

Fifty Shades of Success

In this day and age, the internet is no odd thing... for the most part. People have gained the ability to talk to others whom under normal circumstances never would have met. The interconnectedness of the internet has allowed for a world full of greater knowledge, and it is basically a virtual hodgepodge of various different peoples and interests. The large amount of people you can find on the internet from all around the world, as well as their interests, play a huge role in what I am trying to get at, for you see—it is here that you can find the vast world that brings about various worldwide phenomenon... like the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, by E. L. James.

Now, what does the trilogy of *Fifty Shades* have anything to do with the internet, you ask? Why, it has absolutely *everything* to do with the internet, because, without a doubt, this book would not be as popular as it is now if it had not been for the internet—at least, that is what I believe. Many people credit the trilogy's success to the content—such as what Zoe Williams claims in her article, *Why women love Fifty Shades of Grey*¹. Even Vicky Ward from the Huffington Post claims “its appeal is that it’s a brilliant psychological thriller—albeit a truly horribly written one.” CNN author Emanuella Grinberg claims, “the most potent (and obvious) factor is that sex sells...” I challenge this stance, though, with a question. The question here would be, “how would anybody know what appeals to the masses from the start if those sorts of things are not made publicly known?” Sexuality, although revered, is very much condoned in our day and age, and is not very much talked about. Call it a “dark hobby,” that little skeleton that many have in their closet. How does anybody really get to know what everybody’s

¹ Williams, Zoe. "Why Women Love Fifty Shades of Grey." *The Guardian*, July 6, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jul/06/why-women-love-fifty-shades-grey>.

skeletons are? The answer? Why, it's quite simple and I have said it various times already—it's nothing more than the internet. Here, you have the intelligent use of publicity, coming from a place where like-minded people come together and talk about their interests at no cost (except for the times you are paying for internet)! It is this, I believe, that allowed the trilogy to become so popular. "People won't stop talking about it, so it perpetuates the sales..." quotes Grinberg from Mala Battacharjee, an RT Book Reviews editor—and this is quite true.

Word-of-mouth has always been one of the best ways, if not *the* best way to make anything well known, whether by written or vocal word—because believe it or not, not everybody has access to the internet or a television. Regardless, the internet is highly known for its ability and accessibility to other *people* more than anything. Having this type of connection to people from literally all around the world is something astounding, and it gives us the ability to know and learn about things that we may have otherwise been completely oblivious to if we live under a rock—such as myself. Places such as Tumblr, Facebook, and way too many others to list off, consist of real people with time to spare to direct into a post or a blog. Usually in these posts one can find what they had for lunch—or about that really good or that really bad book they just read and just how good or just how bad it was and that everybody else has to read it. What do people do after they get told that something is really good or really bad? Why, they seek it out for themselves. This is where publicity takes place—you get your average person going around and talking about your product, and bam! Suddenly it has become a best seller.

Let us call it a hive-mind. People want to be in on "the in" simply because everybody else is, and in this day and age being left out of the loop can go so far as to

getting you harassed in various ways. The hottest diet, the latest fashion, the best book, that one movie—things like these are what everybody talks about. On Facebook you simply find people stating how much they like or dislike something, and on places such as Tumblr you get extremely long and elaborate posts that you would expect to see only in a college essay. Even now the topic of the *Fifty Shades* series is one of the most talked about, especially on places like Tumblr. Fauzia Burke from the Huffington Post claims that “Marketing through online communities is less expensive and much more powerful than trying to reach the general public...” She later goes on to say in the same article that “publishers and authors could enlist the support of the community to spread the word.” Coming from personal experience, you see it a lot, so much so that it gets kind of tiresome. “Dramatic reads” from people recording themselves reading passages from the book, artwork, reviews—you can find almost whatever you want regarding almost any topic on Tumblr, and Tumblr has thousands upon thousands of users. Tumblr, like any social website, has the ability to share anything; the moment one person writes something and posts it, it gets said person’s viewer/reader-base of anywhere from one to thousands of people, and then the moment that one *reblogs* the post, it gains the new person’s viewer/reader-base and it virtually doubles. The pattern continues, and thus the viewer/reader-base triples, quadruples—it grows exponentially. This is also taking into consideration that the user-base of places such as Tumblr and Facebook are literally people from all over the world, so you get news that was only made public in one place to become known world-wide simply by the push of a few buttons. What James had working for her was not the content of the book, it was not the past readers of her book—

it was the fact that people were talking about her book. How do you get people to talk about your book? Well, first you start out with knowing what people want.

Let us begin by looking at the roots of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy. It is a known fact that the *Fifty Shades* trilogy was not always an “original” piece and it is constantly debated if it even *is* an original piece today, even though we all know the answer. Before it became published, the *Fifty Shades* trilogy was known as *Master of the Universe*, which was an alternate universe fan-fiction of the *Twilight* saga by Stephenie Meyer, which covered some sexual endeavors between the main characters, Bella Swan and Edward Cullen. Fan-fiction is a fan-made piece of literature using material, ideas, and/or characters from a pre-made world of some sort. They usually reflect the inner desires of the reader that were not sufficiently quenched in the source material, or simply their own take on something about the story. In the case of the original *Fifty Shades* trilogy, the source material was *Twilight* and its characters.

Fan-fiction is rather controversial in various ways, but it always manages to find some sort of reader-base to fawn over the material. In James’ case, who was then known as “Snowqueens Icedragon” on a fan-fiction site known as—wait for it—FanFiction.net, she had input from her readers while she was writing this story. Now, this type of reader-and-writer relationship is not a very common occurrence, even in this day and age—or rather, it is not in terms of actual face-to-face communication or professional publishing. The only places that one could possibly find this type of relationship would be within the context of fan-fiction, experimental writing, or even web-comics (comic books written and self-published/posted in real-time online). The internet allows for this kind of communication to occur between the writer and their readers, which gives them instant

feedback as to what they want to see next, what to improve on, et cetera. What happens if a writer knows what their readers want? Well, they know what to write and what appeals to them, do they not? They do. Compare it to when one side of a war somehow obtains instant access to the enemy's knowledge base. They gain a huge advantage over their enemies without ever having to have moved a finger, and victory more often than not swiftly becomes theirs. The author gains the biggest tactical advantage that could serve them quite wonderfully in the long-run, whether they become an internet phenomenon or a worldwide one like James. When people know everyone's interests, they can easily figure out how to manipulate one and essentially monopolize on it. It is much like the way internet uses your search history to "personalize" the advertisements that you see online. Authors gather the things that appeal to the masses as per what they gathered from the internet, and create highly sought-after books. Now, whether James had actually planned to make her fan-fiction into an actual published piece from that start is uncertain, and if one looks at how she tried to erase most if not all traces of its previous incarnation, *Master of the Universe*, from the final piece, then it tells us quite well that she may have intended to capitalize on the material. Whether or not it actually *is* an original piece though, is another question we shall not delve into today².

Taking advantage of the internet and its freedom is something that many authors and artists do not really want to bring themselves to do because of the risks that also come with it. This brings me to another point—and that is the non-paying reader-base. There is such a thing as getting knock-offs for cheap in the physical world, but again, the internet gives one the opportunity for something non-physical to go around. I am not

² Ewan Morrison writes in her article that the story is much like that of an older folktale, which is more of a collection of stories fused into one. This, in turn, makes the *Fifty Shades* trilogy into a book with "60,000 authors," as Morrison says, which makes the creditability and originality of the trilogy a bit questionable. That being said, it does not really do much in the fact that the books are still and are likely to remain hugely popular.

talking about ebooks or the such, though, I am talking about the people who bought the product and decided to distribute it for free, at no cost, other than maybe a few minutes or hours depending on your internet speed. This includes but is not limited to torrenting and downloading things off the internet without paying a dime. While you can easily find excerpts of books online for free as a sort of preview for what you are buying, illegal downloading, or on a lighter note—free sharing, is a much easier and a less costly option. This is something that is even more controversial than making a fan-fiction into an actual published piece, seeing as it is an unlicensed but rather conventional form of distributing the book itself. This happens often with films, shows, and obviously books. Whether one did not have the money to buy the product or they simply did not want to pay for it, the reasons vary, but the fact remains that the book has gained another reader, and thus another voice to talk about the book.

This type of distribution I find to be one of the most... proactive. More often than not, if one comes to enjoy the product they pirated, they will oftentimes find another way to show their support to the author or creator of the piece. This can come in the form of watching the movie if it gets an adaptation—which in the case of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it did—or actually buying the book for themselves. Other merchandise produced for the source material is also a likely option for fans. Whatever the case, the easier it is to get your hands on something, the easier it will be to read, and if it was something worth reading, whether for the beauty of the piece or utter failure of it—it will definitely be worthy enough to talk about. When something is worthy, be it good or bad, enough to talk about, more people will seek out the book, and thus—more sales.

Combining the efforts of getting to know who you are possibly appealing to, gaining insight from the private lives of all your readers thanks to the internet, and having people talk about one's creations—these are all things that can get most people to read one's stuff. While it may be considered manipulative, or simply unoriginal, it is a smart thing to do. Such tactics are usually frowned upon in this day and age—but let us be honest here, without this type of approach, how could anybody become big in the matter of a few days or months? There are various other methods that one can choose to do in order to become as “big” as James and her *Fifty Shades* trilogy, but for the most part, this is by far the cheapest and easiest, not to mention the most efficient. James knew whom she was appealing to from the fan-fiction side, and people only had to complain about the book or simply talk about how it changed their life online in order for the trilogy to gain more readers. People have decided to distribute the book for free for those who do not have the money to spend or the time to care to pay. All of these combined actions result in something that has created a “worldwide phenomenon”—the explosion of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and its following two books. Get a woman who knows what people want, get people to distribute it and to talk about it, and you have a recipe for a success... in most cases. Whether or not the book is worthy of all the talk and the hype, what matters here is that it managed to achieve what most people thought was unlikely or even borderline impossible. The methods may be a bit unorthodox, but is that not how most of the world functions these days? What matters here is that somehow an author was able to make it big thanks to the power of the internet, and many more books are following in its stead, following a similar pattern. All we have to do now is wait and see what happens next.

After all, the internet is a strange, awkward, and glorious place that gives birth to even stranger, more awkward, and even more glorious things.

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