

Digital Disruption and Author Strategy: A Qualitative Study of Self-Publishing in the US Science Fiction and Fantasy Market as a Source of Intangible Assets

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Abstract

This paper examines how self-published authors in the U.S. science fiction and fantasy (SFF) market strategically respond to digital disruption in the publishing industry. Drawing on fifteen expert interviews analyzed through Mayring's qualitative content analysis, the study integrates four theoretical perspectives: disruptive innovation, diffusion of innovations, the resource-based view, and actor-network theory. The results show that independent authors act as entrepreneurial micro-firms, leveraging intangible assets such as brand identity, digital marketing skills, and reader communities to navigate platform-based markets. Authors adopt funnel marketing, hybrid publishing, and platform-specific strategies to enhance visibility and monetise creative output. The sample is limited to one genre and national context, and findings are therefore exploratory. The study advances our understanding of cultural entrepreneurship and platform economies by demonstrating how digitalisation reconfigures authorial agency within sociotechnical networks of platforms, algorithms, and digital tools.

Introduction

With rapid digitalisation, creative industries such as publishing have been reinvented accordingly. Despite traditional literary production and distribution hierarchies being pervasive for centuries, self-publishing platforms, virtual communities, and publishing tools – especially those provided by Amazon (e.g., the KDP system) – led to the current paradigm change in how authors produce, distribute, and profit from their work. This change has opened avenues for creative entrepreneurship that have disrupted the traditional publishers' gatekeeper role and led to a more decentralized, author-led world.

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While the boom in self-publishing has experienced strong growth in significant economic and cultural terms, the academic literature has yet to adequately grapple with the strategic logic of author behaviour in this nascent space. Current literature on digitalisation within the publishing industry has concentrated on industry-level disruption (Thompson, 2012; Striphas, 2009), and there is little focus on micro-scale strategies that authors employed. Authors adopted adaptive strategies in response to changes in the publishing landscape. Moreover, most strategic management studies focus on established firms and intermediaries rather than individual actors functioning as micro-enterprises in creative economies. This leaves a notable gap in understanding how independent authors develop and implement strategic responses to digital disruption, particularly in highly competitive niche markets such as science fiction and fantasy.

The genre-fiction market – in this case, the US science fiction and fantasy (SFF) market – offers an interesting case study for these dynamics. Writers in this category sometimes employ high-powered marketing techniques, audience analytics, and a media mix to develop a readership community and generate revenue. Self-publishing's flexibility means these writers can play with pricing, formats, markets, and branding. However, little empirical research captures how authors experience and conceptualize these strategies.

The shift from a publisher-centric to an author-centric business model constitutes a fundamental disruption within the field. Drawing from the theory of disruptive innovation (Christensen, 1997), digital self-publishing platforms can be seen as low-cost entrants that gradually gain market share by addressing the unmet needs of both readers and aspiring authors. These platforms now represent a significant share of published content, with Amazon alone estimated to account for over 80% of self-published ebook sales in the United States (Statista, 2023). This transformation also aligns with the principles of the diffusion of innovations theory (Rogers, 2003), in which early adopters of new technologies—such as direct publishing tools or targeted Facebook advertising—become exemplars of emergent practices in their respective fields. While Christensen's theory of disruptive innovation highlights how self-publishing platforms challenged and restructured the traditional publishing industry, Rogers' diffusion of innovations framework complements this view by explaining how such disruptions are adopted and normalized at the individual author and reader levels. In other words, if disruptive innovation clarifies why the industry's structural

landscape has shifted, diffusion theory explains the mechanisms through which authors have adopted new tools, practices, and publishing pathways. Together, these perspectives bridge the macro-level industry transformation with the micro-level processes of adoption and adaptation.

In addition to technological affordances, the rise of author-as-entrepreneur reflects broader shifts in cultural labour and precarious work (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011). Independent authors must simultaneously perform creative, editorial, marketing, and managerial roles, blurring the boundary between artist and entrepreneur (Bennett, 2018). These hybrid practices are underpinned by strategic decision-making. However, there is little consensus in the literature about how such strategic behaviour should be conceptualized or assessed without traditional organisational structures. This study addresses the theoretical ambiguity by situating author strategies within the broader discourse on micro-entrepreneurship and digital transformation.

The core objective of this article is thus to examine the strategic responses of self-published authors to digital disruption in the US science fiction and fantasy book market. Based on 15 semi-structured expert interviews with independent authors conducted in early 2024, this qualitative study aims to generate empirically grounded insights into the motivations, tools, and decision-making processes underlying contemporary authorial strategy. This cohort was chosen to capture diversity in publishing experience, ranging from emerging to established authors, and to reflect the significance of SFF as one of the most commercially dynamic segments of self-publishing. The sample size was guided by the principle of theoretical sampling, with data collection continuing until no substantially new themes emerged in relation to strategic decision-making, platform use, and income challenges. Saturation was considered to have been reached when subsequent interviews yielded repetitive insights rather than novel categories or perspectives. This threshold is consistent with established standards in qualitative research (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006), ensuring both empirical depth and analytical reliability. The following questions guided the research:

R1: How has digitalisation affected the publishing industry, particularly from the perspective of authors

R2: How have self-published US science fiction and fantasy market authors responded strategically to this transformation?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to make two significant contributions to the literature. First, it deepens the understanding of digital disruption in publishing by foregrounding the perspectives and practices of individual authors rather than institutional stakeholders. Second, it expands the scope of strategic management research by exploring how entrepreneurial strategies are developed and applied in the context of creative micro-enterprises operating in digitally mediated markets.

The findings provide a comprehensive account of how self-published authors interact with platform dynamics, digital marketing funnels, branding practices, and emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence. These practices are discussed within a broader conceptual framework incorporating disruptive innovation, resource-based strategy, and cultural production. The findings illustrate the various tactics, challenges, and uncertainties that authors face in making a living beyond the traditional publishing economy.

The article's structure is organized as follows: The next section provides an overview of relevant theoretical literature on digital disruption, innovation diffusion, and creative entrepreneurship. The preceding contextual discussion of the US publishing market, genre fiction, Amazon, and the like provides the foundation for this analysis. The methodology section outlines the qualitative approach adopted in the study, including interview design, sample characteristics, and analytical procedures. The findings and discussion section presents the key themes derived from the data, supported by illustrative quotations. Finally, the article concludes by summarising the main insights, addressing the research questions, discussing limitations, and identifying directions for future research.

Theoretical Background

Understanding the strategic responses of self-published authors to digital disruption requires a multi-theoretical approach that integrates perspectives from innovation theory, strategic management, and sociotechnical systems. This section presents four key theoretical frameworks that underpin the conceptual foundation of the study: Disruptive Innovation (Christensen), Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers), Resource-Based View (Barney), and Actor-Network Theory (Latour). These frameworks offer a comprehensive perspective on technological innovation, individual initiative, and market response in digital publishing.

The concept of disruptive innovation, as introduced by Christensen (1997), is a key concept that can be used to interpret the evolution of the publishing industry. Disruptive innovations are new technologies or business models that cater to overlooked or underserved market segments, eventually replacing existing market leaders. In publishing terms, this took the form of self-publishing platforms like Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) and Smashwords, offering a cost-effective alternative to the gate-kept world of the big publishing houses and allowing aspiring authors with little chance of breaking through the gates of the publishing elite a chance to reach their audiences. These venues provided an efficient way to reach global readers, allowing authors to sidestep agents and editors and maintain control, as well as a greater percentage of revenues. Slowly, these disruptive models have taken hold among hobbyists and niche writers willing to experiment, as well as mid-list and bestselling authors in search of greater independence. Thus, the self-publishing model exemplifies Christensen's framework by demonstrating how innovation from the margins can reshape core industry practices and value networks (Christensen et al., 2015).

Rogers' (2003) Diffusion of Innovations theory complements this, which explains how new technologies and practices spread across social systems. According to Rogers, adopting an innovation depends on its perceived relative advantage, compatibility with existing values and practices, complexity, trialability, and observability. Within the creative sector, digital publishing tools offer clear advantages in terms of cost, control, and speed to market. Early adopters, authors inclined towards technology or entrepreneurship, often make such tools commercially successful, which tends to rub off onto the larger author body. Social proof, delivered through forums, writing communities, and success stories on YouTube and Facebook, helped the spread. Moreover, with time, self-publishing became not a niche but a mainstream choice, particularly for authors of genre fiction—science fiction and fantasy, in particular, appealed to digital readers, and production schedules were brisk.

While innovation theories explain the macro-level dynamics of disruption and diffusion, the Resource-Based View (RBV) offers insights into how individual authors develop and sustain competitive advantage in this environment. As Barney (1991) articulated, the RBV focuses on the firm's internal resources—valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN)—as key

determinants of strategic success. Although independent authors are not traditional firms, they function as micro-enterprises, managing a portfolio of strategic resources, including writing skills, brand identity, audience loyalty, marketing expertise, and digital fluency. Successful self-published authors differentiate themselves through content and unique combinations of tools and capabilities, including reader analytics, social media presence, and customer relationship management via newsletters or patronage platforms. These resources are often embedded in the author's brand, making them difficult to replicate and forming a basis for sustainable advantage in a highly competitive market.

To account for the interplay between human and non-human actors in the self-publishing ecosystem, this study also draws on the Actor-Network Theory (ANT), initially developed by Latour (2005). Actor-Network Theory (ANT) provides a valuable lens for analysing the hybrid sociotechnical character of self-publishing. Rather than privileging either human actors or structural conditions, ANT emphasises that agency is distributed across networks of both human and non-human elements. In the self-publishing ecosystem, human actors include authors, readers, editors, and platform managers, while non-human actors encompass algorithms, contractual arrangements, digital tools, and distribution infrastructures. Each of these elements actively shapes publishing outcomes: for instance, recommendation algorithms determine the visibility of books, while contractual terms on digital platforms constrain or enable authorial choices (Chen, 2021; Thompson, 2020). By foregrounding these heterogeneous interactions, ANT demonstrates that publishing practices are not solely the product of individual strategies or industry structures, but emerge from dynamic networks where human and technological actors are mutually constitutive. This perspective complements the other frameworks by providing a sociotechnical explanation of how opportunities and constraints in self-publishing are co-constructed.

ANT challenges traditional dichotomies between technology and society by conceptualising networks as heterogeneous assemblages of people, tools, platforms, algorithms, and texts. In the case of digital publishing, authorial strategy cannot be understood solely in terms of human decision-making; instead, it emerges from the interaction between the author and a range of sociotechnical artefacts such as Amazon's algorithm, formatting software (e.g., Vellum), cover design tools (e.g., Canva), and community feedback mechanisms (e.g., Goodreads). These elements co-construct the conditions

that make strategic action possible. For instance, a book's visibility on Amazon is not merely a function of content quality but also metadata optimisation, pricing strategy, and the algorithm's response to early sales data—an actor-network in which human intent and machine calculation shape outcomes.

These four frameworks provide a robust theoretical base for analysing the digitalisation of creative sectors, such as publishing. Christensen and Rogers explain the industry-level transformation and adoption patterns. At the same time, Barney and Latour focus on the micro-level processes of value creation and strategic positioning within technologically mediated environments. Together, they shed light on the factors that influence how independent writers respond to digital disruption, create strategic responses, and survive outside traditional organisations. This synthesis informs a sophisticated account of how digital devices are taken up and become implicated in wider assemblages of practice, performance, and power in various aspects of the cultural economy.

Taken together, these four frameworks provide a multi-layered understanding of the dynamics of self-publishing. Christensen's theory of disruptive innovation situates the rise of self-publishing within the broader structural transformation of the publishing industry. Rogers' diffusion of innovations model complements this by explaining how the disruption spreads and becomes embedded at the level of authors and readers. Barney's resource-based view then brings attention to the strategic dimension, clarifying how individual authors leverage distinctive resources and capabilities to gain a competitive advantage in a platform-driven market. Finally, Latour's actor-network theory adds a sociotechnical perspective by highlighting the entanglement of human actors (authors, readers, intermediaries) and non-human actors (algorithms, platforms, contractual infrastructures) in shaping outcomes. Together, these perspectives operate at different but interconnected levels—industry transformation, adoption processes, strategic agency, and network interactions—allowing for a comprehensive explanation of self-publishing as both an economic and cultural phenomenon.

Context: Digitalisation in the Publishing Industry

The publishing process has undergone a significant structural change over the past 20 years, primarily due to the digitalisation and rise of platform-based

economies. Such changes have blurred the lines between traditional economic models, distribution channels, and power dynamics. The dynamics of this context are essential to consider in the analysis of the strategic responses of independent authors in the current study.

Traditional Publishing: Organisational Forms and Constraints

The traditional publishing industry was an oligopolistic, top-down system in which large publishing houses, agencies, and wholesalers acted as gatekeepers. Writers submitted manuscripts to agents, who, if successful, received editing, design, and marketing support. In return, they typically received modest royalties (8–15%) and limited creative control (Thompson, 2012). High capital requirements and long lead times created barriers to entry (Striphas, 2009), especially for new or non-mainstream voices.

Power asymmetries characterised this model: authors often relinquished control over pricing, cover design, and content in exchange for access to formal distribution networks and legitimacy. While this model maintained quality control and industry standards, it offered little entrepreneurial agency to creators.

The Rise of Self-Publishing and Author-as-Brand

Digital platforms—especially Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP)—have dismantled many of these barriers. Self-publishing allowed authors to bypass traditional gatekeepers, distributing their work directly through ebook stores, print-on-demand systems, and audiobook platforms. This disintermediation is supported by user-friendly tools that cover the entire publishing value chain.

A central element of this turn is the dominance of the author as a brand. Whereas independent authors used to write books but make design, pricing, and marketing decisions based on speculation, they have become something akin to producers of digital publishing content running small businesses. They rely on branding and targeting. This works best in genre fiction (science fiction and fantasy, romance, etc.), where high-volume outputs and engaged reader communities create quick feedback cycles and strong signals for the algorithms.

Platform Centralisation and Strategic Compromises

It is digitally based, and Amazon remains in a dominant

position in the global publishing market, providing a distribution, analytics, and royalty management platform. Kindle Unlimited (KU), its subscription-based programme, compensates authors by page reads rather than unit sales, shaping strategies around book-length, reader retention, and rapid releases.

While Amazon offers up to 70% royalties and a broad reach, exclusivity requirements and dependency on opaque algorithms introduce volatility. Authors benefit from robust infrastructure, trade-off control, and revenue predictability (Srnicsek, 2017). Audible, ACX, and KU expand revenue channels but further consolidate Amazon's influence, a tension that shapes long-term strategy and risk tolerance.

Digital Tools and Tactical Innovation

Digitalisation has democratised publishing through affordable tools that enhance both production and marketing. Software such as Vellum supports professional formatting, while Canva and BookBrush enable easy visual branding. Advertising and analytics platforms (e.g., Facebook Ads, BookReport) allow authors to test strategies and iterate in real-time.

Email marketing tools, such as Mailchimp and ConvertKit, foster direct communication with audiences, allowing authors to build their fan bases away from social networks. Data-informed decision-making is standard practice, with authors analysing ROI, reader behaviour, and campaign results to refine blurb writing, pricing, and promotion.

Hybrid Publishing and Shifting Power Relations

Writers today work with more independence but also more accountability (Lobato, 2019; Arrigada & Ibañez, 2020). Moreover, many adopt hybrid strategies – they blend self-publishing with selective (or limited) traditional deals, crowdfunding, or use platforms like Patreon. These are either side of the pluralisation of the publishing economy and the emergence of authorial entrepreneurship.

Rather than following a single model, authors navigate trade-offs between reach, control, and profit. The result is a complex ecosystem where creators manage multiple roles—writer, marketer, strategist—within a volatile but flexible environment.

Methodology

To examine the strategic responses of self-published authors to digital disruption, this study employed a qualitative research design based on expert interviews. Given the exploratory nature of the research questions and the lack of extensive prior literature on the micro-level strategies of independent authors in digitally mediated markets, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable. Qualitative approaches are particularly well-suited to understanding the complexity, reflexivity and context specificity of lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). This approach enabled the study to uncover the nuanced rationale, motivations and practices that drive authorial decision-making practices – dimensions often missing in quantitative surveys or secondary data.

The study employed a purposive expert sampling method of those with specialist self-publishing knowledge who have sustained active participation. Following the criteria developed by Meuser and Nagel (2009), experts were defined as self-published authors who (1) have published at least three titles independently, (2) generate a significant portion of their income from book-related sales or subscriptions, and (3) have experience in engaging directly with digital publishing tools, platforms, and marketing techniques. These criteria ensured that participants were not merely passive users of publishing infrastructure but active agents capable of reflecting on and articulating their strategic practices.

The research focused on the United States science fiction and fantasy (SFF) market for three reasons. First, this genre segment is particularly prominent in self-publishing, with a large and commercially active readership accustomed to digital consumption formats such as ebooks and audiobooks. Second, SFF authors often exhibit higher levels of technological engagement and experimentation, including the early adoption of marketing funnels, crowdfunding, and AI-assisted content tools. Third, the US publishing industry provides a relatively mature and stable foundation for digital self-publishing, which allows the evolution of author strategies to be studied over time. Although the results are those found in one genre and in one region, the report's findings are relevant to other digitally focused creative industries.

The interviews were conducted with 15 authors from February to April 2024. Interviews occurred remotely via video and were 60-90 minutes in duration. The interview guide was organised according to the following three research questions: the selection of a platform, pricing

strategy, branding and marketing strategies, use of tools, and perceptions of risk and success. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed fully and anonymised in line with ethical research guidelines. Pseudonyms were used in this article to protect participant confidentiality and adhere to *Our Economy* journal guidelines.

Given the heterogeneity of the interviewees, author profiles were systematically categorised along three dimensions. First, publishing pathway distinguished between authors who exclusively self-publish, those who pursue hybrid strategies, and those transitioning from traditional publishing. Second, career stage differentiated emerging, mid-career, and established authors. Third, market positioning captured whether authors targeted niche readerships or sought broad commercial appeal. These categories enabled structured comparison across profiles, making it possible to identify both common patterns and meaningful divergences in strategic behaviour. The comparative analysis was conducted by examining similarities and differences within and across these categories, thereby linking author profiles to the strategic choices observed in the data.

The interviews were analysed based on Mayring's (2014) approach to qualitative content analysis. Inductive and deductive coding generates and discerns patterns, categories, and themes within the data. The coding process was conducted collaboratively by two researchers to enhance analytical reliability. Inter-coder reliability was established by independently coding an initial subset of interviews, followed by comparison and discussion to resolve discrepancies and refine the coding framework. After agreement was reached, the remaining interviews were coded, with coder triangulation applied through periodic joint reviews to confirm the stability of categories and to ensure interpretive consistency. This approach combined systematic reliability checks with iterative refinement, strengthening both the credibility and the depth of the qualitative analysis. The process started with constructing an initial coding frame guided by the research questions and theoretical background. Emergent codes were developed inductively to reflect emerging ideas as transcripts were reviewed. We used an iterative and recursive coding procedure, whereby we continually checked cases against each other to develop categories and to ensure analytic saturation. Through qualitative analysis software, the codes were systematically organised and provided transparency for the coding decision. To enhance transparency, a structured codebook was developed, defining the main categories and their subcodes. This codebook is provided

in the Appendix A together with illustrative quotations, which are systematically linked to categories in the Findings section.

The study acknowledges the possibility of survivorship bias—a form of selection bias that arises when only successful or visible individuals are included in the sample. Since many of the interviewees were recruited through self-publishing forums, social media, and professional networks, there is a risk that they may represent disproportionately successful or resourceful authors. To counteract this, a deliberate attempt was made to ensure that the sample was varied and included lower-selling authors, hybrid authors (who have a mix of traditionally published and self-published books) and newer authors. Throughout the interviews, authors were prompted to describe successes or failures, disappointments, and things that did not go as planned. This reflexive strategy sought to reveal the dense range of strategic experimentation and its diverse effects.

The applied method has proven to be a solid basis for investigating the complexities of authorial strategy in a digital era. Through its unique method of combining expert sampling with a focus on a genre with rich participatory traditions and the authors' careful analysis of the content, the study provides empirical evidence on how a sample of individual creators manages life in a dynamic, ideationally competitive marketplace of digital publishing.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the core empirical findings of the study, derived from 15 semi-structured expert interviews with self-published authors operating in the US science fiction and fantasy (SFF) market. Two principal areas of insight were identified: (1) dominant strategic themes used to position and promote work, and (2) differentiated strategies reflecting diverse goals, professionalism, and technological adaptation. The final subsection links findings to theoretical frameworks, conceptualising authors as entrepreneurial micro-firms embedded within evolving sociotechnical ecosystems.

Author Strategy Themes

Funnel Marketing: From Discovery to Conversion

Authors frequently employed funnel marketing to guide potential readers through structured stages—discovery, engagement, and conversion. Standard techniques included lead magnets (e.g., free novellas), automated

email sequences, and social proof mechanisms. One participant explained:

"I give away a novella to get them on my list, then send lore bits, teasers... they are already invested." (Author A)

These strategies often incorporate tools such as Mailchimp, BookFunnel, and StoryOrigin, aligning with Rogers' (2003) innovation diffusion theory, showing how authors adapt digital marketing practices to niche creative contexts.

Launch Planning and Targeting

Interviewees highlighted launch planning as critical to algorithmic visibility. Preorder periods, ARC teams, and time-sensitive ads were common tactics. Some described "mini-campaigns" to trigger early Kindle Unlimited reads or sales, thus activating Amazon's recommendation algorithms:

"Cover reveal, preorder ads, countdown... to prime the algorithm and list." (Author D)

This reflects a strategic sensibility built on real-time analytics and iterative experimentation—traits common in tech-savvy entrepreneurial environments.

Newsletter and Patreon Engagement

Email lists were widely regarded as core business assets. Authors used them not just for promotions but also to build loyalty and maintain relationships between releases. Several also used Patreon for reader-supported subscriptions, offering exclusive content or access to communities on Discord.

"The list is where the relationship lives. Social media can go away tomorrow, but email? That is mine." (Author G)

This aligns with Barney's (1991) resource-based view: email lists represent valuable, non-substitutable assets supporting sustainable advantage. Barney's resource-based view further clarifies the strategic dimension of self-publishing by focusing on the resources and capabilities that authors mobilise. The interviews revealed that competitive advantage is often derived not from financial capital, but from distinctive intangible resources: intellectual property rights over one's work, personal branding and reputation, digital marketing skills, and strong reader communities. These resources are valuable, rare, and difficult to imitate, thereby fulfilling the VRIN criteria outlined in RBV. For example,

authors who successfully built loyal fan communities reported more sustainable income and resilience against platform fluctuations. The RBV perspective thus highlights that the heterogeneity of author success in self-publishing can be attributed to differential access to and development of these strategic resources.

Platform-Specific Strategy

Respondents adapted their strategies to the affordances of different platforms. Some decided to be Amazon exclusive with Kindle Unlimited, while others diversified across Kobo, Apple Books, and Google Play. Social media use also differed: Facebook for advertising and reader groups, TikTok for virality, and Instagram for aesthetics. Audiobook distribution typically occurred through ACX or Findaway Voices, utilising royalty-share deals to offset upfront expenses.

"Amazon is all about keywords and categories. Kobo is about global reach. Each platform has its logic." (Author K)

These practices align with Latour's (2005) actor-network theory, showing how authors co-construct strategies with algorithmic and technological actors. Actor-Network Theory (ANT) provides a valuable lens for understanding how the dynamics of self-publishing emerge from networks of both human and non-human actors. The interviews showed that authors' decisions were shaped not only by their own agency but also by algorithmic visibility, platform contracts, and digital infrastructures. For instance, several participants explained how changes in Amazon's ranking algorithms directly affected their sales trajectories, illustrating the agency of technological artefacts within the network. ANT thus complements individual- and industry-level explanations by foregrounding how publishing outcomes are co-constructed by authors, readers, platforms, and technological systems. This perspective demonstrates that strategic choices cannot be understood in isolation but are embedded within sociotechnical networks that continuously evolve.

Strategic Differentiation

Varying Objectives and Approaches

Authors differed in their definitions of success. Some focused on long-term brand-building; others concentrated on niche monetisation.

"LitRPG, military fantasy—it is not mainstream, but it pays well if you know your readers." (Author E)

Such diversity in objectives influenced decisions across pricing, pacing, design, and style. Strategy is thus not monolithic but highly situated.

Hybrid Publishing and AI Use

Several authors engaged in hybrid publishing, mixing traditional and indie approaches. AI tools (e.g., Sudowrite, ChatGPT) were used for outlining, ideation, and editing support—though never as substitutes for full manuscript writing.

"AI helps with outlining or naming—it saves me hours. But I still write the book." (Author L)

These examples reveal an experimental ethos and emerging tensions around authorship and automation.

Entrepreneurial Mindset and Adaptability

Across all interviews, an entrepreneurial mindset was evident. Authors spoke of tracking return on investment, testing ads and covers, maintaining SOPs, and learning from failure:

"You cannot just write a book and hope anymore." (Author B)

This aligns with Christensen's (1997) concept of innovation through market responsiveness. Indie authors frame publishing as iterative problem-solving and brand development—not merely a creative expression.

Interpretation: Authors as Micro-Firms in an Evolving Market

Authors in the self-publishing sector operate in many respects as micro-firms within platform capitalism, strategically mobilising resources such as intellectual property, brand identity, digital marketing skills, and reader communities. The interviews revealed practices such as pre-launch planning, funnel marketing, and diversification through newsletters or Patreon, all of which mirror entrepreneurial strategies typically associated with small firms competing in market-driven environments.

From a disruptive innovation standpoint, indie's counter

to traditional publishing is speedier, cheaper, and audience-er alternatives, especially in digital-first genres like SFF.

From the resource-based view, durable assets such as engaged mailing lists, branding, and platform fluency underpin strategic differentiation. These are valuable, rare, and hard to imitate—core tenets of sustained competitive advantage.

Actor-network theory helps explain how author strategies emerge through interactions with non-human actors, such as algorithms, dashboards, metadata, and distribution systems. Authors become “translators” between digital tools and creative intent.

Finally, using diffusion of innovations, authors can be seen as early adopters and peer educators. Many openly share learnings via blogs, Discord groups, or courses, thereby professionalising self-publishing through bottom-up innovation ecosystems.

The adoption of self-publishing practices among the interviewed authors can be further interpreted through Rogers’ diffusion of innovations framework. Several participants who adopted digital publishing early positioned themselves as ‘early adopters,’ experimenting with emerging platforms when they were still regarded as risky or unproven. By contrast, mid-career authors who transitioned after observing peers’ success reflected patterns consistent with the ‘early majority,’ emphasising reduced uncertainty once market viability was demonstrated. A smaller group, largely those with backgrounds in traditional publishing, mirrored ‘late majority’ characteristics, adopting self-publishing only after it became mainstream and professionally legitimised. This differentiation highlights how diffusion dynamics shaped the pace and rationale of adoption, showing that the spread of self-publishing cannot be understood solely as an economic opportunity, but also as a socially contextualised process influenced by perceptions of risk, legitimacy, and peer behaviour.

Conclusion

This study has explored the strategic responses of self-published authors to digital disruption in the publishing industry, with a particular focus on the US science fiction and fantasy (SFF) market. Drawing on fifteen expert interviews and employing Mayring’s qualitative content analysis, the research has revealed the complex interplay of digital tools, entrepreneurial strategies, and authorial agency in a rapidly evolving sector. The findings

contribute to a deeper understanding of how creative micro-entrepreneurs adapt to technological change and navigate new pathways to market participation and professional legitimacy.

The first research question asked: How has digitalisation affected the publishing industry? The evidence indicates that digitalisation has reshaped industry structures, thereby lowering classical barriers to entry and reallocating ownership of the means of production, distribution, and marketing. Platforms like Amazon’s Kindle Direct Publishing and Audible have paved the way for authors to bypass traditional gatekeepers. At the same time, services such as Canva, Vellum, and Facebook Ads have made professional-level self-publishing more affordable. These developments have expanded market access and introduced a new logic of competition, where visibility is algorithm-driven, and success depends on content quality, metadata optimisation, and community engagement. The digital shift has reconfigured publishing from a relatively closed cultural field into an open, dynamic ecosystem governed by technological platforms and data flows.

The second research question asked: How have US SFF book market authors responded strategically to this disruption? The results demonstrate that authors have adopted multiple entrepreneurial approaches, including funnel marketing, pre-launch preparation, and developing fan-owned audience channels, such as newsletters and Patreon. These are all tactics to put in place to grow a brand, increase discoverability, and provide a source of monthly, recurring income (The Authors Guild, 2018; European Commission, 2022). Authors also adapted to the affordances of these platforms and, in some cases, marketed themselves and their books in accordance with the affordances and constraints of platforms like Amazon, social media, and audiobook platforms. Crucially, the data also revealed diversity in authorial orientations – from niche monetisation to brand building – demonstrating the heterogeneous nature of the field and the extent to which authors can and do shape career paths consonant with their specific goals and values.

Theoretically, the study suggests that self-published authors can be conceptualised as micro-firms within a broader landscape of disruptive innovation and platform capitalism. This perspective is supported by the Resource-Based View, which highlights how authors strategically mobilise distinctive resources such as reader loyalty, brand identity, and digital marketing capabilities, and by Actor-Network Theory, which shows how these

strategies are embedded within platform-mediated infrastructures, including algorithms and contractual frameworks. Evidence from the interviews—such as investments in fan-owned audience channels, use of pre-launch marketing funnels, and adaptation to algorithmic changes—demonstrates that individual authors employ practices typically associated with small firms competing in market-driven environments. In this way, the study extends existing research on cultural entrepreneurship by showing how firm-based strategy models can be meaningfully applied to individuals operating in digital creative industries.

The integration of disruptive innovation, diffusion of innovations, the resource-based view, and actor-network theory demonstrates that self-publishing can only be fully understood through a multi-level perspective. Industry disruption, adoption dynamics, strategic resource use, and sociotechnical networks are interdependent dimensions that together explain how authors operate in and shape today's publishing ecosystem.

Nonetheless, the study has certain limitations. A limitation of this study lies in the scope of its empirical sample. The findings are derived from 15 interviews with U.S.-based science fiction and fantasy (SFF) authors. While the SFF genre is particularly significant in the context of self-publishing due to its commercial dynamism and strong digital readership, the results may not fully generalise to authors working in other genres or in different national contexts. The insights presented here should therefore be interpreted as exploratory and illustrative, highlighting patterns and tendencies rather than offering a comprehensive representation of the broader self-publishing community. While sufficient for thematic saturation, the sample size is restricted to one

genre and geographic context. Moreover, survivorship bias must be acknowledged, as the authors interviewed were among the more established and reflective self-publishers, which may have skewed their perspectives toward successful cases. Future research might compare different genres, explore additional geographic regions, or undertake longitudinal studies of authors tracked over time. Complementary quantitative work, for example, on sales patterns, pricing models, and the statistical impact of strategic variables (such as newsletter size or advertising spend), would further enhance generalisability. Ultimately, the rise of self-publishing in the digital age signifies more than a change in the means of production; it suggests a restructuring of the terms of authorship. Independent authors are not merely adapting to change but, in some cases, are actively shaping new norms of creative production and economic participation. These practices offer indicative insights into how digitalisation transforms labour and entrepreneurship in cultural industries, while recognising that they represent one specific case rather than a universal model.

Although this study focuses on self-publishing, its findings may have suggestive relevance for other creative industries that are shaped by digital platforms. Similar dynamics—such as reliance on algorithmic visibility, the need for entrepreneurial agency, and the instability of income streams—are also observed among musicians who distribute through streaming services, filmmakers who use online platforms, and digital content creators working within the platform economy. These parallels indicate promising avenues for future comparative research and point to the wider transformation of cultural production in the digital age, where creative labour is increasingly mediated by platform infrastructures and sociotechnical networks.

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Appendix A. Codebook with Illustrative Quotations

Category	Definition	Illustrative Quotations
Publishing Pathway	Author's chosen mode of publishing (self-publishing, hybrid, transition from traditional).	"I started self-publishing after several rejections from traditional publishers – it was the only way forward."
Initial Publishing Experience	Motivations and experiences with the first publication.	"At first, I didn't know what to expect, but hitting 'publish' was empowering."
Ebook Strategies	Approaches to pricing, formatting, and promotion of ebooks.	"Keeping my ebook at \$2.99 helps me stay visible in Amazon's ranking."
Audiobook Strategies	Choices regarding audiobook production and distribution.	"Audiobooks are costly, but they reach a completely different audience."
Distribution Breadth	Decisions about exclusivity vs. wide distribution.	"I stayed exclusive with Kindle Unlimited because the page-read royalties were worth it."
Book Launch Strategies	Marketing activities around release (pre-orders, newsletters, ads).	"Every launch, I run a Facebook ad campaign and notify my mailing list."
Author Platform	Use of websites, social media, and communities to reach readers.	"Building a newsletter has been the most important step for sustaining my readership."
Collaboration & Networking	Cooperation with editors, cover designers, or peer groups.	"My critique group has been invaluable – they push me to improve before publication."
Other Monetisation Strategies	Revenue streams beyond book sales (e.g., Patreon, merchandise).	"Patreon allows me to engage directly with my most loyal readers and stabilise income."

Digitalna preobrazba in avtorska strategija: kvalitativna študija samozaložništva na ameriškem trgu znanstvene fantastike kot vira neopredmetenih sredstev

Izvleček

Članek preučuje, kako se samozaložniki na ameriškem trgu znanstvene fantastike (SFF) strateško odzivajo na digitalno preobrazbo v založniški industriji. Na podlagi petnajstih poglobljenih intervjujev, analiziranih z Mayringovo kvalitativno analizo vsebine, študija integrira štiri teoretske perspektive: preobrazbene inovacije, difuzijo inovacij, koncept virov in zmožnosti ter teorijo »akter–mreža«. Rezultati kažejo, da neodvisni avtorji delujejo kot mikro-podjetniki, ki strateško mobilizirajo neopredmetena sredstva, kot so blagovna znamka, digitalne marketinške kompetence in bralske skupnosti, za učinkovito delovanje v ekosistemu digitalnih platform. Avtorji uporabljajo lijakasto trženje, hibridno založništvo in strategije, prilagojene posameznim platformam, da bi povečali vidnost ter učinkovito ekonomsko ovrednotili svoje ustvarjanje. Vzorčenje je omejeno na en žanr in en nacionalni kontekst, zato so ugotovitve raziskave eksplorativne. Študija prispeva k razumevanju kulturnega podjetništva in platformnih ekonomij, saj pokaže, kako digitalizacija preoblikuje avtorsko agencijo znotraj sociotehničnih mrež platform, algoritmov in digitalnih orodij.

Ključne besede: digitalna preobrazba, avtorska strategija, znanstvena fantastika, kulturno podjetništvo, platformna ekonomija, založniška dejavnost, neopredmetena sredstva.