

How Many Copies of the Same Book Do You Need?

The sneaky connection between publishing industries and your growing bibliomania

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"Take a look at the spellbinding new edition of This Popular Book featuring never-before-seen interviews of the author and brand new illustrations from well-known artist, X. Coming to bookstores near you in early 2022. Keep an eye out on our Instagram!"

...and you're sold. It doesn't matter if you've read this book several times before because you already happen to own three exclusive editions of it.

It's perfectly fine to ignore the fact that this is an unnecessarily expensive luxury you probably can't afford in the time being. It's all okay because this exclusive new edition you've just gotten wind of is trending all across social media and you can't be the only one who doesn't partake.

This isn't the first time this has happened to you, is it?

The term "bibliomania" was first coined by physician John Ferrier, in 1809. Generally, bibliomania is regarded as a rather trivial hardship which tends to befall readers who are a little too passionate about their love of books and resort to obsessively hoarding books as a result.

It appears as though in the present day, publishing houses are seemingly exploiting that very obsession in readers so as to reap increased amounts of profits through the release of reprinted books alone.

In the 80s and 90s, publishing houses operated in a seemingly closed-off and old-fashioned manner, working only with well-established and successful authors who'd approach them with completed manuscripts of their work.

Advertising tactics during that period weren't the most creative, with the publishing houses relying largely on popular community book clubs and most-frequented bookstores to

ensure greater sales of physical copies of books.

As the 21st century dawned upon us, authors such as David Baldacci, J. K. Rowling, Zadie Smith, Dan Brown, Stephenie Meyer, and Marjane Satrapi rose to international prominence owing to the widespread successes of their works in fiction, all of which eventually attained cult status in the later years. Soon enough, the publishing houses came to see the potential that the cult status of the aforementioned authors' works in fiction had to offer.

Enter *Hollywood*.

For a globally-bestselling book series such as *Harry Potter*, it was expected that the series' massive fanbase would ensure the success of screen adaptations. Reality met the expectations as the film adaptations of Rowling's books emerged as box-office hits, paving the way for a franchise associated with the literary and cinematic world of *Harry Potter*.

Banking on the films' growing popularity, it expanded into the *Wizarding World* as we know it today, a commercially-viable franchise in its own right. Aside from the movies, the *Wizarding World* franchise continues to churn out massive profits thanks to new editions of the original source material, each offering something new, whether it be illustrations or Hogwarts house-themed covers.

Publishers don't limit their lucrative marketing strategies to only promote "pop lit" books like *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, or even Dan Brown's *Robert Langdon* series. They are using similar tactics to lure readers into hoarding classic works of literature they might already have studied in English class.

Penguin Books, who started out printing cheap paperbacks of classics to make them accessible to the masses, now sells attractive editions like the *Clothbound Classics* in tandem with

their iconic black-spine paperbacks. Moreover, there are publishers who bring out editions with gilt or deckled edge pages, or leather-bound tomes.

These additional features of reprints and the umpteenth editions with the long-dead author's handwritten notes are merely for aesthetic value, an aspect heavily promoted online by book influencers, which is good for the publishers but bad for your wallet. How many copies of *Pride and Prejudice* do you need anyway?

The eagerness on the publishers' part to find innovative ways to keep readers buying books could be a reaction to the changing of reading habits.

In the early 2010s, there were fears that the publishing industry was dying due to the advent and growing popularity of e-books. A decade later, physical books are still going strong, thriving even. However, the way we read books *has* changed since readers can choose to buy a book in either its print, e-book, or audio format. In addition, a book now has to vie for our attention through extensive social media-based marketing campaigns, when it would have to compete only with other similar books back in the day. Then again, there are platforms such as "bookstagram" and Goodreads to keep the love of reading alive.

Traditional publishing houses also have to deal with the rise of self-publishing authors, because there are many online platforms available that streamline the trajectory of the publication process. Case in point: bestselling Wattpad authors Anna Todd and Beth Reekles, both of whose works in fiction, the *After* series and *The Kissing Booth* duology, have gone on to become cult classics in literature and on screen.

If you, a publishing house, don't have hopeful writers (or their agents) come to you with their manuscripts

now that they can publish on their own, doesn't that spell trouble for your business? Hence, the fancy covers, the film adaptations, and the merch.

Then comes the pandemic. The local industry has been particularly hit as evident in the poor sales and turnout at this year's Boi Mela. Yet, the lockdowns have turned readers towards books for solace during these difficult times. Since we can't go to bookstores, online shopping has become the default purchase method. In Bangladesh, readers are well-acquainted with the various book distributor pages on social media, while international readers rely on publishers' websites or online shopping platforms like Amazon.

Hence, the publishers have to step up their online game by optimising their websites to increase site traffic. To stay afloat, publishing sites have now opted to commodify literature even further with the introduction of limited-edition merchandise with their bestselling reprints. Forget *Harry Potter* mugs, you can now also buy t-shirts with Shakespearean quotes modified as puns.

The concern here is whether in the publishers' efforts to retain glory, they're inadvertently causing significant amounts of damage through their manipulation of customers' demands, by encouraging an unhealthy habit of hoarding expensive reprints of books.

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