

Midocean University

College of Management

Master of Business Administration



**Print-on-Demand in the MENA Publishing Sector: A Case Study of Its Role in Risk Management,
Performance Improvement, and Sustainable Publishing**

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Introduction

The publishing industry has changed rapidly over the past two decades. Applying the different digital technologies has reshaped the way books and journals are produced, distributed, and sold, the huge transition from the printed materials into the electronic copies forced the publishers in general and university presses specifically to rethink traditional business models. One of the most important of these developments is Print-on-Demand (POD), a model that allows books to be printed only when a customer places an order, rather than producing large number of copies in advance or one time as a bulk.

For many publishers & university presses, especially those dealing with specialized, academic, or low-demand titles, traditional printing creates serious challenges. Books may remain unsold for long periods, storage costs can become a challenge, and publishers often take financial risks based on uncertain demand forecasts. These issues are particularly relevant to the MENA publishing sector.

In this context, Print-on-Demand offers more than just production technology. It can be viewed as a strategic tool that helps publishers control risk, improve efficiency, and keep titles available without committing to large stock. It also supports more sustainable publishing practices by reducing waste and limiting unnecessary production.

This study explores the role of Print-on-Demand in the MENA publishing sector through a case study approach. It focuses on how POD can contribute to risk reduction, better organizational performance, and more sustainable publishing practices.

Research Problem

The publishing industry globally in general and specifically in MENA is facing growing pressure to become more efficient, flexible, and sustainable. Traditional printing models often require publishers to print large quantities of books before they know the real level of demand. This creates several challenges, including high production costs, unsold inventory, storage expenses, and financial risk. These challenges are even more serious when publishers work with specialized or low-demand titles, which is common in academic, educational, and scholarly publishing with an exception for fiction and literature titles

In recent years, Print-on-Demand has emerged as an alternative approach that allows books to be printed only when they are ordered. This model has been discussed to reduce stock risk, improve operational flexibility, and support the long-term availability of titles. It has also attracted attention as a more sustainable publishing practice because it can reduce waste as well as CO2 emissions reduction by eliminating overproduction, and unnecessary storage.

Even so, most of the existing research on POD has focused on Western publishing markets or on academic publishing in Europe and North America. There is still limited evidence on how POD works in the MENA publishing sector, and whether it can genuinely help publishing houses and university presses improve their performance, manage risk, and adopt more sustainable practices.

The problem this study addresses, therefore, is the lack of clear and context-specific understanding of the role of Print-on-Demand in the MENA publishing sector, especially in relation to risk management, performance improvement, and sustainable publishing

Study Significance:

This study is important for several reasons, as stated below:

- First, it has an academic value because it brings together three areas that are often discussed separately: Print-on-Demand, publishing performance, and sustainability. Some studies have examined POD as a technical or economic innovation in publishing, while others have focused on sustainability in scholarly communication. This study connects these discussions by looking at POD not just as a printing method, but as a management tool that may influence efficiency, risk, and long-term sustainability.
- Second, the study has practical importance for publishers and publishing managers. Many publishing houses, especially those dealing with academic, specialized, or low-demand titles struggle with issues such as uncertain demand, inventory buildup, rising costs, and pressure to stay competitive. If POD can help reduce these challenges, then understanding its impact becomes highly relevant for decision making. The findings of this study may help publishers assess whether POD can improve cost efficiency, reduce operational risk, and support better performance over time.
- Third, the study has regional significance because the MENA publishing sector has not received enough attention in this area of research. Much of the existing literature focuses on Europe, North America, or broader international publishing systems. As a result, we still know relatively little about how these publishing models operate in MENA markets, where business conditions, market needs, and distribution systems may be quite different. This study adds value by examining the topic within a regional context that remains underexplored.

Study objectives:

This study aims to explore the role of Print-on-Demand in the MENA publishing sector and to understand its practical value for publishing organizations. More specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine how Print-on-Demand can help reduce financial risks in publishing houses.
2. Explore the effect of POD on publishing performance, particularly in terms of inventory management, and title availability.
3. Understand how POD may support more sustainable publishing practices.
4. Investigate how POD can be linked to selected Sustainable Development Goals, especially those related to responsible production, innovation, and climate awareness.
5. Provide case-based insights that help publishing managers and decision-makers in the MENA region evaluate the strategic value of POD.

Research Questions:

The study is looking to address the following research questions:

1. How does the adoption of Print-on-Demand affect the operational performance of publishing houses in the MENA region?
2. To what extent can Print-on-Demand reduce inventory and financial risks in publishing operations?
3. How does Print-on-Demand influence title availability, backlist sustainability, and overall publishing efficiency?
4. What role does Print-on-Demand play in promoting sustainable publishing practices within the MENA publishing sector?
5. How may the adoption of Print-on-Demand in publishing houses be associated with selected Sustainable Development Goals?

Research Hypotheses:

H1: The adoption of Print-on-Demand has a positive effect on the operational performance of publishing houses in the MENA region.

H2: The adoption of Print-on-Demand contributes to the reduction of inventory-related risk in publishing operations.

H3: The adoption of Print-on-Demand contributes to the reduction of financial risk by lowering upfront printing and storage costs.

H4: The use of Print-on-Demand improves title availability and supports the long-term sustainability of backlist publishing.

H5: The adoption of Print-on-Demand positively supports more sustainable publishing practices through reduced waste and more efficient resource use.

H6: The adoption of Print-on-Demand strengthens the ability of publishing houses to align their operations with selected Sustainable Development Goals.

Literature review:

The literature relevant to the study can be organized into several main categories: Print-on-Demand as a publishing model, Print-on-Demand in academic and university publishing, Print-on-Demand and publishing performance, Print-on-Demand and sustainability.

1. Print-on-Demand as a Publishing Model:

The first group of studies examines Print-on-Demand (POD) as a publishing and production model. These studies show that POD is not simply a technical innovation in printing, but a broader shift in how publishers manage inventory, distribution, and title availability.

Lewis (2002) presents POD and short-run digital printing as an important technological development that allows publishers to produce low-volume titles economically, especially books that would otherwise go out of print because demand is too small to justify a reprint. His work is useful in showing the early role of POD in addressing rising publishing costs and backlist availability.

Gallagher (2014) explains that POD has transformed the traditional publishing model. According to Gallagher, the older way relied on printing huge stock in advance and then planning to sell it, while POD allows publishers to produce books only when an order has been received. In this way, POD changes the structure of the book supply chain by reducing the need for warehousing and pre-printed stock and by linking production more directly to sales and distribution.

Mabaso (2020) adds an important distinction between true POD, short-run digital printing, and offset printing. His study is valuable it demonstrates that POD must be understood in relation to broader business concepts such as supply-chain efficiency, value creation, and the tipping point between digital and offset production.

Taken together, these studies suggest that POD is best understood as a demand-driven publishing model that reduces dependence on large print runs and supports more flexible and responsive operations.

2. Print-on-Demand in Academic and University Publishing

A second theme in the literature focuses on the use of POD in academic and university publishing. This is especially relevant because academic books often serve small and specialized audiences and poorly suited to traditional stock-heavy publishing models.

Magadán-Díaz and Rivas-García (2025) provide one of the most directly relevant studies for this research. Their analysis of Spanish university presses shows that POD has become an important strategy for academic publishers facing uncertain demand, declining use of monographs, and pressure to reduce costs. Their study demonstrates that POD improves flexibility, lowers storage costs, and helps university presses manage the lifecycle of academic books more efficiently.

Clare (2014) also contributes to this theme by examining university presses in the digital age. Her study shows that many university presses have struggled with limited budgets, slow digital adaptation, and changing market conditions. However, the Pace University Press case demonstrates that small academic presses can survive and even grow by adopting new distribution models, including POD, which reduces the need for unnecessary print runs and storage.

Tynan and McCarney (2014) provide a library-based perspective that is closely related to this theme. Although their study focuses on patron-driven acquisition rather than POD directly. Their case from University College Dublin shows that demand-driven approaches can improve usage and better align academic resource provision with real user needs.

These studies collectively show that POD is valuable in academic and university publishing because it helps presses maintain title availability, support niche scholarship, and respond more efficiently to unstable and limited demand.

3. Print-on-Demand, Risk Reduction, and Publishing Performance

A third theme in the literature concerns the relationship between POD and organizational performance, especially through the lens of risk reduction.

Gallagher (2014) emphasizes that POD reduces the need to print massive stock, tie up capital, and carry inventory risk. He argues that the reduction or removal of pre-printed inventory changes the financial shape of publishing businesses and can help them avoid both lost sales and unnecessary overhead.

Magadán-Díaz and Rivas-García (2025) support this view by showing that POD reduces the risks associated with overproduction, storage, and changing demand. Their study explains that scholarly publishers benefit from POD because it enables them to produce books based on actual market demand, which is especially valuable when financial resources are limited and title demand is difficult to predict.

Mabaso (2020) adds practical insight by showing that publishers and printers most often use POD for reprints, backlists, custom publishing, and low-demand titles. Importantly, his study argues that

publishers evaluate POD not only by print cost, but also by its effect on inventory control, supply-chain responsiveness, and access to books. This makes POD directly relevant to both operational performance and risk management.

4. Print-on-Demand, the Long Tail, and Backlist Sustainability

A fourth theme in the literature relates to the way POD supports low demand titles and backlist publishing over time. This theme is closely linked to Long Tail Theory and is especially relevant in scholarly publishing, where many books do not sell in large numbers but continue to generate occasional demand over long periods.

Magadán-Díaz and Rivas-García (2025) show that POD becomes particularly valuable as academic books move through different stages of the lifecycle. Once demand declines, POD allows publishers to continue offering these titles without the need for costly reprints or warehousing. This extends the useful life of books and allows them to remain accessible even when demand is low.

Mabaso (2020) reaches a similar conclusion, showing that backlist and niche titles can continue creating value when publishers use POD instead of relying on conventional inventory-heavy methods. His study explicitly links POD to the logic of long-tail publishing, in which many titles with small individual sales can still become valuable when they remain available at low cost.

Gallagher (2014) also emphasizes this point by noting that POD brings books back from the “out-of-print graveyard” and enables publishers to generate additional revenue from titles that would otherwise disappear from the market.

This theme is particularly useful for the study because it shows that POD matters not only for reducing cost, but also for preserving title availability, supporting access to scholarly content, and creating long-term value from low-demand publications.

5. Sustainability in Publishing

A fifth and increasingly important theme in literature concerns sustainability. Recent studies suggest that publishing is under growing pressure to reduce waste, lower CO2 emissions, and adopt more responsible production models.

Gadsby et al. (2024) provide an especially useful contribution through three sustainability case studies from the scholarly publishing ecosystem. Their article shows that major academic publishers are increasingly focusing on environmental sustainability and linking publishing operations to broader

sustainability goals. The Oxford University Press case highlights the importance of paper sourcing, waste reduction, and carbon management, while the Taylor & Francis case is especially relevant because it shows that increased use of POD helped reduce transport, warehouse stock, and excess pulping.

Magadán-Díaz and Rivas-García (2025) also position POD as part of a more sustainable publishing model by showing that it reduces overproduction, unnecessary inventory, and waste. Their study presents POD as both economically and environmentally useful, particularly for scholarly publishers operating in conditions of demand uncertainty.

Kayal et al. (2021) contribute to this discussion from a broader academic-publishing perspective. Their article argues that the current academic publishing system is economically and institutionally unsustainable and that more responsible alternatives are needed at the levels of individual researchers, the scientific community, and publishers. Although their work is not specifically about POD, it strengthens the argument that publishing reform is increasingly being discussed in terms of sustainability and fairness.

These studies suggest that POD may contribute to more sustainable publishing by reducing overproduction, lowering waste, and aligning production more closely with real demand.

Research Gap

Although literature provides strong evidence on the role of POD in publishing, academic books, and sustainability, most existing studies focus on Europe, North America. There is still limited research examining POD in the MENA publishing sector, especially from the combined perspective of risk management, publishing performance, and sustainable publishing. the study seeks to address that gap through a case-based approach.

Study Theoretical Framework

This study is built on a combination of ideas that help explain why Print-on-Demand helps and offers great value for publishing organizations.

The first is risk management theory. Publishing has always involved uncertainty. Publishers must often decide how many copies to print before they know the real level of market demand, and this creates risks related to unsold books, storage costs, and financial loss. From a risk management point of view, Print-on-Demand offers a different way of working. Because books are printed only when they are ordered, publishers may reduce the risks connected to overproduction, excess inventory, and wasted investment.

The second foundation comes from operations management, especially the logic of demand-driven production. Traditional publishing is often based on forecasting and stockholding, while Print-on-Demand shifts production closer to actual demand. This makes it like just in-time or immediate thinking in operations, where the goal is to reduce waste, improve efficiency, and match production more closely to real needs. In this sense, Print-on-Demand is not only a printing method but also a more flexible operational model.

The third perspective is long tail Theory. This idea is very relevant in publishing because many books do not sell in large numbers, but they may continue to generate small sales over long periods of time. Academic books, niche titles, and backlist publications fit this pattern well. Print-on-Demand supports this model because it allows publishers to keep these titles available without the high cost of storing large quantities. As a result, titles that would otherwise go out of print can continue to create value.

The fourth foundation is the idea of sustainable operations and responsible production. Sustainability is becoming more important in all industries, including publishing. This means using resources more carefully, reducing waste, and building systems that are more efficient in the long term. Print-on-Demand fits this perspective because it can reduce unnecessary printing, reduce CO2 emissions from environmental perspective, limit returns, lower storage requirements, and support a more responsible use of materials and logistics.

Combined, these perspectives help position Print-on-Demand as more than just a technical solution. They suggest that it can be understood as a strategic tool that may help publishers reduce risk, improve performance, and move toward more sustainable ways of working. This is the main idea that guides the present study

Methodology

This study will use a case study approach because it allows for a close and detailed understanding of how Print-on-Demand works in a real publishing environment, the case study method makes it possible to explore how Print-on-Demand is actually used in practice, what problems it helps to solve, and how it affects publishing operations and decision-making. The case itself will focus on one selected publishing house, university press within the MENA region.

The study will follow a qualitative approach, relying mainly on interviews with publishing professionals and documents analysis to understand how managers and publishing professionals view the use of Print-on-Demand and how they believe it has influenced organizational performance.

Research Tools for Data Collection & Analysis:

Data collection: The study will collect data from more than one source to build a richer and more reliable picture.

- The first source will be structured interviews with people involved in publishing operations, such as publishing directors, production managers, operations managers, or sales and distribution staff. These interviews will help explain why Print-on-Demand was adopted, what challenges it addressed, and how it has changed the organization's way of working.
- The second source will be document analysis. This includes internal reports, sales records, production data, inventory records, and other documents that provide insight into the operational effects of Print-on-Demand.
- The third source, where available, will be performance-related data such as inventory levels, cost per title, order turnaround time, number of titles kept in print, and revenue from backlist titles

Data Analysis:

- Interview data will be examined using thematic analysis, which will help identify recurring ideas and patterns related to risk reduction, performance improvement, and sustainable publishing.
- Documents and performance data will be analyzed descriptively, and where possible, the study may compare conditions before and after Print-on-Demand adoption or compare Print-on-Demand supported workflows with more traditional printing practices.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is defined across four main dimensions: subject scope, institutional scope, geographical scope, and time scope.

Subject scope: the study focuses on Print-on-Demand (POD) as a strategic publishing practice and examines its role in three areas: risk management, publishing performance, and sustainable publishing. More specifically, the study is concerned with how POD may help reduce inventory and financial risk, improve operational efficiency and title availability, and support more responsible and sustainable publishing practices.

Institutional scope: the study is limited to selected publishing organizations, such as publishing houses and university presses which operate within the publishing sector. The focus is not on the entire publishing ecosystem, but on gaining an in-depth understanding of how POD is applied in a real organizational setting.

Geographical scope: the study covers the MENA region. The intention is to provide insight that is regionally relevant, while acknowledging that publishing conditions may vary across countries in the region.

Time scope: the study focuses on the contemporary publishing environment, particularly the recent decade in which digital transformation, sustainability concerns, and flexible production models have become more prominent.

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