

THE VALUE OF THE READER AND READING: TYPES OF
READERS ON BOOKTOK

by

ASHLEEN BRAR

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Approved: Dr. Mattie Burkert
Primary Thesis Advisor

This thesis explores the question: in today's world, where the presence of technology and social media is constantly increasing and advancing, what is the importance of reading as an activity and the reader as an identity? Focusing on BookTok, TikTok's sub-community of book lovers, it examines how people define value in books and how that connects to their identity as readers. Through case studies of BookTok content captioned, "types of readers," this thesis identifies three main categories: print book, audiobook, and e-book readers, along with subtypes such as annotators, overthinkers, and collectors. These videos often use humor or relatable scenes to show how people experience books, revealing how different reading modes and preferences shape a person's connection to books, in addition to the role of aesthetics, emotional engagement, and social performance, which are all key to understanding how books and reading are valued today. By drawing on current scholarship by researchers like Sarah Jerasa, Brenda Wiederhold, and Elisavet Rosaki, this thesis concludes that BookTok, as a digital reading community and platform exemplifies how readers collectively understand pleasure and belonging, reaffirming that books continue to be powerful sites of meaning, identity, and community in the contemporary world.

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Introduction

I have always considered myself a “reader.” My family would agree. Whether I’m at home, visiting relatives, or traveling to India, I almost always have a book with me. I can read in moving vehicles too, making it easy for me to take a book on road trips. Then there’s my wish lists for birthdays or Christmas, which frequently list books as my top options. My mom does not hesitate to tell anyone that I love books because I tend to tune out the world, including my mom’s voice.

But identifying as a reader seems to go beyond simply being able to read. Reading is defined as being able to understand written or printed words and symbols, in its most basic sense, but it also “prioritizes meaning” (Fischer, 11). Fischer elaborates on the various ways in which things like art, pictures, and even signals are considered as being “read” (15). In this sense, being a “reader” could mean that anyone who gives meaning to objects and engages with concepts from a wide range of texts, beyond just printed words, such as sounds and images, is a reader. This suggests that identifying as a reader is more about how one interprets and connects with content rather than simply understanding written language.

Being a reader, as opposed to a person who knows how to read, can be connected with what Jessica Pressman calls “bookishness”: “feeling attached—to books, bookish identities, and communities...” (xi). I have come across many examples of bookishness in my personal life as well as on social media, where I follow content creators who are passionate about reading and sharing the books they read. Many of my current favorite books are ones I read based on these kinds of videos, which utilize certain trends and techniques to relate to readers and develop their “bookish identities.”

While reading has long been an intellectual and cultural activity, the way books are valued today is changing in response to digital culture. Social media has shaped the way people engage with culture since the emergence of social networking sites in the late 1990s, which allowed users to connect and communicate with each other, especially in the early 2000s with social media that is still being used today (Dhingra & Rakesh, 2019). Reddan et al. focus on the social reading practices of book communities on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, and use Pressman's work as one of the pieces of scholarship that recognizes "a convergence in book and digital culture in the twenty-first century" (2). While Reddan et al. analyze reading communities on particular social media platforms, including the ones previously mentioned, this paper builds on their work by focusing on the identities and self-representation of readers on BookTok with the contemporary reading formats used to express modern reading practices.

This thesis will examine two major, interrelated shifts: the increased availability of literary works in digital formats, such as electronic books and audio recordings; and the emergence of bookish social media communities, where users actively debate the respective merits of various formats and modes of reading, among other issues.

From Print to Digital Reading

When we hear the word "book" or "reading," the images that come to mind are likely to be pages filled with words arranged and bound together in a rectangular shape; a physical object to engage with intellectually. Oxford Languages defines "book" as "a written or printed work consisting of pages glued or sewn together along one side and bound in covers."

Before the print form, there were manuscripts: works of writing written by hand (LB, Incunabula). And before that, words and images were carved in stone and other media. Steven Fischer explains that, in Egyptian times around 1300 BC, reading was equivalent to speaking

(11). After realizing that verbal procedures could be “garbled, disputed, or forgotten,” writing was introduced and “the human voice turned to stone” (Fischer, 11). Research shows that people originally read out loud in different ways depending on the culture or region (Fischer, 2003; Manguel, 2014). Over time, reading became silent when people read aloud so quietly that they mouthed the words, only a breath of a sound coming out. This realization came about by the philosopher, Saint Augustine, “For with Augustine we first encounter a clear distinction between loud reading and silent reading: between the written word as the human voice and the written word as its own medium” (Fischer, 89). Now, reading aloud and reading silently have their own values and appropriate times, making each method important in its own ways.

This shift in how reading is performed—whether aloud or silently—highlights not just changing practices, but the enduring power of the book as a technology. Nicole Howard says it best:

“But in fact, no other technology in human history has had the impact of this invention. Indeed. The book is the one technology that has made all others possible... Books represent a peak of technology, giving permanence and form to ideas and knowledge (ix-x).

Howard defines the importance of books in this way, and I corroborate her point. Whether 500 years ago or today, books continue to be a place where humans have put their thoughts and ideas into a tangible object that can be moved and circulated to spread information, knowledge, stories, and, overall, the traces of people.

As someone who started reading at a time when my school library held exclusively print books, the word “library” still brings shelves of physical books to mind. Today, however, libraries and bookstores offer the same literary works in a variety of formats-- one can find a print novel available as an e-book or audiobook to check out in the same way you would the print book. In the context of books going from print texts to electronic modes, Fischer argues that

the act of reading is essentially the same between the e-book and the physical book, and that the way humans process the written word will remain the same as well (Fischer, 324). Other critics, including Brian Cummings and John P. Feather, emphasize the ways that the reading experience is modified by the book's material features. As Feather puts it:

Authors can only envisage the dissemination of their works in the physical form that is the normal product of the techniques available at the time of writing. When the techniques or the forms undergo major changes, such as those from the scroll to the codex, or from manuscript to print, or from print to VDU, the text itself may be the same, but the reader's perception of it is profoundly different (13).

This tension between reading as a mental act, Fischer's argument, versus reading as a materially situated experience, Feather's point, speaks directly to contemporary reading cultures. I concur with Feather. At university, I have read dozens of books on my phone. Yet, I still regard print books in a very different, sometimes higher way. This is because even if the words do not change, the experience of reading them does. The medium transforms how the text is interpreted, processed, and valued. In other words, materiality shapes meaning.

When referring to books in this thesis, I will be talking about works of literature as they are accessed and used today through different modes and on social media. While I refer to all of these media formats as "books," I remain mindful of the ways reading experiences differ with medium and interested in how social media communities understand and debate these differences.

Bookish Communities Online

While it might seem counterintuitive, the physical book has taken on new symbolic and performative significance on social media. Reddan et al assert that "the identity of being a

reader” in online communities is defined by “a preference for printed books” (2). This preference is shown clearly in videos on social media where creators often make content displaying a book on their Kindle along with a physical copy of the same book on their shelves. Simply for the aesthetic pleasure of owning and displaying them, some readers collect books such as special editions, sometimes even different kinds of the same novel, which contain exclusive artwork or sprayed edges. Despite the rising popularity of e-books and audiobooks, physical books are consistently sought after. This want is also not only in books of various modes, but in various book-related merchandise such as phone cases, jewelry, clothing, shoes, and more, which exhibits the presence of books in a reader’s life and elaborates on what elements of books they value beyond reading itself.

Books take on new meanings beyond their textual content on platforms like TikTok, a short-form video social media app. Specifically in the sub-community of BookTok, they are not only read but also displayed and performed as part of online reader identities. Books are often presented in the personal spaces of content creators through elaborate bookshelves or other aesthetically pleasing arrangements for their visual and symbolic value. This has led some critics to express concern that, on TikTok, performative engagement with books is just as significant as reading itself. For example, in his discussion of the performative nature of online engagement with books, Michael Dezuanni discusses “shelfies,” selfies with a bookshelf, that creators use in the formation of their identities and performing the roles specific to them. Dezuanni also describes “markers of bookish aesthetic,” meaning objects acting as props, that feed into the performative nature of bookish content creators (14). Along with creatively decorated bookshelves using fake plants and fairy lights, creators will arrange their books in specific ways to appeal to viewers. Some will show books in a “TBR,” to-be-read, pile, or stacks of books in

the shape of a tree (Dezuanni, 11). By showing their collections of books in large stacks and on shelves in the background of videos, readers can display their “expertise” and knowledge of books.

But how do we know they have read all those books? How can we trust they are not just like Jay Gatsby, from *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, who displayed an impressive library of books only to reveal that they are all unread? A man in Gatsby’s library, Owl Eyes, exclaimed, ‘It’s a bona-fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me... What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop, too—didn’t cut the pages’ (45). This detail, that the pages were uncut, is what signaled that the books hadn’t been read. When books had pages that were bound together, like Gatsby’s, meaning the edges were not trimmed, the pages had to be cut in order to read the book and since Gatsby’s were not cut, it showed that he had not read them and likely did not have the intention of reading them in the future, either. Gatsby created this persona, which his grand library was a part of, to show off for the people that attended his parties, especially Daisy, his love interest. But, as Owl Eyes’ commentary showed, this display was not a well-received one.

Barry Pierce, a former BookTuber, critiques the culture of the community because of the performative aesthetic that results in “a showy nothingness that only approximates bibliophilia” (Pierce, 2023). A bibliophile, or what is often known as a bookworm, is a person who loves books with a special interest in collecting them. Many creators on BookTok exhibit this personality by showcasing their book collections online and creating various trending videos that may not even have anything to do with reading. Pierce explains some of these TikTok videos where people put more effort into being viewed as a reader than actually reading books. I would argue that many of the examples Pierce gave—making mini versions of books, wrapping unread

books in brown paper, or reading in cute outfits—are part of what makes readers enjoy the act of reading and can often help readers develop their identity and reading styles by pushing the reader to appreciate books in unique ways.

Research Aims and Methods

This thesis addresses the following questions: What is the value of a book and its reader? Is it still in the book's contents, or more about the book's role in a reader's personal and social identity? How has the act of reading evolved, and how does social media portray it? In a time where books are used as symbols for various purposes just as much as intellectual works, what does it mean to be a reader?

The central argument, that BookTok as a platform and its “Types of Readers” content exemplifies the value of a reader and the act of reading, is explained through the display of reader identities on BookTok by examining the behavior, sounds, and aesthetics of the content, as well as the videos' captions, subtitles, and hashtags. Reading culture continues to evolve, and BookTok is a contemporary community that creates a welcoming environment for all types of readers, which has amplified and expanded what readers value as well as the value of the readers themselves.

One of the main ways books retain value in the digital age is through their economic and cultural worth. As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, “value,” as a noun, is “the regard that something is held to deserve; the importance, worth, or usefulness of something.” This defines value in three parts, each of which means something different but equally important, as books have historically been valued in all these ways: their usefulness as educational tools that inform, their worth as treasured objects that symbolize knowledge and economic privilege, and their importance as cultural artifacts that shape identity and community.

On BookTok, books are valued for their content and as aesthetic objects that contribute to readers' online identity formation. This way of valuing books corresponds to another definition of "value" from the OED: the "principles or standard of behavior; one's judgment of what is important in life." As I will demonstrate, BookTok communities are often deeply invested in identifying a set of shared standards for behavior, and members engage in collective judgment of one another's adherence to these values. Being a "reader" may involve the development of a set of individual values with respect to the act of reading, but in many cases, those values are shaped and policed by a social group as a condition of acceptance and belonging.

This thesis examines how book value is created and the evolving role of reading in a contemporary context by conducting case studies on different "types of readers" as represented on TikTok. My work builds on Andrew Bennett's exploration of the construction of various models of "the reader" and his questions of if "true or correct reading" exists, what "readers do when they read," and how to explain "the identity of the reader" (2). He lists almost twenty models that have been named by critics, such as "the female reader (Schweickart, Flint)," "the ideal reader (Culler)," and "the mock reader (Gibson)" (Bennett, 3). While Bennet describes them as "models" or ideal identities of "the reader," this thesis regards them as "types of readers" because of the nature of BookTok, which represents many types of readers, whether a video is explicitly about the topic or not, without the intention of enforcing a certain model on viewers. Some may perceive or be influenced to accept and internalize an ideal or standard of a type of reader, but the variety of BookTok content shows that the subcommunity fosters these identities, as the studies will show, though some more prominently than others, answering some of Bennett's questions.

After laying out the theoretical framework at the end of this introduction, the section *Platform History* will discuss the history of the social media platforms YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, in reference to their book communities to display how TikTok's platform and algorithm surpassed its competitors and why it was the ideal app for my research. *Material Media* will dive into the bulk of the primary case studies, introducing the "types of readers" content on BookTok and exploring the electronic, audio, and print modes of books as depicted in the videos. In *Interactions with Print*, the sub-types of readers that focus on how readers interact with print texts are explained through annotators, book abusers, and collectors. *Critical or Calm?* uses BookTok videos to portray the debate of book criticism and reading for enjoyment. It provides examples of a different set of readers, overthinkers, pro reviewers, and mood readers, briefly drawing on the website Goodreads as a comparison of the review culture. "Reading as Object, Concept, and Experience" places reading in a personal context to discuss the role of interpretation. This leads to the final section, *Receptivity in Reader Experience*, which shows the feelings of TikTok users, through their comments, and the judgment towards books and authors, like Colleen Hoover.

Theoretical Framework

Contrary to what many may believe, reading is not a purely individual or solitary act (Dezuanni, 2022; Bennett, 2014). It “is an inherently social practice” and “produces meaning shaped by the time and place in which a reader reads” (Reddan et al. 1). One example of this is a book club in which a group of people read and discuss a book that everyone agrees upon. By meeting regularly, often monthly, readers can share their thoughts about books with others and create experiences that display an aspect of the social act of reading. This format of reading continues to grow and evolve with subgroups that focus on niche interests and utilize social media to further engagement. As this paper focuses on the role of social media, it is notable that what was once thought of as an in-person activity has transitioned online with the evolution of digital culture, which pertains to “the most dramatic and important” changes that occur in society from the evolution of digital technologies (Gere, 5).

There are social, political, and cultural factors that influence how one might read, which can be demonstrated through the reader-response framework. This theoretical framework, explored by Andrew Bennett, provides a valuable lens for analyzing the dynamics of Bookstagram and Booktok communities. This approach aligns directly with observations in online book communities and how they mediate reading choice and interpretations. On these platforms, readers publicly share their responses to books, engage in discussions, offer recommendations, and construct shared meanings. In this way, readers turn the act of reading into a social activity in which they can get input from others and give feedback as well.

This is particularly insightful for the viewer and reader as both are active agents in the process of interpretation (Bennett). Some people may only like getting books that they believe are popular through the repetitive appearances of certain novels. Others like seeing books that

are underrepresented to expand their repertoire. Books can be seen, read, and understood as a work of art (Habib, 711; Bourdieu, 4). Whether it is the writing itself or the material aspect, the receiver is experiencing a phenomenon that allows them to view an ordinary object as something more.

“Judgement of Taste”

According to Pressman, “The book has historically symbolized privacy, leisure, individualism, knowledge, and power” (2). Readers may associate books with personal identity, self-expression, or status, especially in social spaces where these symbols are displayed and interpreted. These symbolic associations align closely with the ways books are valued not only for their content but also for their cultural and aesthetic significance.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu claims, “The aesthetic disposition demanded by the products of a highly autonomous field of production is inseparable from a specific cultural competence” (4). In this statement, there are three primary parts working together. First, “aesthetic disposition” refers to a person’s tendency to appreciate something from a physical, outward standpoint over its use or function. In the case of books, this means the look and feel of a book is admired more than its content. The way it looks sitting on a shelf or a coffee table, or the way it feels when you hold it in your hands, has more significance than what the book is about. Next, Bourdieu says this inclination is ordered “by the products of a highly autonomous field of production.” This is describing areas that are largely independent of broader economic or political pressures and more set through traditions such as classical music. This connects to what he calls “cultural competence,” which represents the understanding needed to appreciate a specific cultural realm. Only if one has cultural competence can one navigate the history and form of an art form, in the context of Bourdieu’s work, and value its complexities. This

knowledge and the skills involved with cultural competence are closely connected, or inseparable, from aesthetic disposition. Overall, Bourdieu argues that aesthetic disposition and cultural competence are interconnected, and both are needed to fully appreciate art from a highly autonomous field of production.

In general, Bourdieu's work critiques the relationship between cultural capital- cultural competence, knowledge, and education- and taste, a social construct that is shaped by social structures and class rather than personal preferences. Along with that, he argues that people with greater cultural capital are perceived to have better taste, or acceptable judgments about the aesthetic value of an object. I agree that cultural capital affects how a person values objects or art, but Bourdieu's claims conflict with the nature of TikTok and BookTok, which strive to create a welcoming platform no matter the cultural capital an individual has.

The claim analyzed in this section is one small part of Bourdieu's argument, which is essential for understanding how and why readers value books and reading. Aesthetic disposition in the context of this thesis applies to readers and collectors who obtain books for their form and to display. Readers who collect beautiful editions, show off annotated margins, or purchase themed book accessories are demonstrating a form of aesthetic engagement that creators and viewers on BookTok need to have the cultural competence to understand. By examining BookTok with Bourdieu's work in mind, the idea that social media platforms shape reader identities by the kinds of reading seen as aesthetic or valuable can be better portrayed.

Platform History

In recent years, scholarship on social media and reading has increasingly recognized the importance of online platforms in shaping how readers interact with books and with each other. Researchers have examined how sites like Instagram (Bookstagram), YouTube (BookTube), and more recently, TikTok (BookTok), cultivate reading communities that reflect personal identities, social trends, and cultural values. Each platform facilitates different kinds of reader expression—Instagram foregrounds visual aesthetics, YouTube supports long-form reviews, and TikTok encourages short, fast-paced, highly algorithmic content. While Instagram and YouTube fostered early online book cultures in the 2010s, TikTok has quickly emerged as the dominant force in reader engagement due to its viral potential, participatory trends, and widespread cultural reach. Because of this shift, TikTok has become the most relevant and generative site for exploring how readers today present, perform, and shape their identities through books.

While Jessica Pressman's research spans from 2000 to 2015, it does not address the influence of TikTok, which had not emerged at the time. Since then, scholarly attention has turned to newer online reading communities, showing that the reading communities online have significantly helped nurture diverse reading identities like #BookTok on TikTok (Jerasa, 2025; Maddox & Gill, 2023) and #Bookstagram on Instagram (Boér-Endacott, 2025). These platforms have each fostered distinct reading cultures, yet comparative studies between them remain limited.

YouTube

YouTube has its own community of book lovers and readers preexisting TikTok by over 10 years (Statista, 2025). YouTube was launched in 2005 and now, 20 years later, is still popular with many creators as part of BookTube, which emerged around 2010 (Wiederhold, 2022). Its

long-form videos make it distinct from TikTok and give creators the time to enable meaningful discussions around various topics with books. BookTube has its advantages, but my brief research showed that BookTok has a strong presence on BookTube, especially with the YouTube Shorts aspect. Upon searching “Booktube” on YouTube, after two ads and two BookTube videos, a horizontal line of Shorts came up with BookTok written as a caption or hashtag in the first five (Fig. 1). The main takeaway here is that YouTube’s platform is ideal for viewers who value long videos that make book-related content at a slower pace, creating a different, unique viewing experience. Because the format of YouTube Shorts is very similar to TikTok and the book community draws from BookTok, it was logical to conduct this research on TikTok to get more original content.

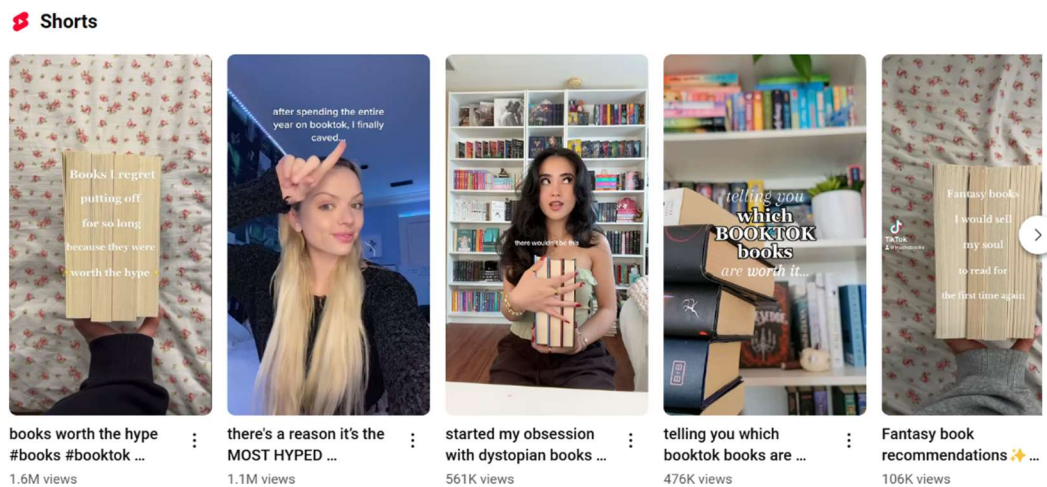


Figure 1: The first BookTube Shorts after searching “BookTube” on YouTube. “BookTok” can be seen in the caption in the video itself, the caption underneath the video, and hashtags, which can be seen after clicking on the Short to view the full caption.

Instagram

Alice Boér-Endacott points out that “how the platform [TikTok] and its communities might compare to other social media platforms” still requires long-term investigation due to the app’s relative newness (89). She also claims that, as of now, “no other platform facilitates a space for community like Instagram” (Boér-Endacott, 76), raising important questions about the specific features and affordances that enable or constrain literary engagement across different digital spaces.

In response to Boér-Endacott, I argue that TikTok is unique in comparison to Instagram and YouTube. As Maddox and Gill explored, the various “sides” of TikTok, such as BookTok, are little communities built up of users with similar interests, but no two people see the same content all of the time (1). There is always some variation in the creators or content, along with how each person interacts with a video. The primary difference between TikTok and Instagram is that TikTok provides an unfiltered version of things, whereas Instagram strives for perfection (Jerasa, 2021; Reddan et al., 2024). Overall, I assert that TikTok’s review and discussion format is more open and relatable to users than Instagram’s by establishing the historical factors of each app and their book communities in the context of this thesis.

TikTok

Before TikTok, the app Musical.ly was released in 2014 and let users make short videos primarily for lip-synching purposes. Then, in 2018, the Chinese company “ByteDance purchased Musical.ly and merged it with TikTok” (Anderson, 7). Many people turned to Musical.ly and TikTok after the loss of the popular app Vine, which was known for being a unique space for people to be their weirdest selves while sharing humorous content. After Vine was discontinued in 2017 and TikTok appeared the following year, it was easy for many Vine users to turn to this

new app. While many other social media apps rely on followers for a user to be popular, “a TikTok video from a user with absolutely no followers can quickly gain an audience as it appears in other users’ feeds,” because of its unique algorithm (Anderson, 8). This algorithmic openness and low barrier to virality created the perfect environment for niche communities to flourish, including BookTok- a space where readers and creators exchange content that often goes viral for its emotional or aesthetic appeal.

BookTok content tends to rely on visual and emotional immediacy, capitalizing on the short-form nature of the platform to promote books in creative ways that are often more affective than analytical. Oftentimes, BookTok creators post a clip that shows a paragraph, usually with dialogue, from a book they may or may not have read that is appealing and quickly catches readers’ interest. In this way, they can sometimes influence a viewer to purchase or read a book with just one sentence, as they will have an idea about the kind of writing they can expect to find in the work. Some creators will not speak for an entire video and instead show facial expressions that show how they felt about a book. Examples of videos like these show the influential nature of TikTok and how that nature extends to the subculture of BookTok.

The success and reach of BookTok is tied not only to content style but also to the app’s user base, which is predominantly young and digitally fluent. TikTok is a prime example of a social media platform that reaches audiences of varying interests and ages. 35% of TikTok users worldwide are between 20 to 29 years old, and 28% are in the age bracket of 10-19 years (Iqbal, 2021). These statistics show that the majority of TikTok users are under 30 and are part of why substantial research has been conducted to understand the impact of TikTok on young adult readers (Iqbal, 2021; Kulkarni, 2024; Reddan et al., 2024).

Underlying all of this is TikTok’s uniquely powerful algorithm, which plays a central role in shaping user experience and community formation, including how BookTok content is circulated and received. These algorithms are the instructional systems that determine and shape what social media users see on a platform. TikTok’s algorithm is very notable because of how it generates content on a user’s “For You” page. This page, often the main one users see content on, shows videos based on what the user does, leaving a comment or interacting with them, “liking” the video, sharing it with someone, or saving the video, to name a few. Each of these actions shows the algorithm that the user is interested in the content and will therefore be shown more relevant videos. In this way, the users or audience in the app are the ones who help produce the content, which is known as UGC, or user-generated content (Chandler & Munday, 2016).

The research conducted by Reddan et al. dives into the key aspects of the social reading cultures on the three platforms discussed in this section, showing how each platform encourages different kinds of engagement and community-building. It concludes that “BookTok appeals to readers who want to get swept up in emotion” (30) and labels BookTok as the platform with the most emotional engagement in comparison to Bookstagram and BookTube because of its “unfiltered” and “chaotic aesthetic” (Reddan et al., 29). My thesis builds on their research by focusing more closely on BookTok as a unique space for shaping reader identities and performances. While Reddan et al. compare multiple platforms, I take a deeper look at BookTok specifically, examining how its short-form video structure influences what types of readers and reading practices are most visible and valued. I also extend their discussion by exploring how different modes of reading—such as print, e-books, and audiobooks—are represented on BookTok, and how these representations reflect broader ideas about reading styles, engagement, and value in contemporary reading culture.

To account for the intense personalization of TikTok feeds, I created a dedicated account for this research, separate from my personal account. The videos discussed in the rest of the thesis are from the research conducted on the secondary account, which were carefully curated by interacting with BookTok videos¹ and swiping past unrelated content. This ensured the *Brar Thesis* account would only see BookTok content.

Shorts & Reels

TikTok's rapid rise and influence in shaping short-form video content has led competing platforms like YouTube and Instagram to adopt similar formats, further demonstrating TikTok's influence as a leader in contemporary social media. The Shorts format by YouTube, created in 2020, is almost identical to that of TikTok and came after TikTok's popularity with the short-form video content (Chang & Guo, 2022). The same is true for Instagram Reels as well- they were created after TikTok popularized the format in order to compete with it. Much of the content found on YouTube or Instagram is first posted on TikTok, where a creator's primary account is, and reposted on the other app to increase viewership in case some followers are on one app and not the other. The fast-growing nature of TikTok makes it worthwhile to research and sets it apart from the decade-older app, YouTube. Together, these platform developments not only reflect TikTok's widespread influence but also establish it as the most dynamic and culturally relevant site for studying how digital communities—especially reader-based ones like BookTok—form, evolve, and shape reading practices today.

¹ These interactions entailed either “liking” the content by clicking the heart icon, watching the video all the way through at least once, or saving the videos.

History of Reading

Since the beginning of the phenomenon, reading, separate from the phenomenon of writing, has inspired and empowered people through the act of reading. This makes it important to understand its past, present, and future, but particularly the first— its history.

Steven Fischer explains that, in Egyptian times around 1300 BC, reading was equivalent to speaking (11). After realizing that verbal procedures could be “garbled, disputed, or forgotten,” writing was introduced and “the human voice turned to stone” (Fischer, 11). When the demand for written words increased, the act of reading changed along with it. It is important to note here the distinct nature of reading versus writing: reading is a faculty and writing, a skill (Fischer, 8). Reading is defined as being able to understand written or printed words and symbols, in its most basic sense, but it also “prioritizes meaning” (Fischer, 11). Fischer elaborates on the various ways in which things like art, pictures, and even signals are considered as being “read” (15) that go beyond the scope of this research, but one of his points on the electronic format of texts is noteworthy. Since the act of reading is essentially the same between the e-book and the physical book, the way humans process the written word will remain the same as well (Fischer, 324). However, the e-book and electronic screens in general, Fischer realized in 2004, were “humanity’s loudest voices” (304), and this continues to be true today.

Going back to the relationship between speaking and reading when the written word was beginning, research shows that people originally read out loud in different ways depending on the culture or region (Fischer 2003, Manguel 2014). Over time, centuries later, reading became silent when people read aloud so quietly that they mouthed the words, only a breath of a sound coming out. This realization came about by the philosopher, Saint Augustine, “For with Augustine we first encounter a clear distinction between loud reading and silent reading:

between the written word as the human voice and the written word as its own medium” (Fischer, 89). Now, reading aloud and reading silently have their own values and appropriate times, making each method important in its own ways.

Reading is valuable for historical reasons, and Pressman’s writing supports this as she states, “The book has historically symbolized privacy, leisure, individualism, knowledge, and power” (2). It also informs the public of past accomplishments and setbacks; the deeds, “good” and “bad,” that have led to the present-day world. This has not always been the case. In the 15th century, after the distribution of printing, there was strict censorship over what people could write and publish (Feather, 1986).

In *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present* by M. A. R. Habib, it’s stated that “Plato was acutely aware of the disturbing power of poetry to affect people at the level of their passions and morality, as well as their basic conceptions of the gods and indeed of reality itself” (708). Whether poetry or prose, reader response theory has shown the impact of readers and literary works because of its persuasiveness (Habib 708), which continues today in the form of social media.

Material Media

This section explores modes of reading and readers, primarily comparing audio, electronic, and print book readers in the realm of TikTok. Through analyzing TikTok content, it considers how users represent the material features of each format, including the sensory experience, accessibility, and perceived legitimacy of each mode. By doing so, this section highlights how BookTok serves as a site where contemporary reading practices are performed, challenged, and valued, revealing underlying assumptions about what it means to be a reader today.

Types of Readers- Part 1

Now for the BookTok content. The primary focus of this research is “types of readers,” a kind of video content that many creators partake in to show the various ways people read. Initially, I came across two of these videos by the same creator, @jadekylielu, separated into Part 1 and Part 2. Part 1 showed the e-reader (on kindle)- who reads fast; the annotator (has color-coded tabs and pens)- who is only one chapter into the book because of that method of reading; the overreactor (is super excited and emotional); the underreactor (they read intense materials since they were a teen); and the mood reader (reads based on environment and personal feelings). It is interesting to see the diversity here and the importance of each type of reader. This thesis will delve into a few of these types, but from Part 1, the focus is on the e-reader in this section. The annotator and the mood reader are explained in the *Interactions with Print* section. These three types of readers reappear in videos with similar content, which is why there is a stronger emphasis on them.

Types of Readers- Part 2

Part 2 continues to act out the “audiobook girly” (who read the whole book because they listened to it while doing other things); the binge reader (reading in one sitting); the forgetful one (remembered that they liked it but not what it was about); and the book abuser (breaking the spine, writing in the book, dog-eared pages). From this video, I focus on the audiobook reader and briefly discuss the binge reader and, in the *Interactions with Print* section, the book abuser. In the upcoming sections, the electronic-reader mode, audiobook mode, and print book mode will be explained.

Electronic book mode

Electronic books are an increasingly popular mode to read in, and the creator believes that those who read with devices such as the Kindle read faster. This electronic reading device allows people to effortlessly read a diverse range of texts due to its compact nature and portability. Many other BookTok creators represent those who read e-books, or e-readers, as a type of reader. A sound by @therealsamalkhatib, Sam, with 78 posts using it, pokes fun at a character reading a paperback book while holding an e-book, saying, “It’s 2023, Steve, embrace the e-book.” The physical book reader responds by saying, “I stare at enough screens, thank you.” A third character listening to an audiobook is included as well, and the first two turn to look at him oddly, saying nothing but make facial expressions that can be interpreted as judgement (Sam, 2023). This humorous dialogue displays the attitudes readers can have towards each mode of reading, whether physical, electronic, or audio, but connotes that #readingisreading as @authormonroeawildrose captioned in a duet. It signals a kind of competition largely between the e-book and physical book but many content creators that use Sam’s sound admit to being a mix of all three types of readers.

To get a better understanding of how creators were engaging with the sound and responding to the audio, a focused analysis was conducted on the top third of the videos using Sam's sound. The videos were ordered by popularity with the videos that have the most likes, comments, or saves listed at the top when you click on the sound. In this process, 26 videos were categorized into whether a creator admitted they were all three types of readers- electronic, audio, or print book- or which one or two specific types. In addition, it was observed that some only asked their viewers which type of reader they were instead of sharing their own. The research highlighted one creator who did a combination of audio uses by revealing they were all three types of readers, had a preference for print books, and asked what type everyone else, meaning the viewers, identified with. Utilizing a sound on TikTok in this way creates multiple avenues for viewer engagement. If a viewer agrees with the creator and is also all three types, they may choose to "like" the video or if they also prefer print books, they may "like" or comment their agreement. A viewer can comment for any reason, whether they agree or disagree or if they are answering a creator's question, and each of these actions will result in higher content interactions, benefiting the content creator.

In terms of materiality, it is almost the antithesis of the print book and the personality a reader can feel towards a physical copy. Some BookTok influencers show the books they read on their Kindle but then buy a physical copy of the same book to keep on their shelves to show that they have read it. The simple act of keeping a book after reading it connotes its importance. This shows the value physical books hold as some can feel a sense of disconnect without any material thing to remember, but in the video, it isn't clear whether this is a particularly good or bad thing. It is simply someone reading at a quicker pace than expected due to the mode of reading used.

There is a connection between reading speed and value, though. In schools, reading quickly was something to impress others and felt rewarding, particularly when students were instructed to read aloud. This is something I had experience with, especially when in contrast to readers who struggled with their reading skills. But reading speed does not equal comprehension, like reading fast by skimming a text, just to get an overall idea of it.

For readers, it is mostly a part of getting through books quicker-- not like a competition but a personal goal and habit that is part of a reader's eagerness to finish a book and find out how it ends. Some readers can remember how much they enjoyed a book based on how long it took them to read it. If a book is particularly captivating, they may finish it within a day or two and when a topic on that particular book, author, or genre comes up, they can remember and share their experiences. On a larger scale, there are many readers that keep track of how many books they read a day, a week, a month, or a year.

On the *Brar Thesis* account, upon searching the query, "how many books I read..." in a week/month/year, it was observed that as the question, "how many" was posed, the suggestion "how many books I read in week," was immediately offered (Fig. 2). This indicates that people frequently wonder how many books others are reading in a week.

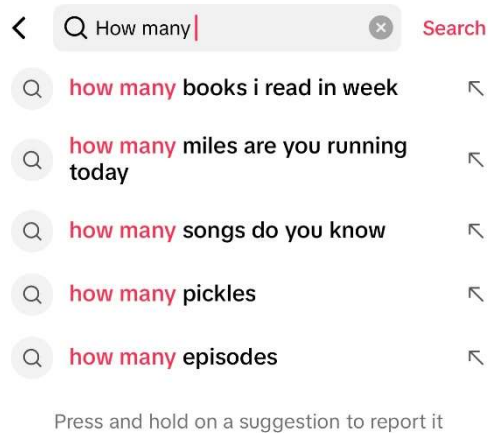


Figure. 2: The words in red in the suggested searches show the words in common to what the searcher is looking for.

After the search was entered, the first video yielded interesting results. The subtitle in the center of the screen read, “how much I read this week as a 9-5 girlie” (Kenya, 2024). As the video plays, short clips show a subtitle listing of the day of the week and how many pages they read each day underneath. Each day said the same thing: “0 pages” (Kenya, 2024). The creator, Naomi Kenya, explains in her caption that she was committing to making this type of video each week in the hopes that it would be relatable, particularly as someone who works a 9-5 job. Out of 174 comments on the video, fewer than 10 mentioned how much they read every day, meaning they did not relate to the content.

A few commenters stood out with how they avoided this: @l.alexis_ said “...audiobooks saved me from this;” @van..essa_ commented, “sometimes you just gotta squeeze in 7 minutes of an audiobook on 2x speed and that’s it,” followed by three crying emojis (Kenya, 2024). Comments like these represent a side of TikTok that offers solutions for readers who struggle to find time to read. The next section discusses audiobooks and the more valuable ways in which audiobooks have been helpful for readers.

Audiobook mode

The first character in Part 2 goes through books by listening to them. She has an app on which there are audiobooks, books that are recordings of them being read out loud, and this form of reading allows the reader to do other things while listening to the book. There are two distinct sides to this method of reading. Some readers need to see the words in order to take the content in, like subtitles with a movie. Then there are those who cannot watch a movie with subtitles and prefer to focus on the actual scenes, like readers who understand a book better when listening to someone else read it aloud. This may be controversial because it is a completely different method of reading compared to what has been traditionally associated with how people read. There are differences between reading on a Kindle versus reading with a page-bound book, but both involve skating the eyes over the words. An audiobook does not require the use of this sense and instead focuses the reader's attention on listening to the words. Even though reading in the traditional sense that many understand it as and as defined in this thesis, does not apply to audiobooks, which require a person to listen, I claim that listening to audiobooks still counts as a method of reading books. The upcoming example portrays one significant reason why audiobooks are used and how it is valuable for certain people.

The retention effectiveness may differ due to the auditory nature of this mode, but it is not every reader's goal to remember the details. Another meaningful reason I discovered for why some readers prefer audiobooks is that they help with their ADHD. Those with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder can find it difficult to sit and read for long periods of time, depending on the severity of their ADHD. The creator, @VictoriasListening, is one such person and enthusiastically posted a duet to another TikTok user with ADHD, answering how she reads and the methods that have helped her. Her three tips were to try audiobooks, to have a

companion activity, and to stop buying books. The first of these, incorporating audio into her reading, allowed Victoria to get through her TBR list, especially with her schedule as a grown adult. Her following suggestion goes along with the first as she recommends finding a simple activity to occupy oneself physically, such as cleaning, coloring, or knitting, so the brain can focus on listening. The third tip can be difficult for some book lovers to follow, but Victoria highly suggests checking out books from a library or some other system that has a set time frame for a person to borrow the book. This encourages the reader to finish the book in time instead of allowing it to remain untouched and unread because they are required to return the book if it is from a library. Audiobooks, as shown through BookTok creators like @VictoriasListening, illustrate how alternative reading modes not only expand accessibility, but also challenge traditional ideas of reading by focusing more on personal needs and habits than on strict rules about how reading should look.

Print book mode

For the last main type of reader in this section, I chose the most traditional form of reading: the print book. Within this category, there are two sides—the hardback versus the paperback reader. In a video by @emilymiahreads, the following types are acted out: “The Hardback only collector for the ‘aesthetic;’ The E-book/Kindle reader for the environment; The Audiobook reader for ignoring people; The Paperback reader for cheaper books; The Indecisive reader for having too many books in TBR pile.” The last one, “The Indecisive Reader,” shows the creator, Emily, walking across the screen holding a paperback book in one hand, an e-reader/Kindle in the other, and wired headphones in her ears that suggest she is listening to an audiobook.

Emily's caption claims readers who get hardcover books only do so for their aesthetic purposes, collecting them to easily display on shelves. Other pros of hardcover books explained by @caitsbooks, are the standardized heights available in the US, the artwork that can be found underneath the dust jacket, and being able to stand the book up on its own. Her cons are that they are "bulky and hard to travel with," being more costly, and difficult to hold while reading (2021). For paperback books, Cait's pros are that they are "floppy," less expensive, more comfortable to read, and their smaller size makes them easier to take while traveling. Her cons include having to wait a year after a book's release, for most genres, varying heights, their inability to stand up on their own, and the likelihood of them getting damaged is higher.

Each of these pros and cons reveals more aspects of readers. The first and sometimes most important reason why a reader gets a book is because of the way it looks. Its aesthetics, such as unique dust jackets and artwork, which can be found on the cover, spine, pages, or the edges of pages, can be the determining factor in a reader's purchase². Not only does a reader feel a connection to the visual features of a book, which can be further enhanced by the way they appear sitting on a bookshelf, but they also care about how a book can feel to the touch. Holding a physical, print book accentuates the feelings associated with the book as an object. It can activate other senses like smell, which can come about from the scent of paper after flipping through a book's pages.

Other readers were also prevalent, using any type of mode, such as the binge reader, a type of reader who is not always consistent. Depending on the amount of free time one has and the mode used, it is possible to finish books in one go, but it is usually difficult to read continuously without interruption. The popular saying, "so many books, so little time," can be

² @sisterslibrary. See "Collectors" section.

understood as reading selectively or, in this context, that there is just never enough time in a day to read a whole book. Time is a privilege for many and especially to have the time to do what one likes. This free time is limited, a contrasting notion, and for readers, it can imply that one must use their time wisely so that they can read the books they want. Everyone reads and understands things at different speeds. While some find it easier to binge-read books using an e-reader, others may find it faster to listen to an audiobook with a faster playback speed. Those who enjoy print books may think that seeing the entirety of the book helps them read faster. Overall, I found it necessary to include a short explanation of this type of reader because it relates to the matter of time. No matter what method is used to read, each one takes time, and this can affect what kind of reader a person becomes or changes into.

The next two readers are similar and the first is the forgetful reader, as it is often the most relatable, something the comments of various videos showed. Many BookTok members find it humorous and special that so many readers share experiences of memory lapses. Many people forget details as they are reading or when they finish a book, humorously dubbed “post-book amnesia,” but they remember the “vibes” or feelings from reading the book and rate or refer it respectively.

Reading feeds creativity, and it pushes readers not only to learn about, appreciate, and foster the work and themselves, but it also encourages them to expand and spread that knowledge. The social act of reading and the shared experiences that accompany it are significant parts of what makes reading and the reader so valuable.

Similarly, @amandabereading explains the concept of a “‘dummy’ reader,” someone who reads for enjoyment instead of reading to analyze the plot or particulars of a novel, such as unreliable narrators, plot holes, and predictability (2024). Her video was the first result after the

search “dummy reader” on TikTok because it is a top liked video, and she claims, “it allows [her] to be fully immersed in the experience” (@amandabereading, 2024). These readers are able to finish a book without giving attention to inconsistencies that readers like @kidpilot, or Lou, cannot ignore. Lou’s video is the second video after @amandabereading’s, and she mentions how she “wants to be” a dummy reader, but notices plot holes too much to be that kind of reader. The method of reading analytically is explored in a later section and can cause debate on TikTok for these opposing views.

Interactions With Print

This section expands on the modes of reading discussed previously by exploring the material aspects of books, reading, and readers. In particular, it will look at three types of book enthusiasts and how they can interact with books: annotators, collectors, and book abusers. These types of readers explore the use of books and their value in that regard versus their value as a commodity.

Annotators

From Part 1 of the video by @jadekileylilu, the annotator is a type of reader who takes their time reading by using sticky tabs and pens to color-code aspects of the book they find interesting or important. In addition to what books people can be influenced to read, they also take in how to read them. The decision to write annotations in books, marking things that they like, that stand out to them, or that they want to remember, is a very popular aesthetic aspect of reading on book community platforms. Many influencers use color-coded tabs with a legend to keep track of why they tab what they tab. Content like this allows both the reader and the viewer to see the physical process of reading and observe their efforts while reading, further delving into what can make reading such an active process. This activity takes more time, but can make the results feel worth it. Whether or not that person will come back to the book in the future, annotating allows the reader to take notes as they go, which helps them slow down as they read and remember many details that other readers may not. This type of reader represents the effort that can go into *using* a book and valuing it for that reason.

Abusers

Part 2 of Jade's video mentions the book abuser, whose label is perhaps the most subjective, because it names and shows behaviors of readers while reading, in which things are being done to the book that not everyone agrees with. The most prominent example is often when someone breaks the spine of a book. The creases that form in the spine can lead to the book appearing worn and "ruin" the feel of a book to some. Another big habit of some readers is to "dog-ear" pages, which is simply folding the corner of a page to mark the spot where a reader left off. This also leaves a small crease, negatively affecting the look of a book's pages in comparison to the condition of a brand-new book. Writing in a book, like annotating, has also been included in some other videos portraying a book abuser. The creator will act out the reader aggressively scribbling in their book to display the act in a negative but also humorous light. Some commenters will voice their emotions and concerns that the book is being "abused" simply for a TikTok before seeing what being it is being done to it. Oftentimes, it will be a book by Colleen Hoover, whose controversial status was explained earlier, and the viewer will comment that they sighed in relief, or something similarly dramatic, once they realize that.

This type of reader interacts with books for their use as well but do so to show themselves and others that it has been read. The creases in the spines and covers of books signal the repeated opening of the book, which indicates that the book has been read. Despite the aggressive name given to these types of readers, I see these behaviors as valuable acts of reading because they represent the reader and their thoughts towards the use of a book. The term "well-loved" is often used to describe an object that has been worn down through touch and use, and the same word can be applied to a book because something that is well-loved is valued.

Collectors

The collecting of books is something that can be attached to many kinds of readers. An annotator, a Kindle reader, or a book abuser, to name a few, are all types of readers who may collect books. A TikTok by @cindy_rivera says, “We’re readers, even though I have the paperback, I’m gonna read it on my Kindle.” This is a short example of how Kindle or e-readers enjoy reading on their devices, but often have a print copy as well.

In another video, by @diesesude, or Sude, a caption placed in the center of the screen asks, “Why are you trying to only own PHYSICAL copies of literature?” This is an interesting example because the creator does not actually answer the question. They pan across stacks of books in the video with an arbitrary song but list two notable hashtags: #bookcollection and #bannedbooks. To Sude’s video, there were 277 comments with various statements ranging from poetic responses to the feel of physical books to the importance of *owning* books. One comment stood out because of Sude’s reply to it. The commenter said, “It’s because things like kindle don’t let you OWN the book. They give you a license that lets you read that book, which can be revoked at anytime.” Sude replied with, “YESS THAT WAS MY POINT, you never own these things, they just allow you to use them” (2025).

Both examples above emphasize one main idea and that is the value of book ownership. Along with the appreciation of a book’s content, readers value the physical attributes of it, and this is only attained by owning a print copy. Many commenters in Sude’s video shared their experiences of only being able to enjoy reading a print book while a few expressed the ease and practicality of reading on a Kindle but buy the physical copy as well like @cindy_rivera’s video. Some book collectors, as briefly mentioned in the Introduction, own multiple copies of the same book or series of books. @sisterslibrary posted a video in which 9 different versions of the

Throne of Glass series by Sarah J. Maas were shown. This ranged from the first edition they read, the ones they were currently reading and annotating, to new paperbacks for friends to borrow and Dutch limited edition.

Based on these examples, I see book collectors as representations of books being consumed for their use, like annotating or reserving a series for friends, and books as a commodity that point to their economic values like special editions. Though @sisterslibrary may have just wanted to show their love of a revered book series, it comes across as a display of economic achievement because other readers aspire to do the same but don't have the financial means to attain it. The financial aspect of owning books is something that appears in BookTok videos from time to time and is a factor that can contribute to why a reader decides to read books through a Kindle or other electronic method over buying the print book. Because of that, it can affect a reader's identity and the type of reader they are.

Critical or Calm?

This next section covers the value of book criticism versus the value of reading for enjoyment or based on one's feelings. It will briefly look at the difference between Goodreads and TikTok and delve more into more subtypes of readers such as overthinkers, pro reviewers, and mood readers. Each of these types is acted out by @j3sseeeca in addition to chill and 5-star readers.

I will briefly describe two characters from Part 1 of @jadekylielu's video because they were about the behaviors a reader can exhibit as they read. The overreactor is portrayed as someone who is very emotional, physically, whether that is laughing out loud or crying intensely. On the other hand, the underreactor does not show any emotion and instead represents those readers who have been reading books with intense scenes or plots for so long that they have been desensitized. This does not mean they are not affected by the content they read, just that they take everything in while maintaining a calm exterior. Overall, there were no negative reactions towards any of the characters in the video, simply an acknowledgment that they are different, which is an important aspect of the video and of BookTok as a whole. And, in either case, each reader enjoys the books they read, despite the contrasting behaviors they display.

Just as there are overreactors, there are overthinkers. These are types of readers who remember minute details and inconsistencies, such as plot holes. They focus on these specific parts of a novel that others may not realize, sometimes obsessing over how the author could've made such a mistake. While it usually does not derail the storyline by much, small errors can stick out to readers who pay attention to every detail and cause them to disapprove of a book. Though this type of reader can be difficult to discuss books with, their experience with

remembering certain moments is important as it can be useful for interconnected series or for job-related reasons like reviewing or proofreading an author's work.

Evaluating books is part of the process of finishing a book. Mood readers, however, sometimes evaluate books a little quicker and can stop reading a book simply because they are no longer in the mood to read it. Thinking deeper about it, I realized that even though it can be inconvenient, it shows the value of a reader's mindset and emotions while reading. A reader may decide to try reading a book again at a later time when they are in the mood for it and will enjoy it instead of forcing themselves to finish it.

Similar to overthinkers, professional reviewers think deeply about the work they read, analyzing the details and rating the book accordingly. In @j3sseeeca's video, the pro review explains how they have an "intricate rating scale" on which they went from 3.12 stars to 3.37 stars. The chill reader, who is the main type of reader facilitating the book discussion, whispers under her breath, asking, "How do you have time?" I decided to look at the comments and see how many people would label themselves as a pro reviewer and found the 23rd comment mentions being an overthinker/rater. They briefly explained a book that they thought had many plot holes, and their ratings went from 3.5 to 3.4 and then back to 3.5 because of the ending. Though meticulous to complete, it can help readers know what a book was about and the specific aspects that they did or did not like. It's valuable to the reader's identity to know what they like in a book, perhaps even noting changes in their preferences as time passes.

To continue on the topic of reviews, in another video, a creator finished a book with the thought that it was exceptionally written, but found Goodreads reviews that express the opposite. The creator used an explicit but humorous audio clip in the video to represent the Goodreads review instead of any literal written reviews. This reveals a division in the culture of reviews, an

aspect of reading and readers that this thesis will not explore in depth, but finds important to mention. While Goodreads is an official website that describes itself as “the world's largest community of book lovers,” its connotation is that the reviews will be formal and critical.

Adversely, on TikTok, people informally share their reviews using various techniques that speak to the viewers. This informal book criticism challenges traditional book reviewing and literary criticism by giving a voice to non-academic people who can review books for non-academic readers. As Alexis Weedon says it, “It is not that you are uncritical, but that you are emotionally engaged in the story.” But the scenario previously mentioned, with a reader’s positive review clashing with a negative Goodreads review, is true for TikTok as well. Some viewers can experience confusion when they enjoyed a book but go on BookTok and find that many others did not. It can make them feel like they missed something or read “wrong.”

This thesis does not aim to decide whether one mode of reader is better than another; It defines the main modes and their materialistic aspects and aesthetic features to display the value of their similarities and differences in conversation with the growing presence of social media. There are many approaches to how one might read, and factors that influence this, along with why they read. The important takeaway is that there is value in the reader themselves- their personality, and the act of reading- the way a reader takes in a book, and how both parts associate with social media.

Receptivity in Reader Experience

During this research, I made sure to keep track of relevant comment sections to see what others have to say about the content as shown previously. One comment that stood out was in response to a video with the creator showing “books [they are] convinced people are lying about liking.” Two parts of this claim are problematic. Firstly, the word “lying” is an accusatory verb in its denotative sense and connotes that the people who “lied” about liking certain books are wrong. Second, it creates an issue between the creator and their audience if the viewers like the books that the creator is denouncing. To this post, a commenter reacted and said, “Maybe you’re shocked about them liking them because everyone has different tastes and like different things and that’s okay?” This reaction shows the dissonance that occasionally occurs on BookTok due to feelings of being judged. While it promotes open discussion and equal opportunity to share one’s thoughts, it can also lead to controversial content when a creator’s opinion puts certain types of readers down. This is important because TikTok is known for being an influential platform. Just as a BookToker could influence a viewer to read or buy a specific book, it can also influence them to *not* read or do an activity related to books or reading.

This judgment is often due to some of the books that are popular on BookTok, but sometimes strictly because the author is problematic. One such controversial author is Colleen Hoover, an American author whose books are just as popular as she is disliked. Her books have been received with mixed reviews but are still overwhelmingly popular, which is proven by the outstanding number of books sold, surpassing the Bible, as well as her prominent status on TikTok and Goodreads (Moeslein 2024). But the biggest controversy was with her son’s sexual harassment case, which sparked debate when people blamed Hoover for blocking the victim who

had reached out to Hoover. Without getting into too much detail, this example demonstrates the attention readers often give to the author and their lives.

This is not only evident on TikTok. When searching for her name in the Google search engine, the overview shows a picture of her and many of her books on the left side of the page. But on the right, a Reddit link with the query “Why don’t people like Collen Hoover novels?” is shown. The question was posted 2 days before my search on March 10th, 2025, so it was posted on March 8th, which displays the ongoing and present controversy over the author’s work. On the Reddit website where the question was asked, I read through many of the comments to see what people’s thoughts were. There was one in particular that stood out because it mentioned TikTok and BookTok. The commenter said, “When something gets popular on TikTok, the instinct is to hate it” (Reddit, 2025).

Colleen Hoover is a prime example of someone who gained much of their popularity from TikTok. Over time, people have labeled Hoover and her work as being “overhyped,” meaning it is talked about excessively. Despite the controversy with her son, the main issue people often have is with her writing and the topics she writes about. Her primary genres are Young Adult and Romance with some Thriller elements, but Hoover also talks about intense topics such as domestic violence, which lead people to accuse her of romanticizing abuse. Others argue that she is an adult author writing for adult audiences, but teens and young adults end up reading her work. Her books can be found in almost any bookstore or library, and there are a large number of books written by her in general. Because Hoover’s work is so widely seen and absorbed, it cements her as an accomplished and popular author, which she is, despite the criticism and backlash she faces. Many readers also consider it a “phase” to read her books and enjoy her writing because of scenes that later seem “cringe.” This term is frequently used to

describe things that make someone uncomfortable and is used as a way to exhibit disgust, elaborating on the way someone might physically cringe.

Even though TikTok is meant to be a community for people to share their thoughts and feelings, either the creator's content or the comments sections can have disagreements and even resentment for someone else's views. But conversely, there is content that is specifically about *not* judging. For example, one creator shared their point of view on someone who made a half-hour video strongly criticizing romance readers (dark romance specifically). People with similar views to the critic doubt the reading competence of romance readers, even though it is the most popular genre on BookTok (Rozaki 2023). The critic's views make it seem like those other readers are not reading the right kind of book or in the correct way, and almost diminishing the romance reader's values. This video displayed a con of BookTok as readers can face judgment for a genre they like to read.

Conclusion

As I mentioned in the introduction, I identify as a “reader.” Prior to this thesis, I hadn’t contemplated what kind of reader I am. Even now, I can’t say I am one specific type-- I prefer print books most, but for ease and convenience, I have read many books on my phone, and I am currently in the middle of an audiobook as well, many of which I decided to read because of BookTok. I also have a phone case with artwork of books on it, which is an example of bookishness, and I consider it a representation of my bookish identity.

Just as my life has changed and been influenced by BookTok, so have many other readers over time, because of digital culture and changing reading cultures. TikTok’s informal and open platform has made it a unique site for different forms of reading, but also judgement, different from the formal and critical book review nature of Goodreads. Its algorithm and sub-communities set it apart from platforms like Instagram and YouTube, whose short-video content is a replica of TikTok’s.

How readers have valued books and continue to today is shown by the case studies done on types of readers on BookTok. They helped answer the key questions in this thesis: What is the value of a book and its reader, and what does it mean to be a reader in a time where books and reader identities are being presented in new ways? How has the act of reading evolved, and how does social media portray it?

This thesis shows that being a reader, particularly on BookTok, is to be involved in a social activity that users engage in as a collective through shared values and behaviors. It argues that BookTok creates a sense of belonging in a community where different types of readers can express themselves. The platform fosters an environment where people are free to share interests, judgment, appreciation, and creative ways to display bookishness and unique methods of

reading. From annotating and book abusing to mood reading, readers adopt certain behaviors through TikTok and then display particular aspects that other readers can relate to. In this process, books have evolved to become not just content for consumption, but physical and symbolic extensions of a reader's identity through thoughtful shelf arrangements and curated collections to share within digital communities.

In conclusion, the social media platform BookTok, and its "Types of Readers" content portray the value of a reader and the act of reading through the display of reader identities on BookTok. Using reader-response theory and Pierre Bourdieu's work on taste, aesthetics, and cultural competence as its framework, this thesis analyzed the behavior and visual aesthetics of BookTok content using video captions to organize relevance and prevalence. The continuous evolution of reading and social media culture makes the findings of this research significant in understanding what readers value about books, as well as broadening the definition of what a reader is without ranking or targeting one mode of reading over another.

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