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**From BookTok to Bookshelf:
Algorithms and Book Recommendations on TikTok**

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Abstract

TikTok, a social media platform focused on short-form videos, is gaining a reputation for renewing interest in books (Bateman 2022; Harris 2021). While reviewing and recommending books is not new, the ability to do so on a large scale used to be limited to a select group of critics. Social media allows readers to voice their opinions, and by gaining followings these readers can then influence at a similar scale as traditional reviewers. This raises various questions as to how culture is created and curated. Today, this curation is done largely by algorithms through recommending and promoting content. The rise of BookTok emphasizes this, combining recommendations with TikTok's algorithm to boost the popularity of certain books. In particular, BookTok has made headlines by repeatedly raising backlist books back onto the bestseller lists. This increases the shift from traditional curators of culture to a community of fellow readers, which can in turn popularize specific genres. Thus, the main question this thesis aims to answer is: what distinguishes BookTok from other digital platforms, enabling it to have such a cultural impact going beyond the online book community? The BookTok phenomenon will be explained by using a mixed-method approach looking at how creators use platform affordances, aesthetic features, and their algorithmic imaginaries to appeal to both users and the TikTok algorithm. The data used in this thesis consists of 148 BookTok videos gathered over a two-week period from the "For You" page. A content analysis was conducted to find patterns in the construction of the videos, the use of specific aesthetic features, and the selection of recommended book titles. Based on this data, it was possible to detect and describe different genres of BookTok videos and to identify the use of relevant platform affordances. This was complemented by a thematic analysis of interviews with three video creators, selected from the authors of the material in the dataset. The interviews gave insight into the algorithmic imaginary of the creators and how the construction of the algorithm informs the creative process. The analysis showed that while the algorithm is what makes the recommendations popular by distributing them to a receptive audience, the TikTok format is what makes the recommendations memorable and has a positive impact on book sales. As the algorithm informs every aspect of the book recommendations, from the creator's decisions of picking a certain book to the decisions on when to make the video and who the algorithm subsequently recommends the video to, the book recommendations on BookTok can be examined as examples of algorithmic curation. By taking up the topic of literature and literary readership from a digital culture perspective, this thesis aims to contribute to the greater discussions on algorithms, personalization, and its' effect on cultural production and curation.

Keywords

BookTok, TikTok, algorithmic curation, algorithmic culture, social media, book recommendations, recommendation systems, algorithms, bookishness, literary culture, literary communities

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1. Introduction

Digital technologies of reading and writing, including e-books, social media and reading related apps, are influencing many people's reading practices. This has repeatedly raised fears about books becoming a thing of the past and given rise to a culture of "bookishness" (Pressman 2020). Not only is reading currently transitioning from a more solitary act to a more explicitly social experience (Foasberg 2012; Albertslund 2020) but it is also, often subtly, being guided by algorithms. These influence the books recommended to us both online and offline, as they structure what content is recommended and what ends up being buried. This raises questions regarding how culture itself is created, and whether algorithms produce it or simply reflect it.

Yet, in a time full of concerns about lower attention spans, books are becoming popular in a new way, a change credited to the very app that is also perceived as a leading cause for the lower attention spans (Harris 2021). This paradox is the main topic of this thesis. Numerous media outlets have attributed a change in reading practices and renewed interest in books in general to BookTok (Bateman 2022; Flood 2021; Nagy 2022; Zarroli 2021), the niche of TikTok focused on everything related to books and reading. TikTok is generally seen as a trendsetter for modern culture, especially as it rose in popularity during a time when daily life was rapidly transforming to accommodate global lockdowns. The same applies to books, yet trends related to them on TikTok tend to last and even see backlist books returning onto bestseller lists (Chaddah 2022). While trends come and go within days on TikTok, the books themselves remain popular for longer. But how is TikTok establishing the ultimate reading list? How is BookTok different from communities, platforms, and literary discussions that came before it?

Like most digital platforms, TikTok's algorithm is shrouded in secrecy, and this is especially prominent on TikTok's famous "For You" page that provides a seemingly endless feed of personalized content. At the same time, this feature can lead to content going viral very quickly and unexpectedly. The reappearance of Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, originally published in 2011 and having received a few literary awards, returning on the bestseller list can attest to this (Harris 2021; Wood 2021). A spike in sales led the publisher to investigate further, tracing the interest back to one specific BookTok video (Harris 2021). Bloomsbury, who published Miller's book as well as other BookTok favorites, went as far as crediting TikTok for being one of the causes for their highest first-half sales in 2021 (Wood 2021). This jump to bestseller lists has happened with multiple backlist books, causing Kimi Chaddah (2022) to dub the term "BookTok Effect". Behind this effect are primarily young women, looking to find others who are interested in reading and discussing the same books (Flood 2021).

While book communities can be found on most social media platforms, the increase in sales and reading interest accredited to TikTok is unprecedented (Wiederhold 2022) as “creators [of videos] are able to establish a book as a must-read” (Chaddah 2022). Internationally, bookstores have set up special displays making it easier to find BookTok favorites (Carlick 2022; Krogh 2021), an accolade no other social media platform has earned (Harris 2021). How this came to be is described further in chapter 3.1. As BookTok is having such an impact on bookish culture it is important to understand how these recommendations come about, especially considering how both BookTok and TikTok as a whole have received criticism for how their algorithm has limited diversity and the reach of certain creators in the past (Köver and Reuter 2019; McCall 2022).

Why BookTok? Platforms, algorithms and bookish culture

Despite the extensive media coverage (Flood 2021; Harris 2021; Krogh 2021; among others), the continued exponential growth of the BookTok community (Wiederhold 2022) and the fact that TikTok is currently one of the most researched platforms (Valdovinos Kaye, Zeng, and Wikstrom 2021), there was a limited amount of academic literature addressing BookTok when this research project started. While more work has emerged during the writing of this thesis, the literature is still sparse and primarily stems from the fields of education and library science (Merga 2021; Jerasa and Boffone 2021; Boffone and Jerasa 2021; Mashiyane 2022; Roberts 2021).

Thus, this thesis aims to explain the BookTok phenomenon by looking at how books are recommended on the platform in a manner that is suited for the purposes of both users and the TikTok algorithm. As many have described the BookTok community as the new tastemaker (Harris 2022), it is important to take a closer look at what books are recommended, and how. Katherine K. Merga (2021) has conducted a content analysis on BookTok which revealed that “The strongest recurring theme [in the content analysis] related to recommendations, a key purpose behind some users’ membership of the BookTok community” (Merga 2021, 5). This shows the relevance of concentrating on recommendations. As there is a lack of research focusing on the creators themselves (Guiñez-Cabrera and Mansilla-Obando 2022), this thesis also examines how they recommend books in their videos. Furthermore, Tolstopyat (2018) has stated that “Research of the mutual interest between BookTubers and publishers can shed light on reading experience in the digital age” (Tolstopyat 2018, 95), and this point also applies to BookTokers as they are becoming ever more relevant to the publishing industry. As BookTube, the equivalent of BookTok on YouTube, has been an active community for over a decade (Eder

2021), the research output on this phenomenon is much higher. As both YouTube and TikTok are video-based platforms, some insights may be applicable to both communities. There is also an overlap between the creators active on both platforms.

Books are a source of insight and information, and thus have the power to change how people think. It is important to be aware of what ideas are popularized, both through fiction and nonfiction. How these ideas are spread among readers is another vital aspect of understanding how culture is created. While digital book communities themselves might only be of interest to those involved in the community, the recommendations made on BookTok also have an impact on which books become popular offline (Paul 2023). This is reflected in the selection offered in bookstores and libraries, which in turn also affects the reading habits of people not participating in online communities. This is already visible in the way that many bookstores, including the chains Ark and Norli in Norway (Ark, n.d.; Norli, n.d.), advertise books as being popular on TikTok.

Furthermore, the increased marketability of the recommended books may affect the publishing industry in the long term. This can already be seen in how books are being sent to content creators on several social media platforms (Harris 2021; Perkins 2017). The uniformity in genre and style of books associated with the recommendation videos may urge authors to write in a manner that appeals to this specific readership, and this process is already being implemented into marketing strategies (Higginbotham 2022). In addition, social media is not just influencing how publishers market books (Nolan and Dane 2018) but also how publishers choose to take risks on certain books based on how books and authors may be perceived online (Steger 2020). This can lead to a lack of diversity in literature, which is paradoxical since many seek recommendations to diversify their reading.

In an article on algorithmic culture and the literary social networking site Goodreads, Simone Murray (2021) argues for an intermeshing of book history with cultural and media studies. By taking up the topic of literature from a digital culture perspective, this thesis aims to build on these ideas. The algorithmic curation Murray (2021) focuses on is affecting how culture is experienced, as algorithms are present in most or all parts of contemporary culture. So far, however, studies on algorithmic curation have mainly focused on news (Bandy and Diakopoulos 2020) and music curation (Bonini and Gandini 2019; Morris 2015) as well as on highlighting key players like Facebook (Rader and Gray 2015). This thesis aims to expand on this existing body of research and assess how this ubiquity of algorithms and personalization is affecting the culture of reading, literature and book publishing. The findings of this research also contribute to the wider discussions on algorithms and personalization in the creation of

culture. Furthermore, this thesis adds to the debate on the changing role of books in society and provides an up-to-date perspective on the recurring fear that “books are dead”.

The goal of this thesis is to identify what distinguishes BookTok from other digital platforms and how this leads to BookTok having such a strong cultural impact, and the manner in which it has changed contemporary literary culture, and continues to shape it. Furthermore, TikTok is known for its powerful algorithm that provides hyper-personalized recommendations and sets it apart from other social media platforms (Feldkamp 2021). Thus, the algorithmic curation of the platform will be a central focus in the thesis as it determines how content is distributed. This enhances the shift from traditional curators of culture to curation through fellow readers and could lead to a diminished variety in genres recommended. These new curators may not possess what Pierre Bourdieu describes as “cultural capital” (Bourdieu 1986) to the same degree as traditional cultural authorities, therefore it is important to also understand how the recommendations enact authority that motivate viewers to buy and read the recommended books. As it is not possible to access the algorithm itself due to the restrictions of black box systems, this thesis relies on what can be observed in the outcomes of the algorithm as well as the perceptions of creators. The thesis thus aims to answer the question of what distinguishes BookTok from other social media platforms, enabling it to have such a cultural impact outside of the online book community?

This main question raises other, related questions on the platform, its algorithm, and their cultural impact:

1. What platform affordances and aesthetic features are used by the book community on TikTok to recommend books?
2. How does the algorithmic imaginary affect how books are recommended?
3. How is authority given to book recommendations, and how do they contribute to the popularity of specific titles?

As this thesis aims to discuss and explain BookTok’s cultural importance, it can be of interest to those working within the book industry – publishers, writers, marketers as well as content creators. At the same time, the topic, and the focus on algorithms should also be of interest to literary audiences and the wider public outside the immediate academic and professional sphere.

On structure and terminology

This thesis begins by introducing the BookTok phenomenon, the gap in the existing research and related literature, as well as the research questions. After an outline of the structure of the

thesis, chapter one ends by addressing and defining some key terms used in this study. Chapter two is the first of two literature review chapters and focuses on algorithmic culture, followed by an overview of research on BookTok at the time of writing in chapter three. The chapter also addresses research on literary communities online, with particular focus on BookTube. Chapter four outlines the main theories and methodology informing this study, a combination of content analysis of TikTok videos and interviews with three BookTok creators. It highlights the main limitations of the chosen approach, namely the impossibility of direct access to the TikTok algorithm, the impact of personalization on the results, and the similarities in perspectives between the interviewees due to the difficulties of contacting smaller creators. The findings of the thesis will be discussed alongside an analysis of the identified videos and interviews with creators. First, chapter five focuses on the different video formats and techniques as well as the most common genres, and chapter six adopts a more technical perspective for a discussion on the algorithmic imaginary constructed by the interviewees, supported through selected examples from the video dataset. This imaginary underpins a closer look at related aspects of the platform, mainly affordances, for example hashtags, and their impact on the algorithm. Chapter seven highlights the ease of using TikTok as a platform, and how this lowers the barrier of entry as well as the convenience of the short form video format. These previous sections of the thesis provide the material and foundation for chapter eight, which connects the key concepts and ideas and takes a closer look at the titles that are being recommended, the dominance of physical editions, and how authority is constituted in this particular environment. The thesis will conclude with a summary of the findings, and some suggestions for future research.

This thesis includes a number of screenshots, not only because the main dataset consists of TikTok videos, but also because of the controversies surrounding the platform itself. As TikTok has been banned or limited in some countries and may be restricted further in the future (Maheshwari and Holpuch 2023), the goal is to present the research in a way that does not require the reader to download the app to understand how it functions within the research context, and how it is used by BookTokers. The material used in this thesis is publicly available and was created with the intention of sharing with an audience. As TikTok is known for making videos go viral (see chapters six and seven), this audience can be large and as such the screenshots were included with a reasonable expectation of privacy in mind. Additionally, all screenshots were taken from videos that were still publicly available as of May 10, 2023.

Before moving on to the research project, it is important to address certain key terms used in this thesis:

BookTok

BookTok is a community on TikTok that focuses on reading, discussing, and recommending books, as well as related topics and phenomena. Creators produce short videos, mostly only a few seconds and up to a few minutes in length. While the community is primarily associated with the literary genres of young adult and romance, a variety of interests are represented.

Book

The term “book” will be used throughout this thesis as an overarching term as it encompasses both books as a literary format and books as objects. The latter is of importance due to the culture of “bookishness” (discussed further in chapters three and eight) and because the interplay between the physical medium and the digital is a theme on BookTok. Depending on the context, “book” will be used alongside “literature”, “novels” and “fiction” to discuss the literary and reading culture aspects of BookTok. Thus, bookish culture is used to describe these different inflections of the word “book”.

Platform

While TikTok is often compared to social media platforms and social networking sites like Instagram and Facebook, the company defines itself as an entertainment platform (Kjellberg 2022; Newport 2022). This distinction in classification is reflected in the platform’s structure and the distribution of content, which is elaborated on further in chapter two. Thus, in the context of this thesis, the term “platform” will be used to describe digital services that offer entertainment and connection to other users in the form of user-generated content and that rely on user data as the main source of income. This includes social media but can be expanded to include entertainment platforms as well. In most cases, “the platform” will refer to TikTok and is used to distinguish between the app and the BookTok community.

Recommendation

Book recommendations are presented in a myriad of ways on BookTok. Apart from the range of different ways for recommending books, one key distinction is whether the recommendation is implicit or explicit. Explicit recommendations use language, both verbal and visual, to show the viewers that these are the books they should read next and often include the word “recommendation”. Implicit recommendations showcase the book in a manner that generates interest without explicitly recommending the book for reading or purchase. In such cases, creators merely share their experience with a book, highlight a feature they liked, or take a more creative or humoristic stance on the book. This leaves the potential reader with a sense of what

the book is about but not much other information, and the lack of context in itself can create the desire to learn more and read the book.

It is also important to distinguish between recommending and featuring books. In this thesis, “recommendation” is applied to both positive and negative reviews of a book, and merely means that there is a recommendation of some kind given to users. In contrast to this, featuring means that a book appears in a video but is not mentioned directly, and there is no statement made about the book itself that encourages the viewer to read or not read the book. These videos primarily come from other corners of TikTok, where reading is shown as a pastime, or as BookTok videos that are meant to be funny or relatable. In these examples, the title of the book is interchangeable, as the video would be the same regardless of which book is featured. This can also apply to books used as backgrounds in videos.

BookTok books versus books on BookTok

While books are the main topic of BookTok videos, not every book is a BookTok book. “BookTok books” are specific titles that are so ubiquitous on BookTok that they are equated with the platform itself. BookTok books are the books that appear on the designated #booktok display tables in bookstores, as described earlier, and on the various BookTok reading lists that populate the internet. These books primarily stem from the young adult and romance genres and are part of the reason the community has become known for recommending these genres. Essentially, this term describes the canon of most popular books recommended on the platform, which will be discussed in chapter eight. The idea of “BookTok books” as something negative due to their popularity also connects with the wider discussion on popular versus highbrow culture, as part of the latter is about intentionally not fitting in with the mainstream.

2. Algorithmic culture

2.1 Algorithms and recommendation systems

Algorithms can be defined as “encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output, based on specified calculations” (Gillespie 2014, 167). More and more these technologies are structuring the culture around us, with algorithmic curation being present in all facets of life. In “The Relevance of Algorithms” (2014), Tarleton Gillespie highlights the varied functionalities algorithms have taken up in daily life, going beyond mere sources of information to directing our ways of interacting with the world and becoming aware of that world in the first place. He states that:

Recommendation algorithms map our preferences against others, suggesting new or forgotten bits of culture for us to encounter. Algorithms manage our interactions on

social networking sites, highlighting the news of one friend while excluding another's. Algorithms designed to calculate what is "hot" or "trending" or "most discussed" skim the cream from the seemingly boundless chatter that's on offer. Together, these algorithms not only help us find information, they also provide a means to know what there is to know and how to know it, to participate in social and political discourse, and to familiarize ourselves with the publics in which we participate. (Gillespie 2014, 167)

Recommendation systems are personalized algorithms that recommend an object of interest to a user. These can be videos, movies to watch, or results of search queries. Nicolas Kayser-Bril defines recommendation systems by distinguishing them through a specific approach to algorithms, as "unlike simpler algorithms, which take a given input to compute an output, recommender systems typically rely on past user activity, as well as reactions from other users" (Kayser-Bril 2022). While recommendation systems are often associated with digital activities, for example choosing a movie on Netflix or scrolling social media, algorithmic systems of recommendation also inform choices and actions, including reading practices and book recommendations online. To do so, "recommender systems collect data from the reader, the reading material or other context features. They then use this data to predict and generate personalised reading recommendations" (Zhang, Buchanan, and McKay 2021, 348-349).

In a 2018 paper, Haifa Alharthi, Diana Inkpen and Stan Szpakowicz developed a book recommender system that recommends books based on the author's writing style to promote reading for fun. The authors distinguish between two categories of these systems: collaborative filtering, which produces recommendations based on data from other users, and content-based recommendations, which uses patterns in the content itself for its recommendations. While the system created by Alharthi, Inkpen and Szpakowicz, learns the writing styles and preferences of specific authors, the content-based approach can be influenced by a number of factors that can be difficult to account for in such a system. Thus, while the system can successfully provide recommendations based on writing styles, users may still not be satisfied as there are more elements that result in a fitting recommendation. At the same time, there are traditional ways to categorize books, including genre and descriptions, that writing styles often reflect. It is possible that the users' expectations towards digital systems, of getting suitable recommendations every time, somewhat differ from the approach to more traditional sources of recommendations.

Michael P. O'Mahony and Barry Smyth (2018) describe how information gathered from social media and other user-generated content represent a new form of recommendation knowledge. The authors suggest hybrid recommender systems, which combine the

collaborative and content-based approaches, as a more accurate recommendation system. However, working with social media data can present a range of problems due to the lack of structure and prevalence of additional information, which can make it difficult to utilize the data to its full potential. This can be further complicated by the varying quality of the reviews themselves, as it can be hard to determine which reviews are helpful. While O'Mahony and Smyth focused on product reviews, these ideas can be applied to book reviews as well, as they are linked to the social media format.

To provide accurate recommendations it is also important to understand how readers find their next read. Studying where readers get their recommendations from in a world permeated with recommendation algorithms, Huiwen Zhang, George Buchanan and Dana McKay (2021) found that they come from a variety of sources. They also found that, in the case of fiction in particular, social media is becoming an important source of recommendations (Zhang, Buchanan and McKay 2021). This shows that integrating social media data into recommendation systems for book recommendations can be beneficial to creating relevant recommendations. Additionally, as TikTok is becoming an increasingly popular platform (TikTok 2021), this research reinforces its perceived importance as an avenue for book recommendations. However, as the research mentioned above shows, there are many different ways that algorithms can structure recommendations. This can make it hard to gauge their accuracy but also to assess whom these recommendations benefit, as the data could be skewed or structured to favor certain parties. By focusing on quantitative data, the content and qualitative features of reviews as their most convincing aspect, may be ignored.

Not only the data taken from the posts but also the platforms themselves could serve as recommendation systems for book recommendations. In this scenario the creators then promote certain titles, with the algorithms determining which videos are the best fit for a specific reader. Based on these definitions, BookTok can be seen as a recommendation system. The algorithm itself uses a content-based approach while the book recommendations follow the style of the collaborative filtering approach. At the same time, as O'Mahony and Smyth have shown, the adoption of user-generated content for recommendations is a separate strategy, and one more in line with TikTok's model.

2.2 Algorithmic curation

As recommendation systems are present in many cultural spaces and artifacts, from their construction to the make-up of the cultural artifacts themselves, this raises the question of whether culture is merely reflected or possibly determined by these technologies. Simone

Murray's article "Secret Agents: Algorithmic Culture, Goodreads and Datafication of the Contemporary Book World" (2021) serves as a starting point for this thesis, as it discusses how algorithms act as curators but also how the associations surrounding them impact culture by looking at one of the key players when it comes to receiving book recommendations: highly emotional discourse is valued on the Goodreads platform as it makes users more engaged and increases the time spent on the platform, supporting its commercial interests. Consequently, Murray calls for analysts to "cease conceptualising the analogue and digital as ontological opposites and instead examine the two domains' complex patterns of coexistence, mutual dependence and even, counterintuitively, revivification" (Murray 2021, 971).

Algorithms are slippery and hard to grasp. The best ones are taken for granted, only noticeable when they slip. This has led to a mythologizing of algorithms and how they moderate content (Myers West 2018), and the belief in algorithmic objectivity (Gillespie 2014). There is an inherent trust in algorithms to work in an ideal fashion, which is primarily questioned when things go wrong. The status of algorithms as a technology leads to the illusion of them being more objective than human curators (Gillespie 2014). However, as Safiya Noble shows in her book *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018), algorithms are experienced differently depending on the user, often due to the narrow perspectives among developers. While algorithms use signals to approximate "relevance" to the user, this idea is flawed as

To accuse an algorithm of bias implies that there exists an unbiased judgement of relevance available, to which the tool is failing to hew. Since no such measure is available, disputes over algorithmic evaluations have no solid ground to fall back on. (Gillespie 2014, 175)

In other words, the notion of algorithmic objectivity is flawed from the outset, since just as with human curation, there will always be a bias of some kind. Thus, it is important to be aware of how this impacts the results of the algorithmic systems and who benefits from this.

One of the reasons why algorithms have what is commonly described as "bias" is because they (often indirectly) take on the biases of their makers, due to design choices determining what is included, what is not, and how it is presented to the algorithm – what Gillespie describes as "patterns of inclusion" (2014, 168). Thus, it is important to learn how to recognize how these biases may affect the outcomes of the algorithms. Human curation is not without its flaws either. Studying Goodreads, Melanie Walsh and Maria Antoniak (2021) used the framing of amateur criticism to examine what constitutes "classic" books on Goodreads, and how they are curated. The authors found that the classics curated through the crowdsourcing and amateur criticism practices of Goodreads lead to a less diverse list, in terms of authors but

also types of books, than those taught in many American schools (Walsh and Antoniak 2021). This goes to show that the curation that goes into the school curricula has an effect on the diversity of the books selected for reading, albeit differently than many Goodreads users probably expect. However, local differences and actions like book banning may affect this, as they lead to more limited book choices (Alleyne 2022) and thus the curricula are not static. In connection with BookTok, the prevalence of certain titles and genres may lead to the same effect. At the same time, having a specific perspective may provide additional value to recommendations and as such a bias is not inherently negative.

Murray (2021, 973) writes about how concerns about this algorithmic hegemony began emerging alongside the launch of the social media platforms that hold a near monopoly today. She draws on David Beer's (2009) work, noting that "Beer's sense of urgency of these questions encompasses both the harvesting of individual's data and the potentially self-reinforcing effects of automated collaborative filtering on users' cultural selection" (Murray 2021, 973). Murray links these concerns to the "outsourcing of long-standing human processes of cultural filtering to an algorithm whose selection criteria are unavailable for questioning" (Murray 2021, 973). One of the reasons for this unavailability is what Sarah T. Roberts (2018) describes as their "operating logic of opacity". This results in very different user experiences, as it is unclear how and why certain content appears and disappears. Additionally, this can make it impossible to investigate the functioning of the algorithms themselves. As it is unclear how the algorithms operate, there is no conclusive way of knowing how these ingrained structures can affect the way culture is perceived and enacted. However, it is possible to look at the outcomes and the responses to these outcomes instead, as will be discussed further in chapter four.

As algorithms are perceived to have an expert status in curating our entertainment, search queries, and daily life, it is important to view them critically. One aspect Murray (2021, 973) highlights is the "rhetorical positioning" of algorithms as neutral and free from human will as a contributing factor to the way algorithms are understood. She goes on to state that "After all, too much talk of the unassailable power of algorithms can have the counterproductive effect of enhancing algorithmic mystique" (Murray 2021, 979). Thus, discussing the power of algorithms with this rhetorical positioning can lead to creating more mystery and myths surrounding them. For companies this can be beneficial, as the more users know about the algorithm, the greater the chances are of them gaming the system (Murray 2021). Murray goes on to discuss the self-perpetuation of algorithms and how it is especially problematic when it comes to cultural selection, as "the net effect is to filter cultural offerings, tending to aesthetic conformity, a narrowing of the marketplace of ideas, and the contraction of an individual's

horizon of possibility” (Murray 2021, 982). The creation of BookTok books may fall into this view, with TikTok seemingly recommending the same books, or style of books, over and over again (McCall 2022).

2.3 TikTok

TikTok as public space

From news and activism to fashion and music, TikTok gained importance throughout the pandemic year 2020 (Smith Galer 2020). For many, TikTok became a welcome distraction as the short video format allowed for a quick escape, especially with the ability to scroll endlessly and to continuously find entertaining content. But more than that, TikTok became a public forum transcending time and space, at a time when users were unable to meet up physically, travel, or share mundane experiences with each other. As a result, TikTok has become the epitome of algorithmic culture and short attention spans; it is a public space controlled by a private corporation. As TikTok as a whole received more attention throughout the pandemic, with many directly linking the quarantine culture to the application’s success (Feldkamp 2021; Boffone 2022), it is no wonder that the BookTok community would also profit from the circumstances.

Due to TikTok’s sophisticated algorithm and the expectations users have regarding it, new ways of engaging with the platform are being explored. Younger users are increasingly utilizing TikTok as a search engine, as highlighted in Elena Cavender’s (2022a) article for *Mashable*. They employ the platform’s algorithm to ensure that the recommendations they receive on a range of topics, from food to news, are in line with their interests and preferences. Cavender describes how there was an increase in this behavior with the launch of the collection feature, which allows users to save videos in different categories, and the fact that due to the uncertainties of the pandemic, information provided by more established search engines was not always up to date. Thus, TikTok fundamentally changes the way younger generations use the internet as it is establishing itself as the go-to place for all needs. It also shows how these users’ trust and rely on the algorithms to know them and to offer fitting recommendations. Similarly to book recommendations, the main categories of recommendations Cavender encountered repeatedly (recipes, restaurants, and travel) are more frequently based on word of mouth and trust in the experience of others, as illustrated by their prevalence on review websites. This also applies to #booktok, as it “validates that word of mouth is still the most powerful force for our industry” (TikTok 2022b) as the Head of Social at Penguin Random House U.S., Alyssa Castaneda, notes.

Platform structure

The aspect that differentiates TikTok from most other apps and platforms is its reliance on the short video format. While Instagram and Facebook have Reels, and YouTube has YouTube Shorts, the inspiration to adopt these features also stems from TikTok's popularity and is reflected in the content and styling of the videos on all three (Abidin 2020). TikTok was able to build on the failure of Vine, an earlier short form video platform, offering users more of what they enjoyed about the format (Green et al. 2022). Similarly to Twitter, which expanded the maximum length of posts from 140 characters to 280 (Twitter Developer Platform, n.d.), videos on TikTok have been incrementally bumped in possible length from the original 15 seconds to up to 10 minutes (Spangler 2022; Reddan 2022). Copying successful features from other platforms is nothing new, as can be seen with the prevalence of stories originally pioneered by Snapchat (Wei 2019). While many platforms are trying to mirror TikTok's success by integrating its top features, there are some fundamental aspects that cannot be copied.

Writing for *The New Yorker*, author and computer science professor Cal Newport evaluates the strategy of big social media platforms emulating TikTok (Newport 2022). He describes how the structure behind TikTok is different, as it relies on the entertainment factor of the content rather than the person creating the content. This lowers the barrier of entry, as users can immediately enjoy content without first having to connect with others. For this strategy of adapting features from TikTok to work, the legacy platforms would need to shift focus away from the social graph structure that led them to success in the first place (Newport 2022). This could explain some of the success of TikTok, as the app itself is immediately fun and there is no need to wait for others to accept a friend request or to search for interesting people. However, for its competitors this could be the beginning of the end as the article is aptly titled "TikTok and the Fall of the Social Media Giants" (Newport 2022). The adaptation of TikTok's strategy by social media platforms is further flawed due to their key characteristics. Newport quotes an interview wherein TikTok's president of global business solutions, Blake Chandlee, classified TikTok as an entertainment platform (Sherman 2022). As such, the biggest difference between TikTok and the major social media platforms is the lack of the social element: "TikTok opens the tiny window in your hand to the entire inexhaustible world" (Kjellberg 2022) rather than primarily connecting you with a network of people you already know.

TikTok has also captured the interest of Eugene Wei, who has published a series of essays on his blog on this topic. In "And You Will Know Us by the Company We Keep" (2021) he also highlights how TikTok does not follow the social graph structure characteristic of the

prominent Western social media platforms. He argues that the aforementioned strategy of the social graph fails due to the mismatch between what we find entertaining and the people we know. TikTok, on the other hand, follows a content first approach where the content gets distributed to a small group of users and then matched to taste profiles to create an interest graph (Wei 2021). Learning what users enjoy and what will get them to engage is the first step in this process. This means that users can receive content based on what interests them, rather than solely based on who they follow or know in real life, which can affect the kinds of content shared, Wei notes: “our followers are our implied audience” (Wei 2021). If there are no followers, do users just create and send these creations into the ether? At some level, there is an expectation of another user finding and interacting with their content, and without followers there are only two ways this can happen. The first would be if the user shared it themselves, the second is with the help of algorithms.

For Newport (2022), the bottom line is that the TikTok interest graph shows a common mis-categorization of the platform. However, now in a reversal of emulations, it seems that TikTok is raising the question of whether a social graph can emerge out of this interest graph. Louise Matsakis (2021) discussed in *Wired* how TikTok and its approach of encouraging interactions with people you know offline does not just make users uncomfortable, but also raises privacy concerns. TikTok’s approach to providing users with content separate from their social circle was part of the attraction of the app, however now the app is trying to connect users with their contacts when they share links to videos (Matsakis 2021). Sharing videos among strong-tie relationships can reaffirm dynamics (Wright 2021), however Matsakis describes how users encountered unwanted recommended profiles of acquaintances after they opened a shared video link, as the shared link connected the profiles. Compared to social first platforms, the process of connecting with others is reversed which may mean that the content posted, viewed, or distributed is created less with others in mind than for other platforms. For some this has led to TikTok being a safe space to explore interests away from people they know (Matsakis 2021). Linking back to the previous quotation from Wei (2021), the implied audience changes alongside this push to connecting with people users know in real life. Furthermore, the covert way that the platform is pushing these social recommendations raises questions about what other problematic actions may be taking place.

Despite TikTok following a different network structure, with many appreciating its distance to their other social media accounts (Wei 2021; Matsakis 2021), this approach seemed to be changing during the course of this research project. While Meta is scrambling to align their projects with features adopted from TikTok, the platform begins to integrate more in-

person connections. The goal seems to be shifting towards closer connections with strangers as well as attempting to create links through things like contact lists. As users are likely already sharing TikToks with the people they care about regardless of the platform's approach, the need for these changes is currently absent.

TikTok's algorithm

The most notable feature of the TikTok user experience is the algorithm itself, as the algorithm is a greater part of the user experience than with other platforms. This is reflected in the stance of many users that TikTok provides endless possibilities of videos that are personally tailored to the user's interests, whether they are aware of them or not (Lee et al. 2022). This personalized content is presented to the user when they first open the app, with the app's "For You" page, which acts as the landing page and main feed of the app, becoming synonymous with the app itself. Like the name suggests, it is a page full of content tailored to the user. It is hyper-personalized, anticipating the content the user wants to see and unlocking hidden interests. Occasionally, a creator one follows or the anticipated but forgotten "Part two" to a video will pop up. Who one follows barely matters, or at least so it seems. The algorithm differentiates itself by not consistently providing just more of the same style of content (and therefore falling into the self-perpetuating logic mentioned by Murray (2021)) but by adapting with surprising speed to the multifaceted interests of its users (Boffone 2022). Communities are formed based on interest, yet there are no strict criteria that determine whether you are a part of these groups (Wright 2021). The main determinant is that engaging with enough of the same content will lead the algorithm to include more of that kind of content. According to Wei (2020a), "TikTok's algorithm is the Sorting Hat from the Harry Potter universe" due to how it divides the users into groups based on their interests. This is further enabled by the platform structure, as "For its algorithm to become as effective as it has, TikTok became its own source of training data" (Wei 2020b). Furthermore, by having users view one video at a time (compared to the feeds of most social media platforms) content is assessed individually which gives the algorithm clear signals on how users feel about every single video from the moment they open the app (Wei 2020b).

The algorithm has been lauded for finding content that appeals to users' areas of interest that they previously did not even know existed, as "At times, TikTok appears to know more about us than we do" (Boffone 2022, 7). By combining past behavior with overlapping interests of other users, as well as trying to intersperse new content, the algorithm manages to create connections that make it seem like it knows the user better than they know themselves. While the algorithm uses a number of signals, reciprocal following does not seem to be as important

as on many other platforms. On YouTube, similar content and channels will be displayed next to the content or channel a user is currently viewing (Anderson Gold 2020, 15). Depending on where these recommendations appear, they can be curated either by creators themselves or by the algorithm (Anderson Gold 2020, 19). On TikTok, the recommended content is decided by the algorithm, even if the user decides to switch from the “For You” page to the “Following” page¹. Alongside the recommended channels and videos, YouTube has a number of other embedded features to promote continuous watching. For example, “by suggesting related content in the right-hand sidebar, autoplaying related content when a video is finished playing, and allowing channels to promote their own content through links embedded directly in the video” (Anderson Gold 2020, 118). TikTok, however, attempts to increase the watch time through making it possible for the users to scroll content endlessly, and it is harder to stay in the loop with one creator. While their videos may show up frequently, to watch the same creator’s other videos users need to view their profile.

In her paper “Mapping Internet Celebrity on TikTok: Exploring Attention Economies and Visibility Labours”, Crystal Abidin (2020) focuses on how conceptions of celebrities are changing on TikTok due to the platform affordances and culture. This is in part due to its content first approach, as “the nature of fame and virality has shifted, and tends to be based on the performance of users’ individual posts” (Abidin 2020, 79). This places the focus on the content rather than the creators themselves. Abidin describes these changes as “the era of post-based fame” (2020, 80). This is a deviation from previous platforms, as the algorithm “ties creator success to the performance of individual posts” (Reddan 2022, 8) which makes the popularity of creators less important as it has limited impact on increased recommendations.

In 2020 TikTok described some of the aspects that are relevant to the recommendation algorithm behind their famous “For You” page in a newsroom article. The recommendation system takes various factors into account when determining which kinds of content a user wants to see more or less of in the future. These can be gathered into three main groups: user interactions, video information, and device and account settings. However, the third group is primarily there to optimize the performance rather than to directly inform what content is displayed on a user’s “For You” page. This is due to the weighting of these signals, as stronger indicators of interest are prioritized. The company highlights how this results in each user

¹ TikTok launched a “Friends” page, during the final weeks of writing this thesis, which allows users to see the posts of their friends. While this allows for streamlining of accounts one follows, it only includes those that follow one back which is unlikely to be the case with bigger accounts. Thus, TikTok has no feature comparable to YouTube’s “Subscriptions” that allows one to chronologically see recent videos of the people one follows (or is subscribed to in the case of YouTube).

having a unique “For You” page. Each interaction with the “For You” page and beyond tailors the recommendations further to the user, making the app more engaging over time. In 2022 the app launched a tool to allow users to learn why a specific video was recommended to them (TikTok 2022c). In a blog post the company lists some of the possible reasons behind the recommendations: “user interactions, such as content you watch, like or share, comments you post, or searches; accounts you follow or suggested accounts for you; content posted recently in your region; popular content in your region” (TikTok 2022c). While this increases the transparency on the platform and can show how the algorithm creates connections between content and users, they are still surface-level insights and often the details left out are the most telling ones.

Louise Matsakis (2020) highlights the importance of the “For You” page in her article on how the algorithm works. The author adds that users can take actions to see less of certain kind of content by using the “not interested” feature. Additionally, Matsakis highlights the lack of chronological structure on TikTok, compared to other platforms. The publication date is not present when viewing videos in the “For You” page and despite generally receiving the most attention soon after being posted, videos can appear in people’s feeds for several months after their initial creation. Matsakis connected this situation to other platforms that have been criticized for enabling echo chambers. In the case of YouTube, the recommendation system suggests videos to watch next based on the genre preferences of the user (Dubroc 2021, 38). While that most certainly encompasses a variety of nuances, YouTube has also been heavily criticized for causing filter bubbles and echo chambers that radicalize (primarily young) people (Roose 2019). According to TikTok’s newsroom (2020), this is something the platform actively tries to avoid by adding variation into the content displayed on the “For You” page.

However, the TikTok algorithm presents content that will leave the user watching as long as possible rather than necessarily reflecting what they find most interesting (Wall Street Journal 2021). Using bots with assigned interests, the *Wall Street Journal* (2021) found that the “For You” pages soon consisted solely of videos focusing on these subjects. At first, the variety of videos as well as the number of times they were viewed was high, but the more the algorithm got to know the user the more niche content was presented, with correspondingly lower views. Overall, the main finding was that from their perspective, the viewer’s watch time was the most valued metric for the algorithm.

As Abidin notes, “TikTok privileges sound over images” (2020, 80) and this serves an important function in the platform structure. Audio memes, which are the background sound of many TikTok videos,

are not limited to an actual snippet of a song or spoken dialogue, but can include variants based on remix and delivery styles as well as ownership of the template. Audio memes are an organizing principle for how content is catalogued into repositories on TikTok, and how users navigate the platform to seek new trends and content. (Abidin 2020, 80)

As these audio memes are easy to replicate, they are an important feature of the platform.

In their study on the acceptance and use of TikTok for discussing books, Nataly Guiñez-Cabrera and Katherine Mansilla-Obando (2022) interviewed Latin American BookTokers to understand their perspective. One aspect the BookTokers highlighted was TikTok's algorithm. They favored the platform as it allows for a great reach and the possibility to gain lots of new followers with one successful video (Guiñez-Cabrera and Mansilla-Obando 2022). Additionally, they complemented the app's ease of use. When describing how the duet function works from a technical perspective, Wei (2021) wrote that "TikTok abstracts a bunch of steps into a single function". Interpreted a bit loosely, this comment can be used to address most steps of the content creation process, including the use of audio memes. This is why the barrier of entry for the app is so low.

3. Literary criticism and reviewing online

3.1 BookTok's beginnings

Tracing the exact origins of online phenomena is hard, yet according to TikTok the BookTok community emerged in early 2020 (TikTok 2021). Like the TikTok platform itself, the BookTok community really took off in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, and was spurred by quarantines and people seeking to discover new hobbies – or rediscovering old ones (TikTok 2021). TikTok thus made headlines as the reason many got into reading, often for the first time (Harris 2021; Jensen 2022; Price 2022). It has even been positioned as the biggest tech disruptor since the 2007 release of Amazon's Kindle (Bain 2022). While the general development of the online reading community follows the historical development of the internet, TikTok has become a major player in the publishing industry despite its paradoxical quick-format approach to books which require hours to read and deep concentration.

The unexpected nature of BookTok, for both creators and publishers, is highlighted in a *New York Times* article titled "How Crying on TikTok Sells Books" by Elizabeth A. Harris (2021). Harris, too, highlights the paradoxical nature of this phenomenon as "an industry that depends on people getting lost in the printed word is getting dividends from a digital app built for fleeting attention spans" (Harris 2021). Even more surprising than the display tables dedicated to BookTok in bookstores is the fact that the titles on these tables are not just new

releases. In fact, the most iconic BookTok books were all released many years before this surge in popularity and attracted attention because they started to climb the bestseller lists again, as could be seen with Miller's aforementioned *The Song of Achilles*. Harris's article title draws on the video that gave recognition to Miller's novel, as the original TikTok recommended books that will make you sob. In a follow-up article the following year, Harris (2022) confirms that the hype around BookTok is here to stay. Now, TikTok is not a mere novelty but a force to be reckoned with when it comes to finding the biggest bestsellers on the market. Harris reports how, rather than visibility in physical stores, now the goal is to reach acclaim on TikTok. Citing NPD BookScan, Harris notes how "BookTok has helped authors sell 20 million printed books in 2021" (Harris 2022), something that no other platform has achieved.

While many of the news articles focus on the US, these developments can also be seen internationally. BookTok helped achieve record levels of book sales in the UK in 2021 as well (BBC 2022). The Canadian bookstore chain Indigo attributed their increase in quarterly revenues in 2022 to BookTok (Bhugra 2022). For Caroline Heitmann, the marketing manager at the Norwegian bookstore chain Norli, nothing is comparable to BookTok, something evident as the company actively follows developments in the community (Krogh 2021). Additionally, the store chain noticed an increase in the sales of English-language books with click and download sales rising by more than 150 percent during the summer of 2021 (Krogh 2021). In the US, more books were sold in 2021 than during any other year since book sales began to be recorded by NPD BookScan in 2004 (Bateman 2022). These numbers also confirm the idea that the pandemic-inspired reading boom is a more permanent phenomenon (Jones 2022), as Bloomsbury had attributed the record sales the company had in the first half of 2021 to both the pandemic and TikTok (Wood 2021). While there was a decline in book sales in 2022, the numbers were still higher than in 2019, before the pandemic began (Brown 2023). In the UK the rising costs of living lead to a drop in sales at the end of 2022 compared to 2021 (Brown 2023). Not only has the number of copies sold been increasing, but there is also a change in the kinds of books that are sold. The sales of print books and audiobooks in particular rose in 2021 (BBC 2022), and both of these formats are popular on TikTok. Despite declining sales in 2022 (based on statistics from NPD BookScan) Jim Milliot (2023) has noted that sales in the adult fiction category increased. Backlist books are still making it onto the bestseller lists, as can be seen with *It Ends With Us*, written by Colleen Hoover and published in 2016. Hoover's novel "was the UK's bestselling title of 2022, selling 693,850 copies over the year and improving 204% on its 2021 sales" (Brown 2023). This is a demonstration of how BookTok can take a particular liking to certain authors (Price 2022): a standout example is the aforementioned

Colleen Hoover, who has built her career on social media for some time, but really rose to fame through her visibility on BookTok (Herman 2022). Considered as BookTok's most notorious author, Hoover's books have had a stable place on the bestseller lists thanks to BookTok. 2022 seems really to have been her year, with five of her books among the top ten bestsellers (Milliot 2023).

Both publishers and booksellers are seeing the effects of BookTok, and acknowledging how fast and unpredictably books can become popular (Price 2022). In "The Rise of BookTok", in *The Guardian*, Alison Flood (2021) highlights how young creators are the ones gathering publishers' attention, with videos dedicated to their favorite books. Primarily young women, these creators foreground the aesthetics of the books as material objects. This style of short videos can draw in new readers by making the book seem more alive and accessible. For Flood's interviewees, the trend led to collaborations with publishers from December 2020 onwards. As the majority of the creators stem from a younger demographic, the book recommendations provided on BookTok reflect this.

Despite many of the popular books belonging to the young adult and romance genres, this does not apply to all books recommended in the community. As "a sanctuary for literature lovers of all kinds" (Lansom 2022), BookTok also offers an opportunity to increase diversity and the representation of previously marginalized groups of readers, as anyone can give recommendations and be heard with the suitably appealing video. However, this diversity is not always visible as searching for #booktok can lead to videos of primarily white creators (Ukiomogbe 2022). This trend is also evident in the recommendations, as the BookTok books recommended over and over are mostly written by white authors (McCall 2022). This shows that while the potential for diversity is there, it is currently at the very least not as visible as some may hope. While BookTok has been described as "the last wholesome place on the internet" (Lansom 2022), it is also creating a space to discuss serious topics connected to the literary world. The community has raised awareness of problematic and missing representation of certain social groups and called out authors for their questionable behavior, as could be seen with the withdrawal of the *It Ends With Us* coloring book within 24 hours of Colleen Hoover announcing its release (Martin 2023). Hoover's novel focuses on breaking the cycle of domestic abuse, and many readers found it inappropriate to make a coloring book based on this².

As the world is taking notice of BookTok, efforts are being made to capitalize on its success financially. TikTok has launched an official BookTok book club (TikTok 2022a), as

² The coloring book was planned to focus on the floral themes in the book as the main character is called Lily Bloom and owns a flower shop.

well as live events and retail partnerships (Shaffi 2022). In her article on BookTok's success, Sarah Shaffi (2022) states that TikTok considers it as one of the platforms' most active communities: as of April 2023, #booktok has had 126 billion views (TikTok 2023). This is emphasized by TikTok trying to engage with readers offline as well, for example by partnering with the British bookstore chain Waterstones. However, such collaborations should be planned with care, and Shaffi, for example, remarks how authenticity has been an integral aspect of bringing the first titles to fame. There is a thin line for companies to tread, and if they get the tone wrong they might face a serious backlash from the community.

One controversial feature TikTok developed to appeal to the BookTok community is the book linking feature (TikTok 2022b). This allows creators to link to the books page which provides information on the book as well as allows the viewer to save it to their favorites tab (Cavender 2022b). The goal is to ultimately make it easier to act on the recommendations talked about on BookTok. Additionally, the videos are added to a playlist which can increase exposure. However, this function is only possible with titles from Penguin Random House, and only to users in the US and UK (TikTok 2022b). Not only does this mean that smaller independent publishers – or even those among the big five – cannot be featured, but it also results in free marketing of the publishers' products and exploiting the time, effort, and passion of the creators. As accessing this function is limited to users from the US and UK, it leaves out members of the BookTok community who are not from these countries. By allowing users to easily save the book title it reduces the need for viewers to save the recommendation video and rewatch it at a later time, for example while book shopping. This reduces views and engagement for the creators and raises questions about how content that uses this tool will be privileged by the algorithm, possibly inflating its adoption rate. While the idea was good, the execution and limitations of this feature were viewed critically by the community.

In the beginning, a part of BookTok's claim to success was due to its sheer novelty (Harris 2021; Flood 2021; among others). By now, however, the novelty has worn off and the short form video has become an established format. Yet, BookTok is still a thriving community that has a considerable impact on the publishing industry. Recent figures show that while book sales peaked during the pandemic, they are still higher than before BookTok started to make headlines (Brown 2023). While the platform has changed, as discussed in more detail in chapter eight, the overall enthusiasm for books and reading continues and requires more research.

3.2 The impact of digital platforms

Similarly to the fears about the death of print, concerns over the state of professional literary criticism have been raised (Löffler 2014). These fears have been confirmed by the reduction of spaces for professional criticism (Driscoll 2021) and democratization within the publishing industry (Thomas 2020). However, such a phenomenon may not be an entirely negative thing: Eder (2021) found that on BookTube, elements of classic literary criticism are often integrated and packaged in a way to appeal to new and younger readers. This can also be seen on Goodreads, as it “allows amateurs to perform acts of literary criticism, to publish their own analyses and judgements of literature without formal training and without access to traditional publishing venues” (Walsh and Antoniak 2021, 247). Digital platforms thus contribute to a more varied field of literary criticism due to the breadth of people who can potentially participate.

This discussion of the literary sphere being altered through social media is also taken up by Bronwen Thomas (2020). She discusses how the relationship between readers and writers, publishing modes and accolades like festivals and prizes is changing through the use of social media (Thomas 2020). In particular, the author emphasizes the idea of democratizing these processes and the way readers are becoming central to literary culture, giving them increasing power in this cultural realm and challenging conceptions of literary value (Thomas 2020). These changes are visible on a number of platforms, including TikTok.

Concerns over social media’s impact on the publishing industry have been building up for years, as the attention books will receive on the internet is taken into consideration when decisions are made regarding how stories are told, and who tells them (Steger 2020). Additionally, readers can express their opinions on everything related to books and publishing on a myriad of platforms. This can have, and already has, influence on decisions by publishers and impact the availability of certain books on the market (Driscoll 2021). As readers have access to authors on platforms, this can alter the interactions between authors and readers in a number of ways, and also have an influence on how their work is viewed.

At the same time, these platforms also offer opportunities for authors, as could be seen in the case of Colleen Hoover. Alex Aster, whose book was released in August 2022, credits BookTok for getting her a book deal. Describing Aster’s book as “gloriously overdramatic and passionate, just how BookTok likes it” Alison Flood (2022) explains how, through promotion on TikTok, Aster was able to get her book to become one of the most anticipated releases of the year. In describing the videos that drove her to fame, Aster credits the BookTok algorithm for her success. At the same time, Aster cautions that the process looks easier than it is, as the

video elements like audio and book blurb needed to achieve popularity with the first viewers. In another interview, she highlights the community aspect of TikTok and the friendships that can emerge (Jones 2022).

Importantly, despite the common perception of reading “as a solitary, private activity” (Albrechtslund 2020, 559), reading has always been social (Birke 2021). While this transformation of reading into a “social event” (Perkins 2017, 355) associated with digital means like BookTube pushes the social to the forefront, it is not as revolutionary of a change as it may initially seem, as “Reading has always been a social activity, but online social networks make the social aspects of reading more visible” (Foasberg 2012, 31).

Bookishness

The rise of these book-centered communities on varying social media platforms contradicts the reoccurring belief that reading, and with it, books, are dying out. According to Murray, “The much heralded death of the book at the hand of digital media has largely failed to eventuate” (Murray 2021, 971). While fears over a waning interest in reading have inspired creative solutions, as can be seen with the recommendations system developed by Alharthi, Inkpen and Szpakowicz (2018) (discussed in chapter two), book sales have been higher in recent years (Wood 2021; BBC 2022; Bateman 2022; Milliot 2023). Many of these online communities are associated with younger readers and the popular young adult fiction genre, showing that the communities are nurturing new readers. Brenda K. Wiederhold (2022) points out that the initial reaction that these short videos may be inconsistent to something that required lots of time and effort to create is unconvincing, as the book as an object in itself is not static. This differentiation in terms of time and effort needed to digest content is also reflected in how books are recommended, as recommendations generally are to the point and only communicate the essence of the books, regardless of the medium they are given with. The value of the book as an object is questioned through the way it is assessed, and at the same time TikTok is not the first platform to engage with books in this manner.

This interest in reading versus the fear of the death of print is central to Jessica Pressman’s concept of bookishness. She describes “how bookishness presents the book object as a site for the projection of feelings about the changing role of books, and objects more generally” (Pressman 2020, 64). In doing so, owning books can “show who we are, or at least who we would like to be” (Albrechtslund 2020, 559). Dorothee Birke defines bookishness as “being a person who regards reading, not only but often particularly reading printed books, as an integral part of life” (Birke 2021, 150). The author proposes this alongside Pressman’s

definition, with the main distinction being a focus on reading rather than Pressman's connection with cultural objects. According to Birke (2021) this is in line with the way bookishness is conceptualized on the internet.

The disconnect between being a reader and interacting with books as objects is also expressed in common hashtags on BookTok. According to Dezuanni et al., "they typically feature variations of 'book', such as #bookishness, #bookworm, [...] and #bookish which signifies the importance of the book as an object, rather than the process of reading" (2022, 369). This emphasis is also dependent on the form of the content, as "collecting and displaying books does not equate to reading them" (Dezuanni et al. 2022, 370). With the focus on the physical attributes of books, this may be something that gets lost when studying BookTok. Additionally, BookTok videos do not just focus on reading books but also the identity and habits that are connected with reading (Duncan 2022).

In their research on BookTok, Boffone and Jerasa describe how "owning Thomas's novel³ is a sign of group identity and insider status" (2021, 13). This emphasizes just one of the reasons as to why readers may want to own the physical copy. At the same time, owning physical books and having an extensive library can act as a status symbol. In her thesis on BookTubers, Dubroc describes the purpose of these bookshelves as "demonstrating an implied vast literary knowledge" (Dubroc 2021, 119). However, it can be argued that this idea of "believing that simply owning a lot of books makes one 'know things'" (Cosslett 2023) is misguided.

Pressman also describes how with the last turn of the century, the fears about the end of reading were linked to the growing ubiquity of digital devices in all spheres of life and the simultaneous favoring of digital copies. When it comes to identifying with books and reading, this is now increasingly possible through images online, as it functions as a means of identity construction and allows for nearness to books (Pressman 2020, 12). Despite the spectrum of digital options, the idea of the personal library is still prevalent (Albrechtslund 2020, 562), something that is also visible in the backgrounds of many TikToks. Thus, the physical book acts as more than a vessel for reading. Also focusing on BookTube, Anderson Gold describes the prevalence of printed books stating that they "can be held up in videos, displayed on shelves, and photographed for social media" (2020, 116). This adds an additional motivation for owning books, and in particular beautiful editions. At the same time, the amount of books collected and featured in the videos of the biggest BookTubers can "inadvertently mobilize feelings of

³ *Cemetery Boys* by Aiden Thomas (2020).

intimidation” (Ehret, Boegel, and Manuel-Nekouei 2018, 156). This is not only due to the desire to match the look of abundant bookshelves, but also because of the financial cost of trying to keep up with these role models (Ehret, Boegel, and Manuel-Nekouei 2018). Thus, books serves a number of purposes in online communities, going beyond just reading. At the same time, ownership of (specific) titles can also be used to mark differences and similarities between readers.

From backlist to bestseller

While TikTok has been making headlines by helping titles climb the bestseller lists, it is important to understand what these lists mean. The definition of bestseller itself is vague, with the average book buyer having a different understanding of the concept than those working in the industry, as the methodology differs between bestseller lists (Grady 2017). And in the same way as the TikTok algorithm can be played, the bestseller lists are not free from manipulation. In an article for the BBC, Carolyn Atkinson (2022) explored how the idea of a bestseller is not as straightforward as many may think. Stores work not only with current favorites but also with data on predicted bestsellers, which can impact the availability of a book across stores as well as its location in the stores themselves. Atkinson reports how some bookstores have deals with publishers, who can pay extra to have a better placement for their volumes, and allows the stores to sell the books at a discount. This can lead to reinforcing effects, as seeing specific books more often or more prominently will increase the chances of customers buying the book which in turn results in higher reported sales. At the same time, the addition of “bestseller” is a construction of how literature is valued as it is understood as an indication of quality rather than just a sales metric, and one that can last a lifetime (Grady 2017). Thus, the effects are similar to those of TikTok, showing that TikTok should be seen as just another form of curation. It also shows that BookTok, and similar changes to bookish culture, may lead to more research on older elements of bookish culture as well. However, focusing on forecasted bestsellers may be the wrong approach, as the public may be fickle. The unexpected effect of BookTok is a prime example of this, as the breadth of different popular books is unpredictable (Price 2022). This shows a mismatch between expectations and what certain groups of readers really want to read.

The fact that many of the popular titles on TikTok are not new releases has been mentioned previously in this chapter. The popularity of backlist books can be witnessed when examining other digital services as well, as Karl Berglund and Ann Steiner (2021) found when studying book consumption data of streaming services. When looking at studies on book streaming services, the importance of backlist books on TikTok can be considerably less

surprising, and the authors note a general shift in the relationship between new and older titles. However, Berglund and Steiner (2021) found that older titles rose in popularity when the same author released another book. They call this “the rule of topicality” (Berglund and Steiner 2021, 24), as the new books sustain the interest in the backlist books.

Another initial suggestion as to why readers may be reaching for older books rather than new releases could be that the pandemic created a desire for the known and the familiar (Jensen 2022). This could have kickstarted the popularity of some books on BookTok that then turned into BookTok books. The remarkable aspect of this is that what started out as a few seconds of fame in a short video can turn into a months-long trend on bookstore shelves (Jensen 2022). Yet, the ability to go viral is not limited to those creators with large followings as any video under #booktok has the potential to go viral, making it an encouraging space to find like-minded peers and discover new things. This is due to the previously described process of post-based fame (Abidin 2020). Additionally, the success of BookTok was supported by bookstores who created dedicated displays which reinforced interest in both BookTok and the books themselves by introducing them to customers (Harris 2022). Not only the reading habits established over the pandemic but also the lack of opportunities to reach readers throughout this time, for example at book signings, have been suggested as reasons for BookTok’s success (Zarroli 2021). However, according to Wiederhold (2022) the appearance of these backlist books on bestseller lists was unprecedented and could be traced back to BookTok. The lure of these bookish communities can perhaps arise from the manner in which they allow users to overcome the solitude usually associated with reading, a feeling that was probably heightened and turned towards loneliness throughout the pandemic. While these links were initially associated with the lockdown atmosphere, the community has continued growing after bookstores reopened.

3.3 Literary criticism in online reading communities

Focusing on Goodreads, Lisa Nakamura (2013) discusses how the social aspect of reading is changing with the prevalence of digital technology. Her insights can be applied to other platforms as well as they focus on reading habits in a digitally permeated world as a whole. Despite print books remaining the popular option, the way we read is changing, especially in an academic context, leading Nakamura to use the term “late age of print” (2013, 238). Both reading and writing are becoming more social, as new ways to do these things emerge. Nakamura states that the reading platform matters as it influences access. Goodreads, where the social nature of reading shines through, still bases its structure on traditional ideas associated with literature, for example by presenting a way of collecting what users have read. In a way,

it is just a remediation of earlier practices of collecting books to demonstrate that you are well-read. At the same time, it offers a sort of relief for the fact that bookshelves become redundant when one reads digitally. Nakamura also describes how Goodreads commodifies the reader and the social network they create around books, as it requires labor from the reader.

In an article for *Kill Your Darlings* publishing and communications scholar Beth Driscoll (2021) discusses how online platforms, with a focus on Goodreads, are shifting the power dynamics in the book industry. Furthermore, as Goodreads data is used as input for different book related recommendation systems, the reviews a book receives impact its perception on more than the review platform itself (Driscoll 2021). Driscoll describes how in this media landscape authority can be given to those who are not a part of what she elegantly describes as “literary gatekeepers”. Driscoll characterizes the Goodreads reviews written by readers as “their aesthetic, emotional and moral responses to books, with an implied community of other readers that is imagined as intimate and non-hierarchical” (Driscoll 2021). This personal angle is in opposition to the goals and style of many traditional critics. Yet, while Driscoll deems the two forms to be complementary, she suspects that due to the emerging opportunities for expressing criticism, reader reviews will win the upper hand in the future. This is reflected in her previous research, conducted with DeNel Rehberg Sedo (2019) as they found that 86.1 percent of reviews on Goodreads contained descriptions of reading experiences and 68 percent included emotional reactions (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2019). This shows that emotions play a vital role when readers review and recommend books.

In her article “How Can BookTok on TikTok Inform Readers’ Advisory Services for Young People?” Margaret K. Merga (2021) describes BookTok and looks at the opportunities it offers for encouraging young readers despite it seeming to be antagonistic for this purpose. Her research has a strong focus on the hashtags used on TikTok, as they can be used to identify the popular genres and reader identities. Reader experience and recommendations were the two most common themes identified by Merga, and the two are closely connected. She describes how “Use of reader experience as a basis for recommendations is about valuing personal and experiential elements of the reader experience, with the reader at the center” (Merga 2021, 5). The reader experience is something that can create common ground between the user and creator, especially as Merga describes how these were often accompanied by discussions on reader habits and tastes. This allows users to relate to each other regardless of whether they are reading the same books and creates an emotional bond. Additionally, Merga finds that book recommendations were also structured around the emotions they can evoke, showing that this is an important element in attracting readers.

This emotional reaction is also commonly shared in videos on the platform (Reddan 2022, 7). Furthermore, rather than giving information on the book, many videos focus on the emotional journey and reader experience (Harris 2022). Wiederhold (2022), like others, stresses how BookTok content places the focus on the emotions involved in the reading experience, supported by the audiovisual features offered by the app. This gives viewers the expectation of learning within a few moments what reading a specific title will be like. As such, expectations to what a video should be and how reviews should be structured are clear and also clearly different from traditional ways of reviewing books. Suman Kalyan Maity, Abhishek Panigrahi and Animesh Mukherjee (2018) describe how the reasons for a book's popularity can be broken down into two categories: "intrinsic or innate content factors and external factors" (212). On TikTok, the external factors of how the video is presented and distributed is the stronger indicator of its popularity. While the book itself needs to appeal to people to land on the list of recommended books, the factors surrounding it are what prompt others to react to it as the information on the content itself is often limited on BookTok. However, this emphasis on emotions and reading experience is consistent with other forms of amateur book reviewing as was described previously in this chapter.

As BookTube has been successful at engaging with younger readers, Jürgen Eder (2021) calls for integration of these communities into literary research. To do so, he introduces a number of BookTubers, primarily from the German speaking side of YouTube, to showcase the variety of content that reflects and utilizes features of classic literary criticism. While most BookTubers purchase their own books, the act of receiving books from publishers pushes them towards the status of traditional literary critics. BookTube has the ability to highlight less loved books, as they do not have the same sense of obligation to cover new and notable books and authors in the same manner as traditional critics. While this trend of appreciating older works can also be seen on BookTok, many of the titles still have strong followings, showing that it can be beneficial to keep up with the popular books, regardless of whether they are new releases. Eder also provides an overview of popular BookTube video types, highlighting how personal stories related to the presented books are used to create intimacy which is furthered through other elements of the video, like the atmosphere and setting.

However, according to Birke (2021, 160), part of what defines the BookTube community is that its members actively distance themselves from traditional literary practices as they "value inclusivity and low thresholds" (Birke 2021, 160). Another benefit of BookTube is the ability to explore new reading adventures or stay within a niche which embraces this inclusivity. While this is linked to diversity, it can also provide updates on the news within the

book world. By sharing these thoughts and opinions, it is not just collective reading but also networked reading (Dubroc 2021, 77). Compared to traditional criticism, a greater diversity is encouraged, as “BookTube promotes diverse reading in breadth and depth” (Dubroc 2021, 111). As TikTok is often criticized for promoting the same five books, this thesis aims to explore whether this statement applies to BookTok as well.

Kathryn Perkins (2017) found BookTubers to be boundary spanners as they connect the different actors from book production to reception. By attending book events, BookTubers can also take this relationship to offline settings. In addition to this, Perkins describes how the content started with just book reviews but has since expanded to include a number of practices related to books, including hauls, read-alongs, and challenges. This shows how reading can truly be a social event, with similar content types appearing on BookTok as well. This raises the question whether BookTokers serve the same function of connecting the social and the private. Due to content creation becoming a viable occupation (Tolstopyat 2018), it blurs the line between professional and amateur critics, as BookTubers can be categorized as a new form of “intermediary between customers and companies” (Tolstopyat 2018, 91). At a certain point, BookTubers transition into professionals, offering a new way of marketing books and other related products. As BookTokers are also receiving books from publishers (Flood 2021), this can be applied to them as well.

Looking at BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok, Bronwyn Reddan (2022) describes this “new category of cultural intermediary” (Reddan 2022, 1) with the term “bookfluencers” for whom “their reputation as a trusted source of book recommendations” (Reddan 2022, 1) is a vital part of their identity. Reddan goes on to state that “In offering their opinion on the books they have read, BookTubers emphasise their identity as readers talking about their personal taste rather than critics or professionals” (Reddan 2022, 5). This is similar to what Birke (2021) noted about content creators distancing themselves from traditional reviewers and critics.

In *A Book Club for the 21st Century: an Ethnographic Exploration of BookTube* Tara Anderson Gold (2020) describes the basic anatomy of a BookTube video which covers the setting, video opening, vocabulary, editing, and ending a video. Anderson Gold also found that the BookTubers she interviewed found joy both in receiving recommendations from community members as well as giving these. Her study also includes an overview of 15 video genres common within the community. This overview, alongside work by other scholars (Ehret, Boegel and Manuel-Nekouei (2018); Tolstopyat (2018); Dubroc (2021)) will be used to help define categorization when conducting the content analysis.

In their investigation of BookTube, Ehret, Boegel, and Manuel-Nekouei (2018) reveal that it is not just content viewers are looking for but also the quality of the videos themselves. This could be a point of divergence between TikTok and YouTube, as a more in-the-moment style is embraced on TikTok. An aspect that therefore distinguishes TikTok from other platforms is its leaning towards what Wiederhold (2022, 158) calls “messy authenticity”. It is easy to engage on the platform, and personal experiences as well as honesty are valued in the community, as Eder (2021) also observed regarding the personal stories. The TikTok format and value of authenticity allows readers to attain something that will help them pick their next read: the feeling they will get from the book, a quality best found through word-of-mouth (TikTok 2022a). Through their formatting, “BookTok videos reflect the playful, unrehearsed aesthetic of TikTok” (Reddan 2022, 8). This is a trend visible amongst creators on the app in general, as “the ‘staging’ of an ‘Instagrammable’ lifestyle that was aspirational and pristine, seemed to give way to the ‘crafting’ of a relatable performance that was entertaining and accessible” (Abidin 2020, 83). This was reflected in the findings of Michael Dezuanni et al. (2022), as when comparing Bookstagram and BookTok, they highlight how, on TikTok, their interviewees’ “videos appear largely unrehearsed and unstaged and reflect the ‘everydayness’ of her life” (Dezuanni et al. 2022, 365). This impression is supported through the tone of the creator and the way they interact with the book. They contrast this to “the highly constructed nature of many book-centric TikTok videos and Instagram posts” (Dezuanni et al. 2022, 365). This shows that the authenticity of imperfection is a big part of the platform but not something all creators abide by.

3.4 New literary tastemakers

The diverse reading associated with social media platforms can be linked to who is creating this content and recommending the books. As Eder (2021) noted, BookTubers are less pressured to focus on new releases and can review books that they pick freely themselves. BookTok has the power to direct which books get attention, making it a great tool for improving interest in a more diverse selection of books as users can get recommendations from within their communities (Canter 2022). Focusing on the review writers of Goodreads, Driscoll states that the transition of readers from seemingly invisible to active participants in the book industry, along with this economic power, has caused the role of readers to change. This adds diversity, as “compared to established tastemakers and gatekeepers, these readers are more likely to be young, to be women, to be people of colour; not necessarily already well-networked or located in metropolitan centres of London and New York” (Driscoll 2021). The prevalence of women

on Goodreads, in particular as part of reading groups, was also mentioned by Mike Thelwall and Karen Bourrier (2019).

TikTok is a further intensification of this process, bringing in diversity and geographical valence. At the same time, the algorithm has been criticized for not promoting videos made by people of color in the same way (McCluskey 2020; McCall 2022). The prevalence of female creators on BookTok (Harris 2021; Flood 2021) reflects a general trend in online literary criticism, which Eder (2021) highlighted in his paper on BookTube. This could be linked to the fact that women read more books (Auxier et al. 2021), and in particular fiction is primarily read by women (Thomas-Corr 2019). At the same time, Eder (2021) notes the change in ages among the professional critics compared to BookTubers. TikTok has a younger target demographic (Price 2022), and thus the appeal of books recommended by creators from that age group (Harris 2021) may be a heavy influence on popularity and buying power. Another quality that the members of the community seem to enjoy is the specialization and creation of niche groups, which is facilitated by the algorithm of the “For You” page.

Sarah Jerasa and Trevor Boffone (2021) state that TikTok gives insight into what it is like to be a teenager today, and as it is a space teenagers already inhabit, taking the leap into BookTok is less daunting than with some other platforms. They also draw the comparison between BookTok and other online book communities, highlighting the value of the former as creating a space to connect and engage with reading in a supportive atmosphere, offering an escape and easy entry. This shows how presenting recommendations in an appealing way can activate readers, especially as they are present in a space in which they already are. Elsewhere, Trevor Boffone and Sarah Jerasa (2021), also discuss how TikTok allows teenagers “to create affinity spaces centered on queer YA literature” (Boffone and Jerasa 2021, 10). This is important as these topics are often left out of school libraries and reading lists, and can help people find a community that may not be present in their everyday lives. This allows for young readers to see themselves represented and normalizes queerness.

This combination of young, and in particular female, readers with the association of feminine genres like romance brings about an age-old discussion when it comes to classifying and valuing culture. The distinction between high and popular culture has been the topic for various debates for a long time, especially in the sense of popular culture associated with the mainstream approach to cultural production. Today, reading is often associated with highbrow cultural activity. However, during the early years and decades of its inception the novel was not afforded that same status, as in the late 18th and early 19th centuries “novels especially tended to be viewed as at best ephemeral, at worst immoral” (Pearson 1999, 14). In particular, women

who read were considered to be disconcerting due to their potential for identifying with what they were reading (Knox 2013). The anxieties surrounding reading women were used to discuss other adjacent topics, resulting in contrasting ideas about women and reading which only increased as femininity gained a negative connotation within the reading context (Pearson 1999). Women's literature and other genres popular among women, for example romance, have since then been frequently categorized, implicitly or explicitly, as a lower form of culture despite often giving deep insights into the lives of women that cannot be expressed elsewhere (Philips 2020). This is also present in the criticism of more recent genres, like chick lit, with the judgements leveraged against products of female cultural production reflecting larger ideas around gender and culture (Mißler 2017) Despite the majority of books being read falling under popular rather than highbrow literature (Swirski 1999), literary and cultural scholars have been hesitant to include it as a research subject (Swirski 1999; Philips 2020). Especially literary genres focused on domesticity and targeted towards women are left out or reduced to a footnote (Philips 2020, 900). Deborah Philips argues that "the study of popular fiction has always been integral to the development of cultural studies" (Philips 2020, 901), focusing in particular on the emancipatory power of the romance narrative found in the literary genre as well as soap operas on television.

Ann Kjellberg (2022) connects this historical standing of the novel as a low cultural form with the expectations people have towards TikTok. TikTok, and social media in general, create a space that users can choose to engage with from the entire spectrum of cultural production. As such, despite the common connotation of being low culture, social media can be seen as more of an intermediary. While the distinction between different levels of culture could be losing its importance (Verboord 2012), it is maintained not just by newspaper commentators (e.g. comments on Harris 2021) but also in contrast to other digital platforms. Yashwina Canter (2022) compares the dominant reading tastes of BookTok and Instagram, showing how having dedicated spaces for different kinds of styles and genres can be beneficial. While Bookstagram is the place for conversation, literary fiction, and nonfiction, BookTok has a focus on genres traditionally excluded from highbrow literary culture. By democratizing virality, TikTok has created an accessible means to discuss such topics, opening up new spaces for literary exchanges and criticism, which seems to create great appeal for the platform (Kjellberg 2022).

Overall, the use of social networking sites and digital platforms has been well-documented (Nakamura 2013; Eder 2021; among others). A number of scholarly articles have focused on BookTok in particular, highlighting its various features like its ease of use (Guiñez-Cabrera and

Mansilla-Obando 2022), imperfect, playful and unstaged nature (Dezuanni et al. 2022; Reddan 2022) and its format creating clear expectations (Wiederhold 2022) respectively. However, what really sets BookTok apart is that none of the previous digital communities have had the same impact on bookish culture as BookTok. While data from Goodreads is valuable to those within the booksphere as it impacts book recommendations, outside of this realm few have heard of it or use it regularly. Booktok on the other hand is leaving its mark all over bookstores and newspapers.

4. Theory & method

4.1 Theoretical framework: studying algorithms

As described in chapter two, TikTok's algorithm has been highlighted as one of the key features for BookTokers in their use of the platform (Gutiérrez-Cabrera and Mansilla-Obando 2022). As such, the algorithm is a central focus of this thesis. However, studying algorithms and in particular recommendation systems presents a number of challenges. As recommendation systems use past activity to generate recommendations, it is impossible to run the same test more than once (Kayser-Bril 2022), and thus, the requirement of replicability cannot be fulfilled. Additionally, there are a number of things that need to be taken into account when running these tests, as while they simplify the research process, they may differ from the regular user experience. In an article for *AlgorithmWatch* Nicolas Kayser-Bril (2022) outlines a few of these elements, including the use of bots, the difference between app and browser, the benefits of user-led audits and the fact that only the platforms themselves are able to actually audit their algorithms. At the same time, how recommender systems truly work can never be fully assessed by outsiders as they take the entire environment surrounding them into account in multiple and often unknown ways. These aspects were also considered when setting up the research design for this thesis, as will be explained in a later section of this chapter.

Due to the proprietary nature of many algorithms that obscure the operating processes and values when it comes to things like content moderation (Roberts 2018), studying the algorithms themselves is nearly impossible. However, it is possible to examine a phenomenon in a black box manner by accessing the perceptions built around it rather than the item itself. Taina Bucher (2017) proposes the concept of algorithmic imaginary to explain the social power of algorithms. Bucher used tweets and interviews, primarily stemming from disruptions to existing beliefs, to examine how regular users comprehend and experience the Facebook algorithm. The reason behind these disruptions is that they reveal ideas about the algorithm that users may have been unaware of before, as it is through the rupture that the algorithm becomes

noticeable. Bucher defines the algorithmic imaginary “as the way in which people imagine, perceive and experience algorithms and what makes these imaginations possible” (Bucher 2017, 31). In turn, these imaginaries also affect the algorithms themselves, as well as the power they hold. As such, the algorithmic imaginary describes both the understandings people have of algorithms and the resulting effects of these ideas. Bucher connected her ideas to Eslami et al.’s 2015 idea of “algorithm awareness”, as this is a prerequisite to having an algorithmic imaginary. This concept of algorithmic imaginaries is central to the thesis, as it will be the lens through which both the videos and the interviews will be viewed. The aim is to see how people are imagining the TikTok algorithm and what features seem to make a pattern, showing how the need to appeal to the algorithms influences the creative process and vice versa. Playing into these imaginaries could also influence the types of recommendation both created and popularized, as the algorithm reflects these imaginaries back through the suggested content. As the imaginary is something that lies beyond the visible, it can develop in individual ways.

Building on the work of Bucher (2017), Crystal Abidin (2020) proposes the concept of algorithmic practices. She defines these as “users’ engagements in patterned and routine behaviour in the belief that their repeated actions will persuade and trigger the platforms’ algorithm to work in their favour, and is informed by a collective ‘algorithmic imaginary’ (Bucher 2017)” (Abidin 2020, 88) with the goal of “the viewer’s engagements with the post to teach the TikTok algorithmic recommendation system to serve them more of such similar posts” (Abidin 2020, 88). As these practices can be seen as a manifestation of the algorithmic imaginary, the practices taken by BookTokers to engage with the TikTok algorithm will be discussed.

In their paper on how Airbnb hosts manage the expectations of both guests and the evaluation algorithms, Shagun Jhaver, Yoni Karpfen and Judd Antin (2018) describe algorithmic anxiety. This comes about due to the “uncertainty about how Airbnb algorithms work and a perceived lack of control” (Jhaver, Karpfen, Antin 2018, 1). While the paper describes hosts on Airbnb, this algorithmic anxiety is not limited to the one platform. Once content creators breach a certain number of popularity metrics, their part-time or full-time livelihoods may depend on the content they create. As such, content creators are in a way at the mercy of the algorithms just like the Airbnb hosts. Thus, they are more likely to not only be aware of the algorithm but also actively be thinking about the algorithm and notice changes over time.

In his article for *The New Yorker*, Kyle Chayka (2022) connects Bucher’s (2017) concept of the algorithmic imaginary with the algorithmic anxiety mentioned by Jhaver,

Karpfen and Antin (2018). Chayka uses these concepts to illustrate the unease users feel about the algorithms increasingly present in their daily lives, as it becomes harder to tell what recommendations are based on the users taste or are a product of algorithms. He describes how the resulting recommendations can land on two extremes as “we are left to guess exactly how they are influencing us, feeling in some moments misperceived or misled and in other moments clocked with eerie precision” (Chayka 2022). Building on conversations with Taina Bucher and Patricia de Vries, Chayka explains how algorithms are a stand-in for the fears brought about by that technology and the associations attached with how they work. This is akin to the rhetorical positioning described by Murray (2021), with the anxieties surrounding algorithmic curation and their use of personalization for profit projected on to the idea of algorithms. Furthermore, one of the main factors Chayka pinpoints regarding this algorithmic anxiety is the loss of transparency when social media platforms switch from chronological feeds to the more common recommendations-based model. The chronological aspect is completely lost when viewing videos on TikTok’s “For You” page, as the publishing date can be viewed via the creator’s profile or the search function instead, thus making it possible to watch older videos without knowing. The videos displayed on a user’s “For You” page are just another set of recommendations in line with the ones Chayka is describing. However, the recommendation is two-fold: one is the video itself and the other is the book (or books) featured in the video. This shows that there are two features that need to be studied closer, even though they are also closely interrelated. This raises questions of how the video itself relates to the recommended book.

Angela Y. Lee et al. (2022) developed the algorithmic crystal framework to conceptualize how users see themselves and each other through the TikTok algorithm. The authors interviewed 24 TikTok users to learn how personalized algorithms influence their identity and how they perceive others. The idea of the crystal works here as the user’s identity is reflected back at them through the algorithm and it is possible for users to encounter reflections of themselves in others. The aim herein is to connect how users think of the algorithm of the “For You” page and how it can connect or disconnect with their identity. The concept is once again building on Bucher’s (2017) idea of the algorithmic imaginary and how perceptions may influence the algorithms themselves. The results of the study found that there was a desire to make sure the self-concept and algorithmic version of the users matched, with users wanting to “bring their algorithmic self into alignment with their actual self” (Lee et al. 2022, 8) and believing that they could achieve this through their interactions with the algorithm. Furthermore, seeing aspects of themselves reflected back meant that “the algorithm facilitated feelings of ‘mere belonging’ towards others on the platform” (Lee et al. 2022, 2). An aspect

users appreciated about TikTok is its ability to show different aspects of one's identity and quickly adapt as interests change rather than just focusing on the most prominent ones (Lee et al. 2022). A shift in relation to previous studies was that the authors found that users both knew of and wanted the personalization to take place.

Thus, the theory presented here will be used to gauge what makes BookTok so special in comparison to other bookish forums of creative expression. The platform features, to which the algorithm counts within the scope of this thesis, as well as content related aspects of the videos themselves will be assessed.

4.2 Content analysis of BookTok videos

For the content analysis 150 BookTok videos were sourced using the "For You" page, with two videos being excluded during data analysis as they did not fit the criteria. The dataset consists of 99 videos taken from a newly created research account as well as 49 videos taken from the author's personal TikTok account. As the videos stem from two separate accounts there is some overlap, resulting in 146 unique videos. The timespan for data extraction was November 7-18, 2022. While viewing the videos, initial notes were taken which created the basis for the interviews (see section three of this chapter). These notes were expanded on later.

In her paper, which serves as an inspiration for this thesis, Merga (2021) discusses how her content analysis may not be a generalizable sample due to the limited scope, as there is no information on how many videos there are overall and the constant expansion of #booktok. As of April 2023, there have been more than 19 million posts under #booktok which does not include the various videos that fall into this classification but omit the hashtag (TikTok 2023). This limitation also applies to this thesis, however the point was to find some of the popular ways in which creators are recommending books. Like Dezuanni et al, an "exploratory-descriptive investigation is appropriate for this project because our aim is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of all Instagram and TikTok activity" (Dezuanni et al. 2022, 359). The authors outline some challenges when studying the platform, as it is hard to determine what content is the most relevant as these search functions do not exist (Dezuanni et al. 2022). Additionally, as these trends change quickly and recommendations are adapted to the user's current interests, it is a momentary look into how people are sharing their recommendations. The findings of Merga's study do indicate that the most common reoccurring theme is book recommendations, as 40.5 percent of the sample videos fall into this category (Merga 2021). This reaffirms the notion that the recommendations are an important aspect of BookTok that is worth investigating closer.

While engagement data was also collected from the videos (number of video likes, saves, and comments), this was to detect trends as well as to allow for a potential closer analysis and comparison as engagement can impact whether or not a video gets distributed to more users. The comments on the videos themselves were not analyzed as that requires resources beyond the scope of this thesis and it is unclear whether the quality of the comments themselves (for example linking to another user) have higher influence on the algorithms ranking than other engagement metrics. Furthermore, the focus of this thesis lies on the way creators present recommendations and interact with the platform itself, rather than in mapping the community of fellow creators and book enthusiasts.

Research vs personal account

The first decision when conducting the content analysis was whether to use the author's personal TikTok account or to create a new one specifically for research purposes. Both methods had their benefits and drawbacks and ultimately, the decision fell to do a combination after seeing how different the BookTok experience was on the newly created research account.

Previous research on BookTok by Merga (2021) utilized a special research account which supported the idea of creating a research account. This has the benefit of creating a separate research entity that is less shaped by the researchers' personal preferences. By reducing this bias the BookTok community can be observed in a more generalized way. By only interacting with BookTok content, the most common videos can be seen as well as what content is adjacent to the BookTok community without distraction from a variety of interests. In a way, these actions also work as reinforcements. As such, it shows the way a new user would interact with TikTok and show the initial BookTok videos they are presented with. Another aspect that eases the research is the ability to save all the videos and immediately see them in the app using the collections feature. At the same time, saving the videos to the profile furthered interest in the specific type of videos from the perspective of the algorithm.

However, reducing a personality to limited interests easily leads to the emergence of echo chambers (Wall Street Journal 2021) and runs into one of the problems outlined by Kayser-Bril (2022), as it does not fully reflect the natural user experience. Moreover, it is not possible to audit a recommendation system without personal bias and the results of auditing these systems will never be entirely replicable (Kayser-Bril 2022). This is furthered by the fact that the algorithm behind the "For You" page is continuously adapting based on the user's behavior, including unconscious behaviors as it collects input from the moment the app is opened (Wei 2020b). This makes it only slightly possible to predict and manipulate the

algorithm to follow a certain path. The blank slate research requirement also leads to a bias, one that follows the research rather than personal preference. This could be beneficial, as it shows what someone with a hyper-specific interest would be viewing. Yet, most users view content from a wider selection of their personal interests as well as content shared by their acquaintances (Lee et al. 2022; Wright 2021). This all results in a more mixed bag of content which is something that TikTok also aims to prevent allegations of filter bubbles (TikTok 2020). All in all, there will always be a bias within the “For You” page, yet a new account would slightly mitigate the personal bias and remove any previous history. With a research account, the perspective of a new user can be taken and the algorithm can be manipulated to show content tailored to the research interests.

As I have been using TikTok for many years my algorithm is perfectly tailored to my interests, including literature. In her paper Merga describes how she underwent a “period of preparatory enculturation” (2021, 3) on a personal account. This was not needed for this thesis, as I have been doing this unknowingly for many years due to following book discussions on multiple platforms. Since BookTok videos regularly appear on my “For You” page, my personal account is a representation of a member of the BookTok community. As other interests are present, this intermeshing of content may also affect the kinds of BookTok videos recommended. This adds to viewing an authentic experience of a TikTok user rather than a sterilized research environment. An example of this could be in the genre of the book, the style of presentation as well as the themes within the book itself. Furthermore, TikTok claims to offer a variety of content on their “For You” pages (TikTok 2020). With the personal account it may be possible to explore the more niche aspects of BookTok culture, as well as the natural algorithm in the wild, without catering to the algorithms by reinforcing solely one topic.

Thus, to be in line with previous research and personal experience on BookTok, a clean slate research account was created for this project. In addition to this, a smaller part of the dataset stems from a personal account to compare the ideal scenario with a realistic account of BookTok viewers. This part of the dataset is smaller as the main purpose is comparison. Furthermore, by limiting the number of videos from the second account the number of duplicates can be reduced. The comparison was placed in the second week of the research account to allow time for the algorithm to first learn the “users” preferences.

Setting up the research account and initial interactions

The idea was to set up a new account to have a blank slate and explore the TikTok algorithm as a new user would. However, this was slightly changed during the setting up process due to

the amount of explicit content that initially appeared on the “For You” page. The new angle was to follow the experience of a person who joined TikTok after hearing about BookTok, for example by seeing one of the store displays, and decided to check it out for themselves. The account was added on the same device using the “Switch account” function in the TikTok app. This allows for multiple accounts to be logged in simultaneously on the same device. It is unclear whether this may impact some of the preferences on either account, yet as there were some overlapping recommendations this could be an indication that there is a clear distinction between accounts.

When setting up the account, no location and language settings were manually selected, with the app using the language setting of the phone (English). While the app displays the default of “never” under location services, this entails that the location will be approximated based on device features. As TikTok was accessed from Norway, this needs to be considered when looking at the languages mentioned in chapter eight. Additionally, only minimal information was used to create the account. The account name, which includes a username as well as a nickname, was linked to the research project and the profile image indicates an interest in books. A research disclaimer was added into the profile should anyone choose to interact with the account (see figure 1), while setting up the account the platform also encouraged connecting with contacts (see figure 2).

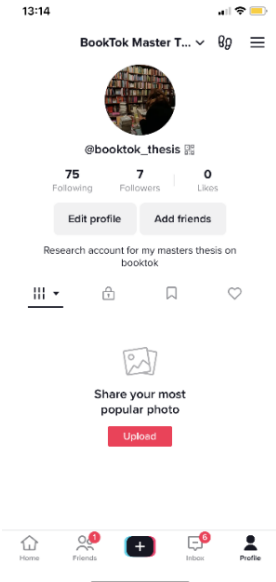


Figure 1 Screenshot of the research account (after data gathering was completed). Profile says “Research account for my masters thesis on booktok”. Screenshot by the author, April 28, 2022.

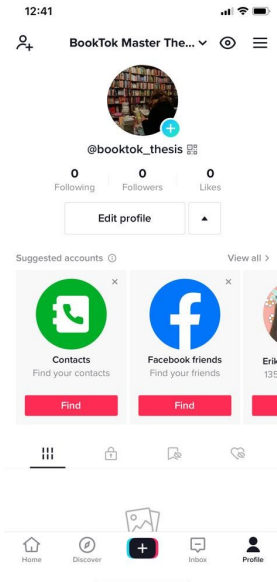


Figure 2 Screenshot of recommendations to connect with others when viewing the research profile. Screenshot by the author, November 7, 2022.

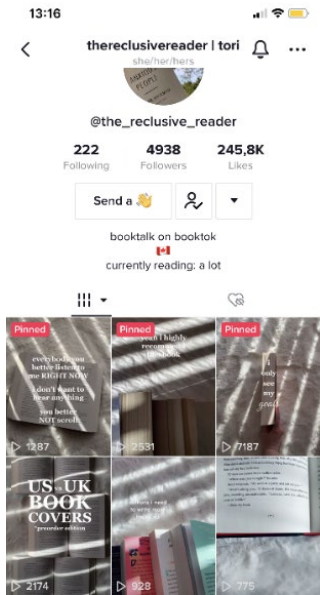


Figure 3 Example of a profile with three pinned videos, as indicated in the upper left corner of the pinned videos. Screenshot taken by author, April 28, 2023.

Following the account creation there was a period of initial interaction with the “For You” page to start receiving recommendations. This period lasted around 10 minutes. The goal was to naturally come across a BookTok video and by interacting with that video go to the hashtag page and continue exploring BookTok videos. The videos recommended to new TikTok users are primarily very popular TikTok videos, as I recognized a number of them. Furthermore, the algorithm seemed to use basic information like location data in the initial videos as there was quite a lot of content in Norwegian. The content overall did not reflect my personal experience of TikTok, and for the most part I scrolled through in search of book related content. What shocked me and ultimately caused me to change the angle of the research was the amount of content of sexual nature. As TikTok has a reputation for being particularly popular among minors, I was surprised how prevalent it was on the “For You” page. Despite refreshing, no BookTok content appeared within this timeframe.

Due to this experience I changed my tactic. Now, the initial interaction with BookTok was by searching for #booktok. Scrolling through the recommended videos was done intentionally. Starting from the first recommendation, the videos were watched in full before scrolling on to the next one. This was done for about five minutes. After that a break was taken before extracting the first videos.

Data gathering

The dataset was created over the span of two weeks, in the period of November 7-18, 2022. This time period was chosen to account for fluctuations as well as allowing the algorithm to be observed over multiple interactions. Additionally, it is a fairly neutral period as no major holidays caused a certain type of content to take the spotlight in the dataset. Each weekday 10 videos were recorded and documented to create the dataset. In the first week, videos were solely collected from the designated research account. In the following week, videos were extracted from both accounts, allowing for comparison. As TikTok was accessed via the mobile app, the screen recording function on the iPhone itself was used to record the video as well as to capture information on the creators account at the time of recording by viewing the profile after watching the video. When possible, the video itself was downloaded in addition. This allowed for a viewing of a “clean”, content focused video as well as one with metadata during content analysis. However, not all creators enabled this function⁴.

⁴ Creators may disable video downloading for privacy reasons but also to prevent their work from being distributed without receiving views as videos can be shared directly. While there is a watermark with the creator’s handle in downloaded videos, TikTok compilation videos (found on other platforms) will often crop this out. Additionally, the videos can exist on devices even if the creator later decides to make the video private or delete it.

The “For You” page was selected as source for the videos as it is TikTok’s most iconic feature. While the TikTok landing page offers the option to switch between the “For You” page and the “Following” page, according to the platform itself, users spend the most time scrolling on the former (TikTok 2020). For new accounts, the “For You” page is the initial interaction with content on TikTok as the “Following” page requires following other users. Furthermore, the “For You” page is unique compared to the feeds of other platforms (see chapter two for an in-depth analysis). As such, it is the feature of TikTok that has the most interesting algorithm and the most potential impact on users. Due to its highly personalized nature, it is also the hardest to research.

Additionally, most previous research on BookTok relies on the hashtag function. For example, Merga (2021) categorized videos appearing under #booktok into different themes while Guñez-Cabrera and Mansilla-Obando (2022) used the same hashtag to source their interviewees by creating a dataset of Latin American BookTokers. However, the aforementioned reasons and my personal experience on the platform lead me to believe that for getting an authentic experience and for learning about the BookTok community, following the hashtags gives a limited perspective. Thus, this research aims to explore new ways to research BookTok and see what the algorithm will recommend beyond the hashtag.

The initial data extraction started with manually refreshing the feed after opening the app, resulting in the first recommendation being a BookTok video. A considerable difference was already noticeable between the initial interactions with the recommendation system and the first data extraction, as along with BookTok videos, there was a general focus on life vlogs, relatable content, as well as study content. Along with screen recording and saving the videos on the phone when possible, the videos were liked and saved within the app. The video was watched in full before accessing the profile to gather more information on the creators. The creators were also followed. This made it possible to find the videos again as well as prompted the algorithm to promote more videos in this style.

As expected, more and more BookTok videos appeared on the feed after each time I interacted with them. While using the app, I spent minimal time taking notes, mainly making sure to document the video topic. This is to avoid the time spent increasing while taking notes and to prevent the repeated watching of a singular video possibly skewing the results as TikTok automatically loops videos once they are done. An investigation by the *Wall Street Journal* (2021) found that the recommendation system is particularly interested in recommending content that will keep users on the app, with time spent viewing videos affecting the material displayed on the “For You” page more than other signs of interest. As such, the prolonged time

spent while taking notes could be an important data point. After recording ten videos, I went back through my recordings to elaborate on the initial notes and fill in the spreadsheet on the quantitative metadata. This led to the realization that the criteria for included videos needed to be refined. Three out of the initial ten videos thus needed to be replaced through renewed scrolling. These practices were repeated throughout the duration of data gathering.

Defining who belongs to this group of literary tastemakers is not entirely straightforward. Anderson Gold (2020) mentions the difficulty of defining BookTubers and BookTube, as there are no clear boundaries around these concepts. This leads to a discussion on the difference between a BookTube video and BookTubers, something that is also present on TikTok. While BookTok is also not formally defined and what content types count under the name can be debated, the common use of hashtags help define the group. In her content analysis Merga (2021) found that 99.1 percent of videos utilized the hashtag #booktok. However, Merga used hashtag sourcing to create her dataset in the first place. While #booktok can be used to create inclusion in the community, there are also videos that belong to the BookTok genre and community without using the hashtag. Furthermore, some users may use hashtags tied to the book community in other ways, yet they may not explicitly include #booktok. As such, the hashtag can help to narrow down the community but is not the only factor when it comes to defining the BookTok community. Additionally, communities are formed based on interest, yet there are no strict criteria that determine whether or not you are part of these groups (Wright 2021). Coming back to a previous discussion, the videos were BookTok videos even if the creators were not BookTokers per se.

BookTok videos were included in the analysis based on the following criteria:

1. The video needs to appear on the “For You” page.
2. The video needs to visibly include the title or cover of at least one book. This could be in the video itself, mentioned in the audio or by the creator talking, in the caption or in the hashtags, as long as the discussed book is easily identifiable.
3. The video should refer to some aspect of the book or the reading experience, e.g. emotion or quantitative rating. This can be done visually, audibly, or through implication⁵.
4. The video needs to focus mainly on the books themselves.
5. Both recommendations to read and recommendations not to read are included, and the focus lies on how the message is portrayed.

⁵ See introduction for an explanation of implicit recommendations.

Examples of videos that do not fall into this categorization include book hauls, videos focusing on a specific trope (for example enemies-to-lovers) or reader moments not linked to a specific title, or vlogs that only quickly feature a book.

Notetaking and analysis

The data gathered about each TikTok was also modeled after Merga (2021), but adjusted to better fit the needs of this project. The metadata was collected in a spreadsheet and included entries on the publication date; the creator's username, followers and likes; video likes, saves, and comments; hashtags and video length. While not all creators chose to disclose personal information, if it was included in their public profile, the location, age, and gender of the creator were also recorded. Additionally, a short summary was included to quickly recognize the main topic. As the post date is not visible on the "For You" page, it was gathered by clicking on the profile once the video ended. TikTok conveniently has a feature that automatically scrolls down to the just watched video. Additionally, it was noted down whether the video was "pinned" to a user's profile (see figure 3). This was to investigate whether older videos were more likely to be promoted if they were regarded as important enough to pin by the creator.

In addition to this spreadsheet, a word document was used to collect in-depth notes about the videos and conduct the analysis. The initial analysis consisted of taking notes based on noticeable features of the video, the main theme as well as any ideas and connections that could be explored further. This was done alongside the data extraction and extended until end of November as it took longer to process than gathering the data. The main aim was to get a general overview of the material available as well as to identify suitable interviewees. Any other noticeable and potentially relevant features and ideas were noted. To prepare the videos for analysis, they were transferred from phone to laptop and the files were renamed so that they could easily be matched up with the name used in the spreadsheet on November 28. This was based on the date, an indication of whether it was a video registered for the thesis or personal account, as well as the number for that day. The corresponding folder system in OneDrive made it easier to view and find the videos at a later stage. A more in-depth analysis of the videos occurred in late February. Here, the goal was to delve deeper into the content itself. The analysis included notes on all book titles and authors mentioned in the videos, as well as identifying themes and patterns in content and video structure. This created the context and material for writing the discussion. As there was a break between the initial analysis and this analysis, this helped to draw attention to different features of the videos.

4.3 Interviews with BookTokers

Selecting creators

Content creators were contacted based on the results of the content analysis, sourced from the pool of videos gathered from the research account. This is in line with what a user may see based on the algorithm, rather than picking out certain creators based on personal preference and interest. Furthermore, as will be discussed in the results, quantitative metrics are not the only determinants for a video appearing on a user's "For You" page. As such, the number of followers is not the only selection criteria. Creators were initially selected to find a balance between different types of genres, content creation styles, sizes of followers as well as diversity of language. Many of those asked for an interview also included tags like "reader", comments on their interest in books, or a book tracker in their profile. This process is similar to how Dubroc (2021) narrowed down the YouTube channels for her analysis – by looking at creators who self-identified as members of BookTube. Additionally, the creators needed to be relatively active or had to have posted something recently to increase the chances of responding to the interview request as well as be aware of current BookTok trends and discussions. All interviewees were above the age of 18 to comply with the ethical guidelines and to facilitate the ethics clearance process. Due to the creators in the dataset primarily being women and the constraints in organizing the interviews, all interviewees are women.

Interview process

The majority of the creators had their email address listed in their profiles, others were contacted through their Instagram account or via their website. As the default TikTok setting does not allow direct messaging unless users are following each other, contacting smaller creators was difficult as they often did not have a listed email address or a corresponding Instagram account. This limits the perspective of the creators to those active on the platform in a more formal manner, or with aspirations to do so. Of the 30 BookTokers invited for an interview, three were interviewed. Interview requests were sent out starting in early December 2022, in multiple rounds, between 1-2 weeks apart with the final round happening in February 2023. Each round included 3-5 invitations to prevent overbooking of interviews.

The interviews were held over Zoom, with the interview invitation sent alongside the consent forms. The interviews were held between December 19, 2022 – January 17, 2023. The interviews were semi-structured to give the interviewees space to elaborate on their own ideas and place the focus on what was important to them. The questions were based on aspects that seemed relevant and interesting for further investigation after the initial analysis of the material

(the list of questions can be found in the appendix). Additionally, some questions were inspired by discussions with peers and the thesis supervisor, in particular the ones based on language-related aspects of the topic. The questions surrounding the algorithm were also inspired by the work of Bucher (2017) on algorithmic imaginary. The interviews started with some basic information about the creator and their process to warm up the interviewees as well as to gain insight into their personal perspective and approach. After that the questions focused on TikTok, the algorithm and BookTok. In conversation with the BookTokers new questions were sparked as a lot of adjacent topics were touched. This resulted in different questions being asked in each of the interviews but with similar results. The main questions that were repeated addressed the TikTok algorithm. For an overview on data processing and ethics see appendix.

Analysis of the interviews

The interviews were coded based on recurring themes that were established using an inductive approach. This was chosen as the questions differed slightly between candidates and while there was overlap between topics discussed in all the interviews, these were not clearly defined. A thematic analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts following the steps outlined by Nowell et al. (2017), which builds on the work of Braun and Clarke (2006), to ensure trustworthiness. These findings were then connected to the findings from the content analysis as well as the theory behind this thesis. Common answers were grouped together to gain consensus on certain topics. The findings of the interviews were then interwoven with the rest of the data.

Overview of interviewees

All three interviewees are women, in their early to mid-twenties, and live in North America. Despite these commonalities, they create different kinds of content, though they also shared experiences that nevertheless overlapped in surprising ways when it came to using TikTok. Throughout this thesis pseudonyms, based on the main characters of books they recommended, will be used when discussing their interviews to prevent identification.

Addie has been creating BookTok videos since early 2020, inspired by her “For You” page solely focusing on books. Now, TikTok has become her job and she has one of the largest followings in the community, with over 880,000 followers at the time of interview. Her content focuses on bookish humor videos and is in tune with current trends.

Alex is the interviewee with the most recently created account, and has created videos for less than a year. While she is Danish, she primarily reads in English, like the other interviewees, as books in Danish are hard for her to access. At the time of the interview she was

approaching 15,000 followers and was hoping to eventually turn BookTok into a job. She creates a variety of content, often speaking to the camera directly for longer periods or putting her own twist on a trend.

Olive was celebrating her second anniversary of being on TikTok at the time of the interview in early 2023. In that time she had amassed quite a large following, with more than 300,000 followers. While she likes to experiment with different types of content, for example storytime videos, her main focus is on aesthetic videos that oftentimes will fall into the listicle genre (these genres will be addressed in more detail in chapter five). Compared to the other two interviewees she is less visible in her videos.

5. Anatomy of a BookTok video

5.1 The basics

5.1.1 Basic formula

Generally, BookTok videos have a clear video structure (see figure 4). The videos begin with an initial scene that hooks the viewer, often using a title element such as a text overlay. Next, there is the main content which can vary from an ongoing scene (similar to the one-shot in film) to multiple connected through creative editing. The overall visuals are tied together by the audio, as TikTok is heavy on both sound and images. The final element most videos have is a caption. This often reiterates a main point or provides extra context for the video itself. It also includes hashtags, which will be discussed further in section 6.3. On TikTok, book recommendations are given using a variety of visual styles and formats. These are often combined, as will be seen later on when outlining the genres.

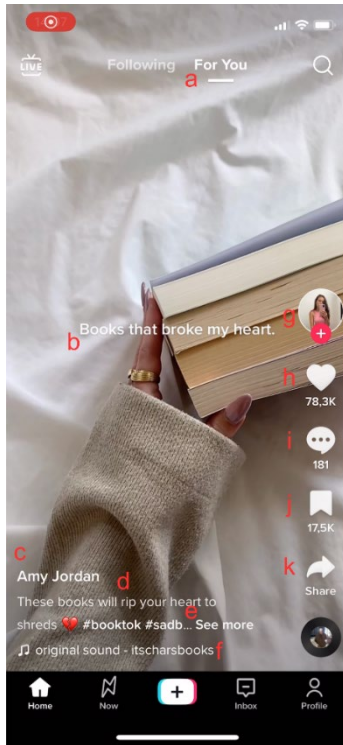


Figure 4: Example of a BookTok video, annotated to show key features of TikTok videos. Video title is “Books that broke my heart.” Screenshot of @amyjordanj (2022).

Legend

- a = Option to switch between the default “For You” page and “Following” page
- b = Video title/text element
- c = Creator’s nickname/screenname (self-chosen)
- d = Video caption (selecting “see more” displays the full text)
- e = Hashtags, included in the caption
- f = Audio used in the video (can find similar videos by tapping it)
- g = Creator’s profile, selecting the plus results in following while tapping on the image shows their profile
- h = Like button
- i = Comments
- j = Save to collection (private)
- k = Share with others (on and off the platform)

Due to the short length of the video and the ease of scrolling past, it is important to hook the viewer within the first few seconds. This is done by demonstrating what the video is about and setting up the expectations, especially when the video itself is relatively slow-moving or long. There are a number of strategies creators use to set up these expectations. When using a voiceover, the focus lies on creating a snappy first line, especially when the content is part of a series as the initial line will always be the same and therefore recognizable. When showing themed recommendations, the books are often shown as a stack that will be revealed later on. This reveal is done by having the spines of the initial stack facing away from the camera. The most common method used to set up expectations is by adding a title element into the video itself. This lets the viewer know what is coming, making it easy to decide whether the video is for them.

Most of the recommendations on TikTok try to get the viewer to read the book by creating desire through highlighting literary or material features of books. However, it is important to acknowledge that the job of a reviewer and critic, which in a way most BookTokers are, is also to call out books when they are a disappointment. In the dataset only nine videos had negative sentiments. These negative reviews were generally given in the same format as the positive ones, although they were more prevalent in genres that gave the creators space to

explain their reasoning. Sometimes they were also given as a contrast element or mentioned alongside positive reviews, for example when discussing books read in a certain time period.

Another decision made during the content creation process is whether the video focuses on a number of different books or just one book or series, something 41.2 percent of videos in the dataset did. Having an entire video dedicated to a single book or series also demonstrates devotion to that one piece of literature and author. A lot of the time the video then focuses on a popular series or author, with common examples including *The Inheritance Games* duology by Jennifer Lynn Barnes, the *Shatter Me* series by Tahereh Mafi and Colleen Hoover's oeuvre. More unknown books and series are often connected to a big name, such as by comparing it to the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series by Sarah J. Maas. This series was used for comparison multiple times in the dataset, as it is often seen as an entry series into the new adult fantasy genre. This reduces the need to introduce plot and features of the book, as many will be familiar with the work even if they have not read it yet. Thus, finding a book one is not familiar with is more likely to happen in the videos that do not focus on a singular book or series.

5.1.2 Text elements

Text elements are often used to add titles at the beginning of videos (e.g., see figure 4, 5). The text overlay can either appear from the beginning or can slowly float in, creating suspense and making users stick around until the title is revealed before deciding whether or not to scroll past. Often a variation in the use of fonts and emojis will add further visual interest. Having a written title not only makes it easier for viewers to know what to expect but is also part of the algorithmic imaginary surrounding the TikTok algorithm. Olive stated that including text elements in the video itself can aid in categorizing the video correctly and appear when users search for related terms. Additionally, TikTok asks users to create a cover image for videos when posting (see figure 3). This determines how the video will appear on the creators profile. Having a title element can help viewers of the profile to identify topics they are interested in or refer back to a video they watched previously. As such, the title serves valuable functions regardless of where and how users view the video. In addition to, or instead of, a title element, some videos will aim to have a catchy first sentence used to keep the viewer from scrolling and giving an idea of what is to come. This particularly applies to videos in which the creator is talking. To make the platform more accessible, these types of videos usually have auto-generated subtitles, however some creators will also add the text on screen when using audio memes or talking (see figure 19).

5.1.3 Audio

As previously described, audio is an important feature on the platform (Abidin 2020). BookTok videos all have audio, which can vary from a trending song to the creator talking or a combination of both. When none of the TikTok sounds are selected, the audio track will be displayed as “original sound” (as can be seen in figure 4). As the platform groups videos that use the same audio together, it is possible to search by audio. This is reflected in Crystal Abidin’s concept of the audio meme, as they “are the driving template and organizing principle” (Abidin 2020, 80) of the platform.

Within the dataset, the audio memes can be divided into bookish audio memes and audio memes made bookish. The first are specifically focused on books and are rooted in the BookTok community. The audios prompt the creator to show specific books from their collection or share recommendations based on a specific topic, for example a bookish gift guide or by sharing their last, current, and next read. The latter group consists of the adaptation of audio memes that are popular all over the platform to bookish content by making books the focus of the videos. An example of this would be the creator singing and dancing along to the popular “It’s Corn” (The Gregory Brothers 2022) song but changing the love of corn for the love of short chapters (see figure 21). The audio meme not only sets the tone for the video itself but also guides the visual elements of the video, as the books are matched to and presented simultaneously with the sentence or passage in the audio. The main differentiation is that bookish audio memes emerge from discussions and ideals relevant to the BookTok community and thus almost exclusively reach people within the community. However, due to TikTok’s use of audio, the videos that are adapted into bookish content can appear on the “For You” pages among those outside of the community and also introduce the idea of BookTok to new audiences.

5.1.4 Mise-en-scène

Aesthetic is one of the buzzwords of TikTok. As such, it is no surprise that aesthetics also feature prominently on BookTok and are also part of the appeal of some videos, as Olive, for example, highlighted when describing her own videos. Many BookTok videos aim for an aesthetically pleasing look with natural light, tidy backgrounds, and soft, feminine colors. The background is commonly a bedsheet, rug, or blanket, preferably in white or other light color with minimal patterns. Alternatively, the background consists of visually pleasing bookshelves. This was also the background of choice for accounts directly linked to the book industry, as the videos were filmed in a bookstore or comparable location. The lighting is generally soft but bright, with some taking advantage of golden hour or unique windows. This is complimented

by an overall affinity towards coziness, whether that be in the lighting or the use of beds and reading corners as backgrounds. This could be due to BookTok's rise in popularity during the pandemic, as creators sought comfort and activities to do at home⁶. Altogether, this is a very attainable look that most people can recreate. It does not require props or even fancy bookshelves, as any household items can be used in combination with natural lighting. At the same time, many videos also embrace the "in the moment" and more natural nature of TikTok that was described in chapter three (Dezuanni et al. 2022; Reddan 2022; Wiederhold 2022). Here the overall feeling is less polished and there is less care put into the styling of the videos. This can result in imperfect lighting and shaky camera work. What matters instead is sharing the experience how it really is, as authentically as possible. This is discussed in more detail in chapter 8.2.

In addition to the overall look, the focus of the video is also determined by the styling of the shot. Some videos use just one focused shot, while others use a mixture of different shots and angles. Many use a title shot and an additional shot, although some combine these to resemble the one-shot in film. This shows a variance in effort in the videos as well as diversity in focus. This is also linked to the norms of the different genres, as the shots chosen emulate the dominant usage of the genre. However, despite these general commonalities there are multiple recommendation styles. Furthermore, based on the dataset and interviews, distinct video genres can be identified. While these styles are distinct, they are not entirely new as the influence of previous platforms is evident. Some feature the polished visual aesthetic of Instagram, others adopt the angles and manner of speaking of video calling friends while others adopt the humor and video length from Vine, similar to what Abidin (2020) found when studying dance videos on the platform. The predominant influence does seem to be YouTube, as many of the genres are in the same vein but adapted to a shorter video length.

5.2 Visual style and formats

5.2.1 Thematic recommendations

One of the most common ways of providing recommendations is by grouping books based on a certain theme, ranging from the reading situation, personal preferences, elements of the book and in some cases thematic aspects within the works. As these themes can be based on a variety of things, this format is utilized in the majority of videos. Compared to traditional

⁶ This emphasis on the home is evocative of the relationship between gender, literature, and domestic spaces in the past (Pearson 1999). In particular the tension between private and public as well as the home being important to building (and here expressing) identity shares similarities with the "interior architectures" (Bryden and Floyd 1999,1) described in Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd's book *Domestic Space: Reading the nineteenth-century interior*.

reviews, which primarily take on a holistic perspective or give an overall statement, many BookTok recommendations focus on just one element of a book or stack of books. This can be something like the aesthetic of the book, a physical element of a specific copy of the book or the writing itself. This is also one of the few formats that can be connected to the innate content factors for popularity outlined by Maity, Panigrahi and Mukherjee (2018). The idea for the recommendations can relate to a current event, like starting a new season or a holiday, for example “Books that are perfect to read in the winter” (see figure 5) or be more timeless by focusing on personal preferences like favorite books. Another common theme is emotions, in particular sad or heartbreaking books (see figure 4). This is in line with what previous research and news articles have found about the prevalence of emotions in recommendations (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2019; Harris 2021; Merga 2021; Wiederhold 2022).

Books can also be recommended by highlighting key passages or scenes (see figure 6). This is a favorite among authors promoting their own books on the platform but can also be used by fans. Here the point is to get the reader intrigued by sharing a key scene, similar to a film trailer. As context is missing the need to know more increases and information on the book is often provided at the end of the video or in the caption. Another way the writing is recommended is with videos where the creator tries to convince the viewer to read a book based on its first line. The videos generally included a voiceover of the creator reading the first line while the book is opened to its first page on screen. In the dataset this was often done with classics, despite, or because of classics being known for having a more challenging writing style and being hard to pick up. Having someone read the first line can remove some of the hurdles to starting these books as the video can get the viewer invested in the story.



Figure 5 Example of a seasonal recommendation. Video title says "books that are perfect to read in winter". Screenshot of @betteroffread_ (2022a).

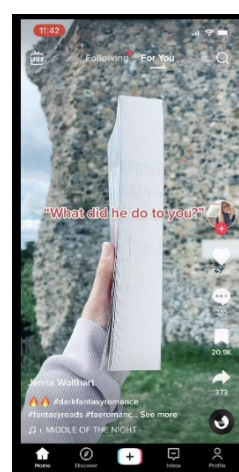


Figure 6 Example of a video focusing on a specific scene in a book. Text on screen is "What did he do to you?" Screenshot of @jennawolfhart (2022).

5.2.2 Video call angle

The video call angle is the most common way for creators to show their faces. Many BookTok videos do not show the creators at all or just their hands when holding books into the frame. By appearing on the screen in the same manner a friend would over video call this camera angle creates intimacy (see figure 7). As it is a less stylized way to appear on screen it also increases the authenticity of the video. This is furthered by the fact that the video may reveal that the phone is often merely held in the creator's hand, or propped up somewhere nearby, which can lead to the video being tilted or elements being cut off in the frame. At the same time, it allows the creator to be within the frame, alongside the books, without the background distracting from them as most of the frame is already taken up by the books and the creator themselves. Additionally, this angle is easy to capture as one is within an arm's reach of the phone. This angle also allows the creator to only partially show their face and further detract attention from themselves and towards the books, while still being present and switching up the format. Having this flexibility allows creators to determine their own boundaries and engage with a comfortable medium when it comes to sharing material also focusing on themselves online.



Figure 7 Bookish humor video using the video call angle focusing on how a book made the creator cry. Screenshot of @aymansbooks (2022).

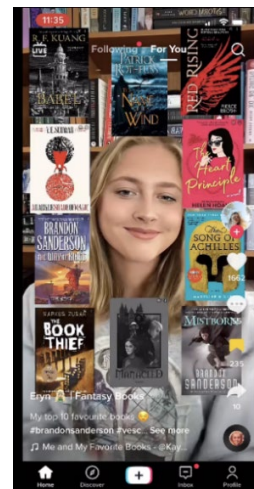


Figure 8 Example of a trend using the video call angle where the creator shows themselves and their favorite books. Screenshot of @erynsarchive (2022).

Another way this angle is used is by having the clip of the person serve as the background image, with images of the book cover appearing around them. One trend, or bookish audio meme, that utilized this was showing yourself alongside your favorite books (see figure 8). This enacted a specific community function as it helps the viewers to get to know the creator better. It also serves as a good source of recommendations, as favorites are the top tier curated recommendations and if a reader enjoyed one or more of the titles already chances are high that they would enjoy the rest. Because this angle is quite common on TikTok as a whole, probably due to it feeling natural with the vertical format guided by the platform, it is also the

one commonly used by non-BookTokers when giving book recommendations. The discussions of books created by non-BookTokers within the dataset all had a video call angle, combined with the talking heads or point of view formats (described later in this chapter) to share their thoughts on a book they had read or were currently reading. This further confirms that this style is embedded throughout the platform.

5.2.3 Talking head videos

TikTok videos do not require the creator to speak as TikTok provides plenty of audios and a text to speech function. Thus, there is a specific recommendation style that features talking heads akin to BookTube (see figure 9). There were only a handful of videos in the dataset that used this method of recommendation, and they also included the longest videos in the dataset. As this is usually combined with the video call angle, the basic set up is reminiscent of video calls with friends, as the camera is usually propped up directly across from the creator. Due to the domestic setting, often a bedroom in front of bookshelves or sitting on the floor, there is a particular sense of intimacy. As the tone of voice is casual and the focus of the discussions is the readers experience of the book, the recommendations feel like they are coming from a good friend. The medium also allows opinions to be expressed in more than just words, for example through the tone of voice and body language of the creator. This can make the recommendation more convincing and memorable. While the talking head videos often still had some text elements, for example a title or a correction to what they said in the video, they did not have a lot of editing or elements added. Talking head videos are often filmed in one take, or at least are meant to appear as such. There is also overlap with other recommendation styles here, for example when a creator talks about their favorite books (thematic recommendation).

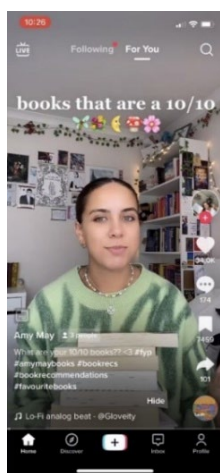


Figure 9 Talking head video wherein the creator talks about some of their favorite books. Video title says "books that are a 10/10". Screenshot of @amymaybooks (2022).

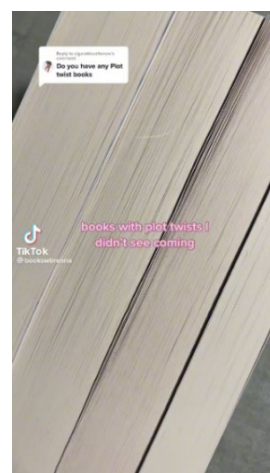


Figure 10 Video recommendations based on a viewers' comment with the comment embedded in the top left corner. Video title is "books with plot twists I didn't see coming". Screenshot of @bookswbrenna (2022).

5.2.4 Embedding comments

Some videos are in reference to the intended audience as they are a response to a comment left on a previous video (see figure 10). This is a feature enabled by the TikTok platform that has multiple benefits. For one, the original commenter will be tagged in the video, making it easy for them to find the video they requested. Secondly, it allows the creators to respond to their audiences who see them as an expert on the topic and a source for good recommendations. This allows for a level of personalized curation, and shows to other viewers that they can trust these recommendations as they are popular enough to have people request specific recommendation videos or even a part two to these videos by this creator. This format is often combined with others, as the comment primarily serves as inspiration for the video topic. It does also play a role when it comes to enacting authority, which is discussed further in chapter 8.2.

5.2.5 Dramatic reveal

A common aspect among most of the genres is the need for drama. By obscuring the covers and or title of the book tension is created. This can be by initially showing the stack with the pages rather than the spines facing the camera (see figure 11) or by showing the books lying flat with their backs showing up (see figure 12). This is a common introductory shot for a variety of genres as it clearly shows that the video is about books, without revealing the exact titles. In this case the clip is kept short before diving in to the titles. The video will usually show either the books being taken off of the stack, one by one, or the creator will hold each book up against the same background. Thus, the initial tension is relieved relatively quickly but there is still suspense as the viewer knows that there is more to come.

However, some videos rely just on this dramatic reveal of the title (see figure 13). Through the use of music and engaging clips, the tension is kept throughout the video and the audience is hooked for the final reveal of the title. Often the creator will be flipping through the book or highlighting key lines of text before closing the book to reveal the cover for a few moments. In doing so the creator may highlight their annotations and page tabs in the book. There may be text overlay to emphasize the feelings of the creator towards the book. The short timing after the dramatic reveal could be used intentionally so that the user may need to watch the video again or pause it to catch what the title of the book is. This can increase the views and engagement on the video, and, in consequence, increase the chances of the creators' other videos appearing on the viewers' "For You" page in the future. The format also plays with the need for instant gratification and shortened attention spans, as it is usually unclear when exactly the cover will be shown. It can increase the interest and make people stay with the video to feel

that adrenaline rush of finding out what the book is. This could be connected to the general theme of gambling metaphors that are associated with the platform that will be discussed further in chapter six.



Figure 11 Books with the spines facing away from the camera. Video title is "Books with Right Person Wrong Time Trope". Screenshot of @lauryns_library (2022).

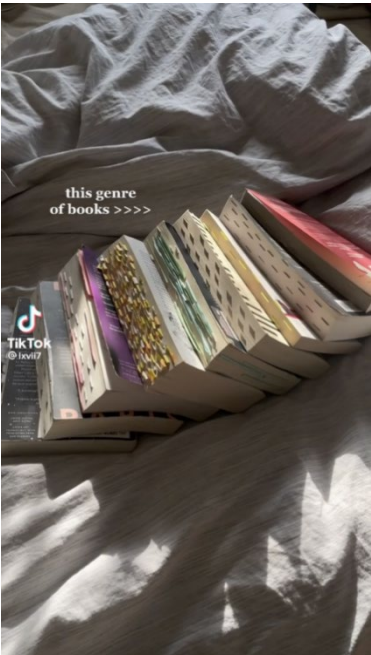


Figure 12 Books with the backs facing upwards. Text element is "this genre of books >>>>". Screenshot of @lxvii7 (2022).

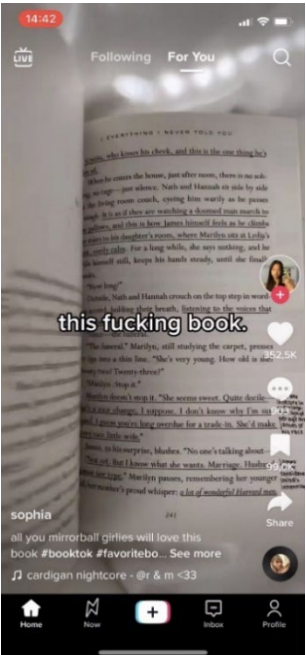


Figure 13 Flip-through video ending with a dramatic reveal of the cover. Text in video is "this fucking book." Screenshot of @sophiareadstoomuch (2022).

5.3 BookTok genres

The visual styles and formats outlined in the previous section are combined to create different genres when it comes to book recommendations on TikTok. As not every video fits entirely into a singular genre, this is just an overview of the main genres present in the dataset. Some are more timeless (e.g. listicle) while others are constantly evolving (e.g. trends).

5.3.1 Listicle

One of the most common video genres is the listicle, wherein books are recommended based on a prompt or theme. Thus, the listicle relies heavily on the thematic recommendations format. Often times there is a video title that includes a number, for example "10 of my top books so far this year" (@bookswithbuzzi 2022). The aim is thus also to present a list, or variety, of titles surrounding the prompt. This is reminiscent of older book recommendation formats and was also the inspiration for the name, as the writing genre describes an article or blog post written in the format of a list (Okrent 2014). While information in listicles is often surface level and can have a more personal nature, it can also cover more prestigious topics (Okrent 2014). This format is perfectly attuned to the internet, as it sets clear expectations and makes processing

information easier (Konnikova 2013). This makes it very shareable, which could partially account for its popularity as it encourages engagement.



Figure 14 Listicle example in front of bookshelf. Text element highlighting book title and author (*Verity* by Colleen Hoover). Screenshot of @pavisfrancesca (2022).

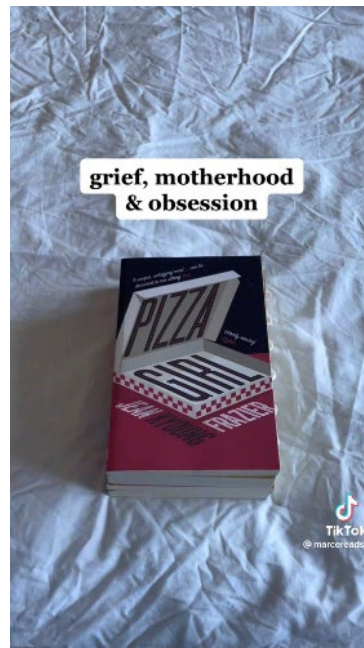


Figure 15 Listicle example with white sheet as background. Video text includes the key themes of the book, "grief, motherhood & obsession". Screenshot of @marcereads_ (2022).



Figure 16 Listicle example with bookshelves as background. Text is "If you wanna: stop a murd3r after it's already happened". Screenshot of @sydneyyybooks (2022).

The listicle videos commonly show the books as a collection, often as a stack with the titles hidden in some way (see figures 11, 12), before showing each of the covers individually. This is done to set up expectations and build tension in line with the dramatic reveal described previously. Sometimes the creator's hand, usually wearing nail polish, rings and a sweater that matches the theme is in the frame holding the books upright in the title shot. The books are then presented individually, for example by a hand slowly removing each book from the stack, with the covers being the main center of attention. Sometimes no information is given about the books, other times text elements are added to highlight certain features or plot elements or to provide context (see figure 15). The mise-en-scène often suits the more clean and cozy look described earlier. A variation of this style is to use bookshelves as a background instead of the bed (see figure 14, 16). In the dataset this was often done by companies, such as publishers and bookstores. Generally, this was done when the bookshelves were either impressively full or could be considered aesthetically pleasing, even if it was a private collection. This format can also be adapted for wrap ups, to be read videos and book hauls which are all video genres adapted from YouTube (Ehret, Boegel, and Manuel-Nekouei 2018; Tolstopyat 2018; Anderson Gold 2020). Combined with the variety of possible topics, this results in an easily adaptable format.

bonds with similar readers, and get recommendations for future reading” (Foasberg 2012, 31). This format is also easily serialized, a concept supported by TikTok’s playlist feature which allows users to group videos around a chosen topic. This is not the only indication that the video is part of a series as the creator will often integrate a verbal or written introduction to indicate that they have already read a certain number of books or that this is part x of them reading a specific book or series. In general, serialized content can be beneficial to a creator’s content strategy because easily viral content is good for reaching new audiences, to build a following those audiences need to have a reason to come back. This is also reflected in how Alex splits up her content, which will be elaborated on in section 6.4.

5.3.3 Book talk

In this genre the creator is speaking freely about a book, or number of books, of their choice. This can be done in a variety of ways, as within the context of this thesis reading wrap ups and guides as well as un hauls⁷ and reviews fall under this descriptor. Stylistically, this genre relies on the talking head format (see figure 9). Most of the time these videos will be longer than the average BookTok video. Thus, they often provide more information about a book and with the personal aspect being more present. The dataset also included book talk videos that used the thematic recommendation format as they gave insight into personal favorites or literary subgenres. One video focused on urban fantasy while another was a deep dive into the popular dark academia genre.

5.3.4 Storytime

The storytime genre is a unique blend of talking head, dramatic reveal and the video call angle that also draws on non-digital storytelling techniques. This is an adaptation of a general TikTok video format into the bookish sphere. Here, the creator tells the story of the book from the perspective of the character as if it happened to them (see figure 19). The camera is held close to the face, replicating the intimate style of video calling a friend. Additionally, the same tone of voice and language is used as by creators telling juicy stories on TikTok, hence the categorization as storytime style. These videos end by revealing the cover of the book and often also with the creator stating the title and author (see figure 20). As the cover is generally added as a full screen image, rather than holding up the book itself, this is one of the few options where the physical edition of a book is not required. This format engages the potential reader immediately and can make them interested to see how the story ends and is thus similar to a

⁷ Unhaul videos, where the creator describes their reasoning for getting rid of certain titles, is one of the few topics with exclusively negative sentiments.

video summary of the blurb. It also shares traits with the performative nature of oral storytelling, as it goes beyond the language and takes the context (here the digital platform) into account (Aadland 2016, 61)⁸. Once the reader is invested in the story, it is a lot easier to pick up the book. One interviewee had a specific strategy for creating these videos, that is described further in chapter 6.4.

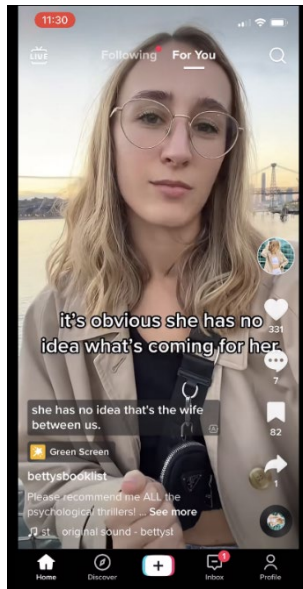


Figure 19 Storytime video where the creator explains the plot. Text on screen are the subtitles. Screenshot of @bettybooklist (2022).



Figure 20 Storytime video ending, where the book cover is revealed. Screenshot of @bettybooklist (2022).

5.3.5 Bookish humor

Most bookish humor focuses on creating relatable and entertaining videos for other readers. While many focus on tropes or reader-related things, others also focus on specific books and thus serve as implicit recommendations. This can be done by poking fun at aspects of the book. Audio memes are especially prevalent within this genre. Furthermore, similarly to the distinction made in connection to the use of audio (see 5.1), it is possible to distinguish humor videos between those originating within the BookTok community, versus adaptations to the bookish community. The latter option makes it easy for those outside of BookTok to understand and follow the humorous aspects, which can further support the growth of the community, especially as they are often linked to popular audio memes.

Many of the more humor-focused videos focus on the emotional aspect of reading. One such audio includes the text “oh yeah, I highly recommend this book... it’s one of my favorites of all time! Oh yeah, it did emotionally scar me... and mentally wreck me... and I don’t think I’ll ever recover from it... I remember bawling to the point that I could not see clearly... and

⁸ Aadland (2016) studied oral storytelling in classrooms, and while interactivity with the audience is not possible in the same way, other platform features like the caption are used to engage readers.

the world just felt very unjust and painful after it... so give it a try! ” (@betteroffread_ 2022), with the creator holding up a book for each line of the audio (see figure 22). This showcases how books with an emotional impact are valued on the platform. Emotions, in particular crying about books are also a main theme of bookish humor videos. One such style is by sharing before and after clips of the creator reading a particularly sad book (see figure 7). The goal with this genre is also to create a sense of community and understanding between the creator and viewers. As Addie primarily created these kinds of videos, she highlighted how she enjoys seeing other readers relate to her in the video comments, especially when the video covered a niche topic.

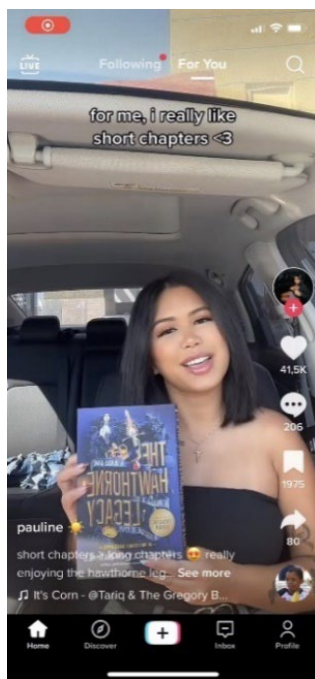


Figure 21 Example of an audio meme made bookish with the song “It’s Corn!” (The Gregory Brothers 2022). Text is altered lyrics “for me, i really like short chapters <3”. Screenshot of @thebooksiveloved (2022).



Figure 22 Example of a bookish humor video about the creators’ favorite emotional books in line with the bookish audio meme. Text says “oh yeah, it did emotionally scar me...” Screenshot of @betteroffread_ (2022b)

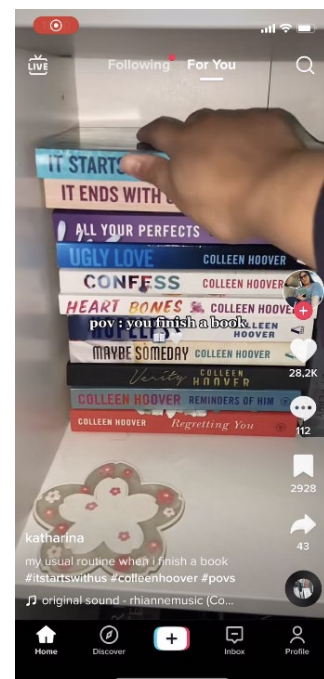


Figure 23 Example of a point of view video that takes the viewer through the creator’s routine when they finish a book. Text is “pov: you finish a book”. Screenshot of @_kathyreads (2022).

5.3.6 Point of view (POV)

True to the name, point of view videos take on the perspective of the creator, with clips either from the creators’ line of sight or up close to their face. Furthermore, these videos often show relatable situations or are so hyper-specific that they serve as a storytelling tool. This is an adaptation of a general TikTok trend that has been adopted by the book community. The purpose and style of the videos is the same, as it is merely the topic that is being adapted. It is also one of the few genres that foregoes the title scene, instead jumping straight into the action. Text is usually provided onscreen to give the viewer context. Sometimes there will solely be a shot of the creator using the video call angle but with the text covering the whole screen, other

times there will be supplementary shots showing the action and story as a whole. While often times the abbreviation “POV” will be used in videos, this can be omitted. The perspective can also be used to show what a creator is doing, for example showing their routine after finishing a book, including writing a review on Goodreads (see figure 23). As the point is to share a specific moment it is also a common choice for antirecommendations as it can show the exact moment and feeling the creator had when they realized that the book was not for them.

5.3.7 Literary aesthetic videos

While aesthetics make an appearance in the stylization of most videos, along with the bookshelves and books themselves (more about this in chapters 5.1 and 8.1), the literary aesthetics within the books are also a big theme. This video genre often focuses on an element of the book, such as the plot, setting, or characters (see figure 24) and expresses that visually. As such, these videos can be seen as a type of thematic recommendation focusing on the content of the book. This can create an initial imagery of what the book is about, for example by showing what the creator imagines the character and their “personal aesthetic” to be like. At the same time, these visual markers surrounding a book can give the reader an impression of not just what the book is about but also the feeling one gets while reading it. This often highlights the writing itself and specific elements of literary style that can be hard to show in any other manner without using verbatim quotations. Having the visuals presented may help viewers feel immediately more immersed in the story and grasp what the reading experience is like. By presenting its material in a beautiful manner, interest can be generated around the book, which can be particularly helpful if the book is lesser known or has the misfortune of a bad cover.

One way the aesthetics are expressed is by adapting the general TikTok trend “If I was a...” trend to a selection of books (see figures 25-27). Here a specific audio and editing style, using the external, official TikTok editing app called CapCut, are combined to create a cohesive video. The trend was initially used to explore creator’s personal aesthetics. However, on BookTok creators show off the aesthetics of their favorite books instead. This can be a great way to get a recommendation, based on the aforementioned reasons, but can also act as a guessing game. The videos generally show a certain number of images before displaying the book title. For avid readers it is possible to guess the title based on the images, thus creating an in group and reaffirming reader status. Furthermore, it can be cause for discussion should someone disagree with the chosen aesthetic.



Figure 24 Example of a literary aesthetic video dedicated to a character from *The Inheritance Games* by Jennifer Lynn Barnes. Text is "Avery Grambs: 'I am the glass ballerina or the knife'". Screenshot of @alexasbookshelve (2022).

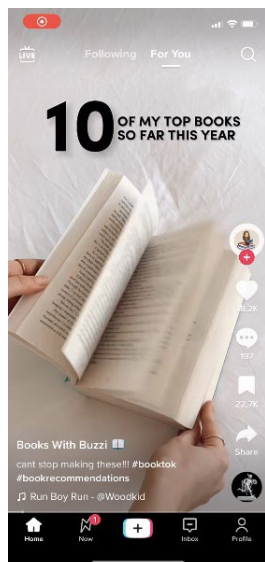


Figure 25 Starting image for the "If I was a..." trend. Video title is "10 of my Top Books So Far This Year". Screenshot of @bookswithbuzzi (2022).



Figure 26 The "If I was a..." trend videos showcase the aesthetic of the books in a quick succession of images. Screenshot of @bookswithbuzzi (2022).



Figure 27 Finally, the "If I was a..." trend videos reveal the title of the book before moving on to the next ones. Screenshot of @bookswithbuzzi (2022).

5.3.8 TikTok trends

Trends on TikTok can come and go within a few days. While the trend usually is connected to an audio, there are expectations for the visual elements of the video as well, which can include the use of specific filters, editing features or angles. While many trends feature creators lip-syncing along to the audio, bookish trends often feature books in a new way. While a number of trends have been mentioned in the previous sections already, the two primary trends in the dataset were what I have termed "sing along if you've read it" and "laptop to reality".

The former encourages readers to sing along to the song if they have read the book shown on screen. The set up of the videos is similar to the listicle genre, starting with a title and showing the entirety of the book stack. Next, the books are taken off the stack one by one. One main difference is that this is all done in one long take, usually with the creator initially panning along the stack of books to show its' size. One creator participated in the trend with the aim to share less popular books, as the title included the phrase "Sing if you've read the book, but it's my goal to keep you silent the whole time pt. 5" (@bookwormmargo 2022c). This merges the trend from something more commonly shared into something more niche as the books are less popular or well-loved. At the same time, this increases the recommendation aspect of it as it focuses more on the discovery of new titles. In contrast to this, the same creator made a joke version that highlighted the most famous titles on BookTok (@bookwormmargo 2022d). The

same set up can also be seen in “if you’ve read x number of books we should be friends” (@rachsbookss 2022), with the creator sharing books that represent their taste. The concepts are quite similar, albeit the latter appeared fewer times in the dataset.

These trends serve multiple functions. On the one hand, they can recommend books as the creators would select books that are worth reading, especially in the case of the “we should be friends” trend as one can presume those are some of their favorite books. At the same time they validate readers as they set the expectation that you should have read at least a few of them to be part of the in-group. Furthermore, this intensifies the recommendation aspect as the probability that a reader would enjoy the other books on the stack is quite high as they are probably grouped together for a reason. Simultaneously, they invite other users to interact with the videos. Often these videos are combined with a call to action that tries to get users to interact, for example by posing a question like how many of the books they have read. The sing along format also creates a video that could be fun to duet. Duets show two TikToks side by side and are primarily used for reaction videos, for example by singing along when users have read the books. This also increases the reach of the original video as it may be shown to other audiences. Additionally, they can also express a need for community or be a way to find people with the same interests. This engagement further increases the reach of the video and ultimately the trend.

The second popular trend was “laptop to reality”. This one was also linked primarily to one audio meme. The main idea is to have a favorite movie or TV show playing on a laptop screen, for example *Game of Thrones* (@itslivdarling 2022) or the classic romcom *10 Things I Hate About You* (@bookwormmargo 2022e). Again, the area surrounding the main action has an air of coziness (see figure 28). The laptop is then closed to reveal a book that has a similar plot or vibe as what was previously shown on screen (see figure 29). This trend integrates different forms of media and presents a recommendation based on content the user is already familiar with. This narrows down the target audience and gives an idea of the book without actually revealing anything but the cover.

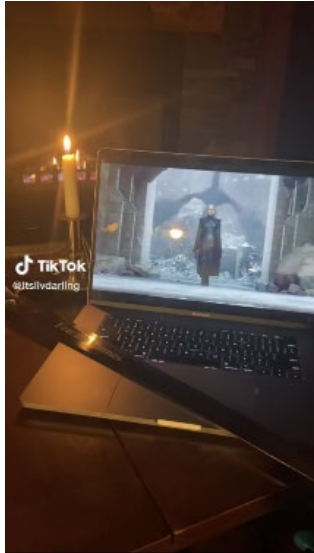


Figure 28 First scene in the laptop to reality trend, showing the reference media on the laptop screen. Screenshot of @itslivdarling (2022).



Figure 29 Book reveal in the laptop to reality trend, after the laptop is closed. Text described the book in bullet points. Screenshot of @itslivdarling (2022).

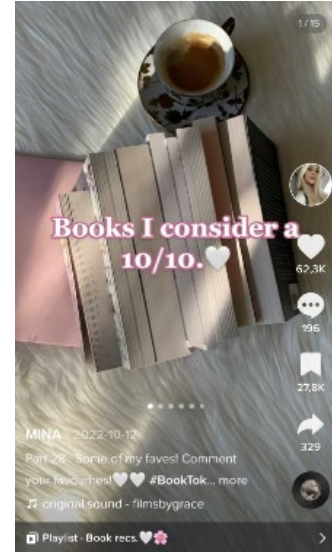


Figure 30 Example of TikTok's photo mode. While not part of the dataset, the creator appeared in the dataset. The title is "Books I consider a 10/10". Screenshot of @mina.undercova (2022).

Video formats can also become a trend, as could be seen after TikTok rolled out the photo mode which allows the user to view a succession of photos in the style of TikTok videos, as the other elements of the TikTok interface, like caption and audio, remain (see figure 30). Olive described how she believes that part of the reason so many creators started using this format is that it is being favored by the algorithm as TikTok wants to incentivize creators to use their new features. Additionally, since the format invites the user to scroll through the pictures to ultimately end up on the profile it also increases the reach of users landing on a creators profile. This further feeds into the popularity of the videos if users scroll to the end. The dataset does not include any examples of this feature as it did not appear on the "For You" page during data collection.

5.3.9 BookTube vs BookTok

The dataset did reflect some of the video genres outlined for BookTube in previous research which primarily fall under the book talk genre when converted to BookTok. The primary overlap between the two platforms are wrap up videos (Ehret, Boegel, and Manuel-Nekouei 2018; Tostopyat 2018), although these could also be found in the listicle genre. The reading diary outlined by Tolstopyat (2018) corresponds with the reading vlogs on BookTok, however the narration differed on TikTok. Similarly, she described "top lists" where once again a more silent concept exists on TikTok, namely the listicle genre. In comparison to Anderson Gold's (2020) anatomy of BookTube videos the basic structure is quite similar with the main difference

being that TikTok videos do not have a specific ending and often end rather abruptly. This could be because the content loops and due to the shortness a farewell greeting is not seen as essential. Her video genres included games and challenges as well as tag videos. While it is not a perfect match, many videos focused on trends take up the ideas and principles of these genres, in particular the memetic nature.

6. Algorithmic imaginary of BookTok

6.1 Algorithmic imaginary

Due to the heavy influence of the algorithm on whether or not other users can engage with content it is no surprise that the algorithmic awareness described by Eslami et al. (2015) is demonstrated by all interviewees. In an attempt to understand how the algorithm works, the creators have created their own algorithmic imaginaries, with theories and practices on how to influence it. Similarly to how Bucher (2017) focused on interruptions in the algorithm, the interviewees explained how the algorithm worked by contrasting the highs and lows of the algorithm. This further shows that the algorithm is the most noticeable when things fall out of the norm. Many of the ideas mentioned by the creators are also visible patterns in the dataset, showing that these ideas are common among other creators as well.

Some of the ideas characterizing the algorithmic imaginary lean more towards superstitions and folk theories, rather than practical theories. This emphasizes how intangible and hard it is to read the algorithmic processes, even for those who interact with them on a daily basis. One such superstition that the interviewee themselves acknowledged as such, was that Addie would close the app entirely for thirty minutes to an hour after posting. The idea was that by not giving the app attention, the video would get more views.

While the language used in the interviews is not the main focus of this thesis, the way users describe the algorithm reveals more about their algorithmic imaginary. The unpredictability, and the addictiveness, of finding out how well a video will perform is visible in the use of words like “gambling” and describing it as a “one-armed slot machine”. These words highlight how the video could either reach just a few people or a much wider audience than at first expected. Ultimately, the creators do not know what will happen, as there is little consistency in determining what works well. This uncertainty can also be seen in how creators were unsure about the link between their personal appearance and videos having more success (see section 6.4). The need to keep creating because this might be the next viral video is an easy way for TikTok to keep accumulating new content on their platform. This can apply both to those who have never had a viral video and to those that are familiar with the experience. Addie,

who is amongst the most successful in the community, described how posting gives her a rush that makes her want to create more.

There is also a personification of the algorithm, as Alex described how she felt the algorithm was “rewarding” creators for taking actions like going live or testing new features on TikTok. This theory is supported by the other interviewees mentioning these practices as part of their content strategy (which will be elaborated on later in this chapter). This can also take a negative connotation, for example when Alex thought that she might be shadowbanned (when a user can interact with the platform as normal but their actions have limited or no reach), with the algorithm “punishing” her after receiving a reprimand about the community guidelines for the use of an emoji. At the same time, she described the algorithm as a “phantom” thing which portrays the algorithm as something that is not quite tangible. This can inspire creators to adopt new features sooner and also turn them into a trendy thing, as could be seen with the use of photo mode on the platform. At the same time, these contrasts increase the uncertainty among the creators whether or not the algorithm truly was rewarding or punishing them or if it was a mental thing.

A phrase that came up a few times in the interviews was “hacking the algorithm”. This demonstrates that the algorithm is a riddle to be solved, something that can be played and manipulated. It shows that there is a perception that there are clear actions or tricks that can be used to break in and win the algorithm’s favor. The challenge is thus to learn how the algorithm privileges certain kinds of content. Similarly, Olive used the phrase “hitting the algorithm”. This was connected with the idea of the algorithm as a wave, as content is not always equally popular and equally likely to get promoted. The idea of the wave also shows that there are times when BookTok content is generally more popular and when it drops of again. This could be related to simple things like the release of a new book or a scandal in the community.

All of the descriptors show the algorithm as something unpredictable and constantly in flux. It emphasizes how even if the content is great, a lot of being viral on TikTok is just being lucky. Hitting the algorithm at the right time, with the right content can help a creator get lucky at the slot machine. Similarly to the concerns raised by Murray (2021), about the rhetorical positioning of algorithms, the language used falls into the “risk of overstating algorithms’ independence from human will” (Murray 2021, 973). The metaphors show that creators view the algorithm as an agent that can give them what they want. At the same time, it is something that can be manipulated, but to do so it first needs to be understood. This understanding can be hard to develop, especially as the algorithm is constantly and noticeably changing.

6.2 Algorithmic anxiety

All interviewed creators mentioned how the TikTok algorithm has changed throughout their time on the platform. Comparing BookTok in early 2020 to December 2022 and January 2023 the interviewees mentioned how individual books are going viral less often than previously. At the beginning, any book mentioned on TikTok, and this rang especially true for older releases, would shoot up the bestseller list due to the demand created by these TikToks. Olive remembers that creators used to be associated with a specific book that they brought into the fold. She also suggested that these effects could be due to “everyone” getting back into reading at the same time. This theory is supported by the fact that all three interviewees stated that they started reading (more) again after finding BookTok. Now, this era seems to have ended. Not every book mentioned on BookTok immediately goes viral, even though sales are still boosted (Milliot 2023).

The unpredictability in the algorithm can lead to algorithmic anxiety. While none of the interviewees mentioned anxiety per se, they all seemed concerned about the changes in the algorithms and were well aware of them. The interviewees also mentioned how they could see the same struggles with not hitting the algorithm among fellow creators, showing that they engaged in a similar practice as the Airbnb hosts described by Jhaver, Karpfen and Antin (2018) when it came to comparing themselves to their peers. Alex described how the changes in the algorithm are changing the number of views creators are getting outside of BookTok as well, as she noted an overall decline in views. Based on what she heard, it may be the end for the “quick viral video concept” which she found comforting as it would enable creators to focus more on the content rather than the views. This further shows that the algorithm is an important aspect of the work they do, especially as changes in the algorithm have lead them to change their behaviors. TikTok is known for having videos go viral quickly. This success was unexpected but not uncommon, as both Addie and Alex described how in some cases they would have put more effort into their appearance or the videos themselves if they had realized the video would become so popular. However, the changes in the algorithm increase the unpredictability of the videos reach even more. This unpredictability was also reiterated by Olive, who checked her statistics, as one video had 2.5 million views while the one she posted the day before only got 6,000 views. This shows a big contrast in the reach of a single creator, even when accounting for the fact that once video has been getting engagement for longer.

As the views are not displayed while watching a video on TikTok, the engagement metrics were tracked instead. The videos in the dataset had an average of 42,434 likes, with the lowest viewed video having no likes at all while the one with the highest had 848.5k likes.

However, it is hard to compare the overall engagement as the videos were created on various publication dates, some stemming from mere minutes before while others were months old. As the posting date is not visible on the “For You” page, it can be hard to gauge how old a video is if there are no seasonal markers or dates mentioned. The posting date was checked manually by viewing the creator’s profile. On the research account the initial BookTok videos were primarily a few weeks, if not months, old. Yet the more the account was in use, the newer the videos got. One way to explain this could be that the algorithm begins by showing the most popular content for a certain topic, in this case any videos relating to books. This would primarily be content that is a little older as it has had more time to get traction. Once the algorithm has more of an understanding of what the user is interested in, the videos become more niche as well as newer as the old favorites have primarily been viewed already. As the personal account had more information to attune the algorithm to, the videos were primarily fairly recent and played into the other interests of the account.

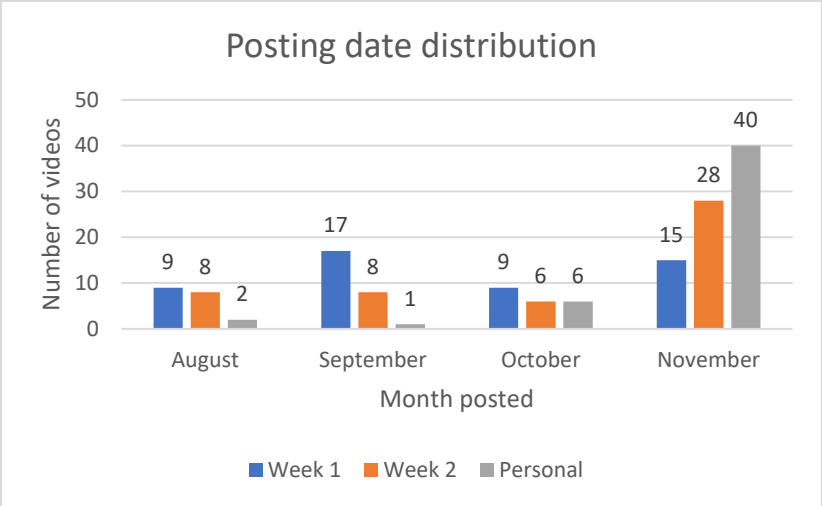


Figure 31 Bar graph showing in which months the videos in the dataset were posted. “Week 1” and “Week 2” indicate the week the data was gathered from the research account, while “Personal” shows the distribution of videos from the author’s own “For You” page.

This also shows another aspect that the interviewees mentioned, namely that videos can unexpectedly gain traction months later. If the initial BookTok videos on the “For You” page are older, then that could be one source for videos gaining more engagement months after posting. Another reason could be that an element of the video, maybe the book that was featured or the audio that was used, is trending at the moment. An example of this could be the use of Taylor Swift’s music in the audio tracks as tickets for her Eras Tour, where she is touring her four most recent albums, went on sale during data collection this could also further interest in both her newly released (at the time of data collection) album *Midnights* as well as her older music. Thus, content on TikTok does not just receive attention within the first 24 hours. Even

the newer content was rarely made that same day but rather often had a few days before it appeared on the “For You” page. This gives the videos more longevity than expected, at the same time this does not apply to every post a user creates.

TikTok gives users the option to pin up to three videos to their profile (see figure 3). Often this feature is used to pin the first video in a series, the creators most viral video, or the answer to a commonly asked question for easy navigation. These videos are then the first things people see when visiting that user’s profile, as pinned videos appear before the rest of the videos in chronological order. In total, 22 of the videos were pinned, with 17 of them stemming from before the month of data extraction. This shows that this may be a criterion that improves the video’s reach.

While this algorithmic anxiety is hard to measure in the output visible on the “For You” page, it is noticeable that creators take inspiration from each other. The patterns that emerge show that creators are trying to emulate the success of other videos and that common ideas exist about what content should look like. This also ties into the values behind the content creation.

6.3 Algorithmic practices

So far, this chapter has focused on the theories around the algorithm. This section will focus on how these theories are enacted in practice by taking steps to get in the algorithm’s good graces, or what Bucher (2017, 41) would describe as “the productive and affective power that these imaginaries have”. Due to the routines and beliefs developed surrounding them these actions count towards what Abidin (2020) describes as algorithmic practices. While the creators are unsure of the individual effects of each of these actions, they do believe that overall, the algorithm can be manipulated to a certain extent. Some of the practices used by the creators have already been described in chapter 5, namely the use of text on screen, the use of audio and trends, serialization, new features and increasing tension to hook the viewer.

6.3.1 Hashtags

A more tangible aspect of the algorithm that has created various contradicting theories are hashtags and how they should be used. Hashtags are a ubiquitous feature of online platforms today. They help both users and the algorithm to categorize, group and find content. Despite this, the theories about them and their influence on the TikTok algorithm are probably the most heavily disputed aspect of creating content today, with some emphasizing their importance and others claiming the opposite.

In comparison to Merga’s (2021) content analysis, not all videos included hashtags and only 36.5 percent included #booktok. Among the videos from the personal page the percentage

videos and made them as specific as possible, thus favoring an impactful hashtag over a wider spread of adjacent ideas. This strategy is also reflected in the variance of popular hashtags (see figure 32). Some examples she presented are #bookishstruggles, #bookishhumor, and #bookishthoughts. One throughline is an emphasis on including the term “bookish”. However, while she did experiment with leaving out hashtags entirely, she was unsure whether the tactic was actually linked to videos going viral as she had seen videos with captions full of hashtags that also reached a large audience. She did also distinguish between her own content and sponsored content, presumably because the agreements include which hashtags should be used. Furthermore, she stated that “I don’t even use #BookTok because that’s already super oversaturated”. Addie’s use of specific hashtags that relate to the book as an object rather than reading itself is in line with the research of Dezuanni et al. (2022). In the case of these examples the idea of bookishness and use of bookish follows the definition of Birke (2021) rather than Pressman (2020).

Alex began by using a lot of hashtags but “I felt like it would confuse where the book would go or the video would go”. Instead she now opts for “normal” BookTok hashtags as well as including the genre or specific features of the book, like fae or witches. Thus, the hashtags are once again specific but focusing on the book that is mentioned. For her, this knowledge was grouped among other business strategies that she was still learning more about. This emphasizes how these algorithmic practices are essential to social media work.

Olive stated that while she did not believe that the hashtags had much effect on the success of a video, she still used them. Her main reasoning was that she had always done it like that but due to hearing about how videos can go viral without them she doubts their usefulness. This is similar to what Alex said about using them but lacking a strategy. Despite neither being convinced that they work, both continue to add them. This could be part of convention but also possibly the hope that it may work. This shows that the results may be more interesting when diverging from the classic hashtag querying. Not only did the interviewees find the use of hashtags unimportant, which can lead to incorrect hashtags, but some of the videos did not have hashtags at all. It can also be hard to determine the right hashtag, as the classic #booktok that is used in many studies is not ubiquitous in this dataset. As Addie stated, the hashtag is oversaturated at this point. This can make it hard to reach the intended audience.

6.3.2 Posting frequency and time

There are also numerous ideas surrounding the posting frequency and time, which also extended to the time after posting and how quickly engagement flowed in. All interviewees aimed to post

multiple times a week, and while they did not have specific posting times they did have rough posting schedules. As often the creators were genuinely excited to post something, they did not always wait for the best time and thus went against these schedules. Having experimented in the past with posting multiple times a day compared to multiple times a week, the creators found that what matters is consistency in creating content rather than the exact timing and frequency.

Addie also found that the algorithm has undergone changes when it comes to timing since she first started on the platform. While she has retained the same thought process that if the video does not do well in the first hour it is a “flop”, this is actually no longer true, as “the first maybe two to three hours that determines if the video will do well”, and in some cases the success comes even later. One example she brought up was a video from February that got more traction in April, possibly due to what was trending at the time. She sums this up as “Views over time is much more slower than it was like a year ago”. This was also noticed by Olive, who said that sometimes the views were delayed by a few days. As it is thus hard to gauge when a video will be popular it is also hard to understand why content appeals to viewers. This lack of transparency and confusion over why and when content is appearing was highlighted by Chayka (2022) in relation to the switch from chronological to social feeds on many platforms. This shows a greater trend when it comes to uncertainties regarding recommendation systems.

These changes in the algorithm were noted by Alex as well, as she switched from posting multiple times a day to just posting around five to six days a week. However, for extra content she does use the stories feature. Olive followed a similar schedule, posting three to four times a week. She also used the platform affordances of TikTok to determine when her followers were the most active and primarily posted at those times, unless she was too excited to wait to share the content. She supported this by thinking about her own viewing habits. However, like with the hashtags, she did not think that timing really had a great effect overall. Addie also described how she would post multiple videos at a time if the previous one was doing well, as in her mind people would be looking at her page and thus creating similar content fast can be rewarding. At the same time, she said that what matters is “as long as you post at the end of the day and keep it consistent. No matter if it's 50 times a day or three times a day”.

6.3.3 Self-censoring text

TikTok has a number of content moderation policies and practices in place. While they have caused criticism in the past, particularly for how they did and did not moderate racial language (Ghaffary 2021), there are a number of forbidden words that most users seem to be aware of. This leads to creators self-censoring by replacing certain letters in words, leaving the word readable to the human eye but showing nonsense to the content censors. This is particularly

prevalent in the videos recommending books with darker themes, in particular thrillers and erotica (see figure 16). The overall tone of these videos is generally darker, with some featuring age limits and trigger warnings. Thus, the overall style of the video is crafted to reach the target audience and inform those who are not part of it. By censoring words and depicting topics in more algorithmically appealing ways the goal is to avoid being caught for breaking community guidelines. Events like the aforementioned shadowbanning could also lead to self-censoring and algorithmic anxiety, as it demonstrates a lack of control on the side of the creator.

6.3.4 Experimenting with features

Using new and trending features can also help promote videos. Olive found that at the time of the interview, the photo mode was doing well (see figure 30). Her theory was that it loops people back to the front which increased the number of views a video gets as people are continuously watching. As this is a trend she noticed all over TikTok, she believes that the platform may be pushing videos using photo mode more to promote this new feature. Similarly to trying new features, multiple interviewees highlighted how using the live function can increase the reach of videos. Addie described how she would go live on the app shortly after posting to increase the reach of her videos. She described how she would especially do this when a video was not doing as great as she had anticipated, as for her it seemed that TikTok would “boost” the video as a consequence of going live. Alternatively, she has also gone live for 30 or more minutes in anticipation of posting to get the “reward”. This shows that there are actions creators take to interact with the algorithm that go beyond just posting a video. As TikTok promotes lives and sends notifications to followers this can increase the probability that someone views the creators profile and interacts with their content, which reinforces that the algorithm would promote that creators videos more.

6.3.5 Creating tension

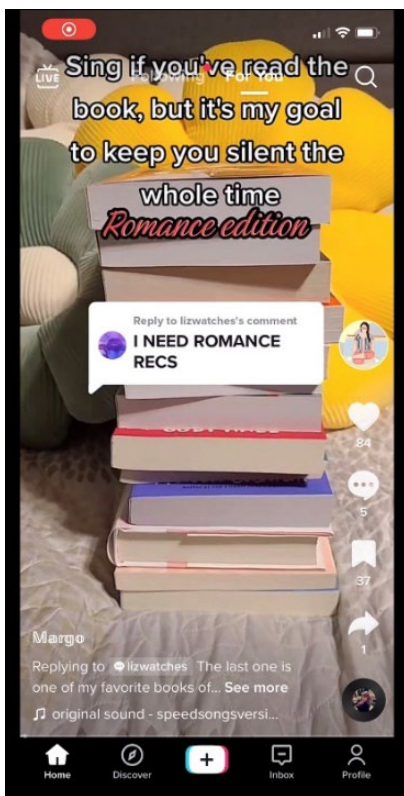


Figure 33 Video caption that aims to keep the reader watching until the end. Caption is "Replying to lizwatches. The last one is one of my favorite books of all time". Screenshot of @bookwormamrgo (2022a).

As discussed in chapter five, the shortness of the videos requires the viewer to be hooked within seconds. To improve reach and be favored by the algorithm the video also needs to be watched until the end. This can be done by creating tension, one way is through the dramatic reveal. Another way is in the placement of the books, for example by leaving the most anticipated title to last. This can be furthered by using other features, for example by including in the caption that the last book is the creators favorite (see figure 33). These strategies can help keep the viewer engaged until the end of the video. Furthermore, by having the dramatic reveal be extremely short the likelihood of users watching the video more than once, to get a better chance at reading the book title, increases. By keeping videos below the length for the timeline bar (which allows viewers to fast forward) this can be further increased as the viewer has no other options than to watch again or live without the knowledge. This is important as whether videos are watched in full and repeatedly is an important measure for the algorithm (Wall Street Journal

2021). Thus, these could be some of the most valuable tactics for the creators.

6.3.6 Engagement

Increasing engagement is another way to have the algorithm be more favorable to a creator's content. Olive mentioned that she has heard from other creators that adding a call to action, for example by asking questions or encouraging users to save the video for later, can increase engagement. This is reflected in the dataset, as many captions created a sense of connection between the creator and the viewer. For Olive, this is also linked to her audience make up, she is aware that many are getting (back) into reading and are therefore saving her recommendations to refer back to. This shows that the engagement on videos can serve different purposes. If the engagement is primarily coming from users who are getting into reading this could explain why some of the recommendations that offer wide appeal are blowing up. Increasing engagement can be done in many ways, for example by being controversial. As such, this builds on the values and strategies creators have. This emphasis on engagement also highlights the social

nature of reading in connection with online book communities (Perkins 2017). At the same time this engagement can also increase social capital, something Dubroc (2021) highlighted about BookTubers.

6.4 Values and strategies

6.4.1 To be or not to be controversial

The algorithmic imaginary is integrated into the content strategies and connected to the values that go into the process. At times the creators need to decide between following their values or pleasing the algorithm. These choices are evident in the content strategies of the interviewees. BookTok has been described as wholesome (Lansom 2022) but that is not without effort. The interviews showed that it is important to creators to keep the community as a positive space. At the same time, they did value how the community can call for change when things are wrong. Despite seeing an easy way to gain attention on the platform, through being controversial, two of the interviewees explicitly avoided doing that in favor of creating a wholesome space and sustainable growth for their accounts. While Alex mentioned that she wanted to have the views, she ultimately wanted to ensure that she has a good relationship and reputation with her audience, other creators and companies.

Alex and Olive both emphasized how they want to create content that does not offend others. This is also at the core of their content strategies, from the opinions they choose to share and which books they pick for their videos. Both interviewees avoided discussing books that they disliked, instead focusing their videos on the books they enjoyed. Olive chose to stop talking about books she disliked entirely, whereas Alex will still mention books she disliked but limit their screentime. This value comes through at every part of the content creation process, as Alex picks popular books that interest her. This is because

You're able to join in on the conversation and you know, they're not going to rattle people because it has been through the ringer already. So I definitely tend to go more towards books that I know are not going to irk people in the wrong way.

By sticking to books that are already being discussed on the platform she can thus avoid putting herself in a situation where her tastes may offend someone. At the same time, this strategy can further the self-perpetuating cycle of everyone talking about the same books.

However, as her reading interests vary across genres, keeping a balanced platform can be difficult as some books are inherently more controversial. She describes how it can be hard to discuss books like *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov (1955) on TikTok “because there are so many

people that might see it and you only have a few minutes”. This makes getting her point across difficult:

So trying to tell people that I do not support what's going on in the book, I like the prose, [...] I like the way that it affected me, rather than I think this is a great plot point is, is quite hard and it's unappealing to a lot of people, especially at the minute, to read books written by, I guess like old white men.

While Olive also enjoys a variety of different genres, she primarily reads and recommends romance books. This predominance is also a draw for her audience, as they have come to expect this style of content. She found that her audience shares this preference, as it is the content that usually does well. However, she will also recommend books from other genres. Her main criteria for these recommendations is that either she really enjoyed the book or thinks that others would enjoy it. As TikTok makes it possible to reach a wider audience, Olive was hesitant about sharing negative reviews, finding it easier not to say anything. Her choice to focus on the positive aspects is not only for her own benefit, as: “I try not to talk about the ones I don't like because I don't want to like hate on an author’s work because they still worked really hard”.

However, by not offending people the creators may also be limiting their reach. Alex stated that:

But I don't think there's a specific hack to it unless you're willing to be controversial, because [...] People like people that are controversial, they like to be able to, to argue with people who are controversial [...] So I think if you're willing to have that, you can hack the algorithm. But I think if you're not willing to do that, which for me, I'm not willing to be controversial because I think it looks really bad if you're trying to get brand deals or work with other companies. [...] Then it's really hard to hack the algorithm, I think.

This is also linked to the question of views or community. By being controversial one is able to get lots of views, partially due to the outrage present in the comments section and other ways users engage with the video. Alex described how this can be tricky to manage as: “It's really hard because you see other people get like these videos that blow up and then you're like, Well, I actually totally disagree with their strategy right now, but I really want the views too”. However, having true engagement with the community is a lot better both for the creator and their image. For example, users are interested in hearing more from her. These types of engagement can prove to be more important than the sheer number of views, both on a personal and professional level.

6.4.2 The need for creativity

Aside from being controversial, being funny is one of the main ways of getting success. For Addie, being funny is what she does:

That's basically my entire thing, I make like kind of like quick little videos using trending sounds. And I think I'm like, okay, how can I make this bookish related? And most of that is just like drawing inspiration from what I see on my "For You" page, because at this point I still do see a lot of BookTok, but I also see like other stuff that's like from different niches of the communities on TikTok, which is like whatever's trending at that moment.

To create her content, she thus takes inspiration from a variety of places. When it comes to picking her books, she follows a similar route as the other creators. While Addie gets most of her recommendations from BookTok, she does try to find books that are less popular as she often finds herself questioning how they became popular as she dislikes them. At the same time, she says that "but I try to read books as soon as I see them getting any sort of traction, and most of that is coming from like BookTok recommendations". Not only does this increase her pleasure when reading, it also puts her ahead of the curve when it comes to creating content.

A similar dichotomy exists between being funny or conventionally attractive. For Addie, bookish humor is the main genre and feature of her content, and it has served her well as she has the largest following not just out of the interviewees but out of all the creators included in the dataset. Addie described how sometimes the unexpected content goes viral and if she had known it would do so well, she would have put in more effort to look put together rather than "crusty". Despite this being the case, she found that overall looks do play a role when it comes to success on the platform:

I remember this one person said [...], it's a hard truth, but it's true at the, at the end of the day, the two kinds of people that [...] have successful platforms and go viral like over and over again on TikTok are either people that [...] are conventionally attractive or people that are just really funny. And I feel like I'm really funny.

She goes on to highlight that conventionally attractive people do not have the same need to be creative as they can use their looks in combination with trending sounds to receive likes. Whereas she, and other creators like her who do not fit traditional, Western beauty standards, rely on relatability and humor to get the same success. This also leads to the people who are not conventionally attractive having a like-to-follow ratio that is off, something Addie has

discussed with her mutuals. Additionally, TikTok has a past of limiting the reach of creators who do not fit into conventional beauty standards (Köver and Reuter 2019).

Alex noticed a similar trend, although she hoped that it does not ring true for BookTok. She elaborates that:

But to at least reach a target market that is not avid book readers and to hack the algorithm in a way, I do think the fact that when I get dressed up that I'm a pretty, white woman does help the algorithm. You know? It's actually just what appeals to people, to a certain extent. But then again, then I say that and then I'm like, Well, I've also posted videos where I felt like I was pretty and it didn't go well.

For people who fit into the idea of conventionally attractive, this can also cause self-doubt, as it creates uncertainty about what parts of your content people are actually interested in. Thus, the looks of a creator do also have an impact on how their content is distributed by the algorithm. As not all BookTok videos feature the creators themselves, this creates an interesting dynamic regarding the criteria for the algorithm. As creators have also seen success when they did not feel like they were looking their best, this could also indicate that the authenticity of the more natural look could aid the success. Seeming engaging, interesting, or charismatic, which can be related to looks but also other features like gestures, may have the greater impact. The unpolished look of the videos can increase intimacy and make videos more relatable, as described in further in chapter 8.2.

Addie also highlighted a similar difference when it came to expectations between men and women. She described how young men would pose with books, often written by Colleen Hoover, as thirst traps in order to get views from young women. The interviewee was critical of this as it showed the difference in effort that needed to be put in to get views and engagement, as Addie stated that “This is just like men in general, doing the bare minimum”. She further criticized the lack of creativity in these videos as they used the book as a prop rather than discussing it. These examples show that creativity is not as important to the content creation process depending on the creator’s background, when solely looking from a perspective of success.

6.4.3 Content strategies

Trends are an integral part of TikTok due to its memetic nature. From formats to content to audio there is a lot of reproduction and remixing of work. As mentioned above, there are a number of different trends present on the platform and in the dataset. Ultimately, there is creativity of some kind involved in the making of each TikTok video. Following trends can be

a good way to get followers, as they often reach a wider audience when a trend is at its peak. This can boost the occasional video on the algorithm, as if users like one video they might like other videos from the same creator. Addie has come across plenty of content that has done well because it is trendy yet not creative. While trends are an easy way to get views, if the goal is to build a following it is also important to offer a unique perspective through creativity. Alex splits her content strategy into two main categories: outreach and nurturing. Trends primarily fall into the first bucket, as the goal is to reach new audiences. Alex describes it as:

So my outreach content is [...] probably like me either using a trending sound or [...] I'[ll] just like, be in there for a couple of seconds and then I'll show the books that are related to that topic, and they're short and they're easy to get through, and they appeal to a lot of people that might not either know me or care what I have to say more than just showing the books. So I call that like my outreach content, and it is the stuff that usually gets a lot more views, a lot more saves, followers and stuff and it kind of like reels people in.

The second category of content focuses more on building community and bringing value. This can be done by giving more in-depth reviews and recommendations, wherein she talks to her followers. Videos from both of these categories by Alex were included in the dataset, proving that the algorithm shows these variations. This is similar to what Ehret, Boegel, and Manuel-Nekouei (2018) found about BookTube, namely that the viewers were not just on the search for content but also quality. With her strategy Alex aims to supply both. Her main basis for the videos is what she is currently reading. This impacts the style of the content as:

And then it also it all depends on what I'm reading at the moment too, because if it's something that's quite popular, you're able to use a lot more trending sounds for it. And like people will know what you mean. Where if it's books that aren't as popular, you will probably need more like talkative videos, or you kind of have to throw them in there and like just get people used to seeing the book.

Her content strategy also comes from seeing a disconnect between followers and views on some accounts, due to them having a few viral videos. This disconnect can be connected to the emphasis on singular posts rather than creators on the platform (Abidin 2020; Reddan 2022). Based on her experience, she prioritizes engagement over the number of followers.

Linking back to the metaphors used to describe the algorithm, Addie used the term gambling when describing the ratio between effort and reward when it comes to which content

she prioritizes making. As TikTok is her job, the success of the videos is more important than if it was just a hobby. This affects the thought process behind creation as:

I do like making those videos, but I's kind of like, oh, do I really want to make this entire video that I dedicate a lot of time to and it just flops, or can I make this video that took me two seconds and it does well. Like I know in my head will do well.

Thus, what works for her is reiterating the same content and topics but changing elements to keep it interesting and different. As:

It's like this kind of insurance that like, oh, the video will do well, but I have this, like trending sound on it. So it seems like a new video or a new idea, if that makes sense. But I guess, sometimes I'm just trying to think outside of the box.

To think outside the box and more creatively, she needs to know how “out of pocket” she can be with her content, as this is where the relatability and authenticity in the bookish humor come from. Here, the challenge is balancing relatability with being too niche, which can lead to Addie making videos private due to embarrassment. For the content itself though, the process begins while reading as she tabs quotes and scenes to help her come up with ideas for future content.

Not just trending features but also trends in general can help set content up for success. Olive was attuned to this, stating that “trending music always helps”. Like Addie, she also described taking trends and turning them bookish. She describes her brand as more aesthetically pleasing (in contrast to humorous content), showing awareness of her audience as well. While she is unsure what the algorithm favors, for her good lighting and a trending sound are good starts. Olive found that certain content consistently does well, for example her storytime videos. For those videos she has even developed a formula. The interviewee found that romance novels were particularly fitting for this genre as the story had to be unusual and intriguing yet believable. At the same time, the book should not be too popular so that viewers do not immediately guess it. Furthermore, Olive avoided creating too many of these videos and posted them with time in between so that her audience would “forget” that she did these videos, increasing the believability. Thus, she uses the algorithm's ability to make videos pop up at random in her favor. Due to the engaging style and mimicking of a general TikTok genre the videos can also appeal to audiences who are not usually interested in books.

In general, if she notices that a video will do well she tries to emulate it, similar to the rest of the interviewees. The consistency of some formats being successful, or at least appealing, was reflected in the dataset as well through the clear use of similar genres and video features. Another thing that is important to Olive is having some variation, as “I'll try to vary the way

that my like grid kind of looks”. She does this by alternating different video genres, for example book talks and listicles.

While Addie was aware that there are a lot of different theories, ultimately she believes that the kind of content one creates is what matters as good content will do well regardless of whether it is trendy or creative. And more than that, what matters is enjoying the process, as “I just at the core of it, I like making content, whether it’s like these long, dedicated videos or these short, simple ones, as long as I’m having fun making both”. Olive has a similar perspective, as her main focus is to create content that she would be interested in watching herself. Having the mentality that as long as she is proud of a video it is worth posting helps her to let go of some of the pressures regarding how well the video will do. Olive concludes about the risk versus reward that “there are some definitely like really high highs and then you just it might not reach anybody. So you just have to kind of be okay with riding that wave”.

For Alex it is also about creating connections as “That’s what makes it worth it for me. Or like when people see my videos and I’m like, oh, this person liked what I said or what I did to extent to where they’re taking my recommendation.” Overall, while the content strategies of the creators are informed by their algorithmic imaginaries and their hopes to reach a wide audience, the interviewees also valued finding pleasure, pride and connection with others when creating content.

7. Ease of TikTok

7.1 Ease of entry

One major reason why creators gravitate towards TikTok is the ease of entry to the platform. While the general ease of entry for users, that videos tailored to the users likes and interests can be viewed within minutes of creating an account, was highlighted in chapter two, this ease of entry also extends to the creation side of it. TikTok makes it easy both to create content and reach large audiences with that content. For Addie, her interest to create videos was sparked after her entire “For You” page was just BookTok. The interest to take video creation more seriously followed after a video went viral overnight, as: “I was like, oh, is it like that easy to get viral on TikTok?” This ease of entry is visible in more ways than one, from the actual platform affordances to the materials needed to the pressures put on creators.

To make a TikTok all you need is a phone, ideally with an internet connection. Regardless of whether the footage is filmed in the app itself or is imported into the app, TikTok offers a number of editing features that are updated regularly. Additionally, the audios are added and adjusted to fit the clips automatically. To create a BookTok video all one really needs to do

is talk about books. Even the BookTok videos with higher production value do not need much more than good lighting, a nice background, and a few books. The basic formula is easy to replicate and is made using things usually readily available in most homes, as could be seen from the examples used in the dataset. However, it is important to acknowledge that while physical copies are not needed to make BookTok videos, there is still a culture around them (this is described further in chapter 8.1). By having the editing features built into the app it makes it easy for users to add something to their videos, like text elements or doing some simple cuts, without needing prior experience in video editing. As there is no need to use different apps it is possible to quickly make a TikTok which makes the entire act a lot less intimidating and technical. For Alex this was also a point of interest, as she enjoyed using new features whenever the editing was upgraded.

Thus, in terms of a material stance, it is a lot easier to start making TikToks compared to other content. While BookTok is often associated with a clean visual aesthetic – good lighting, light sheets as a background, beautiful bookshelves, and pristine editions – videos do not need to have a polished visual aesthetic to be successful. This is a key differentiation to the heavily stylized nature of Bookstagram, where the focus lies on creating the most visually appealing image of a book possible. Especially reading vlogs and bookish humor videos emphasize relatability and stray away from the perfect background and lighting. The messy aesthetic is a clear departure from YouTube as well, as Alex mentioned that one of the main reasons she started creating TikTok's instead of YouTube videos was that she lacked the right background for filming. This messiness reduces the pressure on the creator, thus also reducing the barrier of entry. This also creates a sense of intimacy, which can make the recommendations more effective as it makes it easier to imagine yourself in the scenario. This is in line with what Reddan (2022) and Dezuanni et al. (2022) found when comparing the different platforms. Olive also felt like Bookstagram was more formal due to the expectation of having images where books are neatly lined up. For her it is also simply easier to film a quick video compared to creating the perfect image and writing a long paragraph about a book. In addition to this, trends are a type of genre that makes it easy to create content. It is content made to be replicated, and the creativity lies in how videos are altered. By adapting to already present formats, it is easy to create new things that are still familiar enough that it is not too hard to make. Often this style of content is quick to produce, making it low effort but high reward. Thus, it is not necessary to have an original idea to make content which is particularly helpful for those just starting out.

These features also make it a good starting point for new readers, as the recommendations appear in a space they already inhabit (Jerasa and Boffone 2021). As the

literary world can seem intimidating, having trends to engage with and attainable standards can make the realm of criticism more accessible. By using formats and tools users are already familiar with, it is easier to both understand the discussions happening around books.

7.2 Ease of use

TikTok affords ease of use not only on the side of the creator but also for the regular user consuming book related content. Due to the ease of use, there are always new videos to discover. Olive states that: “I mean I’s very easy to use for myself too, I’ll just scroll and scroll and scroll and scroll”. She continues that it is the only platform she really likes as she feels the quick videos, and thus quick recommendations, appeal to people. This makes it possible to consume a constant stream of content, from mainstream recommendations to niche reading interests. Due to the wide spread of users on the platform, niche groups and interests can form and be quite prolific. While usually the content will find the user, if the user does want to explore a certain topic the search function provides a stream of fitting recommendations to the user.

Furthermore, the app has features that support the building of community, even if it works differently than most contemporary social media. First of all, TikTok offers a number of ways to engage with videos and share ones thoughts and start a discussion. This engagement can come through comments, likes, saves, or creating a video response in the form of a duet or stitch. These also reinforce the algorithm, as they show interest in the topic and creator. Second of all, it allows for video reactions by the creator to comments (see chapter 5.2).

While the interviewees described adding books to their carts or Amazon wishlists, recommendations can also be saved by saving the video itself. This also reinforces the algorithm by showing that this is the kind of content you will come back to and therefore want to see more of. This is also one of the features that can be encouraged in the call to actions discussed earlier (see 5.3). By encouraging the share function, especially after interacting with a video, TikTok also pushes users to distribute the videos further. This can lead to recommendations being discussed offline and further solidifying themselves. Even though the platform is structured through a content rather than a network graph (Newport 2022), TikTok encouraged the research account to be shared with contacts (see figure 2). This would allow both the contacts to find the new account, as well as make it easier to find your contacts. This was promoted repeatedly but primarily when viewing the account page. The suggested accounts start by connecting contacts and Facebook friends instead of other TikTok accounts. While this feature was not used in the research context, this can make it easy to connect with friends.

Creators need to balance a variety of expectations, from their viewers as well as themselves, which can create a lot of pressure. The already mentioned easy scrolling afforded by TikTok may alleviate some of this pressure. Alex spoke about how she wants to avoid bothering people and wasting their time which was one of the reasons that she picked TikTok over YouTube despite her interest in long form content, as she feared people would not be interested in her talking for 20-30 minutes. As people can just scroll when they are uninterested, which also signals the algorithm to avoid content like this, it is easy for content to be ignored if it does not appeal to people. Alex describes this as being “easy to get cast out”, as users can just scroll past. Thus, there is less pressure on TikTok compared to YouTube because of the format (short video) and platform design (ease of scrolling).

As shown in chapter six, one of the benefits of TikTok is that it is easy to gain new followers and reach new audiences as it is unclear how the reach of a video will be. It is not necessary to have a lot of followers to appear on the “For You” page as the number of followers in the dataset ranged from 18 to 879.000. Additionally, half of the videos were created by accounts with less than 10 000 followers. When looking at just the videos from the personal “For You” page the percentage is higher, with 61.2 percent of videos being created by accounts with less than 10 000 followers. Especially through the use of trends, that may go beyond a creator’s regular audience, new eyes can be reached. This is in line with previous research, as the algorithm and the potential for growth it offers to creators was one of the main draws of the platform in the research conducted by Guinez-Cabrera and Mansilla-Obando (2022). Additionally, the authors found that the ease of use of the platform was another factor.

Another aspect is that it is possible to have a successful account without having to share personal or private information. While the general idea of influencers is that they share their lives online and turn themselves into a brand, this is not necessary on BookTok. The books are at the core of the videos and are prioritized over sharing personal details. Many of the common formats do not require the creator to be visible at all. The creator is in control over how much they show of themselves, how much they speak. While similar levels of anonymity are possible on Instagram, this is uncommon when it comes to video platforms like YouTube. Most Booktubers speak to the camera and thus their personality is more present in the videos. This can also minimize language barriers, as creators can choose to use visual language or use translating services to add text. This can make it easier for creators from non-English speaking countries to receive larger international followings.

7.3 Ease of short form video

TikTok as a platform differentiates itself from the other main social media and entertainment platforms as it solely offers content in the short video format. Even when sharing photos these are displayed to create a story and have the audio and autoplay features that turn them into a slideshow. The majority of the videos were less than 30 seconds long, with the average being 24 seconds. This was also slightly skewed by the handful of book talks, as those were primarily over a minute with some reaching around three minutes. Wiederhold (2022) points out an inconsistency in effort in the videos, as the shortness of these videos as well as the ease of producing them contrasts starkly with the effort put into creating a book. While this contrast may seem jarring at first, the creation of these videos requires the BookToker to read (at least parts of) the book. In the same manner as traditional reviews, the content of the book is then condensed into a tool to help other readers determine whether the book is for them. As such, the short form video just provides a new way to present these bullet points. Depending on the video, it is possible that a creator may spend more time creating the video than they would have on a written review.

When comparing TikTok to other platforms Addie concluded that “I feel like books translate better on TikTok compared to any other like bookish platform, if that makes sense, because TikTok is so fast paced”. This can be linked to the nature of the short form video content as well as the way the platform has set up the scrolling on the “For You” page. As Addie personally prefers receiving recommendations this way that also impacts her opinion. If the creator does not get to the point within the first 10-15 seconds she will continue scrolling, making it essential for creators to present the books in a specific way. This creates the need to be concise and snappy. Moreover, it is efficient and commercially effective which could be why it is being picked up on more. Thus, the short video format is one of the key differentiators when it comes to the impact of BookTok.

Due to the constraints of the short video format, there is no time to talk at length about all of the elements one would find in a traditional review or that would be needed to fully understand what a book is about. Instead, BookTok gives viewers an idea of what they can expect from a book. This can further make it easier to digest the information given and remember when a book sounds like it might be interesting. This usually comes from a specific angle as certain aspects are foregrounded, whether that be literary tropes, the feeling of the book or an otherwise unique feature. Additionally, structuring content in the form of lists, like the listicle genre, can make it easier to remember information (Konnikova 2013). Rather than

spending time on getting a full review, users get a sense of what the book is about which often is enough to decide whether or not it is something one might be interested in. To quote Addie:

you don't have to, like tell the audience like this entire description of a book, you just name the tropes or give out-of-context quotes, and then the viewer, or whatever the audience, will already have, like a preconceived notion of what the book is about.

In general, the interviewees stated that short form videos make it easier to remember and later act on recommendations. Olive found that due to short attention spans she listens to BookTube videos as podcasts rather than giving them attention in the same way she would a TikTok video. While this is enjoyable, it makes it hard to remember what books are talked about. Olive describes it as:

Like if she talks about a book at the beginning of her 20 minute video, then like, I'm never going to remember it by the end. Whereas like if I see her post a video on TikTok and I'm like, Oh, those are good, I'll save this.

This shows the effectivity of BookTok. Putting herself in the shoes of a viewer who has not read much, it is easier to quickly check TikTok for recommendations when they are searching for something to read at the bookstore. Addie had a similar opinion, as her main reasoning for watching BookTube was when she had a lot of free time to digest the content slowly. TikTok in comparison offered a bit of everything, in that fast-paced manner she lauded previously. Aligning with news reports, she found that books have not gotten particularly popular the way they have on BookTok on other platforms, transcending from a nerdy hobby to something everyone does.

8. BookTok and literary culture

8.1 Bookishness on BookTok

Bookishness is alive and well on TikTok, as books are not just seen as vessels for reading but as beautiful artifacts in and of themselves. Despite TikTok being at the forefront of the digital book world, the physical editions of books are the stars of most BookTok videos. The books themselves are used not just to visualize recommendations but also as props in the videos, for example by creating a big reveal for the book title or flipping through the pages as a background video. This use of physical editions is comparable to how Anderson Gold (2020) described the presence of physical editions on BookTube. It is not uncommon for BookTokers to share a new edition they are adding to their collection. In these videos book as an object in itself is as much part of the recommendation, if not more, than the content of the book. This was often done with

an audio meme that described shifting to different sides and each time exclaiming that it was perfection. Alongside these instructions creators showed off different angles of the books as well as details on the covers, the book with and without the dustjacket, artwork on the end pages or other interesting features (@siuxireads 2022). By showing off the book itself, particularly when a creator already owns another edition of the book, and also by dedicating an entire video just to a book or series the love a creator has for it is expressed.

Furthermore, the books are often in pristine condition. In particular, books recommended in more stylized videos can often look unread or well-preserved and there is an emphasis on the cover or edition one owns. One video highlighted the fact that the sticker on her new book was removable (@wandering_chapters 2022), further emphasizing how the details matter on BookTok. In general, there is a focus on the beauty of the cover art and overall features of books rather than just the writing itself. This links with how Albrechtslund (2020) described the remaining popularity of the personal library, as the videos show that readers treasure owning books and building a collection. The act of collecting books is thus also a vital part of recommending books.

The focus on the material aspect of books is the greatest divider when it comes to access to books and reading as well as creating videos. Books are more accessible than ever before in history as they can be read in a variety of formats – print, digital, audio – and accessed at a range of prices. However, having the physical editions and bountiful bookshelves is not something every reader has, as neither e-books or library books will permanently fill those shelves. As library books often have a plastic cover added to protect the books, this can lead to unwanted reflections. Thus, how readers read can impact their variation when it comes to creating videos as props and backdrops may be missing. Owning multiple copies of the same book is in line with the general overconsumption present on TikTok (Peiser, Paúl, and Chong 2023). An example of this is the adaptation of the “If I like it, I’ll just grab it in another color” audio meme to BookTok. One video featured the different editions of the creators favorite book, totaling to 37 versions of her four favorite books (@bookwormmargo 2022b).

8.1.1 Digital copies

In her book *Bookishness*, Jessica Pressman describes how physical copies are also used for identity construction. Due to the prevalence of photos, and videos, of books online today it is possible to “maintain a ‘nearness’ to books” (Pressman 2020, 12) through these digital substitutes. This gives readers a way to engage in this process through the videos. However, for

users reading primarily on digital devices or listening to audiobooks, such a reading practice can be hard to combine with being a creator due to the emphasis on physical editions.

While most formats can be adapted to include just the covers of books rather than a physical copy, very few of the recommendation styles go completely without presenting a physical edition of the book to the camera. One format that does this is combining the video call angle with the cover images; as the videos are short this is the simplest way to display all of the books and still show the creator at the same time. This is often also combined with trending audio memes, for example “show yourself, then share your top ten favorite books” (see figure 8) or “these are the books that I am going to recommend to you if I don’t like you, okay?” (@aaliyahreads 2022). Some videos, particularly those created by the authors themselves, focused on highlighting lines of text and combining them with background shots to create a natural transition to the digital cover of the book. Another work around to not having the physical copies is by filming at a bookstore or library, for example “BookToker tells you what books are 5 stars in Waterstones” (@kailinreads 2022). A few of the videos were set there, with some created by the staff at the location. This shows how creators that come from the book industry can create videos that are in line with the general style but also provide their own angle by taking advantage of their role. However, the commercial aspect is emphasized there more with titles like “Are these popular BookTok books worth it? part 7” (@emmalouisebooks 2022).

Very few videos do not contain the cover of the books they discuss, either physical or digitally. This could be because the cover is what will stick with viewers especially when the title may be hard to understand. When the viewer next goes to the bookstore or shops online, they may see the cover again and remember the recommendation they received on TikTok. This indicates that the book cover itself is valuable for recommending and buying books, as it may be the most recognizable feature. Providing these recommendations, where the cover is then provided on screen is similar to what Nakamura (2013) described about the function of Goodreads shelves. It is an outward signal of what the person has read, showcasing their identity as a reader and substituting that they cannot show what they have read on bookshelves in their own home.

Some videos, especially trends, primarily focus on the physical aspects of the book; without the pretty edition of the book, the video would serve no purpose. Thus, to make certain kinds of content the presence of the physical book is a requirement. Additionally, Boffone and Jerasa (2021) found that in some videos, ownership was also used to signify membership within the community, thus adding another layer of meaning to the physical editions. Sometimes the videos can appear like ads, even when they are made with passion, because the focus lies on

the tangible item rather than the creators thoughts and ideas about it. Furthermore, some videos do more than just blur the line between advertising and passion, as the books are not always bought with the creator's money.

8.1.2 Professionals on BookTok

This focus on physical editions can also put pressure on viewers to buy books and expand their personal libraries, regardless of having the space or the money. TikTok as a whole has been criticized for showcasing aspirational lifestyles that can become attainable through purchasing the right product or following the right routine, while ignoring the systemic issues that make them unrealistic for many (Sweeney-Romero 2022; Peiser, Paúl and Chong 2023). Not only does this create aspirations but it can also lead to a sense of disappointment. This extends to books as well, as at a certain point some of the people recommending books switch from just another book lover sharing their favorites to what Reddan (2022) calls a “bookfluencer”. This switch from amateur to professional has been observed and discussed on BookTube already (Tolstopyat 2018) with many of the criticisms applying to BookTokers as well. As many BookTok influencers receive copies for free and are paid to read this can set up expectations and aspirations that can be hard to meet for regular readers. While this switch can compensate the creators for the work they put into the accounts, it also sells their opinions. At times it is clear that the video's main purpose was advertising rather than sharing the books a creator genuinely loved. This was visible as the recommendation style changed and, in particular, the feeling of the video was altered.

A noticeable aspect that would merit further research is the way in which authors are using TikTok to promote their own work, in particular independent and self-published authors. Due to the extensive nature of this, this subject will only be briefly touched upon. The dataset includes multiple authors who use TikTok to advertise their books. Generally, the fact that they are promoting their own work becomes clear once one takes a look at the username and/or caption, as this often includes the descriptor “author” as well as details on when the book is set to release or where it is available to buy. However, the videos themselves often fall right into the stylistic norms of videos created by devoted fans. As such, it can be hard to tell that a video is meant as a direct promotion. This is often done by engaging in trends, for example the laptop to reality trend described in chapter five. The visual style can vary, from following trends to looking more like a marketing campaign. The dataset also included videos that were in line with traditional book trailers or that showcased especially enticing scenes. While a few videos did focus on the material features of the book, in particular the cover art, a lot of the author-made videos instead focused on the writing. This corresponds with a sense of where their strengths

lie. At times a quote or scene was picked and set to dramatic music and engaging backgrounds. Similar to how the laptop to reality trend plays on the atmosphere of the book by presenting an already known story, videos that fell in the more “aesthetic” side of TikTok often added information on the tropes and key points onto the screen.

This also raises the question of whether TikTok users are opposed to the idea of direct promotion, as long as it fits in with the general style. Addie pointed out how non-traditionally published books are having their moment, looking quite favorably at books that would have been a lot harder to discover before BookTok. As such this seems like it could just be a natural extension of the community as authors have to be aware of the norms for their videos to get views.

Authors are not the only ones using TikTok to market their books. The dataset included videos made by companies within the book industry, from publishing houses to bookstores. However, when these businesses do BookTok well, they appear like any other creator. The videos in the dataset adapted common BookTok visual styles and genres to fit their needs, allowing them to be a part of the space. They pick specific formats that are less personal, like thematic recommendations. That way they can fall into the style and align with other content without being overtly commercial. Alternatively, they call themselves out for not being your regular reader, taking advantage of the privileges they get through their jobs, from fancy backdrops to early access to new releases. Another aspect that most have in common is that they focus on presenting the content and key themes of the book in a simple manner, rather than going overboard in terms of trying to be relatable or adding too many internet phrases. This can also be because companies have a different message they want to share than individuals. While content creators also have clear ideas, they often speak in the moment or focus on how the book made them feel.

Creating videos in this way highlights the dichotomy between BookTok being a personal, intimate space and a marketplace. While the initial idea of BookTok is to share honest opinions and in the moment soundbites of books you love, with a crazy virality, the personal and honest part is tainted once money starts to get involved. As Alex pointed out, the compensation of creators is not yet well-established as most of the videos created are made by creators with small followings. Unless creators are big enough to be approached for sponsoring they receive little compensation for the work they put in, with Alex describing it as a “glorified hobby” despite her wish to transition to have BookTok as her job. Thus, even though BookTok can be seen as an effective marketing tool, the creators behind the videos that have pushed

books to fame rarely get compensated for their work. This is important to take into account when looking at the success of BookTok and assessing the different styles.

Like BookTubers before them (Perkins 2017), BookTokers can be categorized as boundary spanners as they bridge the gap between regular readers and those working to make books possible. They also connect readers with each other, creating a social activity out of a traditionally more solitary one. At the same time, these actions are a commodification of users participation on the platform (Anderson Gold 2020). This can be beneficial to users but as Alex pointed out in her interview, unless creators have a large following they rarely get any compensation despite pushing out the majority of the content.

8.2 Authority

For BookTok to be successful outside of the platform, and to have the effect highlighted in the media (see 3.1), users need to follow the recommendations they find on TikTok and read or buy the books. To do so, the creators need to establish authority on the subject matter to engage the viewer enough to take the recommendation.

In general, creators attain authority by having an air of bookishness and seeming well-read. This can be done by having the bookshelves in the background, as Dubroc (2021) mentioned in connection with BookTubers. At the same time, recommending multiple books at once, especially when they are focused on the same theme, shows that the creator is aware of different books around a topic and also that they have read widely (or very niche). Owning multiple editions, a common practice based on the dataset, is another way to increase authority on a specific recommendation as owning multiple copies is quite an endorsement. Having multiple copies also requires more shelf space and can thus also support the overall authority through having a bigger book collection as just discussed. Thus, the popularity of the personal library (Albrechtslund 2020) also serves a supporting function here.

The *mise-en-scène* of the videos reinforces the sense of authority of the videos. One aspect of this is the materiality of books discussed in 8.1, as books are the dominating element in the background, whether that be as piles, stacks or in tidy bookshelves. This large amount hints at the creator being well-read and as someone passionate about books, as previously mentioned. Having the physical edition can also reiterate the fact that the creator is serious about their recommendation. However, when books feature in videos it can be hard to tell whether a creator has actually read them, as reading preferences differ and some people aim to have pristine looking books. A common way is to show annotations (especially in reading vlogs and flip-through style videos) as well as tabbed pages. These practices emphasize that the reader

has engaged with the text on a deeper level. Annotating and marking pages are signs of more scholarly work with texts, giving a sense of expertise. Additionally, on BookTok the emphasis often lies on matching the page tabs and pen colors to the cover of the books. This ties into the focus on beauty and material features. In a way, this seems like more effort to show the viewer that the book has been read than just having the book look “read” by having cracks in the spine or bent edges that can come naturally while reading.

By utilizing terms such as “BookToker” or “avid reader”, either in the video itself or in the hashtags, creators link an identity to support their authority on the topic. Emphasizing that they are present on the platform or well-read highlights that they have expert knowledge on the topic and their recommendations should be trusted. Similar to recommending multiple books at once, this positioning aims to show that they are “in the know”. Some creators who work in the book industry use their job title to support the recommendations they give. Thus, authority is enacted through both official and unofficial labels that express expertise.

The connection with the bed as a common background may have to do with the practice of reading in bed. The bed is seen as a cozy and safe place in the home, something that may be reflected in the genres associated with BookTok. Filming in a personal space can also position the creator as a trusted friend as it creates intimacy and warmth, and thus distinguishes reviewers from the more traditional critics. It creates the image of a reader like oneself that can make it easier to relate to the creator’s reading experience. Having the personal be at the forefront of the recommendation is in line with greater trends, as Driscoll (2021) found that social media is giving readers more power. Driscoll was focusing on Goodreads but this shift in reviewing is present on BookTok already.

At the same time, having the reader be “in action” and sharing the reading experience can also support the video’s aura of authority. Active reading and reacting is a display of authenticity that increases the honesty and believability of the recommendation itself. TikTok is particularly attuned to this, as it generally focuses on sharing in-the-moment, unfiltered content rather than staging this (Boffone 2022). However, this reacting in the moment can also be found in more edited videos. The dataset included a video where the creator tried to read a book every day for seven days (see figure 18). Each day she recorded around three clips that were structured to summarize the reading experience with this “in action” feeling. The first clip focused on showing the title and sharing her anticipation, next there was a progress update or two that could be limited to just a line, and lastly there was a final sentence on how she felt finishing the book. Her conclusions are thus supported by audiovisual evidence from when she was reading the book.

Authenticity is also important when sharing recommendations as it lends authority to recommendations by building trust through honesty. This is at the heart of why people enjoy using TikTok (Boffone 2022). This could also be why Olive stated that she took recommendations from other creators she trusts. Authenticity on TikTok can be displayed in a number of ways, from the opinions shared to the visual style used. The messy style that is present in some videos can give it a sense of being raw and therefore real. This is in line with previous research on BookTok (Reddan 2022) and TikTok (Abidin 2020) as a whole, showing the importance of Wiederhold's "messy authenticity" (2022, 158) to the platform and community. By not focusing on hiding things through flashy editing, this realness can be increased. The influence of marketing may put BookTok's success to a halt due to the over-commercialization, as opinions on books may seem less genuine when they are exchanged for money and authenticity may be lost (Wiederhold 2022; Shaffi 2022).

Visually, authority can be illustrated by justifying why a title is recommended (see figure 15). Many videos have text elements that highlight main tropes or the couple that is meant when it comes to the theme of the recommendation. Some videos provided just a quick insight into the main theme, whereas others have a lot of information on each title. This not only gives the reader more information on the book itself but can also make it comprehensible why the title fits into that specific theme. By following the requests of commentators, which are embedded in the video itself, authority can also be given to the creator as it shows that they are reliable at giving good recommendations and have the trust of their audience (see section 5.2).

Another, harder to measure, theory on how authority may be enacted is linked to the algorithm. Often times the same creators will appear repeatedly on a user's "For You" page. This creates a reinforcing effect, and if they continuously talk about books or had a good recommendation before this can reaffirm their authority on the topic. Connecting to this, seeing the same books over and over or seeing a creator recommend books one already enjoyed can increase the success of the recommendation. This can lead to more people buying it, consequently pushing the book up in popularity in the real world. Similarly to how the position of bestsellers and having competitive pricing can create a loop where the same books gets more popular due to being popular (Atkinson 2022), this repeated focus on the book can spur more people to buy it even if they have never heard of TikTok.

Authority usually is not linked to just one of the previously mentioned elements, but rather emerges through their combination. One example for this is a video created by a "spicy" bookseller who leverages her profession to give her recommendation more weight

(@fictionandfriction 2022). She introduces herself by that title, and further reinforces this authority by filming at her store that is filled with bookshelves. By reacting to a stitch asking for recommendations she is also helping other readers out, similar to reacting to comments. Furthermore, there are small elements that add up to the bigger picture when it comes to taking videos seriously. As outlined earlier, there are a number of different video genres and styles on TikTok. However, there is still a general style formula and goal throughout. By being in line with the dominant style and unspoken rules the recommendations are taken seriously. Overall, authority is created on TikTok by positioning the video creators as experts through a number of audiovisual as well as linguistic tactics. Furthermore, this status of expert is connected to the identity of the creator as either a book nerd or a professional within the field. To make the recommendations transcend the community, platform features and norms further support the reach and believability of the recommendation.

8.3 Recommended by BookTok

Being recommended on BookTok has revived older books and brought new releases to fame. Many bookstores have displays highlighting reads recommended on the platform as well as TikTok books on the shelves of their respectable genres. Thus, BookTok is influencing reading culture beyond the platform itself. As these recommendations are so prevalent it is important to take a closer look at them.

8.3.1 From viral to known

The interviewees highlighted that a main change they experienced in their reading habits is that it has become a lot harder to discover new books since the emergence of BookTok. In a way it feels as though there are so many books already being constantly recommended that there is nothing left to discover. Instead of browsing bookstores to find new books, the creators usually walk in already knowing which books they want to get. Addie describes these changes as:

prior to BookTok, I'd go to a bookstore and just kind of like self discover what I think would look good, or seem like a good read or whatever or something that maybe a friend or somebody like recommended. But now at this point it's like I go into a bookstore knowing what I want, going straight to either the BookTok table, the romance section, and like authors that I'm familiar with, genres that I like [...], than just like self-discovery, if that makes sense.

This means that most of the discovery for them happens on BookTok. Furthermore, as many in real life friends are not readers, BookTok offers another way to get recommendations from people they trust.

Olive described how initially people were constantly discovering books and making them go viral. She believes that part of that virality came from everyone getting back into reading at the same time. This, alongside the release date of the most popular TikTok books, is probably what led to all the news headlines. Now, the roster of well-known books within the community is much larger which increases the chances that any book has already been mentioned on the platform. Olive states that “books are not going viral as much anymore because everybody sort of knows what's out there”. Olive describes this as a positive development despite lingering nostalgia as it shows that people are reading more and therefore familiar with more books. This essentially causes a shift in the way BookTok has been used in the past and it will be interesting to see how it develops further in the future. While BookTok is being criticized for promoting the same titles, it is not that different to how books are promoted in the industry as this popularization is similar to spots on a bestseller list.

Thus, the TikTok algorithm plays a large role when it comes to which books are being discovered and popularized on the platform. While algorithms are trusted to curate content based on personal interests but also more objectively it is possible to believe that this will lead to a greater variety of recommendations. Yet, due to how different factors impact the algorithm on TikTok every user has their own reality on the platform. This also plays into the question of whether algorithms are determinants or reflectors of contemporary culture. As mentioned previously, Walsh and Antoniak (2021) found that crowdsourcing and amateur criticism may not lead to more diverse recommendations than those provided by professional curators at academic institutions. This shows the difficulties present in curation, as something will always have to be left out due to the nature of the act itself. In connection with BookTok, the prevalence of certain titles and genres may lead to the same effect. In total the dataset included 780 book recommendations, averaging out at 5.27 recommendations per video. However, this number requires more nuance as 50 videos focused on just one book while another 11 focused on an individual author or series. Out of these recommendations 539 unique book titles were identified, written by 369 different authors. This shows that just 30 percent of the titles were recommended repeatedly, indicating a greater variation in titles than originally believed. Of these titles, only the 15 most recommended titles appeared five or more times in videos. As can be seen in table 1, all of these titles are written by women and fit into the genres associated with BookTok. Most of these titles are not new releases, as only a third of the books were

released in the 2020s (*The Inheritance Games*, 2020; *The Invisible Life of Addie La Rue*, 2020; *The Love Hypothesis*, 2021; *The Fine Print*, 2021; *Delilah Green Doesn't Care*, 2022). Part of the popularity behind *The Secret History*, published in 1992, may be connected with the release of the 30th anniversary edition.

Table 1 The 15 most recommended books in the dataset.

Title	Author	Mentions	Main genre
<i>Verity</i>	Colleen Hoover	11	Thriller
<i>It Ends With Us</i>	Colleen Hoover	9	Romance
<i>The Inheritance Games</i>	Jennifer Lynn Barnes	9	Young Adult, Mystery
<i>If We Were Villains</i>	M. L. Rio	7	Mystery
<i>The Love Hypothesis</i>	Ali Hazelwood	7	Romance
<i>Shatter Me</i>	Tahereh Mafi	7	Young Adult, Fantasy
<i>The Cruel Prince</i>	Holly Black	7	Young Adult, Fantasy
<i>A Court of Thorns and Roses</i>	Sarah J. Maas	6	New Adult, Fantasy
<i>The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo</i>	Taylor Jenkins Reid	6	Romance
<i>The Fine Print</i>	Lauren Asher	5	Romance
<i>The Secret History</i>	Donna Tartt	5	Mystery
<i>The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue</i>	V. E. Schwab	5	Fantasy
<i>Delilah Green Doesn't Care</i>	Ashley Herring Blake	5	Romance
<i>A Good Girl's Guide to Murder</i>	Holly Jackson	5	Young Adult, Mystery
<i>Six of Crows</i>	Leigh Bardugo	5	Young Adult, Fantasy

8.3.2 BookTok canon

Despite BookTok being known for their celebration of young adult literature and romance authors like Colleen Hoover, these are not the only books featured in the community. It is possible to find recommendations for a large variety of topics and genres, from very niche to those with large appeal. Some of the more eclectic recommendations included in the dataset focus on tropes like primal chasing (@smuttybookdealer 2022) or are very specific like “Books

with interesting & complex sibling relationships” (@amanisworldofbooks 2022). At the same time, the prevalence of certain titles on BookTok and how these are synonymous with the community indicates that there is a canon present on the platform. For the most part these books are fiction. The BookTok literary canon is in flux, however there are a number of titles and authors that have been popular for many years. The TikTok canon is established through the repetition of content, wherein the same books are recommended over and over again, but also through the early BookTok videos that created hype around certain books. Many of these books are no longer recommended regularly because it is a given that community members are familiar with them and most likely have already read them. Furthermore, they can be picked up from the display tables at many bookstores and are featured on many online lists.

Bookstores also helped establish this canon, as Harris (2022) describes how the American bookstore chain Barnes & Noble was one of the first stores to start displaying books as trending on the platform, which further increased interest in BookTok as a whole. Thus, the canon is also established through reinforcement from both offline and online sources. At the same time, the selection process for these displays is unknown. As such, the displays may reflect established BookTok favorites rather than the most current titles. This could mean that the BookTok community is reading more diversely but only the bestsellers are displayed. As only a fraction of what BookTokers read can be displayed in stores either way, the curation may not reflect the current reality and further reinforces the idea that everyone is reading the same few books.

Another way to establish what should be considered to be BookTok books is to observe what members of the community describe as such. For example, videos like “Popular BookTok Books I Wish I Never Read” (@madeleinereadsbooks 2022) or the sing along challenge but using popular BookTok books are indicators of what the creators themselves associate with the platform. As these often have multiple parts it further indicates that the books taken into consideration are a large range of titles. Furthermore, having a book or series used as a work for comparison when providing recommendations can also establish it as part of the canon. This is because the viewer is expected to be familiar with the original work which will then give them an understanding of what the current recommendation is about. This is reminiscent of the 2010s and how every new and popular book was described as “the next Hunger Games!”. It also shares similarities with Alharthi, Inkpen and Szpakowicz’s (2018) recommendation system as it is based on the authors’ style. Often creators will also justify why the books are comparable, whether it be writing style, plot, characters and creatures or the overall feeling of the book. The primary series this can be applied to is *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas. It has

become a series that most people in the community know about regardless of whether they have read it. While this is a series that is mentioned often on BookTok as a whole, it was often used to encourage readers to pick up similar series or to base recommendations on and branch out into more spicy content. Thus, it can be seen as a “gateway” recommendation that can get readers into more books from the genre. This can make certain content more accessible, as it can be intimidating for some to start reading more explicit content.

However, there are outliers to the BookTok canon. A number of videos in the dataset focused on classic literature, wherein a similar tactic to explicit content is used to introduce new readers. By using a known format, TikTok can make classics more accessible. One example for this is the trend of reading out a first line, as this can give viewers a glimpse at what the writing style is like and make it easier to dive in. Many of the classics focus on mythology, in particular Greek, which is a theme that is popular among contemporary fiction as well, for example in the books written by Madeline Miller.

At the same time, the recommendations in the dataset show that there is more variation in the titles than in the authors recommended. One major reason for this is the prevalence of book series and videos focusing on a singular author. This shows that the BookTok canon may also focus more on the authors than the titles themselves. Colleen Hoover, whose fame has been credited to social media and in particular TikTok (Herman 2022) was mentioned 60 times in the dataset. For her, Berglund and Steiner’s (2021) rule of topicality may apply, as she has been publishing between one and three books a year for the past eleven years.

As different platforms serve different users it follows naturally that different genres and styles of content are prevalent among these spaces. While the title of “New York Times bestselling author” can be a career-defining distinction and sign of success (Grady 2017), the label of “BookTok book” may not have the same effect. At the same time, these two titles are not exclusionary and may also be valued differently depending on who the target audience of a book is. As popular literature is read more than highbrow literature (Verboord 2012), it is also important to have spaces to get recommendations and discuss these titles. Interviewing creators, Canter (2022) found that BookTok has created a home for book lovers who have an affinity to books that traditionally fall into the categorization of low culture. Thus, it represents an important space for expression of these interests and explains the canonization of books that may seem questionable to the more intellectual critics. For readers, this can reduce shame around reading certain genres like romance (Thapa 2022) as well as serve as an introduction to get into reading (Paul 2023) similarly to how *A Court of Thorns and Roses* introduces readers

to a genre. This normalization can lead to a general shift in values, especially as culture targeting women have historically been at the bottom of cultural classification (Philips 2020).

8.3.3 Recommended by readers, just like you?

The book titles recommended, similarly to the hashtags, are also indicators of the demographic present on BookTok. Many of the titles come from genres with more feminine connotations such as romance and mystery (see table 1). There is also a large gender gap when it comes to the authors who are recommended repeatedly, as only five male authors were recommended three times. In contrast to this, 13 female authors were recommended 10 or more times. Additionally, many titles can be classified as “young adult”, which overlaps with the primary age range on TikTok as a whole, as the platform is still known for targeting a younger demographic despite catering to users of all ages (Boffone 2022). Additionally, the general focus on fiction is indicative of the need for escapism and is read more by women than by men (Thomas-Corr 2019). These results are similar to what Merga (2021) found in her paper, as through looking at the hashtags she found that the most popular genre on BookTok was young adult. She also found that the identities of avid readers were manifested in the hashtags. Analysis of the hashtags in the collected dataset confirmed this as #reader and #bookworm were among the most common hashtags (see figure 32). Some of the most popular genres in the hashtags are fantasy books, sad books, romance books, dark academia, spicy books, and combinations of genres such as fantasy romance. This is in line with the genres of the most repeatedly recommended books in the dataset, as can be seen in table 1. This analysis only looked at the repetition of individual hashtags and to get a total for the genres variations in wording and subgenres would need to be grouped together. They also gave insight into the country and language, as they were not just in English.

Compared to traditional spaces for literary criticism, there is more diversity on TikTok. Or rather, there is the potential for more diversity. This depends not only on access, which as established previously is one of TikTok’s strengths, but also visibility as being on the platform is not enough to reach the “For You” pages of other users. While TikTok has been lauded for bringing more diversity into modern reading cultures (Carlick 2023), this is not as straightforward as it sounds. The interviewees acknowledged that they were seeing more diversity on the platform but that there were still improvements to be made. At the same time, Alex mentioned that before BookTok it was not a factor she took into consideration when it came to her reading. The dataset showed some diversity, with creators from different

backgrounds as well as diversity within what is being read and recommended. However, the question of where the diversity really is on BookTok is still open.

Due to the wide array of creators on TikTok, in theory it is possible to find someone who looks like you and reads and reviews the kind of books you are interested in. TikTok has the potential to let anyone review and recommend books, yet in practice this is not the case. The creators appearing the most often on the “For You” page still have a lot in common: they are primarily female (or female presenting), under the age of 40 and speak English. Most of them are white and from English speaking countries. Despite the dataset being collected over a number of days and at different times, the amount of male presenting BookTokers is limited. As not all creators listed pronouns and many videos do not include the creator themselves, it can be hard to analyze the gender ratio. Within the dataset only two videos were clearly identifiable as having been produced by men. Bookish spaces online are known for primarily catering to women, as Mike Thelwall and Kate Bourrier (2019) found when looking at the gender distribution in book clubs on Goodreads. As several articles have highlighted this fact about BookTok (Harris 2021; Flood 2021), it is not surprising that the dataset confirms this. Overall, this predominance of women is in line with previous research on the demographics of reviewers on social media (Driscoll 2021; Eder 2021). At the same time, young women may still have troubles getting into the more gatekept literary spaces and as such can get their opinions heard through TikTok. The algorithm has been known to limit the reach of creators of color and has been accused of the same thing when it came to other visible features such as size and general attractiveness (Köver and Reuter 2019; McCluskey 2021). This can put focus on physique rather than intellectual merit when it comes to reaching a wide audience with recommendations.

At the same time, because of the niche areas, it may be possible to find more recommendations that lie outside the mainstream. These could be works that are not seen as important enough to be read and reviewed by members of the book industry. Furthermore, due to the sheer number of books being published every year most non-academic criticism lies on newly published works. Thus, the revisiting of older titles that was characteristic of early BookTok is unique to reader-run places of criticism. This is similar to the freedom described by Eder (2021) when it comes to BookTubers picking which books to read, as they have the possibility to give attention to books that otherwise would not get any. In their paper Boffone and Jerasa (2021) argued that TikTok allows teenagers to engage with queer literature in ways they otherwise might not be able to as the spaces to do so may not be available. This interest

was also reflected in the dataset as several of the recommendation videos focused on LGBTQ+ recommendations.

One space where BookTok is pushing diversity forward is in the publishing formats. Independently or self-published authors can easily promote their books on the platform and receive more engagement than otherwise expected. Moreover, the interest from the community is there. Addie mentioned how they are now getting to have their time of day, as a number of independently published books have gone viral and are receiving more interest. This could indicate a change in the publishing industry.

BookTok has become attuned to calling out authors and creators for doing things wrong. This was mentioned by the interviewees, as BookTok opened their eyes to problems present in books they enjoyed. Alex highlighted that for people like her, who do not speak English as their first language, they may not be able to notice subtleties like the roots of words. Thus, BookTok can also work as a place for discussion and awareness when reviewing, going beyond the experience of reading the book. This was also visible in one of the chattier videos in the dataset, as the creator spoke about current debates regarding the genre and directed to resources to learn more before recommending books from that genre (@kaliereads 2022).

A lot of the press coverage BookTok has received has been positive in tone, however it is not a sentiment shared by everyone, which becomes evident when reading some of the comments on these articles (Harris 2021). This negativity could be linked to the fact that the community is primarily made of women or female presenting people. This is in line with historic tendencies of female reading practices, from the early novels to chick lit (Pearson 1999; Mißler 2017). This prevalence of women is also reflected in the main genres that are recommended on the platform, as aforementioned, there is a strong focus on the romance genre as well as books that have a strong emotional impact. Furthermore, the structure of the videos and aesthetics used within the dataset are generally quite feminine and in line with a feminine target audience. Among the recommendation topics were also videos that focused on books written by women, and in general the majority of the most-recommended authors featured are female. This feminine atmosphere on the platform can also be linked to the use of personal experiences in recommendations, as women are traditionally seen to be more in tune with this.

As discussed, expressing emotions is a vital part of recommending books on TikTok. The emotional experience of reading the book is also often at the forefront, with the language use reflecting what emotions the books will cause. For example, thriller books were described by focusing on their effects in terms of scary or mind altering. The dataset included multiple videos of people crying and holding books. These expressions of emotion are an endorsement

for the books, as it shows that the writing and characters impact the reader. While not all videos included crying, there is a focus on books with sad themes. Many recommendations included the words sad or heartbreaking. This was further supported by the music picked which would increase the drama and the tone of the video. In some cases the audio was a sad dialogue or monologue from a movie or TV show that like the music increased the emotional strength of the recommendation. Recommending books based on the feeling they caused the creator to have was quite common. This focus on emotions when recommending books is in line with previous research on reader-based reviews (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2019; Driscoll 2021) as well as BookTok (Merga 2021; Wiederhold 2022). The video format allows creators to share unfiltered emotions, making it possible to show feelings and reactions that may be hard to put into words. Furthermore, the tone of voice in book talk videos often revealed an extra layer of passion, whether or not the creator enjoyed the book. At the same time, some nuance and context may be lost that would be present in a written review as there is more time to think and ensure that the sentence expresses the correct meaning.

Due to the prevalence of physical editions, it is also possible to see which edition of a book creators are reading (as opposed to digital images of the cover which could be chosen solely based on looks). This shows that not all of the books in the dataset are read in English (see figure 34, 36). It also highlights the prevalence of English language books, as most of the books that appeared in another language were translations from English. Many of the international titles were also popular TikTok books, so at times the covers would be recognizable to users who do not speak the language, allowing the video to retain international appeal despite the language switch. This is also because many of the formats used on BookTok can be done without speaking, making it easy to adopt to different language contexts (see chapter seven). The prevalence of BookTok books shows that people are taking recommendations and adapting them to their own language needs, and the books famous on TikTok are successful internationally. At the same time, it is important to highlight that not all books featured on TikTok were originally written in English even if the edition shown is in English. Japanese and Korean literature especially have become popular in the last few years and make up quite a lot of the recommendations.

The dataset showed that the way in which BookTokers utilize English in comparison to their native language varies. While some videos featured books in another language, the caption was still in English (see figure 34, 35). Some videos had captions in English as well as another language, which seemed to be a direct translation of the English caption. This also happened in some videos where the reading language was English (see figure 35). Thus, the language in the

captions reflects the target audience of the videos, for example having both languages present targets both international and local audiences, whereas videos with captions in the same language as the editions focus on the local group, as can be seen in a video posted by a library in Sweden sharing their newly arrived “feel good” romances (see figure 36).

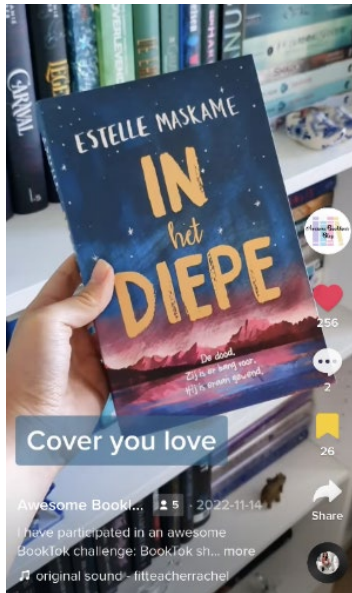


Figure 34 Example of books in another language (Dutch) with English in the caption and on screen. Text on screen is “Cover you love” and is part of a bookish audio meme. Screenshot of @awesomebookloverblog (2022).

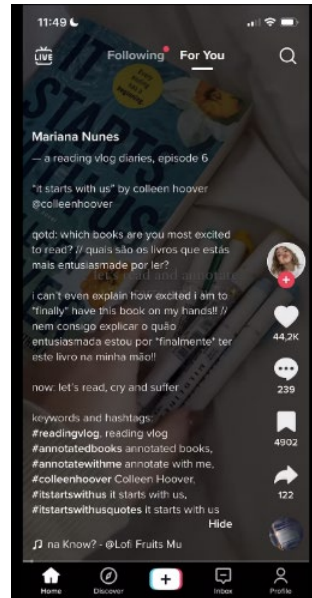


Figure 35 Example of a video caption in both English and Portuguese. The book read in the video is in English. Screenshot of @chroniclesofmariana (2022).



Figure 36 Example of a video where the book recommendation and the caption are not in English (here: Swedish). Screenshot of @filipstadsbibliotek (2022).

While the majority of BookTok-related topics that are talked about in the news are in English, as creators from non-English speaking countries also post in English, there are signs that there are country or language specific subgroups within BookTok. These can be identified through the hashtags, as the analysis found that there were a number of different country markers. A common hashtag was #booktokaustralia or #booktokau, creating a distinction among English speakers alongside #ukbooktok. Other nationalities visible in the hashtags were #booktokgermany and #booktoknl or #boektok, as well as a hashtag in Arabic. This indicates that there are delineations within the BookTok community and possibly separate group norms depending on target country or language. These hashtags can be used to target a certain demographic as well as develop a sense of community. It can also make it easier to find content relevant to one’s regional background, for example book titles that have not been translated into other languages.

All in all, BookTok recommends a more diverse set of book titles than originally anticipated. The creators use a variety of different platform features to best get their message across, while still enjoying the creative process of making content.

9. Conclusion

The success of BookTok can be linked to a combination of factors including platform affordances, the short video format and an infamous algorithm that BookTokers can take advantage of to bring their recommendations to a wider audience. However, there are also other factors at play that cannot be measured by looking at the content and platform itself, such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the prevalence of short attention spans and the overall cultural significance of TikTok.

While the algorithm is what makes the recommendations popular by distributing them to an interested audience, the TikTok format is what makes the recommendations memorable and causes viewers to act on them. Compared to previous platforms it is easier to introduce bookish content to new audiences as the algorithm will recommend it to both those who have already shown interest in this style of content and those who are predicted to be interested in it based on overlapping interests and past interactions with content on their “For You” pages. The use of audio memes and trends that span across the different niches of TikTok further supports this, as the prevalence of these creates instant understanding and allows videos to be connected. The format also allows books to become viral because of the limited scope in the videos, the ease of retrieving the recommendation, and the memorability of the recommendation itself. Due to the limitations of the format, which requires quick recommendations that focus on just one or a few main points, it is more effective when it comes to getting viewers to buy the book.

The interviews showed that algorithms impact how creators pick which books they read and recommend, as well as the creative process when making a recommendation video. This shows that algorithms influence the recommendations both before and after they are given. Thus, the algorithmic curation is a red thread throughout the entire content creation process. This is increased through reinforcing effects on the recommendations as the interviewees found it easier to talk about books that are already popular. Not only was it easier as context about the book could be omitted, due to viewers familiarity with it, it also increased the likelihood of creating popular and inoffensive content. Offline, these recommendations are then further enforced through their placement in BookTok displays and referencing by the media. At the same time, the dataset found that the range of popular titles today is still expanding as new books are being recommended.

The different genres found in the dataset are a mixture of adaptations of previous formats as well as unique TikTok formats. This makes it possible to cover a wide range of niches in terms of both video formats and contents which in turn due to the variation makes the recommendations more effective as they can reach wider audiences. TikTok supports this

further by actively creating niches because it connects the users' different interests and recommends content that may fit, for example if a user is into cozy habits they may receive recommendations for cozy fantasy novels.

As aforementioned, the success of BookTok cannot be attributed solely to the platform itself. It rose to popularity during a time when other spaces for discussion, trends, and socializing were severely limited. The pandemic combined with developments in the book industry as well as general trends in media consumption and user agency created the perfect mix for BookTok to create an unprecedented sphere of influence.

The main limitation this thesis faced was that it is not possible to access algorithms directly. To solve this the outcomes of the algorithm, in the form of the algorithmic imaginary and subsequent algorithmic practices of the creators were researched. As the TikTok algorithm focuses on personalization this is present in the research dataset despite precautions taken (separate research account, restricted actions, screen recording instead of rewatching). Furthermore because of the time that content remains popular future research will yield different results. Thus, this thesis shows what books were and how they were recommended in November 2022 to both new and established users. Additionally, it was hard to contact smaller BookTokers as with the default settings it is not possible to contact other creators on TikTok without being friends. As many creators did not respond to the request for an interview, the number of interviewees is quite limited. Thus, this thesis focused on creators with mid-to large followings and problems of smaller creators most likely have been left out. In consequence, combined with the short duration of the video gathering the data collected for this thesis is quite limited. While it is possible to use the results to make suggestions, the limitations of the dataset in terms of size and personalization need to be taken into account.

While in this thesis the benefits of the "For You" page instead of the "Following" page were highlighted, future research could focus on the effect of following a creator on TikTok. A comparison could be drawn between which videos show up on the two pages or whether the content on following is more tailored to a users' interest. This is of particular interest as TikTok's tactic of being content-first seems to be undergoing some changes as the platform integrates more features akin to social-graph first platforms. Another interesting research avenue would be to explore the way authors experience TikTok and how they model their decisions on which video styles they choose to copy. While the use of certain genres by authors was touched on in this thesis, the perspectives of the authors themselves are not.

Future research could also look further into the gender gap, perhaps by specifically seeking out male BookTokers and learning about their experience within the community. Due

to the prevalence of female BookTokers there might be stark differences in the ways creators communicate about books based on gender, as well as the role domestic spaces play in the videos. Similar to this difference, investigating the different countries and languages present on BookTok could be another potential research project. As the video hashtags indicated, there are country- and language-specific subgroupings within the community. This could even be seen among English-speaking BookTokers, as the hashtags signified if the BookToker was Australian or from the United Kingdom. Additionally, the use of English alongside the mother tongue, especially if the reading language is the latter, presents another research opportunity.

There has been a shift on TikTok in the last year, when it comes to the way content is being distributed and received but also how it is taken up by the audience. As discussed in chapter six, the virality originally associated with BookTok is passing. This will, and already is, lead to changes in how the community interacts with books in the future. Thus, BookTok and its role in the book industry can be explored further in ways now still unknown.

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Appendix 1: TikTok videos

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Appendix 2: Book titles mentioned

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Appendix 3: Interview materials

1. Interview questions

Demographic/introductory questions

1. Where are you from? (country)
2. How long have you been creating TikToks?
3. What is your language background and what languages do you usually read in?
4. What kinds of books do you enjoy reading?

TikTok algorithm

1. Do you consider TikTok to be social media?
2. Do you share book content on other platforms as well?
3. Have you noticed anything special on TikTok compared to other platforms you use?
4. Do you prefer using TikTok? If yes, why?
5. What are your favorite features of TikTok?
6. How do you feel about the TikTok algorithm? Have you noticed (anything about) the TikTok algorithm?
7. Does the algorithm affect how you use TikTok?
8. How do you think the algorithm works?

BookTok

1. How did you find out about BookTok?
2. What is special about the BookTok community?
3. Do you interact a lot with other TikTok users/creators?
4. Have you read the popular BookTok books? Why or why not?
5. Do you receive recommendations from TikTok? How do you save these recommendations?
6. What inspires the content you make?
7. How does the content you create on TikTok differ from other platforms?
8. How do you select what to talk about on BookTok?
9. How do you structure your videos?
10. How do you decide on the format, e.g. whether or not to show your face?
11. How do you select which hashtags to use, for example book titles and authors?

12. What content do you think is the most popular/performs the best on BookTok, e.g monthly wrap ups, specific recommendations, reading vlogs?
13. What things would you like to see more of on BookTok? Is there something that is missing entirely?
14. Why do you create BookTok videos/who do you create the videos for?
15. For people who speak more than English: is there pressure to use English/read English books based on the algorithm?
16. What books do you read outside of BookTok?

2. Data processing and ethics

The interviews were recorded using the built-in record button on Zoom. During the interview notes were also taken by hand to record key points in case of data loss. The file was then downloaded. Zoom creates multiple audio files making it easy to create a transcript. This was done by importing the audio file into Adobe Premiere Pro and transcribing the sequence. Once imported into Word, the transcript was edited by hand to remove errors and make the format easier to read.

The audio files were encrypted and saved on the University of Bergen's OneDrive. Only the researcher had access to the files and upon request the thesis supervisor. The consent forms and transcripts were saved anonymously with the number of the interview included in the file name. All recordings will be deleted upon acceptance of the thesis. The data was anonymized and all quotes used in this thesis are attributed under a pseudonym.

3. Thematic analysis

Table 2 Overview of the main themes in the thematic analysis.

Main themes	Subtopics
algorithmic imaginary	awareness, posting strategies (including timing, hashtags, and live), metaphors, superstitions
tiktok platform	comparison, benefits of the platform (including mentioning favorite features)
reader life	reading and buying habits, finding booktok (some overlap with algorithms), changes in habits, shift from amateur to professional

content creation	strategies for types of content/being successful (overlap with posting strategies), different styles, production/creative process, audience awareness, values (including controversy)
booktok community	community engagement
content creators	pressure, looks (linked to algorithmic imaginary), role, compensation, perception (linked to values)
other (topics that came up and just do not fully fit)	gender, diversity, booktok titles, independent authors, materiality, attention span