, detailed in Chapter 4, where her self-published book was later picked up by a small independent publisher. Such instances illustrate what Dilevko and Dali (2006) argue: self-

publishing can act as a launching pad for emerging authors to build recognition and eventually secure contracts with established mainstream publishers, providing access to wider audiences and distribution networks. This suggests that self-publishing not only supports individual authors but also fosters incremental growth and diversification in the publishing industry.

Traditional publishers have approached successful self-published authors, including Author 6, with offers to republish their works. Author 6 declined these offers, preferring to maintain the creative control and success she had achieved through self-publishing. While publishers claimed to treat all authors equally regardless of their publishing history, Authors 1 and 3 reported that their self-publishing success gave them stronger negotiating positions with traditional publishers. This discrepancy between publisher statements and author experiences suggests the need for further research into how previous self-publishing success influences traditional publishing agreements. Such research would illuminate evolving power dynamics between authors and publishers in an increasingly diverse publishing landscape.

Publisher 2 highlighted that fan fiction self-published authors have successfully transitioned to traditional publishing deals. In contrast, Publishers 3 and 7 have never republished self-published works and view this as an international industry trend. However, evidence from South Africa suggests otherwise, where such transitions are more frequent. Publisher 7 noted that many authors eventually return to traditional publishing after experimenting with self-publishing, a trend illustrated by Author 1's experience.

7.6.5 Implications of self-publishing on the trade sector

Reflecting on the implications of self-publishing, Publisher 1 noted that self-publishing is not a new phenomenon, so no major shifts are anticipated. While self-publishing

differs from traditional publishing in its motives, the two can coexist and complement each other within the broader publishing ecosystem.

> *Publisher 1:*
> We stick to our knitting about publishing important books, great stories and I do think publishers bring experience and we have a track record. We have a lot of insight. There's a lot of cross-subsidization, cross-marketing and selling. These are some of the things that self-published authors cannot always bring to the table … I think that I can see the benefit that we bring to the publishing process, but we should always be very aware of what's happening, and we must remain responsive to the market. So, I don't think we would reposition our role. I think our role is quite entrenched.

According to Publisher 1, while traditional publishers maintain a well-established role in the industry, they must remain attuned to market changes. Their position is founded on core strengths – accumulated expertise and an integrated business model – that individual self-published authors struggle to replicate. This suggests that traditional publishers can adapt to market shifts without fundamentally redefining their essential functions.

Additionally, Publisher 4 highlighted the key distinctions between self-publishing and traditional publishing:

> *Publisher 4:*
> Niche voices and topics can be published. I don't think it interferes with the publishing value chain. There is value attached to being published by a publisher and many writers want that.

Publisher 4 emphasized that self-publishing enriches the literary landscape by amplifying niche voices and specialized content that traditional publishers might overlook. Publishers 4, 5, and 6 broadly see self-publishing as a market-expanding force that complements, rather than disrupts, the traditional publishing value chain. This aligns with the author perspectives presented in Chapter 4, which regard self-publishing as a democratizing force within South

Africa's publishing landscape. However, the prestige and validation associated with traditional publishing remain significant, as many writers aspire to that recognition. Both self-publishing and traditional publishing serve distinct but valuable roles in the ecosystem, catering to different author needs and reader interests. Traditional publishers bear production costs and risks and are often misunderstood as profiting heavily from authors. Their profits are not as substantial as many authors assume, which may explain the mistrust expressed by authors in Chapters 4 and 5.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter analysed traditional publishers' perspectives on trade publishing and self-publishing. Traditional publishers maintain carefully curated lists through self-funded operations, adapting book formats and print runs to specific markets. Their pricing reflects multiple factors including production costs, VAT, discounts, royalties, and overheads. Marketing approaches vary by publisher size and often involve author participation. Sales patterns demonstrate how successful titles must compensate for underperforming ones, illustrating the complex dynamics of publishing profitability.

Self-publishing has gained traction across diverse South African demographics, serving various purposes and particularly benefiting niche voices. While quality varies based on authors' investment in professional services, self-publishing has become an important component of the literary ecosystem. Traditional publishers have responded strategically – some by offering publishing services, others by using self-published works as market research tools or occasionally republishing successful titles. The relationship between traditional and self-publishing is complementary, with self-publishing expanding market opportunities without disrupting traditional publishing models. This dynamic exemplifies the adaptability of South Africa's publishing industry.

Chapter 8 Insights from publishing services companies

8.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an in-depth look at the role and offerings of publishing services companies in South Africa and their perceptions of self-publishing in South Africa. Publishing services companies, also known as author services companies, provide a range of publishing support to authors or organizations choosing to self-publish, a model often referred to as 'assisted publishing.' In this arrangement, the self-publishing author or organization pays for the services rendered. As outlined in Chapter 5, these services include author mentoring, book production, marketing, and distribution (Dilevko & Dali, 2006; Shrestha, 2022). Publishing services companies are central to this study because of their close collaboration with self-publishers, offering critical insights into self-publishing.

A publishing services company contrasted traditional and assisted publishing:

> *Company 2(2):*
> Traditional publishers pay 7–10% royalties to the author because they cover the production, marketing and distribution costs. In our situation, the author finances everything and we facilitate it for a fee because that is our expertise and time. We do not have the capital to finance, but we offer a lot of advice and mentoring.

Publishing services companies help self-publishers with professional publishing services. Self-publishers pay upfront for the services and the proceeds from the books go to the author. Assisted publishing shifts the financial risk to the author. This model is ideal for authors with financial resources who want more control and are willing to invest in their work.

8.2 Research participants

I interviewed six publishing services companies. Each company had one interviewee except for Company 2, which had two (a husband-and-wife team). In addition, two self-published authors I interviewed formed publishing services companies after self-publishing their books. This shows that enterprising authors leverage publishing expertise to provide publishing services to other self-publishers. I will include data from these two companies that pertain to their working experience with self-publishing authors. Research participants are described in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1: Publishing services companies research participants

Company pseudonym	Publisher classification	Publishing experience (years)
Company 1	Publishing services company	12
Company 2 (1), Company 2 (2)	Publishing services company	14
Company 3	Hybrid publisher	33
Company 4 (Author 5)	Hybrid publisher	6
Company 5	Hybrid publisher	17
Company 6	Hybrid publisher	15
Company 7	Hybrid publisher	12
Company 8 (Author 7)	Publishing services company	9

The research participants represent a diverse demographic: five female and four male; five White, two Black, and two Coloured. Their publishing experience ranges from 6 to 33 years. Companies 1, 3, and 4 gained expertise at other publishing houses, while Companies 2, 5, 6, 7, and 8 developed theirs after founding their own publishing services companies. Five companies (3, 4, 5, 6, and 7) are hybrid, offering both publishing services and traditional publishing models, while three (1, 2, and 8) focus solely on supporting self-publishing individuals and organizations.

The sample reflects diversity in gender and racial background, with a balanced mix of female and male participants. However, White participants predominate (five out of nine), which may not fully represent South Africa's majority-Black population, potentially limiting the findings' generalizability. The participants' extensive industry experience adds depth and credibility to the study, while including hybrid and dedicated publishing services companies captures diverse business models.

All companies, except for Company 4, are full-time ventures. This suggests a robust and viable market for assisted publishing services, as most companies can sustain full-time operations. Multiple companies run by full-time employees also indicate that the market is likely competitive, which gives authors more options. Companies 1, 3, 5, 6, and 7 are one-person companies that rely on freelancers. In contrast, Company 2 is run by a husband-and-wife team, Company 4 by three women, and Company 8 by a husband-and-wife team and two full-time employees – a chief editor who assigns projects to freelancers and checks everything for quality control, and a chief graphic designer who oversees graphic design and handles all in-house tasks such as marketing material.

8.3 Motivations for starting publishing services companies

Four companies (4, 6, 7, and 8) were founded by authors who initially self-published their books. They researched and understood the publishing process and decided to assist other self-publishers who lacked publishing experience. Furthermore, the founder of Company 8 found it difficult to find self-published authors who could mentor him. Self-publishing packages from international companies were expensive, and he wanted to offer authors quality products at a reasonable price. The founder of Company 1 worked at a publishing services company (Company 2) and was responsible for distribution, marketing, and typesetting. She managed almost everything at the company and realized she could start her

own company. This represents a typical case of an employee transitioning to an entrepreneur by applying their broad operational experience. The diverse motivations for starting new companies illustrate how entrepreneurs respond to evolving dynamics in the publishing industry. By offering specialized services, they meet emerging needs and capitalize on changes in the publishing landscape.

All eight companies aim to produce quality self-published books because they noticed that self-published books on the market were often inadequately edited, had amateur cover designs, and were inappropriately priced. This concurs with Dilevko and Dali (2006) who argue that author services companies offer professional publishing services to address the bad production quality normally associated with self-publishing. Companies have identified the inferior quality of many self-published books as a business opportunity. By providing professional editing, formatting, marketing, and distribution services to self-publishing authors, these companies have turned the perceived weakness of self-published content into profitable business ventures. Additionally, many authors had a limited understanding of the publishing industry and lacked effective book marketing plans. Companies 2 and 4 were further motivated by a passion for publishing high-quality books by African authors. They argued that the book market is not sufficiently diverse, as it is dominated by imported books that do not adequately reflect African perspectives and stories.

Companies 3, 5, and 6 started self-publishing departments in their publishing companies to supplement income and cover their overheads. They recognized that self-publishing was growing and realized they had valuable publishing expertise to offer authors. These three companies were initially interested in traditional publishing only until they saw the opportunity that self-publishing presented. This is supported by PASA's (2023) annual survey, which reports that some traditional publishers now offer publishing services such as

editorial, production, marketing, sales, warehousing, and distribution to third-party authors and self-publishing entities.

By providing professional services to external parties beyond just producing their books, traditional publishers have created an additional revenue stream beyond relying solely on income from their book products. This highlights that publishers are creating new business models by taking on new roles like conversion services, distribution, marketing and community engagement around books, compensating for declining core functions (Carolan & Evain, 2013; PASA, 2023). Self-publishing enables evolving literacy practices with multiple viable models competing with and complementing traditional publishing (Poland, 2018).

Companies 7 and 8 noted that selling a book is often more challenging than writing one, a view echoed by all authors in Chapter 6. To address this, Companies 7 and 8 aimed to provide authors with comprehensive packages, including distribution and marketing services, to enhance the chances of their books' success and profitability. The founders of all eight companies were driven by a passion for publishing. However, with the rise of self-publishing, many new companies have emerged, primarily focused on profit, despite lacking expertise in publishing processes. Publishing is an open market, and some publishing services companies exploit authors by prioritizing revenue from author fees over developing high-quality books. These entities are known as vanity or predatory publishers. Companies 1 and 2 outlined how vanity publishers operate:

> *Company 1:*
> These publishers often offer packages, and this is a clear sign that it is vanity publishing. Packages don't work because books are different. You don't do a one-size-fits-all approach. You have different word lengths, some books have artwork, editing required, etc. These packages are almost always overpriced, e.g., for a small book, one author pays for the other author's bigger book.

Company 2(2):

Self-publishing in SA is a very good thing, unfortunately, a lot of the self-publishing companies see it as a way of making money and they are fraudulent and cheat the authors for an unpublishable book. The actual writing needs to be worked on a lot. They don't have any idea of page design and cover design. They just think that it is easy to do.

Vanity publishers often sell generic publishing packages without considering the type and quality of the book. Suspiciously low charges are a red flag, as professional services typically come with commensurate fees. Unfortunately, many vanity publishers are exploiting authors and not providing value for money. This concurs with Shrestha (2022) and Hartiningtyas (2023), who assert that vanity publishers charge authors to publish their books without providing professional services like editing and proofreading. These predatory publishers are only concerned about profits and not quality control.

Publishing services companies put authors in control, while vanity publishers exploit authors. Some unethical practices vanity publishers use to exploit aspiring authors include selling generic publishing packages regardless of book quality, using predatory tactics and false promises to lure authors, hiding costs through unexpected fees, neglecting quality control, and providing little to no real distribution or marketing services. These companies not only exploit authors but also damage the reputation of all publishing services companies. This underscores the need for comprehensive author education on publishing options, industry self-regulation, and clear differentiation between vanity presses and reputable publishing services companies.

Statutory regulation of the publishing industry may be difficult to implement, but PASA could play a key role in establishing voluntary standards and certification programmes. This could include developing a code of conduct and best practices for publishing service

providers, implementing a registration or accreditation system to identify reputable companies and providing educational resources and guidance for authors on evaluating different publishing options. By empowering authors with knowledge and steering them toward certified, professional publishing partners, the industry can help mitigate the risks and challenges associated with vanity publishing. This balanced approach of author education and industry self-regulation may be a more practical solution than attempting comprehensive statutory regulation.

Companies 5 and 8 argued that some service providers lack publishing expertise and follow authors' instructions without offering professional advice based on the book's requirements. This approach often results in poor-quality books – riddled with errors, badly typeset, and featuring unappealing covers – that are ultimately unsaleable. Furthermore, these companies agreed that many self-publishing services companies fail to adequately empower authors with industry knowledge and best practices. As a result, they strongly advise aspiring self-publishers to thoroughly research potential service providers to ensure they receive value for their money and to avoid falling victim to scams. This is supported by Shrestha (2022) who advises on key steps to avoid vanity publishers: thorough background checks on publishers, understanding all fees and services before agreeing to anything, maintaining ownership of rights and consulting with mentors or experts when unsure. Authors 8 and 10, who were part of this study, used publishing services companies, further supporting this as they used referrals and word of mouth to identify companies to work with, as discussed in Chapter 5. This due diligence is crucial for authors to navigate the self-publishing landscape successfully and produce professionally crafted books that can compete in the market.

8.4 Services offered by self-publishing companies

The eight publishing services companies offer different services for different books, from author mentoring to marketing and distribution. Table 8.2 details the type of services that each company offers.

Table 8.2: Publishing services offered by each company

Company	Services offered
Company 1	manuscript evaluation; editing; page layout; cover design; proofreading; printing facilitation; distribution; e-book conversion, uploading and distribution; Amazon search engine optimization
Company 2	author mentoring; manuscript evaluation; editing; page layout; cover design; proofreading; printing facilitation; distribution including books they do not help publish; e-book conversion
Company 3	manuscript evaluation; editing; page layout; cover design; proofreading; printing facilitation; distribution services for some books they help publish
Company 4	author mentoring and coaching in writing, strategy and marketing; overwriting; manuscript evaluation; editing; page layout; cover design; proofreading; printing facilitation; marketing
Company 5	manuscript evaluation; editing; page layout; cover design; proofreading; printing; marketing
Company 6	author consultation; manuscript evaluation; editing; page layout; cover design; proofreading; printing facilitation; distribution services for some books
Company 7	author mentoring; manuscript development; ghost writing; manuscript evaluation; editing; page layout; cover design; marketing; brand building; distribution via Exclusive Books
Company 8	author mentoring; author workshops (online and in-person); manuscript evaluation; editing; page layout; cover design; proofreading; printing facilitation; marketing (marketing material, coaching, brand building)

None of the companies publishes every manuscript submitted to them; they reject some manuscripts due to perceived poor quality and lack of potential. All eight companies offer modular services tailored to each project's needs. For example, an author might come with a book that has already been edited and request page layout and printing services. This flexibility allows authors to choose the specific services they need, potentially reducing costs and streamlining the publishing process.

All eight companies provide comprehensive book production services, from manuscript evaluation to printing, offering customizable packages for editing, design, marketing, and

distribution tailored to authors' needs and budgets. Companies 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7 include distribution services, recognizing it as a major challenge for self-publishers. However, Company 3 distributes only select books based on their perceived potential, indicating that they produce some titles with uncertain market viability. In contrast, Companies 4, 5, and 8 do not offer distribution services due to capacity constraints, as book distribution is labour-intensive. Instead, they advise authors on alternative distribution models, such as setting up their own sales channels or using freelance distribution agents.

Company 7 distributes books exclusively through Exclusive Books, leveraging its strong brand recognition, extensive market share, and dominant position in South Africa's book retail landscape. As a registered vendor, books can be ordered at any of Exclusive Books' nationwide stores. Company 7 found that distributing through independent bookshops was ineffective due to their limited foot traffic and less strategic locations. While Exclusive Books offers a broad reach, relying solely on this retailer limits accessibility for readers who shop elsewhere, potentially reducing the books' overall market penetration.

All publishing services companies aim to provide authors with expert advice on appropriate print runs and book pricing strategies, to help authors make a reasonable profit. However, not all authors may achieve profitability, as many factors affect a book's commercial success beyond just the publisher's recommendations. Publishing services companies give authors a price range considering printing costs and competitor prices. They all agreed that pricing a book correctly contributes to the performance of the book on the market. Company 1 summarised the price strategy that she recommends for self-publishers:

> *Company 1:*
> With self-publishing, you can't factor in the whole production costs; otherwise the price of that book will be very high, and you will outprice the book. What I use that works is the unit cost plus a small profit from what you will get back from the bookshops. I also

> do break even on the full production costs, normally from experience, for a standard book, the author normally breaks even between 300-500 copies.

This pricing strategy highlights that setting the retail price based on market realities, rather than simply trying to recover all production costs immediately, helps authors strike a balance between profitability and market competitiveness. This approach recognizes that pricing a book too high, purely to offset all publishing costs, can make it uncompetitive and less attractive to potential buyers in the market. By initially accepting a narrower profit margin per sale, authors aim to drive higher overall volume and revenue through more accessible pricing. Over time, this allows them to gradually recover their costs through cumulative sales, rather than relying on inflated individual unit prices.

As discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, book marketing has increasingly become the author's responsibility, regardless of whether they are self-published or traditionally published. Company 1 emphasized that publishing a book accounts for only about 20% of the overall effort; the remaining 80% is dedicated to marketing, which is crucial for the book's commercial success. This aligns with the experiences shared by authors in Chapter 6. Companies 4, 5, 7, and 8 offer marketing services to authors, while Companies 1 and 2 do not provide these services directly. Instead, they refer authors to professional public relations (PR) specialists to assist with publicity efforts.

The services offered by these PR companies include creating press releases, developing marketing strategies, conducting media outreach, and coordinating events. A rate card from a publicity company shows that the costs for a three-month publicity campaign can range from R18 000 to R27 000, depending on the book genre and services required. This extra cost is often beyond the financial reach of most authors. To help address this, Company 1 offers Amazon search engine optimization (SEO) services for authors. This includes keyword

optimization and identifying niche categories with less competition, which can improve the book's online discoverability and visibility.

Companies 7 and 8 distinguish themselves from other publishing service providers by placing a strong emphasis on marketing and brand-building for their author clients. Rather than just focusing on the publishing process, these companies also work closely with authors to help them establish and solidify their brands. This includes developing strategic marketing plans to grow the author's audience and platform. They provide guidance on content creation, social media management, email list building, and other audience engagement tactics. The aim is not just to publish the book but also to empower authors with the skills and insights needed to successfully market themselves and their books. Company 8 explained the importance of marketing:

> *Company 8:*
> Nobody focuses on how to sell a book, or how to make a book successful … that is the missing link in the process, and that's what's attributed to our success as a company… We teach authors not just how to write and publish a book, but how to turn it into a business and to create profitable income streams from their book.

The two companies identified a key market gap: authors need more than publishing support. Their success comes from teaching authors to treat books as business assets, creating multiple income streams from each book and providing complete support (writing → publishing → monetization). By taking this comprehensive, marketing-centric approach, these companies aim to position their author clients for long-term success beyond just the initial book launch. The focus is on building sustainable author brands that drive consistent book sales over time. The two companies offer valuable services to self-publishers because the analysis in Chapter 6 showed that marketing is more difficult for self-publishers than publishing.

8.5 Print runs

All eight companies advise authors on optimal print runs, recommending small initial print runs to test the market. It is better to under-print than over-print, as authors can always reprint to fulfil orders. Company 1 added that small print runs allow authors to correct any errors that may have been overlooked during production. Based on their experience, authors typically need to sell between 300–500 copies to break even on publishing costs. Company 1 suggested initial print runs of 200–300 copies for unknown authors and 500–1 000 copies for those with a large existing network. This indicates that print runs are determined by the author's profile and sales potential, aligning with the discussion in Chapter 4. As previously explored, successful self-published authors often build their platforms and communities – a form of social capital, as described by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986). This social capital, alongside cultural and financial capital, can be leveraged by authors to achieve business success.

Based on their experience managing inventory, Company 2 recommended an initial print run of 300 copies. They explained that it is more cost-effective to reprint additional books as needed rather than storing excess inventory.

> *Company 2 (2):*
> We advise authors not to print too many because, with digital printing, you can always reprint and in two weeks you will have your copies. Rather, save your money as you don't want to store your books in boxes in the garage and they go mouldy.

Company 3 recommended 500 to 2 000 copies because the lower the print run, the more expensive the unit cost of each book. As explained in Chapter 5, printing costs depend on the book's extent, design, type of paper, colour, and print run (SABDC, 2007). Company 5 agreed with Company 3, as he advised against printing 50 copies because the unit cost is too

high, and authors will not make a profit. Company 3 also highlighted that self-publishers choose their print runs based on production and printing costs and not on the profit margin.

As discussed in Chapter 5, book printing is expensive in South Africa because the creamy bulky paper or book paper used for novels is imported (SABDC, 2007). Printing books in South Africa can be a significant financial barrier for self-published authors. Unlike larger commercial publishers who can leverage economies of scale and access lower-cost printing options, self-publishing authors face elevated printing expenses due to the relatively small print runs. This puts self-published authors at a cost disadvantage, as they must bear the full brunt of the higher upfront printing investments (Poland, 2018).

Company 5 recommended a range of print runs of 150–300, but 300 is the optimum print run to sell at the right price and to make a profit. However, self-publishers' print runs vary greatly. Some authors print up to 10 000 copies when funded. This shows that self-publishers are different and cannot be generalized. One of Company 5's successful self-published author prints 15 000 copies of each of her books (children's books). The books are used as part of a reading programme. Company 5 once advised an author to print 300 copies, which proved overly cautious when the books sold out at just the first of three planned launch events. The author needed two reprints to meet demand. This case demonstrates that while publishing services companies offer general guidance, authors often have better insight into their specific market and potential sales volumes.

Determining print run size involves many variables, some unpredictable, such as audience demand and market trends, competition from other books in the same genre or category, effectiveness of the book's marketing and promotion, author's existing platform and ability to drive sales and unexpected events or changes in the publishing landscape. This demonstrates

the diverse and often unpredictable nature of self-publishing, where the author's intimate knowledge of their niche and audience can be crucial in making better-informed decisions around print run sizes. It underscores the importance of close collaboration between publishing service providers and authors, leveraging their respective areas of expertise, to arrive at the most appropriate print quantities.

Company 6 recommended an initial print run of 200–500 copies. She advised authors to be modest in initial print runs and then increase them because it is important not to over-print. Company 7 recommended an initial print run of 100 copies, but 5 000 copies for celebrity clients because they anticipate high sales. The small initial print run of 100 copies suggests a cautious approach, possibly to test the market or minimize risk. Conversely, the much larger print run of 5 000 copies indicates high confidence in sales for celebrity-authored works, assuming the celebrity's name alone will drive significant sales. However, overestimating celebrity appeal could lead to unsold inventory. A more nuanced strategy might involve a range of print runs based on multiple factors such as genre, target market, celebrity popularity and relevance, and production costs, not just celebrity status alone. Stock management is important. As discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, POD is inexpensive, thus enabling authors to print in smaller numbers in response to demand.

8.6 Cost of contracting publishing services companies

Publishing companies provide authors with quotes based on manuscript word count, as this impacts editing, proofreading, and page design costs. They also consider the quality of writing and the specific services each author needs. The level of editing required – from developmental to proofreading – can significantly impact the cost and time involved in preparing a manuscript for publication. However, some companies, like Company 7, only charge editing and proofreading based on word count, with a flat fee for other services. This

pricing model may indicate a vanity publishing model because the flat fee is uniform for all books and does not consider factors like genre, quality and the extent of the book.

Company 1 was transparent about its costing strategy, providing detailed current (2024) quotes for different client types. The company emphasized customizing services to each project's needs, rather than offering standardized packages. This approach ensures clients only pay for necessary services. Company 1 has also negotiated fixed fees with service providers and applies a 30% markup, which decreases for larger print runs. This is detailed in Table 8.3.

Table 8.3: Costing of services per book

Services	Rates for corporate clients	Rates for individual clients
Copy-editing	R0.50 per word	R0.25–R0.32 per word
Proofreading	R50 per page	R0.15 per word
Sample layout/design	R250 per hour	R250 per hour
Layout and design[3]	R50 per page	R20–R25 per page
Cover design[4]	R5 000	R5 000
ISBN application and barcode	R300 per title	R300 per title
Printing and binding, per quote	R52 per unit	R35.47–R69/23 per unit
E-book conversion[5]	R3 500 per book	R1 500 per book, R18 per page
Set-up of e-book and POD accounts[6]	R6 000 per book	R2 500–R5 000 per book
Marketing and PR (3 months)	R24 500 per book	R18 000–R24 500
Project management[7]	R20 000	R3 500

Table 8.3 shows that Company 1 charges more for corporate than individual clients. This could be because corporate clients usually have larger budgets and established funding, unlike individual authors who often self-fund their projects. The higher pricing also reflects market positioning because corporate clients expect to pay premium rates for professional

[3] This allows for three sets of proofs; additional changes are charged R250 per hour.

[4] If an original cover art image is needed, R1 500 will be added to the cover design cost. The client pays for stock photos.

[5] Costs for 'epub' and 'mobi' formats vary according to the complexity of the books.

[6] Set up an Amazon and Takealot account plus upload (includes Amazon SEO research and optimization of keywords and categories).

[7] This covers the general administration and management of the book publishing process to ensure quality control and adherence to deadlines.

services, and lower prices might reduce credibility in the corporate market. Service costs vary based on book specifications. For instance, printing costs depend on size, page count, paper type (bond vs. creamy bulky), colour options, and print quantity.

Company 1 has partnered with a distribution company that promotes and garners orders of single titles to book chains and independent bookshops. The distribution company takes care of all administrative processes, such as invoicing, packaging, couriering books to bookshops and warehousing a limited number of books. Invoices to the bookshops are sent monthly to collect payment (approximately 60 days from the invoice date). A once-off non-refundable service fee of R1 500 is payable to the distributor to cover book returns and administration fees. This covers distributors on major losses on book returns, which can be as high as 74%. The significant returns may stem from working with first-time, unknown authors, which poses challenges for smaller distributors to break even, let alone turn a profit.

The distributor takes a 25% commission on successful sales, bookshops get a 45% discount from the recommended retail price (RRP), and authors receive 30% of the net amount after value-added tax (VAT). From the analysis in Chapter 5, R250 appears to be a common price point for many self-published books in South Africa, regardless of the book's length or production costs. Consequently, R250 will be used to illustrate an example calculation of distribution fees in Table 8.4.

Table 8.4: Calculation of distribution fees

Retail Price (including VAT)	R 250.00
Retail Price (excluding VAT)	R 217.39
Distributor's Commission @ 25%	R 54.35
Bookshop Discount @ 45%	R 97.83
TO AUTHOR: 30%	**R65.22**

This calculation demonstrates why authors often prefer self-distribution, as discussed in Chapter 6. Self-distribution offers authors better returns compared to traditional distribution

models. The ability to retain more revenue per book sold makes self-distribution an attractive option for many authors. While bookshops can order books as firm sales, they prefer sale-or-return (SOR) or consignment arrangements. These models allow bookstores to stock a wider variety of titles, with the option to return unsold books within 6–12 months. After this period, any remaining sales become firm and non-returnable.

8.7 Author control during the publishing process

As observed in Chapter 4, one of the major reasons why authors choose to self-publish is that they want full control of the publishing process and profits. All eight companies agreed that authors have complete control of the publishing process. Publishing services companies guide authors on what is best for their books, but the final decisions rest with the authors. Since authors are paying for the service and retain ownership of their intellectual property (IP), they can change their minds at any stage of the publishing process. This aligns with Haugland's (2006) argument that publishing services companies, since they do not assume financial risks, do not function as cultural gatekeepers. Instead, they simply provide paid services to authors.

Self-publishing companies offer authors the option to use their imprint, as they curate and maintain quality control over the books they accept. However, the use of the imprint is flexible, and authors can choose to use it or not. Some authors prefer to use a company's imprint to avoid the stigma often associated with self-publishing. In this study, six out of the ten reviewed self-published books utilized the imprints of publishing services companies (see Appendix B). Company 3 noted that when a self-published author uses their imprint, it becomes difficult for readers to distinguish between books fully funded by the author and those supported by the publisher's resources. Both parties benefit from enhanced brand recognition. Additionally, some commercial publishers, such as Jacana and Bookstorm,

maintain separate imprints for their publishing services divisions, allowing them to leverage their institutional reputation while differentiating self-published titles.

Company 2 explained the type of consultation that goes on between the author and publishing services company during the book production process:

> *Company 2 (2):*
> In between each process, the book goes back to the author so that they are involved in the book production process. The authors have full control. They are given sample cover designs to choose from and if they don't like them, then they can be modified with their ideas, after all, they are paying for it, but the cover must speak to the content of the book and also fit onto a bookshelf.

According to Company 5, the full control that authors have sometimes presents a challenge because authors often do not know the production process, so they do not appreciate the importance of some aspects of the production process. In some instances, authors choose to publish without editing, and then the company distances itself and does not use its imprint on the book.

> *Company 5:*
> They can take that advice or not, we can't force them to do something because at the end of the day, they will also be responsible for paying for those services… Authors have decided to publish without editing, in those cases we distance ourselves from the book by not placing our logo on it or referring to us. So, we then become a silent service provider, we would do the design and then prepare for print. But we are not associated with it.

This excerpt highlights that the publisher can advise and provide services, but the author retains control over the final decision-making. If authors publish without the publisher's recommended editing, the publishing services company may refuse to allow the use of their brand or imprint. This allows the publisher to distance itself from books that do not meet their quality standards, protecting the credibility and reputation of their imprint. The policy

incentivizes authors to follow the publisher's editorial guidance to benefit from the brand association.

8.8 Book sales

Building on the bestseller discussion in Chapters 6 and 7, Table 8.5 highlights that the definition of a 'bestseller' in South Africa is contentious, even among publishing services companies as they have varying bestseller thresholds.

Table 8.5: Bestseller classifications by publishing services companies

Company	Non-fiction Bestseller	Fiction Bestseller	Average Seller	Self-published Average	Other Definitions
Company 1	2 500–5 000	2 000–3 000	600–800	82–150	
Company 2	3 000	1 500	–	–	Most successful publication: Over 5 000 Top-selling publication: 11 000
Company 5	–	–	–	–	500–1 000 per year
Company 6	–	–	–	–	2 000 in a book's lifetime
Company 7	–	–	–	–	5 000
Company 8	–	–	–	250 copies lifetime	2 000

Notes:
Dashes (–) indicate where specific data was not provided for a company.
'Other definitions' column captures additional information that does not fit the standard categories.

The distinction between fiction and non-fiction bestseller thresholds across multiple companies in Table 8.5 suggests different market dynamics for these categories in South Africa. The dominance of non-fiction in the South African book market is corroborated by the discussions in Chapters 4 and 7, as well as various industry sources (SABDC, 2016; le Roux, 2019; PASA, 2023; Nielsen BookScan, 2022, 2023; Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse & Huston, 2023). Companies 5, 6, 7 and 8 do not differentiate between bestseller copies for fiction and non-fiction books. This comparison highlights the variability in bestseller

definitions and sales expectations across different publishing services companies in South Africa.

The South African book market presents a complex picture. While its total value grew to R1.78 billion in 2023, this increase was driven by rising book prices rather than sales volume, which contracted during the same period. This contraction reflects broader economic challenges, particularly the high unemployment rate of 33.5% (as of Q2 2024), which affects consumer purchasing power. The market's structural challenges are further evidenced by the limited penetration of local fiction – only 14% of readers prefer South African fiction over international titles (Nielsen BookScan, 2024). These factors contribute to lower thresholds for bestseller status than major English-language markets like the USA and UK.

Company 3 finds bestseller classification challenging due to undefined measurement periods. The term 'bestseller' is often used for marketing purposes, which underscores that the term can be manipulated. Company 1 highlighted that a common phenomenon is full-time authors publishing exclusively on Amazon and attaining international bestseller status. This aligns with the experiences of Authors 4 and 10 (discussed in Chapter 4), who primarily publish on Amazon to target the global market.

> *Company 1:*
> Authors like Rachel Morgan, Joan McGregor have figured out the Amazon model, their books aren't recognised in SA, but they are bestsellers internationally on Amazon. These authors focus all their efforts on Amazon and make a living out of it. They are full-time authors, which is rare in SA. They mostly focus on e-books and then add POD.

Some South African authors achieve international bestseller status on Amazon, focusing on e-books and print-on-demand. Amazon provides authors with tools to edit, design, print, market, distribute, and sell books through online retail channels. This enables authors to

bypass traditional publishers (Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez & Weidner, 2013). Amazon's platform allows authors to bypass traditional gatekeepers and reach international readers directly. This example showcases alternative paths to publishing success that do not rely on traditional models or local recognition, emphasizing the opportunities available in the global digital marketplace.

8.9 Who is self-publishing in South Africa?

All eight companies agreed that self-publishers' demographics are broad and cut across racial lines, ages, and class groups – individuals, organizations, and NGOs. Both debut and experienced authors are self-publishing, which complements the analysis of self-publisher demographics in Chapters 4 and 7. The common characteristics of those who self-publish are the desire for control over their books and the intent to use books as marketing tools for their businesses.

Self-publishing has found success in certain market segments, including niche self-help books, personal memoirs of non-celebrities, experimental poetry, and fiction that falls outside traditional market categories, and novellas that traditional publishers often consider too short for cost-effective print runs. While established publishers regularly publish self-help bestsellers, celebrity memoirs, and commercial fiction, self-publishing has created opportunities for authors whose work may be too specialized, unconventional, or targeted to smaller readerships for traditional publishing models. This provides an outlet for creativity and diverse content that might not otherwise reach readers. This can lead to the emergence of new literary voices and perspectives.

According to Company 2, self-help books are popular among self-publishers, as fiction does not perform well in South Africa, and readers are drawn to self-published non-fiction that can

improve their lives, likely due to socioeconomic factors. As discussed in Chapter 7, the South African book market prefers non-fiction over fiction, particularly evident in bestseller performance from 2010–2020 (Nielsen BookScan, 2024). During this period, the top non-fiction title sold 546 904 copies compared to 47 714 copies for the leading fiction title – an eleven-fold difference. This market trend helps explain why self-publishers often focus on self-help and other non-fiction genres that promise practical value to readers, rather than fiction. Meanwhile, popular genres on Amazon include fantasy, young adult, paranormal, romance, and erotica, as seen with Authors 4 and 10, who primarily publish on Amazon. Companies 3, 5, and 7 highlighted that public or motivational speakers often achieve self-publishing success by utilizing their entrepreneurial skills and treating their books as marketing tools, a strategy also employed by Authors 7 and 9, as discussed in Chapter 4.

8.10 Impression of self-publishing

Companies' views of self-publishing are varied, but all eight companies agreed that self-publishing is growing rapidly because digital technologies have made it possible for authors to self-publish. Self-publishing was once stigmatised, but it is now more accepted. Self-publishing is important because it makes diverse publishing possible, including new and controversial stories and new voices. Self-publishing also enables the archiving of stories for future generations. Company 5 summarised the importance of self-publishing:

> *Company 5:*
> One thing I love about self-publishing is it allows us to work in all sorts of genres that, as a traditional publishing house, we wouldn't work in.

Most companies agreed that self-publishing plays a significant role in transforming the publishing industry by enabling diverse publications (bibliodiversity). Many self-publishers

are carving out their own space in the industry rather than waiting for traditional publishers to create opportunities for them. Self-publishing offers an accessible platform for authors whose voices and stories might otherwise struggle to find a place in traditional publishing, empowering individuals to share unique perspectives and experiences. For instance, successful self-published authors like Dudu Busani-Dube, whose *Hlomu* series has garnered a dedicated readership, and Jackie Phamotse, whose *Bare* series addresses sensitive social issues, demonstrate how self-publishing has amplified niche fiction voices that resonate with underserved readerships. This shift has contributed to a more inclusive literary landscape by expanding the range of ideas and lived experiences available to readers.

Companies 1 and 5 also asserted that self-publishing is contributing to book output as authors are taking risks that traditional publishers do not want to take, even for books that have small target markets and may not be profitable. As discussed in Chapters 4 and 7, traditional publishers only invest in a list that they can get a return on investment. This is why traditional publishers republish self-published books that are doing well on the market. Importantly, self-publishing allows authors to bring their books directly to their communities, often addressing niche markets or underrepresented perspectives that might be overlooked by mainstream publishing.

> *Company 2 (2):*
> Books that are published traditionally are market-oriented – they must make money. For self-publishing, it is a partnership between people with the expertise and people with the urge to write, so this is serious risk publishing.

All companies agreed that self-publishing is a diverse and varied landscape with successful and unsuccessful stories and varied quality of self-published books. All companies cited Dudu Busani-Dube as a successful self-publisher. Some self-published books are good quality, but most of them are bad quality. In addition, Company 4 highlighted that most

authors do not realize that editing and proofreading are important aspects of book production and that they are different processes. Companies 4 and 6 agreed that most authors who opt for assisted publishing, depending on their choice of service providers, produce quality books as they benefit from the companies' publishing expertise. This concurs with Dilevko and Dali (2006) who argue that historically self-published book quality has been seen as poor but self-published books published through author services firms seem to be changing library and public perceptions, but quality still varies considerably. Publishing services companies play a crucial role in enhancing the quality of self-published books.

Company 4 highlighted that there is a common misconception among self-publishers that self-publishing means doing everything yourself. The quality of self-published books often correlates with the author's socioeconomic status and understanding of the book production process. Authors from higher socioeconomic backgrounds typically have the means to invest in professional services, which can significantly enhance the quality of their work. Afolabi and Zolkepli (2023) support this as they argue that self-publishing requires authors to invest financially upfront for editing, design, printing, marketing, and distribution, which can be a significant challenge for some authors.

Company 8 attributed the poor quality of some self-published books to a tendency among some self-published authors to consider mediocre work acceptable for publication and inadequate support from certain publishing services companies, which fail to provide sufficient guidance and resources to their authors. Vanity publishers were discussed in Section 8.3.

> *Company 8:*
> So many people will go to a self-publishing company that will just slap a picture of them on the front cover, give them back exactly what they've given, and nobody takes the time to empower authors…

Companies 1, 4, and 7 observed that the overall quality of self-published books has improved significantly in recent years. However, they noted that some authors and companies continue to take shortcuts, resulting in subpar publications. This issue often stems from a lack of understanding about the publishing industry and its processes. The companies emphasized that most manuscripts require extensive editing to reach publishable quality. Company 3 specifically attributed the poor quality of some self-published books to authors underestimating the complexity and importance of the book production process.

These observations highlight the ongoing challenge in the self-publishing industry: balancing accessibility with maintaining professional standards. While self-publishing has opened doors for many authors, it also requires a commitment to learning about and investing in proper book production techniques to ensure quality output.

> *Company 3:*
> There's a lot of bad quality in self-published books. I think people underestimate the amount of professional input that it takes to make a book look right and also the amount of attention to what's going on in the market.

This observation accurately reflects a significant challenge in the self-publishing industry. Many new authors underestimate the complexity and professional experience required to produce a high-quality book. The process involves much more than just writing – it includes editing, proofreading, formatting, page layout, cover design, and market analysis, among other steps. Without the gatekeeping function of traditional publishers, the self-publishing market can become saturated with low-quality works. These quality issues can be addressed through education, resources, and perhaps industry standards.

All eight companies agreed that they could tell that some books are self-published due to quality issues. The issues cited by the companies are summarised in Table 8.6.

Table 8.6: Quality issues that show that a book is self-published

Company	Quality issues
Company 1	bad covers (e.g., photo of the author)
Company 2	choice of paper (bond paper vs creamy bulk for trade books); poor editing
Company 3	bad covers; spelling mistakes; bad page design; inappropriate book binding; no bar code on back cover, thus no ISBN hence bookshops cannot stock the book
Company 4	bad cover; poor binding; bad page layout
Company 5	bad page layout; inappropriate font choice; choice of paper (bond paper vs creamy bulk for trade books); bad covers; the back cover design and spine; wrong book format (A5)
Company 6	bad covers
Company 7	unprofessional covers; poor printing quality; book format; not following book genre standards; bad book design; poor editing
Company 8	poor editing; bad covers (photo of the author); bad page layout; wrong book format (A5); unprofessional blurb; no bar code on back cover, thus no ISBN hence bookshops cannot stock the book

From the quality issues outlined in Table 8.6, the aspects of self-published books requiring the most attention are covers, page layout, and editing. The most frequently cited issue, mentioned by all companies, is poorly designed front covers. Many self-published authors place their photos on the covers, overlooking the cover's critical role as a marketing tool. Among the ten books reviewed in this study, only one featured a poorly designed cover with the author's photo, and only one lacked an ISBN barcode on the back cover (see Appendix B). According to NLSA (see Appendix A), all publishers in South Africa must legally deposit copies with the National Library. ISBNs are crucial for book identification, tracking, and distribution in the commercial market. While some self-publishers produce books without ISBNs, many fail to comply with legal deposit requirements due to a lack of awareness, leading to inaccurate documentation and incomplete information about South Africa's self-publishing landscape. Professional covers are essential as they are the first point of contact with potential readers, playing a key role in attracting attention and conveying the book's genre and tone (Iwana, Rizvi, Ahmed, Dengel & Uchida, 2016).

8.11 Challenges of self-publishing

8.11.1 Inadequate documentation

Companies 1, 2 and 4 lamented the lack of documentation on self-publishing and the informal book sector in South Africa.

> *Company 1:*
> I want to do my MA on that [self-publishing] because I believe the current statistics are skewed. There are so many authors whose books are not accounted for; second-hand books are not recorded as well. We are only touching the tip of the iceberg.

Furthermore, Company 4 attributed the skewed statistics to the publishing industry not taking independent bookstores and pocket sales into account. The lack of documentation results in skewed statistics in the book sector, which are misleading. The second-hand book market is not documented, so when book-buying and reading reports claim that people are not buying books or not reading, they do not take account of that. They also do not take account of people lending each other books informally, for example, five people in a family reading the same book.

As a result, when reports claim that people are not buying or reading books, they may not present a complete picture of actual reading habits and book circulation. For instance, a single purchased book might be read by multiple individuals within a family or social circle, multiplying its impact beyond what sales figures alone would suggest. To address these issues, the industry could benefit from more comprehensive data collection methods that account for diverse reading and acquisition patterns. This might include periodic surveys on reading habits, collaboration with second-hand booksellers, and improved tracking of digital lending and long-tail sales.

The lack of comprehensive information on self-publishing in South Africa presents a significant research challenge. According to NLSA representatives (see Appendix A), the National Library maintains a database of self-published titles (identifiable by ISBN prefix 620) that should be accessible through their website. However, attempts to locate this resource proved unsuccessful, with non-functioning links and no response to follow-up inquiries. This discrepancy suggests potential communication gaps within NLSA or technical issues with their website. Many self-publishers fail to comply with legal deposit requirements due to a lack of awareness or absence of ISBNs, resulting in incomplete documentation of South Africa's self-publishing landscape. While NLSA claims this compilation promotes visibility for self-published works, the inaccessibility of such information undermines its effectiveness as a resource for authors, readers, and researchers. This situation highlights how institutional barriers and information gaps can significantly impact the visibility and documentation of self-publishing activities in South Africa.

8.11.2 Exclusion from mainstream literary events and awards

According to Companies 1, 2, and 6, books by independent authors are often excluded from literary competitions. This observation is supported by authors' experiences in Chapter 5 and Maneta (2018), who notes that self-published works are typically ineligible for South Africa's prestigious literary awards, such as the *Sunday Times* Literary Awards. The eligibility criteria for these established accolades often favour traditionally published books, either by requiring submission through a publishing house or excluding works not vetted by an editorial team. The rationale behind this exclusion is multi-faceted. Many literary awards aim to celebrate works that have undergone rigorous editorial scrutiny and curation, which most self-published authors do not have access to. This exclusion from awards and literary recognition can impact book publicity and, consequently, book sales. It highlights a challenge self-published authors face in gaining the same level of industry validation and exposure as

traditionally published works. However, some debut author awards, like the University of Johannesburg Prize, accept self-published entries as a pathway to formal publication, providing a bridge for emerging voices.

To cater to books excluded from the literary scene by independent publishers, authors and bookshops, Company 1 in 2015 organised a book fair to aid book visibility. It was funded by the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture, but in 2016 they did not get the funding due to a decline in available funds. The demise of the South African Book Development Council (SABDC) in 2021 was also a negative development because it was a space where small publishers could interact with other publishers and like-minded people. According to Company 2, self-published authors used to meet at Skoobs, Theatre of Books, which has since closed and PASA also does not recognise self-publishers.

8.11.3 The state of the economy

The downturn of the economy has resulted in a decline in disposable income, resulting in low book sales. COVID-19 also impacted the book sector negatively. According to Companies 2, 3 and 7, the shutting down of bookshops has led to a reduction in retail space. Trade books relied on discoverability in the physical space, but that now becomes a challenge online. In addition, according to Company 7, the demise of CNA, a major South African retailer, impacted vendors negatively as they were not paid for months. Company 2 also argued that the low reading levels in South Africa are a challenge that can be circumvented by people telling their own stories. This approach could motivate reading by providing relatable content.

8.11.4 Distribution challenges

All eight companies cited distribution as a significant challenge for self-publishers. Bookstores are often reluctant to stock self-published titles due to the increased administrative work required. Handling self-published books involves more individualized processes compared to working with major publishing houses. Self-published authors must coordinate directly with bookstores on ordering, invoicing, returns, and other logistical details that larger publishers manage centrally. This decentralized, case-by-case approach is more time-consuming for bookstore staff, making them less inclined to devote scarce shelf space to self-published works unless they have a strong commercial appeal. Most self-publishers are part-time and do not have adequate time to promote and distribute their books. Authors focus more on getting their books published and not on what happens after publication, thus most authors end up with unsold stock. Company 1 currently offers distribution services for self-publishers, but is in the process of selling the book distribution arm because it is not profitable:

> *Company 1:*
> I haven't drawn a salary since last year February out of the distribution. It's been tough with COVID-19. The return rate has been high from various bookstores. Books go onto the shelf on consignment. We have lost between 20–28% of sales. From the 25% we take, we need to cover costs for the sales reps, package books and send them off, the admin is time-consuming. A lot of distribution companies in the industry have closed … The industry is in a bad state and book distribution doesn't make money… Main trade bookstores work on a 12-month return policy.

Book returns are time-consuming as it is administratively heavy because bookshops send a return request, the distributor authorises the request and then the distributor receives the parcel, checks the books and returns them into stock. Returns are also a headache for authors and distributors as the terms and conditions of bookshops are limiting, as most bookshops buy on consignment and can return books after 12 months. Companies 1 and 3 agreed that

book distribution has low returns as distributors must cover the costs of sales reps, packaging books, and delivering them. Company 3 initially followed a traditional distribution model in which they charged 35% for the sales and marketing services and the remaining 65% was remitted to the author. They have since realized that distribution costs are huge and returns have impacted their distribution model because they would have already paid the authors. Company 1 also highlighted that connections and quality assurance are important for distributors to get their books into bookstores. The company prides itself on producing quality books on par or even above some traditional publishers.

8.12 Implications of self-publishing in the trade sector

All eight companies agreed that self-publishing enables diversity in literature, which grows the industry and gives way to new voices and new stories that are demographic-specific, that traditional publishers will not publish. According to Company 6, niche voices are published, but this does not impact the publishing value chain as publishers add value to books. This suggests a complementary relationship between self-publishing and traditional publishing rather than a purely competitive one. The statement also acknowledges the continued perceived value of being published by an established publisher.

Company 1 asserted that self-publishing has become a way to test the market and can open opportunities for authors to be published traditionally.

> *Company 1:*
> Self-publishing has become a way to test the market for a book. You can publish a book yourself, get it into some bookstores, work hard at marketing it, and if it starts to sell, traditional book publishers will consider publishing the author's next book.

This supports Author 3's experience of initially self-publishing and then being republished by a traditional publisher. Additionally, the discussion in Chapter 7

underscores that traditional publishers are often on the lookout for self-published books that are performing well, with some publishers then going on to republish these successful self-published titles. This dynamic suggests that while self-published works may face barriers in terms of industry recognition, strong sales and reader engagement can still lead to traditional publishing opportunities.

Company 5 has signed on six authors who initially wanted to self-publish. Authors mostly negotiate a profit-sharing agreement instead of a traditional royalty agreement because they are entrepreneurial. These are new ways of setting up publishing agreements between authors and publishers. It is a partnership that benefits both parties.

Company 3 is always looking out for successful self-published books but has not signed on any self-published authors. She commented that most traditionally published authors who have experimented with self-publishing have gone back to traditional publishers after realising that self-publishing is difficult. This is true of Author 1, who ventured into self-publishing to experiment but has gone back to traditional publishing. Self-publishing can open opportunities in new market areas as self-publishers are taking the financial risk first and testing the market.

> *Company 3:*
> I think that in a way it's more of an opportunity in certain ways of opening new market areas. You know it's like a riskier form, somebody else is taking the risk and then the big publishers can follow. And so, it can be a market opener in certain ways.

The growth in self-publishing has brought some changes in business practices. Some traditional publishers in South Africa, such as Jacana, Bookstorm and Modjaji, have established self-publishing wings to offer publishing services to self-publishers. Big publishing companies in South Africa have not done this as it is not worth their while.

Internationally, traditional publishers have also established self-publishing departments, for example, Penguin Random House UK. Self-publishers thus benefit from the expertise of traditional publishers and produce quality books while traditional publishers get another stream of income. Self-publishing is not competition but complements traditional publishing as there is space for all types of publishing in the publishing ecosystem. However, Company 2 was of the view that traditional publishers are threatened by self-publishers thus they have responded by publishing narrower lists that they know will sell well. Self-publishing is an alternative model of financing that promotes vibrant publishing.

8.13 Conclusion

This chapter has provided an in-depth look at the role and offerings of publishing services companies in South Africa. These companies are vital in empowering authors and self-publishing organizations. These companies offer diverse services – editing, design, distribution, and marketing. They offer authors professional support that can elevate their books' quality and commercial potential. However, it is crucial to distinguish between reputable, professional publishing companies and vanity presses that may prioritize profit over quality. The publishing services industry has evolved to meet the changing demands of authors. As self-publishing continues to grow, the role of these companies will only become more important in supporting authors and shaping the future of the publishing ecosystem.

Chapter 9 Self-published books in retail: Bookshop perspectives

9.1 Introduction

Trade books reach consumers through multiple channels – from traditional bookshops to supermarkets, online retailers, and direct sales (Smith & Bold, 2018; PASA, 2023). In South Africa, distribution companies connect publishers with major bookshop chains such as Exclusive Books and Bargain Books, and independent bookshops such as Adams Books, Love Books, Bridge Books, and The Book Lounge. While online platforms like Amazon, Loot and Takealot have expanded their market presence, physical bookshops, airports, and supermarkets remain the primary sales venues (PASA, 2023). Bookshops were part of this study because they play a crucial role in the publishing value chain by connecting authors, publishers, distributors, and readers. They curate quality content for customers and, as Darnton (1982) notes, serve as cultural intermediaries bridging book supply and consumer demand. This chapter explores the perspectives of three independent bookshop owners and one bookshop chain employee on self-publishing, offering insights into the differences between independent and chain models.

9.2 Description of participants

I interviewed three independent bookshop owners and one bookshop chain employee. The independent bookshops in this study are single-store operations. The owners run the independent bookshops and handle all stock purchasing. Bookshop chains dominate the retail book market in South Africa (PASA, 2023). However, my research participants are skewed toward independent bookshops because they commonly stock self-published books. Independent bookshops stock self-published books primarily because of their community-centred approach and commitment to local authors.

Kelso (2019) argues that independent bookshops prioritize building meaningful customer relationships and community engagement, even when these choices may not maximize short-term profits. By curating diverse collections that include self-published works, independent bookshops create a unique value proposition – they become cultural hubs where readers can discover emerging authors, local voices, and alternative perspectives typically absent from mainstream retail chains. This customer-focused strategy helps them compete with larger retailers while serving their communities' interests and needs. The research participants are described in Table 9.1.

Table 9.1: Bookshop research participants

Bookshop pseudonym	**Bookshop classification**	**Position of research participant**	**Years in bookselling**
Bookshop Owner 1	Independent	Owner	7
Bookshop Owner 2	Independent	Owner	16
Bookshop Owner 3	Independent	Owner	14
Chain Bookshop Employee	Book chain	Employee (Sales representative and children's book coordinator)	25

The bookshop participants in this study (two male, two female) were all white – a demographic that, while reflective of South Africa's historically racially segmented book industry, inevitably limits the perspectives captured. Given the country's majority Black population and ongoing transformation efforts in literary spaces, this homogeneity may affect the generalizability of findings, particularly regarding accessibility, reading cultures, or publishing barriers faced by marginalized groups. Future research could explicitly explore intersectional experiences (race, gender, class) to better represent South Africa's diverse readership.

The research participants bring diverse bookselling expertise, with experience ranging from seven to 25 years. All four participants share a deep passion for books. Bookshop 1 is in Johannesburg CBD, Bookshop 2 is in Cape Town CBD, and Bookshop 3 is situated in a shopping centre in a suburban area west of Johannesburg. The bookshop chain, which operates over 40 stores across South Africa, is primarily located in busy shopping centres or malls. These locations align with Kelso's (2019) assertion that independent bookshops, unlike branches of large chains, often cannot afford prime mall locations. The positioning of these bookshops highlights the importance of location, as they are all situated in high-traffic areas with significant footfall.

As discussed in Chapter 6, trade books rely heavily on visibility within bookshops. When browsers cannot see a book on display, they are unlikely to purchase it, underscoring the critical role of shelf space and prominent placement in driving sales (Hichens, 2012; Christensen, Lueke, Ramirez & Weidner, 2013). This is further supported by Nielsen's data from 2015, which identified in-store browsing as the primary way readers discover new books (Nielsen Company, 2016).

The three independent bookshop founders I interviewed each identified unique market opportunities in their local communities and developed distinct business models to address them. The journey of Bookshop Owner 1 particularly highlights the significant challenges newcomers to the industry face. While pursuing his studies, he uncovered a striking paradox in South Africa's book market: local literature was more readily available through international retailers than local bookshops. Starting with nothing more than determination, he began selling books door-to-door. His breakthrough came through a pivotal relationship with an experienced publisher who became his mentor, offering industry guidance, access to essential resources, and introductions to key industry figures.

Bookshop Owner 1's experience illuminates several critical aspects of South Africa's publishing industry: First, it shows how established networks can block or enable entry into the field. Second, it demonstrates that successful entry often requires more than capital or business acumen – it demands access to industry insiders who can provide guidance and open doors. Third, it reveals how mentorship is crucial in transferring explicit knowledge about business operations and an implicit understanding of industry dynamics. These findings align with and deepen the analysis presented in Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8, which detail how high entry barriers and closed professional networks shape opportunities within the industry.

Bookshop Owner 2 believed that Cape Town needed another independent bookshop. Before opening his store, he had gained experience working in other bookshops and at one of South Africa's largest bookshop chains. His experience offers valuable insights into the differences between independent and chain models, as well as the specific needs of Cape Town's book market. Bookshop Owner 3 had a background in trade publishing, having worked as an editor and as a producer of a book publicity show, which gave her in-depth knowledge of trade books. She was approached by someone interested in entering the bookselling business, and together they opened the bookshop. However, her partner later left, leaving her to manage the shop independently. Her expertise in trade publishing and book publicity brings a unique understanding of how trade books are marketed and sold, which is crucial for exploring the visibility and sales strategies discussed in the study.

The fourth participant was initially employed as a Chain Bookshop Employee when first contacted. However, by the time of the interview, they had left that position. Despite this change in employment status, their insights remained highly relevant, as the interview

focused on her experience working within the chain bookstore environment. With extensive experience in book sales, she had previously worked in the sales department of a publishing house before joining the bookshop chain in 1998. During her tenure there, she held roles as a sales representative and a children's book coordinator, working with new vendors, including self-published authors. She has since transitioned to a role as a sales representative for an independent book distributor, representing independent publishers and self-published authors. Her experience bridges the gap between large-scale retail operations and the independent sector, adding depth to the study's exploration of shelf space, visibility, and consumer behaviour. Her perspectives on chain bookstore operations and consumer interactions contribute to the study's analysis of how different bookselling models function and compete.

The participants' varied yet complementary experiences ensure a comprehensive understanding of the bookselling landscape, making their contributions relevant and valuable to the study. The breadth of knowledge offers a well-rounded perspective on the challenges and dynamics of the bookselling industry, particularly within the South African context. Their insights align closely with the research focus on location, visibility, and consumer behaviour, as well as the broader themes of independent versus chain bookselling dynamics.

9.3 State of the book market in South Africa

The state of the book market in South Africa is crucial because it provides essential context for understanding how bookshops operate and make decisions. The market conditions directly influence bookshops' willingness to stock self-published works and reveal the unique characteristics of the South African publishing industry and factors that affect book sales.

9.3.1 Challenges

Inaccurate statistics in the book industry

All four research participants highlighted that it is difficult to characterize the South African book market because it is complicated, and information is scarce. The little information available is skewed because data collection is inaccurate, as it only focuses on the sale of new books and ignores the sale of second-hand books.

> *Bookshop Owner 1:*
> The data collection on the book industry is bad. I think we tend to ascribe a zero to numbers that we don't know what the book value is … the majority of the market in South Africa is not new books, Nielsen collects data on new books, because that's the thing that's more accessible, … but 80-90% of the market is second-hand books.

This suggests that used book sales comprise a significant portion of overall book sales, but the exact figures are not recorded. Bookshop Owner 1 commented that they used to sell mostly new books but are now selling more used books because they are cheaper, and customers are more price-sensitive, especially because of the economic impact of COVID-19. The demand for affordable, second-hand books has increased, likely driven by tighter household budgets during and after the pandemic.

Although Nielsen BookScan provides useful insights into the industry, Kelso (2019) highlights that independent bookshops rarely subscribe to Nielsen BookScan due to the high costs, which small businesses cannot justify. This systemic exclusion of independent bookshop sales data creates a distorted picture of South Africa's book market, particularly for local titles. Independent bookshops frequently host successful book launches where more than 50 copies are sold, yet these significant sales remain invisible in industry data, undermining the reliability of market insights. This incomplete data affects industry-wide decisions, as publishers and retailers operate on partial information. A potential solution

would be offering affordable BookScan access to smaller bookshops, benefiting both Nielsen through more comprehensive data collection and the industry through more accurate market insights.

Bookshop Owner 1 further indicated that e-book sales statistics are inaccurate because most e-book sales occur through Amazon, which does not provide sales data by country. The estimated 10% e-book market share in South Africa is based on downloads through local websites, but most e-book reading likely happens on Kindle, making this market share figure unreliable. The lack of reliable data in the publishing industry impacts publishing decisions, as publishers make choices based on incomplete information, which can be misleading. For example, publishers might underestimate the market for digital books in certain genres, leading them to limit their e-book offerings or invest insufficiently in digital formats. Similarly, they might misjudge the potential success of local authors whose strong e-book sales through international platforms remain invisible in domestic market data, resulting in missed opportunities for print publications or marketing investments.

State of the economy

All four bookshop participants agreed that the economy in South Africa is depressed, which negatively impacts the book sector because most people are struggling financially and cannot afford to buy books. This concurs with Kelso (2019), who asserts that books are considered luxury items, so sales are vulnerable during economic downturns.

> *Chain Bookshop Employee:*
> The second-hand market is still very active and busy... so it's not that people don't want to read, it's just the affordability which is a major issue… The challenge is always disposable income, so it's a small section of the market that buys new books… And COVID impacted us badly, especially when the bookshops were closed for a little while and people couldn't go to the malls.

According to the Chain Bookshop Employee, the second-hand book market is vibrant in South Africa, suggesting a strong demand for affordable reading options. Many South African readers cannot afford to buy new books due to their high prices, which limits the overall book market growth. Statistics South Africa's 2017-2022 salary data reveals severe income inequality in South Africa. The median monthly salary of R5 417 contrasts sharply with the average of R24 813, showing that half of 13 million workers earn below R5 400. The top 5% earn R35 000 monthly, while the bottom 5% receive just R1 000, highlighting significant economic disparities nationwide (Statistics South Africa, 2022). The average cost of a new book in South Africa is around R300, while the median monthly income is only R5 427. This pricing mismatch has negatively impacted new book sales. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these challenges, as widespread job losses and the closure of bookstores limited access to both new and second-hand books. Bookshops closed for five weeks during the Level 5 lockdown and could not sell or courier books as they were not classified as essential goods (Hlalethwa, 2020). The Chain Bookshop Employee also reported libraries closing due to a lack of funding for new book purchases. In summary, the South African book industry faces structural affordability issues, which the economic impacts of COVID-19 have amplified. While the second-hand book market provides an important alternative for price-sensitive readers, these bookshops are also struggling, with sales remaining below pre-COVID levels and some stores closing permanently.

Barriers to entry

Bookshop Owner 1 argued that there are informal barriers to entry for new entrants in the publishing industry because it is unclear to an outsider how the industry works.

> *Bookshop Owner 1:*
> I think publishing is very opaque, it is very hard for new entrants to figure out how to get into it, whether that's as a bookseller or as an author or publisher … I had a really hard time getting set up because the formal publishing system is not set up for new entrants.

Bookshop Owner 1 faced various barriers when starting, including paperwork, computer systems, and book distribution challenges. He could only establish the bookshop due to his media background and industry contacts. This suggests that new publishing value chain entrants lack the guidance and support to navigate the complex industry. This is supported by Author 7's experience as a self-published author, who struggled to find mentorship. Additionally, while Bookshop Owner 1 could set up a coffee shop within five days, the bookshop took six months to establish. This underscores the complexity and challenges of breaking into the South African book industry. These difficulties align with broader critiques of the sector, where gatekeeping and entrenched systems often stifle innovation and limit diversity. This indicates a clear need for more inclusive and supportive structures to encourage new entrants and amplify fresh perspectives. Addressing these barriers would not only benefit newcomers but also enrich the industry by fostering greater creativity, representation, and growth.

Despite having a good credit profile, Bookshop Owner 1 struggled to secure credit from distributors, reflecting a broader challenge facing South Africa's book industry. As PASA (2023) notes, independent bookshops face systemic barriers to accessing credit and institutional support, largely due to distributors' risk-averse credit policies and the high capital requirements of maintaining book inventory. While these credit constraints affect many small businesses, they are particularly acute in the book industry due to the high inventory cost and slim profit margins.

The book distribution landscape in South Africa is marked by significant complexity and concentrated market power. Distributors play a crucial intermediary role by warehousing books, managing logistics, and providing trade credit to retailers. Unlike in markets such as the UK, where publishers often sell directly to bookshops, South African publishers rely almost exclusively on a small number of major distributors to reach retailers. This concentrated distribution model gives distributors significant market power and allows them to maintain strict credit policies that disproportionately impact independent bookshops.

The opacity of distribution practices appears to serve established industry players rather than promote market efficiency. Distributors' stringent credit requirements and complex ordering processes create barriers to entry for new bookshops, while their consolidated market position reduces pressure to innovate or improve service levels. However, emerging alternatives suggest a potential disruption: self-publishers have partnered with smaller logistics companies and courier services to reach readers directly, demonstrating that more efficient distribution models are possible.

The book sector appears ready for technological and business model innovation in several ways: digital inventory management systems could reduce costs and improve transparency; alternative credit scoring methods could expand access to trade credit; and platform-based solutions could better connect publishers, retailers and logistics providers. These innovations could help create a more dynamic and inclusive book retail sector while preserving the valuable coordinating functions that distributors provide.

Discoverability of books in South Africa

All four bookshops noted that the digital marketplace's saturation makes it challenging for new books to gain visibility. This challenge is particularly evident in self-published titles on

Amazon, as documented by Noorda and Marsden (2019). Traditional book review channels in major publications like *News24, Johannesburg Review of Books, Mail and Guardian,* and *Daily Maverick* have diminished significantly. The Nielsen Company (2016) study reinforces this shift, showing book sales are primarily influenced by word of mouth (44%), online recommendations (40%), and print media reviews (10%).

While South Africa maintains an engaged reading population, combining a crowded digital space and declining traditional marketing channels necessitates innovation in book promotion. Publishers must develop new strategies such as social media influencer partnerships, interactive online book launches, targeted digital advertising campaigns, and community-building initiatives through platforms like Goodreads and BookTok.

9.3.2 Opportunities

Digital transformation and market recovery

All four bookshops highlighted that the book market showed mixed recovery post-COVID-19. Nielsen BookScan (2023) reported a 7.7% decrease in volume but 1.2% growth in market value, indicating higher per-book spending. Publishers reduced output amid inflation while retailers adapted through social media, particularly TikTok's #BookTok, which Exclusive Books leveraged for engagement. Kaabwe (2020) noted increased online physical book sales and independent bookshops' shift to e-commerce.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated online book sales, presenting a crucial survival strategy for bookshops. Bookshop Owners 2 and 3 recognized online sales and delivery as key growth opportunities, with digital platforms enabling sales during lockdown. Platforms like Collectors Treasury successfully leveraged online marketplaces such as ABE and Amazon. Exclusive Books partnered with Uber Eats to deliver books resulting in a 40% higher delivery

demand (Kaabwe, 2020). While Bookshop Owner 2 thrived through online sales by reaching new customers, Bookshop Owner 3 struggled with implementation due to staffing constraints. This digital divide became a key competitive factor, demonstrating that online sales capability is essential for sustainable book retail.

Diversity in publications

Bookshop Owner 1 asserted that the rise of self-publishing reveals significant gaps in mainstream publishing's output. Although comprehensive data on self-publishing in South Africa is limited, Bookshop Owners 1, 2, and 3 observed that self-published books often represent stories and perspectives absent from traditional publishing lists. This raises important questions about market dynamics and publishing decisions. While publishers aim to maximize profits through their book selections, there appears to be a disconnect between market demand and current publishing outputs.

There is growing diversity in children's books, but adult literature shows less transformation. Industry data shows that mainstream publishers still predominantly publish established writers, with a significant skew toward middle-class White authors (Moller, 2014; Miya, 2023). This pattern likely reflects complex factors including established author networks, perceived commercial risk in new voices, and historical industry relationships. Self-publishing has emerged as an alternative platform for diverse voices, particularly young Black writers. While the book market is recovering post-pandemic, sustained sales growth remains uncertain. Self-publishing demonstrates a robust demand for storytelling that challenges existing publishing norms, suggesting the industry must comprehensively evolve to represent South Africa's diverse narrative landscape.

9.4 Factors that influence book stocking decisions

Bookshop selection strategies reveal complex challenges in book retail. While all four bookshops sell new books, Bookshop Owner 1 uniquely offers new and used titles. Bookshop owners and employees rely on imperfect selection methods, choosing stock based on descriptions, authors, and sales representatives' recommendations. Research participants recognized inherent limitations in their selection process, acknowledging that non-fiction typically outsells fiction and that South African non-fiction requires prioritization. This is supported by the Nielsen annual summary for 2023, which provides clear insights into the South African book market: trade non-fiction dominated at 43.8% of market value, followed by adult fiction at 25.3%, children/YA literature at 20%, and educational materials at 3.7%. Adult fiction showed the strongest growth at 7.4%, while trade non-fiction grew by 4.3%. Local titles performed particularly well in non-fiction categories (Nielsen BookScan, 2024). The absence of a foolproof stocking method underscores the nuanced art of book retail. This aligns with Kelso (2019), who argues that bookselling, while a retail business, has unique challenges. Success requires specialized knowledge and experience in selecting marketable titles.

Bookshop owners and employees evaluate potential stock through sales potential, author track record, market needs, and cultural significance. Quality assessment includes design, printing, editing, and physical presentation. While South African readers show price sensitivity, certain categories command premium prices, as demonstrated by *The President's Keepers*, an investigative book by Jacques Pauw published by NB Publishers in 2017. The book was priced at R340–R375 but sold 138 000 copies between 2010–2020 (Nielsen BookScan, 2023). Bookshop Owner 2 highlighted that booksellers can actively influence market dynamics, not just respond to them. While commercial viability remains crucial, they deliberately stock important works and emerging authors despite uncertain sales potential,

viewing their role as both cultural curators and market makers. Through strategic display, staff recommendations, and targeted promotions, booksellers can help create demand for diverse voices and challenging works that might otherwise struggle to find an audience. This approach reflects a deeper understanding of bookselling as cultural activism, where commercial and cultural imperatives can work together.

All four interviewees agreed that the needs of the market where a bookshop is located determine the type of books that a bookshop stocks. Bookstores in various areas serve diverse customer bases, as there is no universal reader profile in South Africa due to the wide range of reading preferences among individuals. Bookshop Owner 1 is in Johannesburg CBD and said:

> *Bookshop Owner 1*:
> We look at the publication and whether it will match our market, because people don't think about the CBD this way, but it's a fairly competitive space.

The market comprises potential customers who frequent a particular area and purchase books. This dynamic suggests that a bookshop's location significantly influences its inventory, as booksellers must carefully curate their selections to align with local customer preferences, considering factors such as genre, language, and subject matter. Bookshop Owners 1, 2, and 3 have extensive experience in the book sector, providing them with nuanced insights into market dynamics and customer behaviour.

Notably, Bookshop Owner 3 acknowledged a personal element in selection, emphasizing individual reading preferences as a key driver of stocking decisions. The Chain Bookshop Employee maintained that the bookshop chain's book inventory is market dependent. However, Bookshop Owner 1 challenged this perspective, arguing that the bookshop chain reproduces identical inventory across different markets. This disagreement reveals the

complexity of book retailing, and the diverse strategies booksellers use in inventory management. Booksellers rely on multiple guides for inventory selection: sales data, customer feedback, regional reading trends, bestseller lists, and personal curation. Book stocking emerges from a sophisticated interplay of empirical sales information and a nuanced understanding of local readership.

The chain bookshop's book selection differs slightly from independent bookshops with complete autonomy. The chain bookshop only orders books from suppliers registered as vendors with the head office. The chain bookshop evaluates vendors based on several quality factors: production quality, binding, editing, subject matter, cover design, proper placement of barcodes and ISBNs, and spine design (particularly crucial for children's books to enable shelf display). However, there are always exceptions, as they stock some comics that do not have a spine. The bookshop chain does not order books centrally; each bookshop manager decides what to stock in their shop. However, if the product manager at the head office feels strongly about a book or if a book is on promotion, the head office can override store managers and order the book for all stores. Individual branches enhance their appeal by selecting and displaying bestsellers and popular titles, focusing on books with proven commercial success to maximize sales and meet customer demand. The Chain Bookshop Employee highlighted that the paperwork to be registered as a vendor is very simple. This contrasts with Author 3, who said it was tedious and complicated, so she never filled out the forms. This discrepancy likely stems from differing perspectives and experiences.

The discussion on stocking decisions highlights that bookshops determine their stock through a multifaceted approach. Bookshop stocking decisions reflect Kelso's (2019) emphasis on comprehensive market analysis using sales history, author performance, and customer preferences. Commercial factors include publisher promotions, discounts, sale-or-return

options, and remainder stock opportunities. Trade terms and local market pricing also influence inventory selection.

9.5 Stocking of self-published books

All four bookshops stock traditional and self-published books but prefer traditionally published books due to significant production quality and administration challenges with self-published titles.

9.5.1 Selection criteria and quality assessment for self-published books

Due to limited time and resources, all four bookshops use rapid assessment methods to evaluate self-published books for potential stocking. Rather than reading entire books, booksellers rely on quick visual and tactile evaluations focusing on key external indicators: cover design, production quality, back cover synopsis, and a brief review of interior pages for obvious writing or stylistic issues. This cursory examination serves as a proxy for quality assessment, effectively treating the book's presentation as a direct reflection of its content.

Traditional publishers provide advance information sheets detailing a book's specifications, market potential, and author information – essential documentation that is frequently missing from self-published works. The visual presentation usually outweighs literary content in initial evaluations in the self-publishing market. As discussed in Chapter 5, book covers serve as crucial marketing tools, with Iwana et al. (2016) noting that they signal content, target readerships, shape expectations, and drive purchasing decisions both in stores and online.

9.5.2 Discovery of self-published books and market demand

All four bookshops identify promising self-published titles through diverse channels, including literary competitions, local writing group recommendations, Goodreads reader reviews, professional author submissions, and online sales rankings. Some actively engage

with independent publishing communities by attending conferences and maintaining relationships with local writing groups to source exceptional works.

The bookshop chain has a nuanced approach. It is willing to stock high-quality self-published books with clear market demand, contrary to the perception that the chain categorically rejects independent publications.

> *Chain Bookshop Employee:*
> They don't have an official stance, but they will take it on if it is of good quality, people want it, and there have been some requests for it.

Authors 1 and 6's success in placing their self-published works in stores exemplifies how proven reader interest can overcome traditional stocking barriers. Carolan and Evain (2013) emphasize that successful self-publishing requires active reader engagement through social media presence, book readings, and direct reader interaction. Independent bookshops show greater openness to self-published authors than bookshop chains, likely due to their shared independent status and willingness to support promising local authors. Raffaelli (2017) identifies three key strategies that distinguish independent bookshops: personalized curation reflecting community interests, establishment as cultural community hubs, and hosting interactive events like author signings and book clubs. These activities drive sales and strengthen the bookshop's community role in ways online retailers cannot match.

The success of authors like Dudu Busani-Dube, whose works were stocked across all four studied bookshops due to customer demand, demonstrates the vital importance of author-driven marketing. As Bookshop Owner 3 noted, they began stocking Busani-Dube's books after receiving requests from non-regular customers – a detail that suggests stocking self-published titles may help attract new demographics or expand a shop's customer base beyond its usual clientele. Given bookshops' limited promotional resources, successful self-published

book placement ultimately depends on the author's professional profile, targeted marketing strategy, and book content quality.

9.5.3 Quality standards in self-published books

All four bookshops agreed that it is challenging to stock self-published books because, unlike traditionally published books, there is no quality assurance.

> *Bookshop Owner 3:*
> If it [book] comes from [traditional publisher], I know someone has read it, they've thought about it and decided that this has a chance to be a commercially viable project. It has been edited, typeset, and everything has been done on the production side so I could order reasonably confidently because I know that those things are in place. If someone comes to me with a self-published work, most of the time, those things are not in place.

As observed in earlier chapters, the quality of self-published books is not always good. This could be due to the author's limited knowledge of the publishing process and no curation, as only one person decides to self-publish. Mainstream published books are curated; they are checked for commercial viability, professionally edited, and typeset, guaranteeing a quality baseline compared to self-published books.

While all four research participants acknowledged significant variation in self-published book quality, they observed that most failed to meet industry standards. Bookshop Owner 2 noted:

> *Bookshop Owner 2:*
> There are some books that are self-published which are a lot better than some of the books that we get from established publishers.

Bookshop Owner 2's observation is supported by Shumake (2017) who argues that most self-published works match traditionally published books in quality. However, all four participants reported that most self-published books fall below industry standards, primarily because authors lack access to professional curation and quality control processes. Common

issues with self-published books include production flaws (misprints, poor binding, inadequate margins); design problems (subpar covers, missing ISBNs); and content issues (writing style, editing, proofreading errors).

Bookshop Owners 2 and 3 attributed poor quality in self-published books to authors' unfamiliarity with publishing processes and lack of resources to hire professional editors and proofreaders. These challenges align with the author experiences documented in Chapters 5 and 6.

> *Bookshop Owner 2:*
> Quality ranges from absolutely terrible, with all sorts of mistakes on every page, with a dreadful cover, through to superb… the big part of that story is about how relatively wealthy or financially secure the author is, and the extent to which they can afford to pay for decent editors and decent printing. People talk about how self-publishing democratizes the publishing industry because anybody can do it... It hasn't democratized anything. It's just made it easier for people with money to publish books.

Self-publishing reveals a critical socioeconomic divide in literary production. While it appears as if the process democratizes publishing, it privileges authors with financial resources who can afford high-quality publishing services. Wealthy authors can produce professionally crafted books that meet industry standards, while those with limited means struggle to create marketable publications. This echoes the experiences of Authors 5 and 7, when they first self-published. This exposes a normative publishing framework prioritizing structural perfection over potentially innovative narratives. By valuing aesthetic polish and professional presentation, the industry risks systematically excluding important works that challenge conventional literary expectations. The self-publishing ecosystem paradoxically reproduces traditional publishing's gatekeeping mechanisms, using economic barriers to control literary access. This raises fundamental questions about artistic representation and the complex relationship between economic privilege and creative expression.

Bookshop Owner 1 argued that readers prioritize narrative engagement over strict grammatical precision. However, this observation needs careful distinction: while readers readily embrace authentic linguistic variation – including non-standard English dialects, township vernacular, code-switching, and idiomatic expressions – they remain resistant to basic grammatical errors. This is particularly relevant in South Africa's multilingual context, where diverse linguistic landscapes risk being flattened by overly rigid editorial standards. The challenge lies in preserving authentic cultural and linguistic expression while maintaining clear communication and avoiding unintentional errors.

Standardizing language can be a form of cultural erasure, silencing emerging voices and distinctive narrative styles. New writers often communicate powerfully through their unique linguistic expressions – grammatical 'errors' might be deliberate strategies of cultural representation and storytelling. The tension lies in distinguishing between genuine linguistic creativity and poor communication. While excessive errors can indeed impede comprehension, rigid grammatical enforcement risks marginalizing innovative narrative approaches that reflect complex social realities. A nuanced approach would recognize that linguistic 'correctness' is a culturally constructed concept, often reflecting dominant cultural perspectives that can systematically exclude marginalized voices.

9.5.4 Administrative challenges in stocking self-published books

All four research participants identified significant administrative burdens associated with stocking self-published books. Managing individual author relationships demands considerable staff time and creates complex communication channels, in contrast to the consolidated approach offered by traditional publishing houses through dedicated sales representatives. The challenges extend to handling smaller print runs, which increase per-unit

costs and complicate inventory management, while inconsistent distribution channels impede reliable stock replenishment. Traditional publishers streamline these operations through comprehensive solutions: standardized distribution systems with reliable delivery schedules, automated reordering processes, consistent metadata across titles, and consolidated billing systems. These established processes allow bookshops to focus on customer service rather than complex logistics.

Major bookstore chains remain hesitant to stock self-published works, citing quality concerns and individualized handling complications. Although digital platforms and print-on-demand services have improved accessibility, self-published authors still face barriers to mainstream distribution channels, events, awards, and reviews. As Bookshop Owner 3 noted:

> *Bookshop Owner 3:*
> Self-publishing is very difficult to manage. There's a big admin component which is not worth it for the bookseller…

Even highly successful self-published authors like Dudu Busani-Dube face barriers to mainstream distribution channels, events, awards, and reviews. Gibixego (2021) advocates for better industry integration of self-publishers. The administrative burden extends to financial processes. Self-published authors often lack an understanding of professional invoicing, forcing bookshop accounts departments to invest significant time in follow-up and reconciliation. Common challenges include VAT registration issues – where unregistered authors do not account for the necessary 15% markup – and misunderstandings about consignment terms, where payment occurs only after sales.

A centralized distribution platform for self-published books could potentially resolve these administrative barriers. Such a collective distributor would standardize invoicing, manage financial transactions, ensure quality control, and provide a streamlined interface for

bookshops. However, this model risks contradicting the independent spirit of self-publishing by introducing a bureaucratic intermediary. The proposed solution represents both an opportunity and a potential constraint. While aggregation could solve practical challenges, it might simultaneously reduce the autonomy and directness most self-published authors value. The ideal model must balance administrative efficiency with creative independence, potentially offering a flexible platform for both bookshops' operational needs and authors' publishing aspirations.

All four booksellers highlighted that they are consistently burdened with educating self-publishers about the book industry's complex mechanics. Self-publishers often harbour unrealistic expectations, misunderstanding fundamental market dynamics, sales potential, and financial processes. These knowledge gaps create significant administrative challenges, revealing a profound disconnect between self-publishers' aspirations and market realities. Clear, upfront communication is necessary for creating a more transparent and functional publishing ecosystem. The persistent need to explain industry intricacies suggests that self-publishing requires creative writing skills and a sophisticated understanding of book market economics.

9.5.5 Order quantities

Research participants approach self-published titles with calculated caution, limiting their initial stock to between two and ten copies. These modest initial orders reflect the inherent risk associated with new, unproven titles. The quantity ordered directly correlates with the author's established reputation and anticipated market demand. For well-known authors with proven readership, bookshops will significantly increase their initial order, reflecting confidence in potential sales. Conversely, unknown authors are usually limited to minimal stock – often just two copies – which serves as a market testing mechanism. Subsequent

orders demonstrate a dynamic responsiveness to market reception. Follow-up orders can range from 2 to 50 copies, calibrated to emerging sales patterns and customer interest. This adaptive ordering strategy allows bookshops to minimize financial risk while remaining responsive to reader preferences. The approach represents a nuanced balance between supporting new literary voices and maintaining commercial viability, with each order carefully considered against potential market performance.

9.5.6 Payment terms

The three independent bookshops that were part of this study operate under three payment models: firm-order (30–60-day payment terms)[8], sale-or-return[9], and consignment[10]. While they primarily stock self-published books on a consignment basis, this model creates operational challenges. Consignment requires tracking individual sales and managing unsold inventory, sometimes for up to a year. The bookshops aim to minimize consignment arrangements due to these administrative burdens. Notably, Bookshop Owner 3 reported feeling pressured by self-published authors to accept consignment terms, indicating reluctance rather than strategic choice in these arrangements.

Practical complications further complicate consignment arrangements. Some authors are unresponsive when books do not sell, and the cost of returning unsold books via courier is prohibitive. Consequently, unsold books accumulate, taking up valuable retail space and creating additional logistical challenges for bookshops. These challenges underscore why bookshops increasingly seek more streamlined approaches to managing self-published inventory.

[8] The bookshop purchases stock outright and assumes the risk of unsold inventory.
[9] The shop pays only for copies sold, returning unsold stock to the publisher/distributor.
[10] The publisher retains ownership of stock until sold, with payment remitted post-sale (common for self-published/local authors).

The book chain distinguishes itself by exclusively using sale-or-return or firm-order models. The sale-or-return process extends between 4–12 months, during which books can become damaged. Suppliers often refuse to accept returns of compromised inventory. If a book remains unsold within a specified timeframe, the bookshop returns it to the supplier and receives a credit. The sale-or-return and consignment models create competing incentives for bookshops. While it reduces financial risk and enables diverse inventory, it can encourage over-ordering and strain operational resources, particularly for small retailers. Bookshops handle this challenge differently: Bookshop Owners 1 and 3 rarely accept consignment, the Chain Bookshop does not accept consignment, and Bookshop Owner 2 takes calculated risks by purchasing 3–5 copies upfront and using markdowns when needed. The consignment model requires managing strict return conditions and complex financial tracking, although many retailers accept these administrative burdens in exchange for flexibility in stocking decisions (Nielsen Company, 2016; Kelso, 2019).

Payment models create significant financial challenges, particularly for small independent bookshops and self-publishers, whose cash flow can be severely impacted by delayed payments and uncertain sales. Large publishers and distributors, by contrast, can absorb these financial uncertainties more easily, maintaining extensive credit lines and diverse inventory. Specialized distributors focusing on self-published books are emerging as critical intermediaries, simplifying refund processes and providing more streamlined financial arrangements for bookshops. These distributors effectively mitigate the economic risks associated with stocking independent publications.

9.5.7 Discounts

The discount that bookshops receive from suppliers varies based on the publisher’s size and the book’s genre, whether educational, trade, or academic. Book suppliers and bookshops

negotiate discounts. Discounts vary between 30%–50%. Textbooks get a smaller discount that can be as low as 20%. Academic publishers offer 35% discount. Small publishers or self-published authors get 30–40% discount. Big publishers mostly give 45% discount and can offer up to 50% discount. Most self-publishers are unaware of these bookshop discounts that eat into the proceeds from their books. Discounts are discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

9.6 Book sales

Research participants reported limited sales data for self-published books, with only a few titles achieving notable success. Most self-published authors, like their traditionally published counterparts in South Africa, cannot make a living from writing alone. This aligns with Carolan and Evain's (2013) and Shumake's (2017) findings that self-published books typically have modest sales due to intense competition from various media formats. Notable exceptions exist, such as Dudu Busani-Dube's *Hlomu* series. Bookshop Owner 1 noted that their largest single order of this series was 320 copies for a gift purchase. The distribution landscape is evolving, with companies like Protea Books now handling self-published works nationwide, reducing individual store exclusivity but potentially expanding reach. However, the Chain Bookshop Employee emphasized that successful promotion remains crucial for securing shelf space.

Independent bookshop owners agreed that bestseller lists are not useful to them because they sell a lot of single or two copies of a book. The concept of bestsellers is usually used by publishers to promote books. Bookshop Owners 1, 2 and 3 noted that their bestsellers are mostly fiction books. Bookshop Owner 2 argued that this shift from non-fiction is because people are running away from the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. Bookshop Owner 1's bestsellers are mostly books by self-published Black women authors. Bookshop Owner 1's

bestseller amounts vary from 100–200 copies; Bookshop Owner 2's vary from 100–800 copies; and Bookshop Owner 3's vary from 100–500 copies.

9.7 Conclusion

The relationship between self-published authors and traditional bookshops in South Africa reveals complex dynamics shaped by market conditions, operational constraints, and evolving industry practices. The South African book market, while showing resilience, faces significant challenges, including limited readership, price sensitivity, and logistical hurdles that affect both traditional and self-published works. These market conditions create a particularly challenging environment for self-published authors seeking retail presence.

The research findings demonstrate that bookshops' stocking decisions are influenced by multiple interconnected factors. While quality and marketability remain paramount, administrative considerations significantly impact self-published books' retail accessibility. Traditional publishers' established systems for distribution, metadata management, and financial transactions contrast sharply with the resource-intensive processes required to handle individual self-published works. This disparity creates substantial barriers for independent authors, even when their work meets quality standards. However, the study reveals that these barriers are not insurmountable. Success stories like Dudu Busani-Dube's demonstrate that self-published authors can secure widespread retail presence when combining quality content with effective marketing and proven market demand. Independent bookshops show a greater willingness to support local self-published authors, suggesting potential opportunities for strategic partnerships. The findings highlight a critical need for infrastructure development in the self-publishing sector. A centralized distribution system could address many administrative challenges while maintaining authors' creative

independence. However, such solutions must carefully balance operational efficiency with the entrepreneurial spirit that characterizes self-publishing.

Comprehensive integration of self-published books into traditional retail spaces will depend on continued evolution in both sectors. Bookshops must develop more flexible systems for handling independent publications, while self-published authors must increasingly professionalize their production, marketing, and distribution. The future success of self-published books in traditional retail spaces will rely on bridging the gap between authors' creative aspirations and the practical realities of commercial bookselling. This research contributes to understanding the complexities of modern book retail and suggests areas for future investigation, particularly regarding sustainable models for integrating self-published works into traditional retail channels. As the publishing industry continues to evolve, finding effective solutions to these challenges will become increasingly important for the vitality of South Africa's literary landscape.

Chapter 10 Reader interactions with self-published books

10.1 Introduction

Readers were part of this study because their perspectives are valuable for understanding book market dynamics and audience preferences, providing authors with crucial insights for their creative and business decisions. This is particularly important in self-publishing, where authors must invest in cover design, editing, and marketing. Reader data helps identify market opportunities and guides content, pricing, and distribution decisions. As Darnton (1982, 2007) points out, reading behaviour remains complex and somewhat mysterious, raising fundamental questions about how readers select books, engage with content, and evolve their reading practices. Reader insights are essential for publishers and authors seeking to optimise their approach in the publishing marketplace. This chapter examines two readers' interactions with self-published books in South Africa, revealing complex dynamics in reading preferences and experiences.

10.2 Description of participants

I interviewed two Black female avid readers who also run book clubs. Reader 1 runs a digital book club and reads 4–6 books monthly. Reader 2 runs an in-person book club and reads about 25 books monthly. Reader 2 is also a publisher who has published a collection of stories on widowhood and sits on many boards of organisations that promote book development and reading, thus she has multi-faceted views of book publishing. The publishing landscape has evolved significantly from Darnton's (1982) linear communications circuit, with readers now able to interact directly with authors, self-publish, and purchase books directly from publishers. This has led to a more complex, decentralized value chain

where traditional publisher control has diminished. Authors can now reach readers without intermediaries, reshaping the relationships between publishers, readers, and authors.

10.3 Reading preferences

Reading preferences for both readers are shaped by publishers' promotions of new releases, Bookstagram challenges, and recommendations, highlighting the marketing impact on book sales discussed in Chapters 6, 7, and 8. Reader 1 primarily focuses on South African and African literature, strongly supporting local storytelling. However, she seldom purchases self-published books due to their limited availability in stores and the additional courier costs when buying directly from authors. This challenge became evident when I struggled to acquire self-published books for book review as part of this study. I also incurred extra courier fees, which significantly increased the overall cost of the books (see Appendix B). This behaviour aligns with the analysis of consumer price sensitivity discussed in Chapter 9. The reading barometer confirms demand for local books, emphasizing that representation matters to readers, although many desired titles remain unavailable (Polzer-Ngwato, Shilakoe, Morse & Huston, 2023). Mavimbela, a street bookseller based in Johannesburg, confirms a high demand for books by Black authors, despite challenges in sourcing these at affordable prices (Griffin, 2016). Self-published books in South Africa are often unavailable in physical bookstores, making them challenging to locate (Harris, 2019). The resulting cycle is problematic: self-published African authors struggle with distribution and cost barriers, while readers miss out on emerging voices that often arise through self-publishing channels.

Reader 2 primarily reads self-published books due to their relatable content, aligning with Carolan and Evain's (2013) observation of increasing reader acceptance of self-published works.

> *Reader 2:*
> The bulk of the books that I read come from the self-publishing industry … I'm a Black girl from the township. Yes, I love reading big literary works, but I'm also very excited when I read a story by someone who comes from where I come from, about a place that I come from, and issues that are unique to me ...

This quote reveals the importance of representation in books. The reader seeks out self-published works because they often provide authentic stories that reflect her lived experience as a Black woman from a township. This suggests that readers actively seek stories that reflect their experiences and cultural perspectives. Self-publishing has helped meet this demand by filling gaps in the traditional market, particularly by bringing forward voices and narratives that mainstream publishers have historically overlooked. This explains the popularity of Dudu Busani-Dube's self-published books, as noted by Readers 1 and 2. Busani-Dube's success stemmed from her relatable storytelling, her engaged Facebook community of readers, and her effective book promotion and distribution strategies (Harris, 2019). Busani-Dube's success suggests that reading habits are influenced by content relevance rather than socioeconomic status alone, indicating that readers engage with stories that resonate with their experiences. This highlights a key value of self-publishing: it creates space for voices and perspectives that might be underrepresented in traditional publishing. While mainstream literary works have their place, self-published stories can offer more intimate, culturally specific narratives that deeply resonate with readers with similar backgrounds.

Reader 2's enthusiasm for stories 'about a place that I come from and issues that are unique to me' shows why self-published works matter. These works may address township life, local cultural experiences, and specific community challenges in ways that mainstream published books might not capture with the same authenticity and nuance. It is particularly notable that

despite the previously mentioned barriers to accessing self-published works in South Africa (like higher costs and distribution challenges), this reader still prioritizes seeking them out. This suggests she values finding stories that truly reflect her community and experiences.

Both readers confirmed that price plays a crucial role in their book-buying decisions. Reader 1 aligned with Bookshop 1's view that publishers and authors must innovate distribution methods to improve affordability. While Reader 2 acknowledged price sensitivity, she noted that readers will invest in books they value, echoing booksellers' perspectives examined in Chapter 9. This reveals that while readers are price-conscious, their purchasing decisions are driven by perceived value rather than cost alone.

> *Reader 2:*
> Readers will pay, we will pay. We will first complain about price … but we will pay if it is value for money … Price is a huge factor, but readers will pay, especially self-published authors. People buy and the authors create packages…

The specific mention that readers 'especially' buy from self-published authors may indicate a tendency toward reader loyalty to independent writers. This could suggest that self-published works are often seen as providing good value despite potentially higher prices. To address delivery costs, self-publishers have developed package deals to reduce courier fees – a strategy also employed by Author 1, as detailed in Chapter 6. This shows that self-published authors adapt to market challenges by developing creative pricing and distribution solutions. This demonstrates a responsive relationship between authors and their readership – they understand the price sensitivity but also find ways to make their books more accessible through bundled offerings.

Readers may make value-based purchasing decisions and invest in worthwhile books, especially when authors offer flexible buying options. However, this perspective must be

considered within South Africa's context of economic inequality. As Reader 1's experience shows, the cost of self-published books can be prohibitive. The higher prices stem from two main factors: courier fees for delivery and the inherently higher unit costs from small print runs as self-published authors try to recover their investment quickly. This pricing reality effectively excludes many potential readers from accessing self-published works.

The significance of book promotion and events in driving sales emerged as a key theme in both readers' experiences. The importance of book promotion was discussed in Chapters 6-9. Reader 2 highlighted the emotional significance of book launches and author interactions:

> *Reader 2:*
> As a reader, I like my books signed and it means a lot to go to a book launch. I will always buy the book just to have it signed.

Reader 1's experience further demonstrates the impact of promotional events. She purchased a self-published book during a book tour despite being initially deterred by its cover design. These experiences highlight how direct author-reader engagement through events can overcome other marketing barriers and significantly influence purchasing decisions.

10.4 Book reviews and promotions

Reader 1 posts content on books on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, the book club website, and TikTok to encourage people to read. She also holds an online book discussion on Instagram or WhatsApp once per month, where they discuss one book.

> *Reader 1:*
> I encourage people to read, and share information on new books, what I'm currently reading and my love for reading… I love making noise about books, especially South African and African books… I consider myself a content creator in the literature space.

Reader 1 reflects a genuine passion for literature, particularly South African and African books, and highlights her role as an advocate for reading and storytelling. This positions her as a valuable book influencer and supports the growth of African literary voices.

Reader 2 runs an in-person book club, which has 15 women members. The book club meets monthly to discuss one book that every member has read, to make it worthwhile for the members. She has developed an innovative hybrid model for book discussions that successfully engages 50–60 participants, a notable achievement for a reading community. Through her commitment to hosting four weekly book chats, she creates consistent opportunities for literary engagement. Her approach combines her love of reading with public outreach, as she deliberately shares her reading experiences to inspire others. This structured yet accessible format serves multiple purposes: it builds a sustained reading community, makes literature more approachable for new readers, and actively promotes reading culture. By sharing her enjoyment of books, she acts as both a facilitator and fellow reader, helping to break down barriers that might prevent people from engaging with literature. The hybrid nature of these discussions likely makes them more accessible, allowing participants to join in ways that best suit their circumstances. At the same time, the regular weekly schedule helps maintain momentum and participant engagement.

> *Reader 2:*
> I'm very passionate about our stories and the book value chain, from where the stories come from to how they reach the readers and how the readers interact with them.

These two readers reveal different but complementary approaches to promoting reading. Reader 1 uses multiple social media platforms to create literary content, hosts online book discussions, and focuses on African and South African literature. In contrast, Reader 2 employs a hybrid model, combining traditional in-person book club meetings, hybrid

discussions, social media platforms, and four weekly book chats. Despite their different methods, both readers aim to build reading communities and encourage engagement with literature. Their approaches show the development of book reading, where traditional reading groups incorporate digital elements while new online literary communities emerge, collectively expanding access to and engagement with literature.

Both readers receive complimentary books from self-publishers, traditional publishers, and retail stores in exchange for reviews and promotions on their online platforms. Both readers prioritize reading for pleasure over reviewing and often decline review requests due to volume constraints. As book influencers, the two readers represent a growing trend of individuals building substantial online followings to shape followers' opinions and behaviours (Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020; Tukia, 2022). These influencers, particularly on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, have become vital to the publishing industry, transforming how books are marketed and discovered (Jensen, 2022; Obreja & Manolică, 2024). Through viral recommendations and engaging content, they drive significant sales – a phenomenon especially evident in the rise of BookTok, where a single video can turn a book into a bestseller. Their ability to reach younger readers is particularly valuable, as they communicate about books in ways that resonate with digital-native generations, often through short-form videos, aesthetic photography, or engaging reviews.

Digital platforms like Goodreads, book bloggers, and influencers have emerged as important curators in publishing, particularly for self-published works (Thomlison & Bélanger, 2015). While these platforms provide valuable promotional opportunities, their impact varies based on authentic audience connections, with ongoing debates about whether trending content emphasis overshadows literary merit (Afolabi & Zolkepli, 2023). As traditional publisher gatekeeping diminishes, these platforms can serve as quality filters and shape perceptions of

literary value, creating a new grassroots gatekeeping system where the reading public collectively determines which works succeed.

The case of Jackie Phamotse, who successfully transitioned from self-publishing to securing a traditional publishing deal, illustrates the complexities of this evolving landscape. Phamotse has now halted sending books to influencers, citing poor return on investment (6 reviews from 50 packages at R1 300 each), superficial engagement, and problematic attitudes (Phamotse, 2024). This shift in strategy reflects broader concerns about influencer marketing, with Obreja and Manolică (2024) emphasizing the need for careful regulation to protect consumers and maintain ethical standards in digital advertising.

Publishers usually use product seeding – providing free books to influencers and content creators for reviews – as an alternative to monetary compensation (Edelman & Salsber, 2010; Pophal, 2016; Mattke, Müller & Maier, 2019; Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020). However, Reader 1 found this compensation method inadequate for the work involved in creating content like book reviews, reading vlogs, aesthetic photography, themed recommendation lists, and social media posts.

> *Reader 1:*
> They don't pay us; I feel like publishers think that giving us some books for free is paying us… South African publishers and bookstores don't have a fair way to compensate a person who dedicates their time making noise about the books that they publish…

According to Reader 1, book promoters and reviewers incur significant costs in their work, from time investment to internet connectivity expenses that often exceed the value of complimentary books. When Reader 1 discusses payment or shares her rates with publishers and retailers, she frequently faces silence or loses opportunities for future collaboration. While traditional publishers resist compensating promoters fairly, independent authors,

despite limited marketing budgets, demonstrate a greater willingness to pay for these essential promotional services.

Reader 1's experiences highlight a critical issue in the South African publishing industry: the lack of fair compensation for book promoters, reviewers, and literary influencers. Getting free books as the only form of 'payment' severely undervalues the essential work of promoting literature, from thoughtful reading and analysis to creating engaging content and building dedicated readerships. The publishing industry stands to gain significantly from promoters who help cultivate a vibrant reading culture and expand the market for local literature (Jensen, 2022; Obreja & Manolică, 2024). Book promotion demands considerable expertise, time investment, and creative energy – crafting nuanced reviews, maintaining dynamic social media presences, and fostering active communities around books. South African publishers need to evolve their compensation practices to properly recognize and reward the value that promoters bring to the literary ecosystem.

In contrast, Reader 2 viewed the complimentary books as sufficient compensation for her promotional work, finding value in both the financial savings and the opportunity to share her passion for literature with a wider audience. Their divergent perspectives on compensation may stem from their different circumstances – Reader 1 relies on book promotion as a source of income, while Reader 2's full-time employment allows her to approach book reviewing as a rewarding hobby enriched by free access to new releases.

> *Reader 2:*
> They don't pay me, but I've saved a lot. Books cost money and I get, like, 25 books a month. That is a lot of money coming my way. Formally reviewing books is something that I've always done, and I have these fantastic social media platforms where I share what I have loved from a book with the rest of the world.

Reader 2's perspective reveals an interesting counterpoint on the book promotion compensation debate. There is recognition of the tangible value received through free books – getting 25 books monthly represents significant savings that might otherwise impact a reviewer's budget. Reader 2 seems to have found a sustainable balance, where their genuine passion for reviewing combines with the material benefit of building a personal library. However, this raises questions about whether free books are sufficient compensation for professional promotional work. While the monetary value of these books is real, it does not address other costs such as time, internet connectivity, and the expertise required to build and maintain engaging social media platforms.

When publishers commission Reader 2 for book discussions, they provide monetary compensation. She chooses to offer these services pro bono for self-publishers and literary organizations as her contribution to the community. The publishing industry encompasses both reviewers who seek payment and those who pursue it as a passion project. Publishers should establish fair compensation structures for book bloggers and reviewers who request payment, acknowledging the time, resources, and expertise invested in their work. Readers and reviewers connect books and audiences, strengthening the entire publishing ecosystem through engagement and advocacy.

10.5 The South African publishing industry

10.5.2 Lack of transformation and diversity

Both readers agreed that while South Africa's publishing industry is experiencing growth and showing promising developments, traditional publishers still face significant challenges in achieving transformation and diversity. Several researchers agree that the publishing industry still lacks full transformation in Black ownership, demographic representation, and cultural diversity (Moller, 2014; Gibixego, 2021; PASA, 2022; Miya, 2023). This gap has led to the

emergence of self-publishing and independent publishers such as Blackbird Books, founded by Thabiso Mahlape in 2015, to deliberately amplify marginalized voices in South African literature (Miya, 2023). Under Mahlape's leadership, Blackbird has become a pivotal platform for diverse narratives, publishing groundbreaking works by authors that challenge mainstream publishing norms. Gibixego (2021) advocates for decentralizing the publishing value chain and strengthening connections between small publishers, self-published authors, and industry stakeholders to achieve comprehensive transformation.

10.5.2 Lack of reliable statistics

A critical issue both readers identified is the lack of reliable industry data. Reader 2 specifically challenges the accuracy of Nielsen statistics, noting their failure to capture significant segments of the market:

> *Reader 2:*
> Nielsen and his cronies don't factor in the self-publishing industry, so I don't really take them to heart…Dudu outsells everyone – non-fiction, academics, children's books, literature but because she is not part of the formal publishing industry, her stats are not recorded. Even Jackie Phamotse is selling.

As discussed in Chapter 9, Nielsen statistics provide valuable industry data, but their incomplete coverage impacts decision-making, as publishers and retailers must operate with partial market information (Kelso, 2019). This has far-reaching consequences: publishers may make publishing decisions without a complete picture of the market, potentially overlooking viable segments. Additionally, excluding informal market sales from official statistics means successful authors outside traditional publishing channels remain statistically invisible, despite their significant market impact.

10.5.3 Financial challenges

Reader 2's entry into publishing in 2020 revealed significant financial challenges in the industry. Initially, she funded her publishing projects using the traditional model due to her unfamiliarity with alternative funding approaches. This aligns with Molapo's (2020) finding that South African publishers generally lack awareness of funding options beyond traditional methods. Despite not achieving profitability, Reader 2 remains committed to publishing diverse voices on taboo topics and has adapted by using a hybrid model where publication costs are shared between the publisher and authors.

10.6 Reading culture in South Africa

Both readers developed their lifelong love of reading during childhood, nurtured by environments rich in books and surrounded by reading role models. Both have continued this legacy by fostering a reading culture within their families. Their experiences align with Author 6's assertion that cultivating a reading habit begins at home, where children are encouraged to embrace reading beyond academic requirements. This perspective is supported by Reader 2's reflection:

> *Reader 2:*
> I've always read. I've been reading from as far as I could read. Growing up, my granny always had a collection … I grew up with the hunger to read something. If I wasn't reading a newspaper, I was reading something, but there was always within arm's reach something to read and I took that into my life.

These personal accounts reinforce the findings of the South African Book Development Council (2016) report regarding the crucial role of early exposure to reading in developing lifelong readers.

Both readers agreed that readership is growing in South Africa, but the main challenge is that books are expensive.

Reader 1:

> The reason South Africans don't read that much is because books are expensive in South Africa … It ends up giving the impression that we aren't reading but we are reading, we are hungry for new work… it would be so much easier if books are not taxed.

Both readers highlighted the growth of readership in South Africa while identifying book prices as a significant barrier to access. Despite these high prices, there are elements of a strong reading culture among certain demographics, as evidenced by Griffin's (2016) article, which demonstrates that books are highly sought-after commodities such that theft has become a significant issue affecting street vendors and established bookstores. The International Publishers Association (IPA) supports Reader 1's suggestion of removing VAT on books as a solution, advocating for zero-rating VAT on all book formats. IPA argues that books are strategic assets driving the knowledge economy and social mobility. While Europe moved to equalize digital and print publication tax rates in 2018, some regions like Kenya have experienced devastating impacts from increased book taxation, including a 40% drop in sales and increased piracy (IPA & FEP, 2018). Given the price sensitivity of the book market, IPA maintains that zero-rate VAT is essential to support education, reading, and continued investment in publishing (IPA & FEP, 2018).

As an unemployed reader, Reader 1 primarily accesses books through free publisher copies, which may not reflect typical South African reading experiences. She manages costs by using her book club's group discounts and buying from second-hand bookstores. Bookseller 1 confirms that the second-hand book market is vibrant and offers more affordable options. While these alternative purchasing channels make books more accessible, they limit readers' choices to whatever titles are available at reduced prices.

Reader 1:

> I also do second-hand bookstores, which helps as I can get a trade paperback for R20 and hardback books for R100, so sometimes I end up getting more books than normal.

Reader 2 pointed out a crucial cultural barrier affecting reading levels in South Africa: the persistent perception of reading as an exclusively academic pursuit and elite activity. As she observed:

> *Reader 2:*
> Reading, even in 2022, is viewed as very elite and academic. If you are not studying humanities, why are you reading books? People always assume that I'm studying something. No, I'm just reading for pleasure.

Through her example and advocacy, Reader 2 actively challenges these limiting perceptions by demonstrating that reading can be a source of enjoyment rather than just a scholarly obligation. Her perspective highlights how cultural attitudes, beyond economic factors alone, shape reading habits in South Africa. Reader 2's advocacy supports Obreja and Manolică's (2024) assertion that book influencers significantly shape modern reading habits and literary culture.

10.7 Self-publishing in South Africa

In the view of both readers, self-publishing seems to be experiencing significant growth across South African demographics and genres, including poetry, literary fiction, and non-fiction (particularly business books and memoirs). Reader 2 observed that self-publishing appears to have gained prominence among Black authors, a trend she attributed to several misconceptions about traditional publishing processes. These misconceptions include:

- The belief that self-publishing offers a faster route to publication, despite requiring the same rigorous processes as traditional publishing
- The assumption that publishers are unwilling to publish Black authors, despite evidence of successful Black authors in traditional publishing

- An underestimation of the challenges involved in becoming a successful self-publisher
- Limited understanding of publishers' list restrictions and selection criteria.

These misconceptions reflect the authors' experiences in Chapters 4–6, demonstrating a widespread lack of understanding about self-publishing and its processes.

Reader 2 observed that Black women comprise a significant portion of self-published authors and often use writing as a therapeutic tool.

> *Reader 2:*
> A huge percentage of Black women are writing and of those who are writing 70% are writing their life stories because of latent trauma, historical trauma, and oppression. So, it's not only them getting their stories out there, but also part of a healing process for them. 30% who are writing, are writing fiction.

Writing as a therapeutic tool is exemplified by Author 6, who began writing as a way of managing depression. This therapeutic aspect of writing transforms the publishing process from a purely literary endeavour into a form of psychological and social healing (Van Emmerik, Reijntjes & Kamphuis, 2013). According to Reader 2, the content distribution among self-publishing authors shows a strong preference for non-fiction, with 70% writing about personal experiences, and 30% pursuing fiction. For many Black women writers, the urgency to document and process real experiences outweighs the desire to create fictional narratives – a pattern that speaks to personal and collective needs. This emphasis on testimony and lived experience serves multiple purposes: it functions as a form of personal healing, creates a historical record of previously undocumented experiences, and directly challenges historical silencing. By choosing to write about their real experiences, these authors are reclaiming narrative power and creating new spaces for dialogue about mental health, personal growth, and social transformation in their communities. Their work

demonstrates how publishing can become a powerful tool for individual and collective healing.

According to Reader 2, who primarily reads self-published books, self-publishing has fundamentally transformed South Africa's publishing landscape. Drawing from her extensive industry experience, she observed:

> *Reader 2:*
> As someone who has been in the publishing space and the book value chain for over 15 years, self-publishing is one of those things that came up and disrupted the whole industry and that's what happens when you ignore a part of the population, a particular segment of the market. They will find a way to come out and make sure that their products are available in the marketplace.

Reader 2 noted that self-publishing has successfully reached previously underserved market segments, particularly within the Black community, whose diverse reading interests and needs were often oversimplified by traditional publishers. By expanding the definition of what constitutes publishable content, self-publishing has created opportunities for books that challenge conventional publishing norms, including works that blend languages, experiment with storytelling formats, or address culturally specific experiences. This has led to the publication of books that traditional publishers might have rejected for not fitting standard marketing categories or for using vernacular languages alongside English. The resulting diversity in published works more accurately reflects the linguistic and cultural richness of South African readers and validates a broader range of storytelling traditions and reading preferences. Self-publishers circumvent traditional gatekeeping as they maintain autonomy over publication decisions and quality control (Ho, Wang & Cheng, 2011). Rather than competing directly with traditional publishing, self-publishing has developed its niche by cultivating previously neglected market segments and expanding the overall readership base.

This promotes diversity in publishing through including niche genres, topics and varied authors (Haugland, 2006; Laquintano, 2016; Elliot, 2016).

10.8 Quality of self-published books

Reader 1, who had limited exposure to self-published books, acknowledged that their quality has improved in recent years, aligning with Dilevko and Dali's (2006) observation that self-publishing services companies have elevated production standards. While she recounted a positive experience with a self-published poetry book – praising its paper quality, cover design, aesthetics, and tactile feel – she viewed this as an exception. Her general impression was that self-published books typically lack professional cover design and physical presentation. Her emphasis on these material qualities suggests that physical attributes play a crucial role in readers' evaluation of books.

> *Reader 1:*
> There's a self-published poetry book that I recently read. The quality is quite good. It's on the right paper, it looks beautiful, the cover is nice, and it's printed on matte, and I liked the feel of the book. It wasn't like most self-published books; the cover and the design of the book are not pleasing to the eye, the look and feel won't be nice.

Reader 2, who primarily reads self-published books, evaluated book quality through two distinct lenses: production quality (covering physical aspects like cover design, paper type, and binding) and content quality (encompassing elements like grammar, editing, plot, and structure). While she has observed significant improvements in production quality over the years, she noted that content quality still needs development.

> *Reader 2:*
> [Production] has improved from picking up a book and the book totally falling apart to buying a book and you are sure that it's going to still live for the next 10–20 years… the aesthetics of the book has improved a hundredfold… there is still a lack in terms of form.

She emphasized the importance of reader feedback in improving self-published works, although she noted that many self-publishers resist criticism. As someone actively involved in the self-publishing community, she contributes to author development by reviewing manuscripts, recommending reliable service providers, and serving on a board dedicated to author skill development.

Both readers gave an example of the quality of the *Hlomu* series by Dudu Busani-Dube. The *Hlomu* series exemplifies the evolution of self-publishing quality in South Africa. As one of the country's most successful self-publishers, Busani-Dube's journey illustrates that publishing expertise develops over time. While her early books had noticeable issues with editing and typesetting, she improved these aspects through subsequent reprints.

> *Reader 1:*
> We love Dudu Busani-Dube's *Hlomu* series, but previously the books were littered with mistakes… But because we loved the books so much, we ended up just buying. But over the years, because she's been reprinting, and she had an editor doing her work and proper typesetting. I bought two of the last five books, and they were great.
>
> *Reader 2:*
> It's the quality of the product, look at your service offering, is this something that someone is going to pay money for … not only the aesthetics, is that story worth your reader's time?... Promotion is important and that is what Dudu knew how to do.

The series' success despite its initial quality issues suggests that readers may prioritize compelling content over technical perfection. Readers connected deeply with Busani-Dube's storytelling, which blended love, drama, gangster elements, and emotional depth. Her success can be attributed to her storytelling ability and aggressive marketing strategy, which built a strong readership even before traditional bookshops began stocking her books.

A book review of ten self-published books that was done as part of this study (see Appendix B) highlights both strengths and challenges in the quality of self-published books. While authors demonstrate strong writing skills, many books struggle with structural issues, poor design, and cluttered covers. Professional editing, typesetting, and cover design are essential to address these gaps. Well-executed books prove that self-published works can achieve high standards, but this requires investment in professional expertise. Self-published authors can create polished, engaging books that stand out in a competitive market by focusing on quality across all aspects – content, design, and presentation.

The reader experiences demonstrate that self-published books exhibit significant variation in quality, making broad generalizations impossible. As Carolan and Evain (2013) argue, the absence of traditional gatekeepers like publishers and editors leads to wider quality disparities in self-published works, placing greater responsibility on readers to assess quality. This is exemplified by the public backlash to Bonang Matheba's book: *From A to B*, which was poorly edited, suggesting that readers value editorial standards even if they do not explicitly recognize them (Thakurdin, 2017; Magwaza, 2017).

10.9 Conclusion

This chapter examined reader interactions with books, revealing complex dynamics in reading preferences and experiences. While social media and online platforms have transformed how self-published authors connect with readerships, the broader publishing landscape continues to shape these interactions. Self-publishing has emerged as an alternative to traditional publishing, offering opportunities for diverse voices and genres while highlighting challenges around quality control. The varying standards in self-published works demonstrate that as self-publishing grows, balancing increased access to publishing with maintaining editorial quality remains crucial for its development in South Africa.

Chapter 11 Findings, recommendations and conclusion

11.1 Introduction

This thesis explores the motivations and experiences of self-published trade authors in South Africa, examines the factors contributing to successful self-publishing and analyses its implications for key stakeholders in the publishing value chain – authors, traditional publishers, booksellers, publishing service providers and readers. By investigating the self-publishing process from these diverse perspectives, the study offers a comprehensive, 360-degree view of the motivations, behaviours, and perceived challenges associated with self-publishing. The research uncovers valuable insights into South Africa's evolving self-publishing landscape by analysing the alignments and disconnects between these various stakeholder perspectives.

The study is structured around one central research question and four subsidiary questions:

Main research question: What are the motivations and experiences of trade authors who have self-published in South Africa?

Subsidiary questions:

1. What is the current state of self-publishing in the trade sector?
2. Why do authors choose to self-publish, and what satisfaction do they derive from the process?
3. What factors contribute to successful self-publishing in South Africa, particularly in terms of production, distribution, marketing, and sales?
4. What are the implications of self-publishing for authors, traditional publishers, publishing service providers, and readers?

This concluding chapter synthesizes the study's findings, reflects on their significance, and considers their broader implications for the publishing industry and future research.

11.2 The state of self-publishing in the trade sector

The findings of this study reveal that traditional publishers in South Africa's trade sector continue to struggle with achieving transformation and diversity in publications and authorship. This gap has created opportunities for self-publishing and independent publishers, such as Blackbird, which focus on diverse authors and content to meet market demand. Gibixego (2021) emphasizes the need to decentralize the publishing value chain and strengthen collaboration between small publishers, self-published authors, and industry stakeholders to drive meaningful change.

Self-publishing in South Africa is growing rapidly and is embraced by a diverse demographic of authors across racial, age, and socioeconomic lines. Both debut and experienced authors, as well as organizations and NGOs, are increasingly turning to self-publishing. Once stigmatized, self-publishing is gaining acceptance for amplifying underrepresented voices, preserving cultural narratives, and fostering bibliodiversity. Stakeholders agreed that self-publishing is transforming the industry by empowering authors, particularly those overlooked by traditional publishers, to carve out their own spaces.

The findings suggest self-publishing has enabled niche fiction and marginalized perspectives to thrive, contributing to a more inclusive literary landscape. It allows authors to directly connect with their communities and address unique experiences often ignored by mainstream publishing. However, the quality of self-published books varies widely, affected by the author's socioeconomic status, understanding of the production process, and access to professional services. Wealthier authors tend to produce higher-quality work, while those

with fewer resources often struggle to meet industry standards. This paradox highlights how self-publishing democratizes access while replicating traditional gatekeeping because of economic barriers.

A primary concern among critics is the perceived inferior quality of self-published books due to the absence of gatekeepers. However, the study indicates that quality cannot be generalized, as it varies in both self-published and traditionally published works. Socioeconomic factors play a significant role, with wealthier authors able to afford professional services, resulting in higher-quality books. This divide underscores the economic barriers that influence quality, limiting the potential for true democratization.

In recent years, the quality of self-published books has improved, particularly in production aspects such as cover design and aesthetics. However, content quality (grammar, editing, and structure) remains variable. Reader feedback plays a crucial role in refining these works, as readers prioritize engaging narratives and authentic linguistic variation over technical perfection. Examples like Dudu Busani-Dube's successful series demonstrate the potential of self-publishing, while cases like Bonang Matheba's poorly edited book highlight the importance of editorial standards.

The study also identified several misconceptions about self-publishing, such as the belief that it is a faster route to publication or that traditional publishers are unwilling to publish Black authors. These misconceptions reflect a broader lack of understanding about the complexities of self-publishing and the rigorous processes it entails.

A significant limitation of this study was the absence of a centralized database for self-published books in South Africa, making it difficult to obtain comprehensive and accurate

data. Compiling the kind of data provided by Bowker in the US would require collaboration among authors, publishers, booksellers, and other industry stakeholders. The study relied on a small sample of eleven self-published authors, which is not representative of all self-published authors in South Africa. However, the focus of this study was not on generalizability to the entire population of self-publishers but rather on providing a detailed description and explanation of the self-publishing phenomenon. Additionally, the reluctance of some self-published authors to share sensitive information, such as sales figures, limited the depth of the data collected.

The self-publishing environment has evolved significantly over the past decade, with increased acceptance, improved tools, and expanded marketing platforms. Social media, audiobook platforms, and alternative publishing models like Amazon have revolutionized the industry, offering authors greater flexibility and creative control. However, the dominance of English and Afrikaans in South Africa's publishing revenue highlights deep linguistic inequalities, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to promote linguistic diversity and equity. Self-publishing continues to evolve rapidly, with new platforms, technologies, and trends constantly emerging, making it challenging to capture an accurate description of its current state in South Africa. There is thus a need for continuous research to track ongoing changes in this dynamic field.

Print books remain dominant in South Africa due to their cultural value and established retail networks, but the growth of digital sales signals a transitional market where both formats will likely coexist. The adoption of print-on-demand (POD) technology by self-publishers and traditional publishers further underscores its growing importance in the industry.

Self-publishing in South Africa is a dynamic and accessible platform reshaping the literary landscape by amplifying diverse voices and expanding opportunities for storytelling. However, addressing quality disparities, economic barriers, and linguistic inequalities will be crucial for its continued growth and development. Continuous research by and collaboration among industry stakeholders are essential to navigate the evolving self-publishing landscape and ensure its sustainability.

11.3 Opportunities

The study highlights several opportunities for growth and innovation in South Africa's publishing industry:

1. **Language diversification:** While English remains the dominant publication language, aligning with market trends, there is an opportunity to expand into other languages. Catering to non-English-speaking readers could enhance inclusivity, tap into underserved markets, and foster greater engagement with diverse readers.

2. **Balancing fiction and non-fiction:** Non-fiction dominates due to its practical relevance, but the growing success of locally resonant commercial fiction suggests a shift in reader preferences. Publishers can balance their portfolios by supporting both non-fiction and fiction that reflect South African experiences. However, strategic marketing and compelling storytelling are essential to stand out in a competitive global market.

3. **Literary agents:** Unlike developed markets such as the USA and UK, South Africa has fewer literary agents. This presents an opportunity for growth. Their viability depends on factors such as the size and health of the publishing industry, the number of aspiring authors seeking representation, publishers' openness to working with agents, and the potential for international rights sales.

4. **Digital transformation:** The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated online book sales, offering a vital survival strategy for bookshops. Independent retailers embracing e-commerce thrived

by reaching new customers, while others struggled due to staffing constraints. This highlights the importance of digital capabilities for sustainable growth in book retail.

5. **Diverse publications:** Self-publishing has exposed gaps in mainstream publishing, showcasing stories and perspectives often overlooked by traditional publishers. While children's books are becoming more diverse, adult literature remains dominated by established, predominantly middle-class White authors. Self-publishing provides a platform for young Black writers and underrepresented voices, reflecting a demand for diverse narratives. This suggests that there is an opportunity for the industry to evolve and better represent South Africa's rich storytelling landscape.

6. **Centralized distribution platforms:** A centralized distribution platform for self-published books could streamline processes such as invoicing, quality control, and financial transactions, reducing administrative burdens for bookshops. Emerging specialized distributors are already helping mitigate risks by simplifying refunds and financial arrangements.

7. **Booksellers as cultural curators:** Booksellers can actively shape market dynamics by curating diverse and emerging voices, even with uncertain sales potential. Through strategic displays, staff recommendations, and targeted promotions, booksellers can create demand for important works that might otherwise go unnoticed. This approach blends commercial viability with cultural activism, positioning booksellers as market makers and cultural curators.

8. **Overcoming bookshop stocking barriers:** The success of self-published authors such as Dudu Busani-Dube in placing their works in stores highlights an opportunity for self-published authors to overcome traditional stocking barriers through proven reader interest. Independent bookshops are more open to supporting local authors due to their shared independent ethos. However, success hinges on the author's professional profile, targeted

marketing efforts, and the quality of their work, as bookshops have limited promotional resources.

These opportunities underscore the potential for digital innovation, greater inclusivity, and strategic collaboration to drive market recovery, meet reader demand, and strengthen South Africa's literary landscape.

11.4 Motivations for self-publishing

The findings of this study reveal that South African authors choose self-publishing for a variety of reasons, reflecting both local and international trends. Their motivations are multifaceted, often combining factors such as rejection by traditional publishers, a desire for greater control over production, marketing, distribution, and financial outcomes, and the opportunity to experiment with new publishing models. Additionally, some authors turn to self-publishing due to dissatisfaction with traditional publishing practices. For some authors, writing and self-publishing serve as therapeutic tools, highlighting how publishing can extend beyond a literary endeavour to become a means of psychological and social healing. This underscores its potential to contribute to both individual and collective well-being.

Technological advancements have profoundly impacted self-publishing in South Africa's trade sector. Although the local book market remains largely print-based, with limited e-book adoption (PASA, 2024), digital platforms such as Amazon have encouraged authors to embrace self-publishing, particularly those targeting international audiences. By leveraging print-on-demand (POD) and digital books, authors are expanding their reach to global markets. These technological tools are transforming the industry, providing authors with innovative opportunities to connect with readers and redefine the publishing process.

Once considered mainly an alternative to traditional publishing, self-publishing has now become the preferred option for numerous authors in South Africa. This shift is evident in the growing number of repeat self-publishers and those who bypass traditional publishing entirely. These trends provide valuable insights for industry stakeholders and aspiring authors navigating the evolving publishing landscape.

11.5 Author satisfaction

The findings of this study reveal that self-publishing offers authors a spectrum of satisfactions closely aligned with their initial motivations. Creative control emerges as a paramount benefit, with authors valuing their autonomy over copyright, production, distribution, and profits – a freedom that makes most reluctant to pursue traditional publishing alternatives.

Financial rewards constitute another significant advantage. Self-publishing provides immediate monetary returns and higher profit margins compared to traditional publishing models. Authors appreciate direct sales for their instant gratification, while many strategically use their books to build personal brands, market businesses, and establish professional credibility.

Beyond financial returns, self-publishing offers profound personal fulfilment. Many authors express immense joy in holding their printed book and witnessing their creative vision come to life. Others find purpose in addressing critical but often overlooked issues such as mental health, bullying, and human trafficking, thereby generating what Bourdieu (1986) refers to as social capital.

The title of ‘published author’ carries significant recognition, independent of sales performance. Self-publishing to establish professional credibility reflects the accumulation of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), with the book serving as concrete proof of expertise. This process also fosters symbolic capital by elevating the author’s prestige (Bourdieu, 1989) and social capital through the expansion of professional networks (Lin, 2017). While direct book revenue may not be the primary objective, the strategic cultivation of these forms of capital can pave the way for broader professional achievements.

The self-publishing experience, however, is not without challenges. Some authors report financial disappointments, often resulting from inadequate expense tracking or insufficient marketing efforts. Platform-specific constraints, such as Amazon’s pricing policies, can further limit earning potential. Experiences with service providers vary considerably; while some authors report satisfaction, others encounter quality issues necessitating costly revisions, highlighting the importance of thorough research when selecting publishing partners.

Self-publishing in South Africa presents a unique landscape. While financially rewarding for some, authors targeting international audiences often find greater success through platforms like Amazon, which allows them to retain up to 70% of royalties, significantly more than traditional publishing offers. This model enables authors to maximize earnings, maintain control over revenue streams, and circumvent traditional gatekeepers. Several South African authors have achieved bestseller status by leveraging Amazon’s comprehensive tools for editing, design, marketing, and distribution.

The ability to receive faster investment returns represents another distinct advantage of self-publishing. Unlike the delayed royalty payments characteristic of traditional publishing, self-

publishing allows authors to retain most proceeds and enjoy immediate financial benefits. This combination of creative freedom, financial control, and personal fulfilment makes self-publishing an increasingly attractive option for authors both in South Africa and globally.

11.6 Challenges for self-publishers in South Africa

The findings of this study demonstrate that self-publishing in South Africa faces several significant challenges, limiting its potential to democratize the industry. Key issues include:

1. **Stigma and quality concerns:** Self-published books are often stigmatized due to perceptions of inconsistent quality, limiting their acceptance by readers and traditional institutions. This is exacerbated by a lack of professional curation, leading to a market saturated with low-quality works.
2. **Steep learning curve:** Self-publishers must navigate complex processes, including editing, design, marketing, distribution, and legal matters, which can be overwhelming for newcomers. Many authors underestimate the expertise required, resulting in subpar production quality.
3. **Financial barriers:** High costs for production, marketing, and professional services (e.g., editing, audiobook production) pose significant challenges. While innovative funding options, such as trading services, exist, limited resources often compromise quality.
4. **Discoverability and market saturation:** In a saturated market flooded with local and imported titles, self-publishers face significant discoverability challenges due to limited marketing reach and distribution networks. The dominance of algorithms on platforms such as Amazon further intensifies these difficulties, making it hard for authors – even those with high-quality works – to stand out amid the overwhelming volume of books, many of which lack unique or compelling content. Additionally, self-published books are often absent from physical bookstores, creating a cycle where authors struggle with distribution and readers miss out on emerging voices.

5. **Distribution limitations:** Despite cutting out intermediaries, self-published books often remain unaffordable and inaccessible to broader readerships, replicating barriers found in traditional publishing. Bookstores are reluctant to stock self-published titles due to administrative burdens, leaving many authors with unsold stock.

6. **Socioeconomic constraints:** Authors' financial circumstances significantly impact book quality, as limited budgets restrict access to skilled service providers and high-quality production. This creates a paradox where self-publishing democratizes access but replicates traditional gatekeeping through economic barriers.

7. **Gatekeeping and industry barriers:** While self-publishing offers creative control and opportunities for niche content, it has not fully democratized the industry. Authors still face significant barriers, including exclusion from established networks, mentorship, and literary awards. As Gibixego (2021) suggests, meaningful change requires decentralizing power, fostering collaboration, and addressing systemic inequities to ensure equitable inclusion.

8. **Predatory practices:** The rise of self-publishing has led to the emergence of vanity or predatory publishers that exploit authors by prioritizing fees over quality. Addressing this requires author education, industry self-regulation, and clear differentiation between reputable and exploitative providers.

9. **Low reading culture:** South Africa's low reading rates, fuelled by the perception of reading as an academic or elite activity and high book prices, hinder the development of a robust reading culture. To address this, stakeholders should subsidize book costs, expand libraries, and support community reading programmes. Partnerships between publishers, schools, and NGOs can distribute affordable or free books, particularly in underserved areas. Public campaigns celebrating reading as enjoyable and accessible, rather than purely academic, can shift perceptions and foster a stronger reading culture.

10. **Economic pressures:** Declining disposable income, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, has reduced book sales. The closure of bookstores has shifted the challenge to online visibility, where competition is fierce.

11. **Inaccurate industry data:** The lack of comprehensive and accurate data on self-publishing, including informal and digital sales, makes it difficult for authors and publishers to make informed decisions. This gap renders successful self-published authors statistically invisible, despite their impact.

12. **Time constraints:** Balancing self-publishing with full-time jobs is a major challenge, as authors struggle to find time for writing, marketing, and distribution.

Despite these challenges, self-publishing offers opportunities for authors to bypass traditional gatekeepers and reach readers directly. Strong sales and reader engagement can open doors to traditional publishing opportunities, while innovative strategies – such as leveraging social media, collaborating with other authors, and exploring hybrid models – can help overcome barriers. Addressing these challenges requires a combination of author education, industry collaboration, and systemic reforms to create a more inclusive and equitable publishing landscape.

11.7 Key factors contributing to successful self-publishing

The study's findings highlight key factors essential for successful self-publishing, each contributing to the quality, reach, and sustainability of an author's work. These include:

1. **Understanding the publishing process:** Authors must familiarize themselves with industry structures, key players, and service providers to make informed decisions. Researching and selecting reliable service providers is crucial to avoid subpar results often associated with vanity publishers.

2. **Thorough research and education:** A deep understanding of publishing workflows, best practices, and market trends helps authors navigate the self-publishing landscape effectively.

3. **Mentorship and support networks:** Guidance from experienced authors and industry experts, particularly in challenging markets such as South Africa, can significantly enhance an author's chances of success.

4. **Community and shared knowledge:** Networking within author communities fosters innovation, enables cost-cutting measures, and the sharing of success stories, which inspire and motivate aspiring self-publishers.

5. **Professional outsourcing:** While self-publishing offers autonomy, authors should assess their skills and outsource professional services (e.g., editing, design, marketing) when necessary to ensure high-quality production.

6. **Quality content:** Producing a well-crafted book with compelling storytelling, professional editing, and polished design is essential to stand out in the market and build credibility.

7. **Strategic printing and pricing:** Adopting cost-effective printing methods, such as print-on-demand (POD), and setting competitive prices ensures accessibility and profitability.

8. **Market awareness:** Staying informed about industry trends, emerging technologies, and reader preferences allows authors to adapt and remain relevant.

9. **Targeted outreach:** Developing niche-focused strategies helps authors reach and engage their target audience effectively. Building a reputation within specific genres or topics mirrors the selectivity of traditional publishing, but on a smaller scale.

10. **Long-term sales strategies:** Sustaining long-term sales requires innovative approaches, such as repackaging content (e.g., condensing series into omnibus editions) and strategic inventory management to extend a book's lifespan.

11. **Adaptability in distribution:** As an author's success grows, diversifying distribution channels – combining independent bookstores, online platforms, and direct-to-consumer sales – maximizes reach and sales potential.

12. **Effective marketing and promotion:** This includes building an audience through social media, author websites, and email marketing; collaborating with other independent authors for joint marketing efforts; and leveraging subscription services like Kindle Unlimited for additional exposure.

13. **Continuous learning and innovation:** Adapting to industry changes, experimenting with new formats (e.g., audiobooks, episodic storytelling), and finding creative solutions to challenges.

14. **Building industry connections:** Establishing relationships with publishing professionals facilitates valuable advice, recommendations, and support throughout the self-publishing journey.

15. **Commitment and hard work:** Success in self-publishing demands passion, patience, and consistent effort – from writing and production to marketing and reader engagement.

By mastering these factors, self-published authors can navigate the complexities of the industry, maximize their potential, and achieve long-term success in a competitive and evolving landscape.

11.8 Implications of self-publishing for stakeholders

Self-publishing has significantly reshaped the publishing landscape, offering both opportunities and challenges for authors, traditional publishers, service providers, and readers. Its impact is multifaceted, disrupting traditional models while fostering innovation and diversity.

Disruption of the publishing value chain: Self-publishing alters Darnton's (1982) linear communication circuit by merging the roles of author and publisher. Authors now take on tasks such as editing, design, marketing, and distribution – roles traditionally managed by publishers (Murray & Squires, 2013; Umezurike, 2020). This decentralization creates a more fluid, networked value chain, empowering authors but also demanding a broader skill set or reliance on external service providers. While traditional publishers still emphasize the importance of author involvement in marketing, self-published authors often shoulder the entire promotional burden.

Implications for authors: Self-publishing offers authors greater creative and financial control, enabling them to bypass traditional gatekeepers and retain higher royalties. However, it also requires them to navigate complex processes, from production to marketing, often necessitating collaboration with service providers or hybrid publishing models. For some, self-publishing serves as a stepping stone to traditional deals, while others prefer the independence and success they achieve on their own.

Impact on traditional publishers: Traditional publishers are adapting to the rise of self-publishing by using it as a tool for market research and talent scouting. They monitor self-published works to identify trends and potential successes, sometimes republishing select titles. This positions self-publishers as market testers who bear initial risks while uncovering new opportunities. However, the growing popularity of self-publishing challenges traditional publishers to redefine their value proposition, particularly in terms of royalty structures and service offerings. Some traditional publishers have established specialized publishing services divisions to take advantage of the growing trend of self-publishing.

Role of publishing service providers: The rise of self-publishing has spurred the growth of publishing service companies, offering support in editing, design, marketing, and distribution. While some provide valuable assistance, others exploit aspiring authors with high fees and low-quality services. Authors must carefully research providers, retain ownership of their rights, and seek mentorship to avoid pitfalls. Some traditional publishers have also entered this space, offering self-publishing services as a revenue stream, although larger publishers have largely avoided this avenue due to scalability concerns.

Diversity and representation: Self-publishing has emerged as a pathway for amplifying marginalized voices and niche genres often overlooked by traditional publishers. This aligns with Couldry's (2012) assertion that voice is a fundamental human right that enables traditionally underrepresented perspectives and fosters greater cultural understanding. Authors like Dudu Busani-Dube and Jackie Phamotse demonstrate how self-publishing enriches South Africa's literary landscape by addressing gaps in representation and reaching underserved markets. However, its reach remains limited for most authors due to challenges such as market saturation, discoverability issues, and uneven access to resources. While self-publishing fosters creativity and broadens the range of voices available to readers, only a select few achieve significant visibility or success. This raises questions about whether self-publishing truly democratizes the literary landscape or simply replicates existing inequalities in a new form.

Despite its transformative potential, systemic barriers – such as varying quality standards, the need for professional services and strategic marketing – constrain its impact. Authors must navigate a crowded marketplace to stand out, while traditional publishers must adapt by exploring hybrid models and enhancing service offerings to remain competitive. Ultimately,

while self-publishing challenges traditional norms and cultivates neglected market segments, its ability to democratize publishing remains limited by persistent inequities.

Economic and cultural impact: Self-publishing reduces reliance on traditional gatekeepers and lowers production costs through digital technologies, democratizing access to publishing. However, it also raises questions about quality control and credibility, as the absence of traditional editorial oversight can lead to variability in content standards. Economically, self-publishing generates new revenue streams and drives innovation, although it compels traditional publishers to adapt to a rapidly changing market. Culturally, it amplifies underrepresented voices and enriches South Africa's literary diversity.

Emerging gatekeepers: While self-publishing disrupts traditional gatekeeping, new gatekeepers such as Amazon have emerged, controlling significant portions of the e-book distribution market. Amazon's dominance, accounting for 81% of e-book distribution, limits authors' independence and bargaining power, challenging traditional distribution models (Noorda & Marsden, 2019). Self-publishers must adapt to this evolving environment, balancing the benefits of platform access with the constraints imposed by these tech giants. At the same time, grassroots gatekeepers such as individuals posting on Goodreads, book bloggers, and social media influencers on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube play an increasingly vital role in shaping literary value and reaching younger readers.

Self-publishing represents a dynamic force for growth, inclusivity, and creativity in South Africa's publishing landscape. By empowering authors, fostering diversity, and driving innovation, it challenges traditional norms while creating new opportunities for all stakeholders. However, addressing challenges like quality control, discoverability, and the dominance of emerging gatekeepers will be crucial for its continued evolution and success.

11.9 Recommendations for further research

These recommendations for further research aim to explore the evolving dynamics of self-publishing, address gaps in knowledge, and provide actionable insights for authors, publishers, and other stakeholders.

1. **Support for self-published distribution:** Further study should explore how traditional publishing stakeholders can better support the distribution of self-published books, as distribution remains a significant challenge for self-publishers and self-publishing complements traditional publishing.
2. **Reader reception and preferences:** A comparative study on reader reception of traditional and self-published books would provide valuable insights into reader preferences and perceptions of quality, content, and value.
3. **Self-publishing success and traditional publishing dynamics:** Research is needed to examine how self-publishing success influences traditional publishing agreements and power dynamics. Investigating discrepancies in how publishers treat self-published authors, particularly those with proven success, could reveal shifts in negotiating power and market influence.
4. **Digital platforms and discoverability:** Research into the impact of digital platforms (e.g., Amazon, Goodreads, social media) on the discoverability and marketing of self-published books would highlight opportunities and challenges in reaching target readers.
5. **Hybrid publishing models:** Investigating the rise of hybrid publishing models – where authors combine self-publishing with traditional publishing services – could provide insights into evolving author-publisher relationships and industry practices.
6. **Impact of influencers and grassroots gatekeepers:** Research on the role of influencers, book bloggers, and social media platforms in shaping literary value and driving sales for self-published works would offer practical strategies for authors and publishers.

These research areas would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of self-publishing's role in the literary ecosystem, offering actionable insights for authors, publishers, and other stakeholders.

11.10 Research significance and limitations

This study explored the motivations and experiences of trade authors who have self-published in South Africa. The research examined the current state of self-publishing, the reasons authors choose this route, the factors contributing to success, and the broader implications for stakeholders in the publishing ecosystem.

The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of self-publishing within South Africa's literary landscape and publishing generally, as it offers insights that extend beyond self-publishing. This research suggests that self-publishing serves as a publishing pathway to amplify marginalized voices, foster diversity, and challenge traditional gatekeeping – potentially emerging as a vital platform for authors overlooked by mainstream publishing.

The study reveals that self-publishing has gained increasing acceptance and plays a significant role in democratizing access to publishing while reshaping industry dynamics. The study offers significant insights into the obstacles and prospects encountered by self-published authors, such as challenges related to discoverability, concerns about quality control, and economic hurdles. These findings offer important guidance for authors, publishers, and policymakers working to support a more inclusive and sustainable literary ecosystem. However, further research is needed to confirm these observations and explore their broader implications for South Africa's publishing industry and literary culture.

While this study provides valuable insights, it has several limitations. A major challenge was the lack of a centralized database for self-published books in South Africa, which hindered the collection of comprehensive and accurate data. Additionally, reliance on self-reported information from authors – some who were hesitant to disclose sensitive details like sales figures – limited the depth and scope of the findings. To partially address this, the study incorporated perspectives from other stakeholders, such as traditional publishers, booksellers, readers, and service providers, which helped triangulate the results. However, the focus on eleven trade authors may not fully represent the experiences of self-publishers in other genres or sectors. Further validation through larger-scale, longitudinal research would strengthen the findings.

11.11 Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this study underscores the significance of self-publishing as a dynamic and evolving sector within South Africa's literary landscape. By addressing challenges of quality control, economic barriers, and discoverability, while leveraging opportunities for diversity, innovation, and reader engagement, self-publishing has the potential to transform the industry. However, achieving this transformation will require ongoing research, collaboration among stakeholders, and systemic reforms to ensure equitable access and sustainability. This study serves as a foundational step toward understanding the complexities of self-publishing and its implications for the future of publishing in South Africa.

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Appendices

Appendix A: National Library of South Africa focus group data

The National Library of South Africa (NLSA) is an institution that documents, stores and preserves all publications produced in South Africa. NLSA issues ISBNs for all publications before they are published, and on publication, all publishers must legally deposit copies with the institution. NLSA provides a national bibliographic service, so I included them in my study to ascertain the state of self-publishing in South Africa and the type of support that NLSA gives to self-publishers. Public libraries play crucial roles in book distribution by purchasing books from publishers and creating market channels for book sales. They provide free book lending, enabling community members to access books without purchasing. This is critical in South Africa where many cannot afford trade books. Libraries serve as discovery platforms for readers to explore new authors and recommendations. Libraries support reading and literacy by democratizing book access beyond commercial markets.

Research participants

I intended to interview one library expert who would give me access to all the information I needed for my study. I ended up having a focus group with five NLSA employees as the person I approached felt I could get more information from a group of employees. This shift from an individual expert interview to a focus group proved advantageous, as it provided multiple perspectives and diverse operational insights from across the organization, rather than relying on a single source. However, the group dynamic may have influenced participants' responses, as some employees might have been reluctant to speak candidly in front of their colleagues. The five NLSA employees that I interviewed are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: NLSA research participants

Pseudonym	Position at NLSA
NLSA 1	Programme Manager (Centre for the Book)
NLSA 2	Project Coordinator (Centre for the Book)
NLSA 3	Acting Director: Bibliographic Services and Collections Management
NLSA 4	Senior Librarian (Bibliographic Services and Collections Management)
NLSA 5	Legal Deposit Coordinator

Libraries in South Africa

According to NLSA 1, South Africa has 1 800 functional libraries. Since 2007, these libraries have been beneficiaries of a conditional grant administered jointly by the Treasury and the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture. The grant finances the building of new libraries, refurbishing existing libraries, and stocking libraries with resources. The grant allocation process involves each province submitting an annual proposal to the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture (DSAC), detailing financial requirements and intended expenditure. Individual provinces have autonomy in deciding how to spend their grant. While this autonomy respects provincial decision-making and allows for responses to local needs, the absence of a dedicated book-buying budget is concerning. Without specific allocation requirements for book purchases, there is a risk that provinces might prioritize infrastructure projects over book purchases. This could lead to a situation where South Africa has well-maintained library buildings but potentially outdated or insufficient book collections.

All provinces in South Africa, except Gauteng, centrally procure books and distribute them to libraries across each province. The provincial-level centralized procurement offers several benefits, including economies of scale, standardized quality control, more efficient logistics and distribution networks, greater bargaining power with publishers, and streamlined administrative procedures. In Gauteng, each metro procures books for libraries within its jurisdiction. This unique approach in Gauteng likely proves advantageous given its status as

the most populous province, containing major urban centres with distinct demographic profiles and significant economic and cultural diversity.

When procuring books for libraries, provinces exercise significant autonomy in their selection process, including decisions about self-published books. This autonomy allows provinces to strategically build collections that reflect local literary landscapes and meet community needs. Provinces can thus support local authors, fill gaps in commercially published materials, and create library collections that resonate with their specific communities. Including or excluding self-published books enhances libraries' capacity to curate relevant collections. This flexible approach ensures that library resources effectively serve their communities, balancing quality standards with the need for diverse, locally relevant content.

Support for self-publishers

Buying self-published books

According to NLSA 1, all provinces purchase self-published books, but the self-publishers must be registered with approved NLSA vendors in each province. The acquisition of self-published materials thus depends largely on registration with vendors and librarians' choices at events.

> *NLSA 1:*
> Self-publishers must find a vendor to register with, and the vendor will be invited to display books at an event where librarians select books that they would like to buy, and then the vendors buy self-published books on behalf of the department. Buying self-published material is dependent on librarians who are invited to choose the kind of books that they would like to buy in that particular year.

The Eastern Cape Province stands out as an exception as the province actively contacts NLSA to identify books published through the community publishing grant each year. The

province then connects these authors with registered vendors for book displays and purchases. While helpful, this approach may overlook self-published books not funded by the grant.

The vendor-intermediary system offers important benefits: quality control, streamlined procurement, professional distribution, and financial risk management with vendors handling payments directly. However, its multi-layered structure presents challenges, particularly for self-published authors. Authors must secure vendor relationships, vendors require approval for selection events, and librarians make final decisions within restricted timeframes. This creates potential barriers through vendor fees, limited market access, and dependency on intermediary relationships. While the system promotes quality control and administrative efficiency, it may unintentionally exclude valuable works from authors who cannot establish vendor partnerships, meet selection deadlines, or afford intermediary costs. Additionally, although librarian expertise enhances collection development, their judgments and preferences influence which self-published works ultimately reach library collections.

NLSA 2 highlighted a significant challenge for self-publishers: authors cannot sell directly to libraries, as they are not registered vendors.

> *NLSA 2:*
> It's a challenge that self-published authors are not registered vendors, so they can't sell their books directly to the libraries. They must make sure that they are using registered vendors. The main challenge is that if registered vendors have not come across those publications, the author will suffer, and the books will not be purchased.

This creates a potential barrier for self-publishers if registered vendors are unaware of certain self-published works, those authors may struggle to get their books purchased. This situation underscores the discoverability challenge for self-published books in libraries because the

procurement process relies heavily on vendors' knowledge of available titles. This can result in reduced visibility of self-published books in libraries, limited patron access to independent works, lost revenue for authors, and less diverse library collections.

NLSA 1 and 2's description of the acquisition of self-published books shows that authors face distribution barriers. Libraries, as key gatekeepers, often exclude self-published works through restrictive acquisition policies (Elliot, 2016; Poland, 2018; Afolabi & Zolkepli, 2023). Pacer (2013) highlights libraries' challenges in evaluating the vast volume of self-published books using traditional review-based selection methods, which limits their circulation. Pacer (2013) and Elliot (2016) call for public libraries to reconsider acquisition policies for self-published books, addressing logistical challenges to improve representation. However, South African libraries face significant resource and infrastructure limitations (Harris, 2019).

In 2021, Gauteng province initiated a programme to support 50 upcoming authors and called for submissions from self-published authors. The response was significant as over 400 submissions were received. Unfortunately, many submissions were of poor quality.

> *NLSA 1:*
> Gauteng Province in the previous financial year undertook to support upcoming authors, so they invited submission of self-published material. They received over 400 submissions, but sadly enough, the material that was submitted was not of good quality.

The high submission rate shows the effectiveness of the submission call and that many people are self-publishing in South Africa. It also shows that authors are eager to get their books into libraries. The quality issue highlights a critical gap between authors' eagerness to publish and their mastery of professional publishing standards. This creates a challenging situation for libraries. While they want to support local authors and diversify their collections, they also

need to maintain quality standards for their patrons. NLSA attributed the poor quality of self-published books to authors' lack of knowledge of publishing processes. Common quality issues that self-published books had were unappealing illustrations in children's books, inappropriate or user-unfriendly fonts, unattractive covers and inadequate editing, proofreading and book design. Despite these quality concerns, the province selected and purchased 50 books from the submissions.

The selection of only 50 out of 400 submissions – a 12.5% acceptance rate – signals significant challenges for self-published books in South Africa. This low selection rate highlights critical quality concerns, indicating that most self-published works do not meet professional publishing standards. It underscores the need for improved editing, design, and overall book production skills among self-publishing authors, and suggests libraries maintain stringent selection criteria to ensure collection quality. Previous chapters reveal that self-published book quality varies, precluding broad generalization. Dilevko and Dali (2006) note that while self-published book quality varies, libraries are increasingly collecting self-published books, particularly from publishing services companies due to improved standards.

Community Publishing Grant

The National Library of South Africa (NLSA) supports South African authors through a community publishing grant. This aligns with Pacer's (2013) call for libraries to launch self-publishing support programmes. The grant aims to help self-publishers improve the quality and appeal of their books by providing resources for editing, proofreading, and design. NLSA 2 explained the grant process in detail. NLSA calls for submissions from authors each year. Authors can submit their manuscripts physically or online. The manuscripts are sent to language and literature experts for review. The reviewers use a review form to guide them so

that the review is a fair and transparent process. All authors get feedback and recommendations on how they can improve their manuscripts. Unsuccessful authors can resubmit their manuscripts in subsequent submissions.

After manuscript review, a selection panel comprising internal staff members and external members from different institutions, publishing companies, and tertiary institutions selects manuscripts for funding based on reviewer feedback. Selected books are edited, proofread, designed, and issued with an ISBN. NLSA prints 300 copies of each book and gives the author 290 copies, and they keep 10 copies (five for legal deposit and five for displays at literary events). NLSA provides content and developmental editing while educating authors about the publishing process. The community grant helps improve self-publishing quality by providing professional editing services and publishing education. Authors maintain creative control while receiving expert support, and even unsuccessful applicants benefit from detailed feedback on their work.

The NLSA community publishing grant is promoted to potential and budding authors through multiple channels, including the NLSA website (although the grant link is currently broken), literary events, legal deposit roadshows, posters at NLSA facilities, and word-of-mouth from past grant recipients. However, awareness of the programme appears limited – of the eleven self-publishers interviewed for this study, only two were aware of its existence, including one grant recipient. This suggests a need to strengthen the grant's promotion and outreach strategies to reach a wider audience of potential applicants.

Book marketing and promotion

The NLSA supports community publishing grant recipients through targeted promotional efforts. The organization coordinates book launches for selected community publishing grant

recipients, often timing them strategically around relevant observances such as youth month and women's month to maximize visibility. Throughout the year, NLSA showcases grant-funded books at literary festivals, book fairs, and industry events, helping authors reach broader readerships.

> *NLSA 1:*
> When we go to literary events such as the Grahamstown Word Festival, we take the works published by our authors to showcase them there, so that at least they are exposed to platforms like those. If people want to buy the books, we then link them to the author so they can buy their books directly.

Although NLSA promotes these books, they do not sell them. Instead, they direct interested buyers to the authors. This approach is beneficial to authors but may result in lost sales opportunities, as there is a gap between a person showing interest and successfully contacting the author. Most self-published authors are not responsive as they have full-time jobs and manage the sales themselves. A more effective strategy might involve having copies available for immediate sale at literary events.

According to NLSA 3, as a legal deposit library, NLSA receives copies of all published books from all publishers in South Africa. They compile and publish a list of these books on their website, which includes information such as the title, the author, the ISBN, and the price. Self-published books are identified by their ISBN prefix, which starts with 620. NLSA 3 believes this list promotes self-published books by increasing public awareness. However, not all self-publishers legally deposit their books, with some unaware of the requirement or lacking ISBNs. The interviewer attempted to locate this information on the NLSA website but was unsuccessful. A follow-up inquiry with NLSA to clarify the availability and location of this resource yielded no response.

The discrepancy between what NLSA 3 claims is available on their website and what the interviewer found could indicate a communication gap within the NLSA or technical issues with the NLSA website. The discrepancy raises questions about the accuracy of other information provided by NLSA representatives. If the list of published books is available but difficult to find, it suggests a usability issue with the NLSA website. This could significantly reduce the effectiveness of this resource in promoting self-published books. The list of self-published books could be a valuable resource for self-published authors, readers, and researchers. This situation underscores the importance of verifying information and the potential challenges in navigating institutional resources, which could impact the visibility and success of self-published authors in South Africa.

Self-publishers and legal deposit

All publishers in South Africa must legally deposit copies of their published books with the National Library of South Africa (NLSA). NLSA 5 explained legal deposit:

> *NLSA 5:*
> The legal deposit is a legal obligation that compels all publishers that anything that has been published in the country must be deposited at the National Library as the custodian of the National Documentary Heritage of the Country.

NLSA promotes legal deposit through roadshows. In addition, when authors are issued with an ISBN, they are made aware that they must legally deposit copies of their publications. However, many self-publishers fail to comply with legal deposit, primarily due to a lack of awareness. This issue is highlighted by NLSA representatives:

> *NLSA 3:*
> I think there are quite a few people who publish books without getting an ISBN and simply because they don't know.

NLSA 2:

Most self-published authors are not familiar with the legal deposit. Our colleagues are going around teaching authors about legal deposit.

The lack of awareness among self-publishers leads to inaccurate documentation of self-publishing in the country. This results in incomplete information about the self-publishing landscape in South Africa. Despite these challenges, NLSA 3 and NLSA 5 noted that many self-publishers not assisted by the community grant deposit copies of their publications with the NLSA, suggesting that the awareness roadshows have some positive impact.

According to NLSA 2, there is a database of self-published titles from 2010-2020 on the NLSA website that I could use to ascertain the state of self-publishing in South Africa. However, the interviewer was unable to access this information due to a non-functioning link on the Centre for the Book webpage. The inaccessibility of the database and other online resources mentioned earlier suggests a recurring issue with the NLSA website's functionality and information accessibility.

Appendix B: Review of self-published books

As part of my study, I analysed self-published books by ten authors I interviewed as material and designed objects. I evaluated the plot, design (text pages and cover design), quality of editing, paper and binding quality. I reviewed the books because of the prevalent negative perception that self-published books are of inferior quality to traditionally published books by interview participants. I reviewed the books as a book publishing professional who has edited and commissioned books for the past 24 years.

I assessed ten books by Authors 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10 and 11. Author 9's book was not analysed because it was out of stock. This is a small sample, so the findings cannot be generalized. I used set criteria to assess the books to avoid bias. The book review is important but subjective because it is based on my views. Nine books that I assessed were all the authors' first publications, I could not get Author 4's first publication as it was out of stock. I assessed her sixth book, part of a series, as it was readily available. I reviewed Author 1's first self-published book, but this was not the author's first published book as he had already traditionally published two books.

Availability of self-published books

Seven self-published books (Books 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8 and 10) I purchased were not readily available in major bookshops, so I had to contact the authors to check where I could buy them. Author 9's book was not analysed as it was out of stock, and I could not find any second-hand copies in online shops. Books 3, 6 and 11 were readily available in physical and online independent and chain bookstores. Books 3 and 6 were available at retail outlets such as Takealot and Makro. Book 3 was also available on the publisher's website. Book 3's availability can be attributed to a traditional publisher now publishing it. Book 6 was written by one of the most successful self-published authors in South Africa, there is high demand for

her books, which could be why several bookshops stock the book. I bought Book 3 at an independent bookshop (Melville Book Circle) and Book 6 from the self-publishing company that published the first edition of the book because I wanted the first edition of the book. I got a free copy of Book 11 from the author.

Books 1 and 5 were only available at one independent bookshop. Book 1 was available at the same independent bookshop where I bought Book 3. Book 10 was available from the author's website and the publishing services company that helped publish the book (the same company that published Book 6). I bought the book at the publishing services company. A web search showed that Exclusive Books stocked Books 1 and 10, but they were out of stock. This could be because of a lack of demand. Book 8 was only available from the author; I ordered a copy from the author, who delivered the book to me free of charge. An internet search showed that the book was also available on Profound Books, an online bookstore for South African authors.

I bought second-hand copies of Books 2, 4 and 7 at an online marketplace called Bid or Buy (Bob) Shop. Book 2 was available from the Author's website, and a few independent bookshops, Loot and Takealot, but I opted for a second-hand copy as it was cheaper. Book 4 was out of stock as the author now only stocks the trilogy editions of that series. Copies of the book printed overseas were available on Loot and Exclusive Books, but these were expensive and would take time to be delivered, so I opted for a second-hand copy. The author of Book 7 did not respond to my email inquiring where I could buy their book, thus I bought a second-hand copy. All the second-hand books were of impeccable quality. This second-hand book market is not formally recorded in South Africa so these sales go unrecorded.

It is important to note that most of the ten self-published books were not readily available in bookshops, which limits the books' exposure to potential customers. Trade books mostly rely on book exposure in retail stores. Six of the ten books were only available in independent bookstores, which shows that independent bookshops support self-published authors. Book 6 was available in book chains and Books 1 and 10 were stocked by a book chain in the past, this shows that book chains stock self-published books if there is demand. Buying self-published books showed me that it takes much effort to buy a self-published book, as one must contact the author or search online to check where the book is available. Some authors are not responsive and for Books 2, 4, 7, 6 and 10, I had to pay courier fees on top of the book price, making the books expensive. In contrast, you can find most traditionally published books easily at the nearest bookshop.

The self-published books by the 10 authors that I interviewed and read are presented in Table 1.

Author	Book title	Year of publication	Book Classification	Imprint	Extent	Language	Colour
Author 1	Book 1	2019	Fiction Short story anthology with 15 stories, 11 were written by the author and four by other authors	Author's self-publishing company	232	English with a few isiXhosa phrases	Black and white
Author 2	Book 2	2018	Fiction Women's literature Novel with a self-help slant as it looks at the stages of grieving	Author	234	English with a few isiXhosa phrases	Black and white
Author 3	Book 3	2017	Fiction Children's picture book	First self-published under author's imprint company (2017) and republished by a traditional publisher (2018)	32	English but translated into 10 languages	Full colour
Author 4	Book 4	2016	Fiction YA fantasy with a romance subplot, paranormal fantasy	Author's imprint	376	English	Black and white
Author 5	Book 5	2015	Fiction Poetry collection	Author's imprint	74	English with a few isiXhosa phrases and words	Black and white
Author 6	Book 6	2017	Fiction Novel	Publishing services company	216	English	Black and white
Author 7	Book 7	2014	Non-fiction Self-help motivational book	Author's Publishing services company	208	English	Black and white
Author 8	Book 8	2018	Fiction Poetry collection	Publishing services company imprint	72	English, and a few Portuguese words	Black and white
Author 10	Book 10	2013	Non-fiction Self-help book on positive ageing	Publishing services company	216	English	Full colour
Author 11	Book 11	Ebook 2011, Paperback edition 2017	Fiction Murder mystery/Thriller/suspense/Psychological thriller	Author's imprint with website	428	English	Black and white

Target readers

The ten books span diverse genres and target various reader groups:

Young adults and adults

Book 1: Literary readers and fans of African literature.

Book 4: Fantasy enthusiasts, with a focus on international readers (written in American English).

Books 5 & 8: Poetry lovers, particularly addressing women's issues.

Book 6: Readers interested in women's issues.

Book 11: Murder mystery fans.

Adults

Book 2: Women and those coping with grief.

Book 7: Educators, parents, and guardians.

Book 10: Individuals preparing for retirement.

Children and families

Book 3: Children aged 5–10, with appeal as a bedtime story for adults to read to kids.

Plot

Book 1: This short story anthology features 15 stories – 11 by the author and four by contributors – blending fresh and classic narratives with diverse literary voices. Spanning from the 1950s to the present, the stories explore rural and urban settings, addressing themes like land issues, racial and gender inequalities, family dynamics, death, and infidelity.

Book 2: This novel follows four lifelong friends whose bond is tested when one is struck by a taxi while jogging. Structured into seven chapters, the story traces the seven stages of grief –

from shock to acceptance – through the perspectives of the surviving friends, the deceased's boyfriend, the taxi driver, and an eyewitness. Unusual for fiction, the book includes a contents page and chapter headings, likely reflecting its focus on the grieving process. Themes of love, friendship, death, grief, empathy, and hope are explored throughout. The author's social media handles and website on the last page serve as effective promotion for the author's other works.

Book 3: This children's book follows the adventures of three friends in Johannesburg, featuring a simple yet engaging plot. The young characters are relatable to the target audience, allowing readers to connect with their journey. The story explores themes of friendship, self-esteem, and discovery, while celebrating African hair, magic, and the vibrant city of Johannesburg.

Book 4: This fantasy novel, divided into three parts and 34 chapters, uses scene breaks marked by three asterisks to transition between moments. It follows a gifted faerie cursed by a witch, who embarks on a daring rescue mission to save another faerie. Together, they must battle three witches to prevent a world-ending prophecy. The fast-paced, action-packed, and emotional storyline is brought to life through the author's vivid descriptive style, creating an immersive fantasy world. Themes of love, forgiveness, good versus evil, family bonds, and danger are woven throughout. As the sixth book in a series, it includes the author's biography, website, and a list of other books in the series, effectively promoting their work.

Book 5: This poetry collection has a foreword by a renowned poet, serving as an effective promotional tool. It includes 43 poems organized into four sections, varying in length and style. While the poems are rich in emotion, they can be challenging to understand, often

requiring multiple readings. The collection is largely biographical, delving into themes of anger, love, sadness, despair, and hope.

Book 6: This novel follows the life of a Black girl born just before apartheid, tracing her journey from primary school through high school and into her early adulthood as she moves to Johannesburg to pursue a modelling career. Representing the voice of young women, the book is divided into 45 chapters of varying length and style, with one chapter written as a poem. Each chapter begins with a quote, and some include subheadings, an unusual feature for fiction. While the novel is lengthy and contains repetitive scenes that could have been trimmed, it tackles heavy themes such as domestic violence, sexual assault, rape, femicide, dysfunctional families, social media pitfalls, transactional sex, and materialism. It also includes some sexually explicit content.

Book 7: This self-help book is structured with an introduction, foreword, and three parts. Part 1 (8 chapters) shares the author's personal experiences with teachers who positively influenced his life. Part 2 (3 chapters) includes stories of how teachers impacted other students, both positively and negatively. Part 3 (4 chapters) offers practical tips for teachers on how to positively influence their students. Each chapter begins with an epigraph (a relevant quote), and some include subheadings to organize the text. The imprint page features the author's website and contact details.

The book serves as a motivational guide, emphasizing how positive affirmations and teachers' care can profoundly impact students. It provides essential insights on raising emotionally healthy, confident, and well-rounded children, who can grow into successful and contributing members of society.

Book 8: This poetry collection features 30 poems of varying lengths, each accompanied by an explanation or dedication at the bottom of the page. Most poems are rhythmic and easy to understand, with a strong biographical focus. They explore the complexities of life, touching on themes such as romance, relationships, love, self-love, unrequited love, hope, happiness, loss, betrayal, parenthood, religion, national pride, celebrating life, women's empowerment, and disability.

Book 10: This self-help book begins with an introduction explaining its structure and purpose. The body is organized into five steps to help readers age positively by maintaining physical, emotional, social, and spiritual health. Each section starts with objectives and ends with summaries, while an appendix includes self-assessments. The book is enriched with cartoons, personal anecdotes, activities, 'Did you know?' boxes, case studies, and references to other researchers. It also directs readers to additional books, websites, and movies for further exploration. Well-researched and accessible to lay readers, the book combines practical advice with character and humour through personal stories. A reference list is included for further reading.

Book 11: This novel is divided into two parts: Part 1 with 14 chapters and Part 2 with 18 chapters. It opens with seven endorsements from book reviewers and a list of the author's other works, effectively promoting their catalogue to new readers. The story is filled with epigraphs and centres on an author struggling with writer's block, who experiments with storylines to create material, leading to a murder mystery. The plot is complex and hard to follow, blurring the lines between reality and imagination, past and present. Despite its convoluted structure, the twists and turns keep readers engaged. Themes include murder, conspiracy theories, and unrequited love.

Editorial review

Book 1: Well-edited with consistent single quotation marks and indentation paragraphing. Includes over 20 widows/orphans and some short pages. Seven typos were found. Some isiXhosa words/phrases are used without explanation, which could confuse non-isiXhosa readers.

Book 2: Well-edited with consistent block paragraphing and single quotes. Contains 17 typos (missing punctuation, capitalization errors) and inconsistent abbreviation formatting. Includes 17 widows/orphans. IsiXhosa phrases are explained in footnotes.

Book 3: Well-edited and illustrated, with consistent block paragraphing and double quotes. No typos or layout issues, likely due to traditional publishing revisions. Effective use of alliteration and repetition for children's engagement.

Book 4: Well-edited with only four typos. Uses consistent indentation paragraphing and double quotation marks. Written in American English with inconsistent em dashes (some spaced, some not). Contains over 46 widows/orphans and three short pages.

Book 5: Writing style varies, making it hard to distinguish poetic license from errors. Eight typos, inconsistent spelling, and missing punctuation. Includes isiXhosa phrases and stanzas without English explanations.

Book 6: Uses simple language but has fair editorial quality. Mixes block and indentation paragraphing, with consistent double quotes. Numerous typos, widows/orphans, and layout issues (missing page numbers, blank pages). Poor structure and excessive brand mentions raise copyright concerns. Could benefit from developmental editing and proofreading. Well-researched medical content with defined terms.

Book 7: Poorly edited, needing language and copy-editing. Issues include inconsistent hyphen/en dash use, wrong words, subject-verb disagreement, mixed quotation marks, and

inconsistent spelling (American/British). Contains typos, missing words, and flawed sentence structure. Block paragraphing is consistent, but headings are inconsistently capitalized.

Book 8: Excellent editorial quality with no errors. Portuguese words are explained in footnotes.

Book 10: Fair editorial quality with ten typos (missing words, wrong word choices, inconsistent quotes). Mixes block/indentation paragraphing and American/British spelling. Well-researched, structured, and accessible to lay readers.

Book 11: Fair editorial quality with five errors. Features jumbled words (e.g., 'likefatherlikeson'), disrupting flow. Contains 49 blank pages (some numbered), inconsistent paragraphing, and six short pages. Excessive quotes and lengthy descriptions suggest a need for developmental editing. Chapter titles inconsistently formatted.

The review of ten self-published books highlights nuanced insights into their editorial quality. While only one book required language editing, indicating strong writing skills among authors, three needed developmental editing, pointing to structural or content-related issues as more common than linguistic errors. The wide variation in quality – ranging from excellent to poor – shows that self-published works cannot be broadly generalized. This analysis emphasizes that, although self-published books can meet high standards, professional editorial input remains essential for enhancing their overall quality.

Book design review

Book 1: Well-designed but with small, user-unfriendly font and text-dense pages lacking white space. Features running heads (author's name on the left, story titles on the right). Printed on white bond paper, causing glare; creamy bulk paper would have been better. Thread-sewn for durability.

Book 2: Well-designed with ample white space, but the font size is too small, straining readers' eyes. Includes running heads (author's name on the left, novel title on the right). Printed on creamy bulk paper, ideal for trade books. Thread-sewn for durability.

Book 3: Well-designed with colourful, age-appropriate illustrations. Large format and font size suit young readers. Printed on thick, durable matt paper. Uses double-page spreads, balancing text and illustrations effectively. Thread-sewn for durability.

Book 4: Well-designed with ample white space and blank pages separating sections. Appropriate font size for the target market. Features running heads (author's name on the left, novel title on the right). Printed on creamy bulk paper. Thread-sewn for durability.

Book 5: Poorly designed with excessive white space and cramped poems. Small font size and tight leading make reading difficult. One poem uses a hard-to-read font, and another is in italics without clear significance. Printed on glare-prone white bond paper. Thread-sewn for durability.

Book 6: Well-designed with adequate white space and appropriate font size. Running heads display the book title on both left and right pages. Printed on creamy bulk paper, suitable for trade books. Thread-sewn for durability.

Book 7: Poorly designed, resembling an amateur Word document. Large, user-friendly font but printed on bond paper instead of creamy bulk. Features running heads (book title on the left, chapter number/title on the right). Thread-sewn for durability.

Book 8: Appealing design with user-friendly font size and ample white space. Black-and-white photographs and artworks complement the poems. Printed on high-quality matt paper. Thread-sewn for durability.

Book 10: Poorly designed with a small, inappropriate font size (10pt on 13pt) for mature readers. Text-heavy pages, though some include colour cartoons, text boxes, and

subheadings. Overuse of bold text and inconsistent page depth. Printed on white bond paper. Thread-sewn for durability.

Book 11: Well-designed with a large, reader-friendly font and good leading. Excessive white space and 49 disruptive blank pages. Printed on creamy bulk paper, ideal for trade books. Thread-sewn for durability.

The poor design of half the reviewed self-published books reveals significant challenges in presentation and visual quality, pointing to systemic issues in layout, typography, and formatting. Common problems include small fonts, excessive white space, text-heavy pages, and inappropriate paper choices. Well-designed books (Books 3, 4, 6, 8, and 11) highlight the value of professional design, achieving a balance of readability, aesthetics, and functionality. The prevalence of design flaws emphasizes the need for professional design services in self-publishing, as strong writing alone cannot ensure a polished final product.

Review of book covers

A book cover is crucial for discoverability, as it is the first element that attracts readers. Many interview participants noted that self-published books often look amateurish, frequently featuring the author's photograph. Some also lack ISBN barcodes on the back cover. Of the ten reviewed books, nine included ISBN barcodes, while one did not.

Book 1: Well-designed, appealing front cover with a matt finish. The back cover is cluttered with a blurb, six endorsements, and small font. Includes an ISBN barcode and spine with title, author name, and imprint logo.

Book 2: Dull background colour fitting the themes of death and grief. Features five silhouettes (likely main characters) and a matt finish. The back cover has a long blurb, one endorsement, and an ISBN barcode. Spine includes title, author name, and imprint logo.

Book 3: Attractive cover with illustrations of the three main characters and a matt finish. Short, concise blurb and ISBN barcode. Spine features author name and title.

Book 4: Eye-catching cover with an illustration of the main character, capturing the fantasy theme. Matt finish, short blurb, two endorsements, and an ISBN barcode. Spine includes title, series number, author name, and logo.

Book 5: Glossy cover with a design matching the title, although the font colour clashes with the background. Long blurb with two endorsements. No ISBN barcode. Spine features title and author name.

Book 6: Attractive cover with a matt finish, capturing the novel's essence. Busy back cover with a tight-leading blurb and six endorsements. Includes an ISBN barcode. Spine lists author name and title.

Book 7: Unappealing cover with the author's photo and a matt finish. Busy back cover with a blurb, author bio, and endorsements. Hard-to-read font. Includes an ISBN barcode. Spine features title and author name.

Book 8: Minimalistic, attractive cover with a gloss finish. Back cover has a short blurb, one endorsement, and an author bio. Includes an ISBN barcode. Spine lists title and author name.

Book 10: Attractive cover with a cartoon matching the content and a matt finish. Includes flaps with book promotion and author bio. Concise blurb and ISBN barcode. Spine features title, author name, and imprint logo.

Book 11: Appealing cover with two endorsements and an 'explicit content' warning. Unconventional back cover with a two-column layout (blurb and endorsements). Includes an ISBN barcode and 'International bestseller' label. Spine lists title, author name, and imprint logo.

All self-published books reviewed include author contact details (either on the imprint page, last page, or cover) and most feature endorsements as part of their marketing strategy. While

these elements aim to guide readers on where to purchase the books and attract potential buyers, some authors overuse endorsements, resulting in cluttered and visually unappealing covers.

Many self-published covers suffer from design overload, characterized by excessive text, poor colour choices, and competing graphic elements. This creates a chaotic presentation that fails to effectively communicate the book's essence or attract readers. The prevalence of amateurish designs underscores a critical gap: many self-published authors underestimate the importance of professional, clean, and aesthetically pleasing cover design. Investing in professional design is essential to ensure covers not only capture attention but also convey the book's core message effectively.

Appendix C: Ethics clearance certificate

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG

Research Office

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (NON-MEDICAL)
R14/49 Nyamapfene

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	**PROTOCOL NUMBER: H21/11/61**
PROJECT TITLE	Self-publishing trade books in South Africa: opportunities, challenges, and implications
INVESTIGATOR(S)	Mrs L Nyamapfene
SCHOOL/DEPARTMENT	School of Literature, Language and Media/
DATE CONSIDERED	26 November 2021
DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE	Approved Risk Level: Minimal
EXPIRY DATE	23 January 2025

DATE 24 January 2022 **CHAIRPERSON** _____
(Professor J Watermeyer)

cc: Supervisor : Professor M Titlestad

DECLARATION OF INVESTIGATOR(S)

To be completed in duplicate and **ONE COPY** returned to the Secretary at Room 10004, 10th Floor, Senate House, University. Unreported changes to the application may invalidate the clearance given by the HREC (Non-Medical)

I/We fully understand the conditions under which I am/we are authorized to carry out the abovementioned research and I/we guarantee to ensure compliance with these conditions. Should any departure to be contemplated from the research procedure as approved I/we undertake to submit an amendment of the protocol to the Committee. **I agree to completion of a regular progress report. For Minimal and Low studies, this is due annually on 31 December. For Medium and High Risk studies, this is due twice annually on 30 June and 31 December.**

L Nyamapfene
Signature

28 / 01 / 2022
Date

PLEASE QUOTE THE PROTOCOL NUMBER ON ALL ENQUIRIES

Appendix D: Participant information sheet

Dear Sir/ Madam

My name is Lorraine Nyamapfene. I am a PhD student in the Publishing Studies Department at Wits University in Johannesburg. As part of my studies, I must undertake a research project, and I am investigating self-publishing of trade books in South Africa focusing on the opportunities, challenges and implications under the supervision of Professor Michael Titlestad.

You have successfully self-published a trade book. As part of this study, I am inviting you to take part in a Teams interview so that you can share your publishing motivations, processes and experiences. This interview will take around 60 minutes. With your permission, I would also like to video record the interview. This recording will be stored securely in a password-protected computer and file, only the researcher and supervisor will have access to this recording. It will be deleted after five years. I will use a pseudonym to represent your participation in my final research report.

The decision to participate in this study is voluntary. You will not receive any financial rewards for participating in this study, and there will be no disadvantages or penalties for not participating. You may withdraw at any time or not answer any questions you are uncomfortable answering. The interview will be confidential and anonymous. If you experience any distress or discomfort, we will stop the interview or resume another time.

If you have any questions about this research, contact me on the details listed below. This study will be written as a thesis, 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 upon request. 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 hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher: Lorraine Nyamapfene
Phone number: 083 404 8002
Email: lorrainenyamapfene@gmail.com

Supervisor: Professor Michael Titlestad
Phone number: 011 717 4115/062 060 9778
Email: michael.titlestad@wits.ac.za

Appendix E: Consent form

Title of project: Self-publishing trade books in South Africa: opportunities, challenges, and implications

Name of researcher: Lorraine Nyamapfene

I, ……., agree to participate in this research project. The research has been explained to me and I understand what my participation will involve.

I agree to the following: (Please circle the relevant options below).

I agree that my participation will remain anonymous	YES	NO
I agree that the researcher may use anonymous quotes in his / her research report	YES	NO
I agree that the interview may be video recorded	YES	NO

…… (signature)

…… (name of participant)

…… (date)

…… (signature)

…… (name of person seeking consent)

…… (date)

Appendix F: Author questionnaire

Demographics

Name:

Age range:

Gender:

Profession:

Highest educational qualification:

Publications

Number of traditionally published books:

Number of self-published books:

Total number of published books:

Please can you list your publications in the table below:

Book Title	***Language***	***Publication Year***	***Genre***	***Format (e.g. print, e-book)***

Appendix G: Interview guides

Authors

A. Background information

1. Tell me briefly about your publishing experience.
2. How would you rate your knowledge of various aspects of publishing?
3. Are you a full-time or part-time author?
4. How many books have you published?
5. How many of your books are traditionally published and how many are self-published?
6. What genre/s have you published?
7. In what formats have you published these books (print, e-book, audio book, social media)?
8. What platform did you use to publish your book/s?

B. Self-publishing in South Africa

1. What are your thoughts about the self-publishing sector in South Africa?
2. What self-publishing platforms are available to South African writers?
3. What type of books are South Africans likely to self-publish?
4. In which areas are self-publishing authors having success?
5. Blogging is a form of self-publishing. Is it still valuable to publish an actual book? Why?
6. What are the advantages and disadvantages of self-publishing?
7. Is it worthwhile to self-publish in South Africa? What has worked in your favour in regards to self-publishing? What has not?
8. What is the quality of books that are self-published? Is there any difference between a book that is published traditionally and a book that is self-published?

C. Book production

1. Why did you decide to self-publish?
2. Describe your book production processes. What platforms did you use?
3. How did you fund the production of your book?
4. Can you give an estimate of the costs and time taken to publish your book? 2
5. What degree of editing did you employ?
6. How did you source your page layout, cover design and artwork?
7. What type of publishing infrastructure/support/services did you have access to?
8. How would you rate the quality of publishing support/infrastructure/services you had access to?
9. a) What was your level of involvement in the publishing processes?

b) Which processes did you execute yourself and why?

10. How expensive was it to: edit and proofread; page and cover design; printing?
11. How big was your first print run? Have you reprinted the book?
12. What type of printing did you use (POD, Litho, Digital, Web)? Why?

D. Book costing

1. How much is your book?

2. How did you determine the price of your book? (All production costs; printing costs; Time and effort put into writing the work; Anticipated profit)

3. How many copies did you have to sell to break even (cover costs)?

4. Is self-publishing cost effective? Are authors making money or are they losing out?

5. How many copies of your book did you sell in the first year after publication and since publication?

E. Distribution, marketing and sales

1. Where do you keep your stock?

2. Who is your target market?

3. How do you distribute, market and sell your book? Why? How much does this cost?

4. How involved are you in promoting your book?

5. a) Do brick and mortar bookshops stock your books on their shelves?

b) If so, which bookshops and how easy was this to accomplish?

c) If not, why?

d) Do you think this plays an important factor in obtaining sales?

6. What has been your experience dealing with bookshops?

7. What discount do you give bookshops?

8. Do you sell directly to the market?

9. What type of online presence do you have? – website, social media 3

10. How is your book/s performing on the market?

11. Are there any reviews of your book? If so, where can I access these reviews?

12. a) Do readers of your book/s give you feedback?

b) How do they do that?

c) What are they saying about your book?

F. Self-publishing experience

1. Describe your self-publishing experience. What would you repeat or not repeat?

2. What aspect of self-publishing were you most satisfied with?

3. What aspect of self-publishing were you most dissatisfied with?

4. How do you plan to publish your next work? Why?

5. What are the opportunities and challenges of self-publication?

6. What factors promote successful self-publication?

7. What lessons have you learnt from self-publishing?

8. Is there anything that you want to share about self-publishing?

Traditional publishers

A. Background information

Name of Publisher:

Type of publisher: Multinational/Independent

Name and position of research participant:

Years in that position:

Publishing experience:

Years with the company:

B. Trade publishing in South Africa

1. What is the state of trade publishing in SA?
2. What are the opportunities?
3. What are the challenges?
4. What are the trends in the sector?

C. Traditional trade publishing

1. What genres does your company publish?
2. Describe the company's publication process (selection, production, distribution and marketing).
3. What effects have the increased ease of self-publishing had on publisher behaviour in the manuscript evaluation stage.
4. What type of printing do you use (POD, Litho, Digital, Web)? Why?
5. What are your distribution, marketing and sales strategies?
6. How do you price your books?
7. On average, how big are your print runs?
8. How many copies do your best-sellers sell in a year? 2

D. Self-publishing in South Africa

1. What is your impression of self-publishing?
2. Who is self-publishing?
3. What is the state of self-publishing in the trade sector?
4. What are the implications of self-publishing in the trade sector?
5. How have traditional publishers responded to self-publishing?
6. Is self-publishing a new type of competition for traditional publishers?
7. What is the quality of books that are self-published? Is there an underlying difference between a book that is published traditionally and a book that is self-published?
8. Have you republished a book that was first self-published? Why?
9. Will the structure of the publishing industry change? How will it change? How should publishers reposition their roles to deal with this new trend in the publishing industry?
10. If authors can take over the roles that traditional publishers only offered like publishing, marketing and selling, what value can traditional publishers offer to authors?

Publishing services companies

A. Background information

Name of research participant:

Position of research participant:

Years in that position:

Publishing experience:

Years with the company:

B. Publishing services companies

1. Tell me briefly about your company.
2. What services do you offer?
3. How do you market your services to authors?
4. Who are your competitors?
5. Are there any reviews from your customers? If so, where can I access these reviews?

C. Self-publishing in South Africa

1. What is your impression of self-publishing?
2. Who is self-publishing?
3. Is self-publishing popular in certain demographics (authors and readers) and genres?
4. Is there something that unifies self-published books?
5. Describe your experiences with working with self-published authors.
6. What is the state of self-publishing in the trade sector?
7. What are the implications of self-publishing on the trade sector?
8. How have traditional publishers responded to self-publishing?
9. Is self-publishing a new type of competition for traditional publishers?
10. What is the quality of books that are self-published? Is there an underlying difference between a book that is published traditionally and a book that is self-published?

Bookshops

A. Background information

Name of bookstore:

Type of bookstore:

Position:

Number of years with the company:

B. Bookstores in South Africa

1. What is the state of the book market in South Africa?
2. What is the state of bookshops in South Africa?
3. What opportunities and challenges do bookshops face in SA?
4. What factors influence your buying decisions?
5. What are your best-selling titles at the moment?
6. What are your best-selling genres in general?
7. What percentage discount do you get from traditional publishers and from self-published authors?
8. What are your best-selling genres in general? Is that what you expected?
9. What are customers asking for that you cannot find from publishers?

C. Self-published books

1. Do you stock self-published books? Why?
2. Which self-published titles do you stock in your shop?
3. Describe your experiences of stocking self-published books (opportunities, challenges)?
4. How would you describe the quality of self-published books in comparison to traditionally published books?
5. Have you ever received feedback from customers who have bought self-published books? What type of feedback?
6. Do self-published books sell well? Can you please give sales figures?