

Bookish Influencers and Audiences:  
Taste, Opinion, and Literary Consumption on BookTok

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## Abstract

This thesis investigates the dynamic interactions between BookTok influencers (BookTokers) and their audiences, focusing on how these relationships shape literary taste, opinion formation, and consumption practices on the TikTok platform. By conducting a digital ethnography and thematic analysis of BookTok comment sections and Goodreads interactions, the study addresses a gap in BookTok research by centering the role of everyday commenters and their engagement with BookTok creators. The findings reveal that commenters seek the intimate experience of discussing books, relying on BookTokers as trusted guides to navigate enjoyable and time-worthy reading experiences. However, this trust is complicated by a protective stance over personal opinions, leading to tense and even toxic behaviors in literary discussions. This research identifies emergent themes such as call-out culture and anti-fandom and the power dynamics embedded in online bookish communities. By expanding current understandings of the interactions between influencers and audiences, this thesis contributes to broader conversations on social reading cultures, media consumption, and the evolving landscape of digital literature engagement.

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## Introduction

Within the last year, the online literary community known as BookTok has received criticism from other TikTok users, prominent BookTubers, literary bloggers, and entertainment news outlets. The criticism leveled at BookTok raises concerns about its contribution to a rising anti-intellectualism and an over-consumption of books.<sup>1</sup> These concerns say that BookTok promotes a shallow reading aesthetic wherein BookTok's most popular books are bad, lack substance, and rely too heavily on literary tropes and cliches. Further, the popularization of book hauls<sup>2</sup> has led to concerns about the hyper-consumption of books which establishes a performative aesthetic of "being a reader."<sup>3</sup> Of course, there are plenty of online discourses that highlight the less concerning aspects of BookTok. These articles point out how some individuals have rediscovered their love of reading through BookTok<sup>4</sup> or BookTok's contribution to rising reading rates.<sup>5</sup> I have noticed three key observations about these articles that must be discussed. First, much of the discourse treats BookTok as an all-encompassing, homogeneous community, disregarding any variety and nuance amongst BookTokers,<sup>6</sup> their content, and their audiences. Second, the discourse on BookTok likens it to a stable, easily defined community. Third, and most importantly for my research, these criticisms do not account for differences between BookTok users and BookTokers, who have a direct influence over shaping what BookTok looks

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<sup>1</sup> Pierce, "In the Shallow World of BookTok, Being 'a Reader' Is More Important than Actually Reading"; Essen, "Has TikTok Ruined Reading?"; Madruga, "How Can Reading Make You Dumber? BookTok Makes That Possible."

<sup>2</sup> A book haul is a video in which creators show off all their recently purchased books. Where or how these books are purchased is not always disclosed. In book hauls, creators may buy upwards of \$500 worth of books and are only required to purchase and display the book rather than read it.

<sup>3</sup> Pierce, "In the Shallow World of BookTok."

<sup>4</sup> Wiederhold, "BookTok Made Me Do It," 157; Schwartz and Sullivan, "Gen Z Is Driving Sales of Romance Books"; Duffield, "BookTok Is Our Way to Escape Reality."

<sup>5</sup> National Literacy Trust, "*Children and young people's reading*"; Wiederhold, "BookTok Made Me Do It," 157; Duffield, "BookTok Is Our Way to Escape Reality"; Dexter, "The Reading Renaissance: Could the #BookTok Bump Save Publishing?"

<sup>6</sup> A BookToker is a content creator on TikTok that focuses all their posted content around books and literature.

like with their videos and posts. This last point presents an opportunity to examine BookTok through the lens of the active BookTok user, which has yet to be explored in current scholarship.

To give a bit more background, BookTok combines the words “book” and “TikTok.” It is both an online hashtag (*#BookTok*) and a subcommunity on the social media platform TikTok. TikTok’s growing popularity at the start of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic gave book lovers another platform to post book-specific content; thus, BookTok emerged and grew popular throughout 2020. The hashtag *#BookTok* helps content creators and users categorize and navigate through videos, the most common videos being book reviews, book recommendations, book reactions, and even comical or satirical videos making inside jokes or poking fun at books.<sup>7</sup> BookTok is also a space heavily occupied by female creators and users.<sup>8</sup> The most visible and popular book genres on BookTok include romance, fantasy, and what some community members have called “romantasy.” These novels and authors include Colleen Hoover’s *It Ends With Us*, Emily Henry’s books, Ali Hazelwood’s books, and Abby Jimenez’s books.<sup>9</sup> Sarah J. Maas’ *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (ACOTAR) and Rebecca Yarros’ *Fourth Wing* books are the two examples of the most popular fantasy and “romantasy” titles on BookTok.<sup>10</sup>

BookTok fits into wider scholarly work on digital social reading cultures and online literary communities like BookTube and Bookstagram. The most comprehensive work on these online literary communities is the book, *Social Reading Cultures on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok* by Michael Dezuanni, Bronwyn Reddan, Leonie Rutherford, and Amy Schoonens. The book is divided into three parts, looking at platforms, practices, and the power of bookish<sup>11</sup> influencers and audiences in social media spaces. The first two chapters focus on the unique

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<sup>7</sup> Dezuanni et al., *Social Reading Cultures on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok*.

<sup>8</sup> Maddox and Gill, “Assembling ‘Sides’ Of TikTok,” 10.

<sup>9</sup> “The New York Times Best Sellers - June 16th 2024.”

<sup>10</sup> “The New York Times Best Sellers - Dec. 15th 2024.”

<sup>11</sup> Dezuanni et al., *Social Reading Cultures*, 2.

platform characteristics of BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok and how these shape the practices adopted by bookish influencers. The last chapter examines the power of bookish audiences to influence publishing industry standards. Dezuanni et al. frame these audiences as tastemakers with significant power in how they collectively review books.

*Social Reading Cultures* is one of the only BookTok studies that looks thematically at participation in this community. Although the authors' last chapter provides an in-depth look at BookTok and Goodreads users, it only accounts for a small part of how users engage in these communities. Jeroen Dera notes this absence in the literature, signaling a need to examine BookTok users' experience and usage motives as well as what a BookTokers' "fame" means in the community.<sup>12</sup> My research aims to fill this gap in BookTok scholarship and examine how BookTok commenters establish and negotiate connections with BookTokers. Therefore, the primary question I ask in my research is, how do BookTok commenters interact with BookTokers, and what do these exchanges reveal about their connections to BookTok creators? This question is worth examining as it addresses a current gap in the literature. It also highlights the role of everyday BookTok commenters in shaping the platform. BookTok is not just shaped by the videos that appear on TikTok's "For You Page" but through the contributions of individual users.

In this thesis, I aim to broaden the understanding of bookish audiences and their relationships with bookish influencers on BookTok. To do this, I draw heavily from research on BookTok like *Social Reading Cultures* and Jessica Maddox and Fiona Gill's article "Assembling Sides of TikTok." I also draw from fan studies because the concepts that come from this line of scholarship—particularly work on fan cultures, media consumption and taste, and anti-fandom—are highly applicable and salient to the research themes. To answer the proposed

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<sup>12</sup> Dera, "BookTok: A Narrative Review of Current Literature and Directions for Future Research," 6-7.

research question, I conduct a digital ethnography and thematic analysis of BookTok comment sections, paired with a smaller analysis of comments under the Goodreads account of a few selected BookTokers. From these analyses, I discuss specific themes that highlight the kinds of interactions that take place between BookTokers and commenters. Ultimately, I argue that BookTok commenters engage with BookTokers to seek the intimate experience of discussing and reading books. Commenters trust that BookTokers will lead them towards an enjoyable reading experience, or away from a reading experience that will waste their time. This trust is complicated by commenters' protection over their opinions, where sometimes commenters call out a BookToker's opinions to challenge or dismiss them. Overall, this thesis contributes to work on online social reading cultures and fills the current gap by examining the dynamics between BookTok audiences and influencers. It invites future research to look more in-depth at the themes in my work like media consumption, literary taste, and anti-fandom on BookTok.

In what follows, I discuss current research on BookTok and relevant fan studies scholarship that conceptualizes my work. I then go into the methodology of the research. From there, I move on to a comprehensive look at the themes that emerged from my analysis of BookTok. Each theme is broken down and discussed in-depth. I repeat this with my thematic analysis of Goodreads comments, dividing the themes and thoroughly exploring each. I give a final comparison of the BookTok and Goodreads analysis to highlight similarities and differences between themes, and what they reveal about commenters' relationship with BookTokers. I will then go over the limitations of my research and what future research might consider before ending with my conclusion.



## Literature Review

In this section, I discuss four different topics of scholarly research: *Conceptualizing BookTok and BookTokers*, *BookTok as an Affinity Space and Fan Culture*, *Consumption and Taste*, and *Fan Protectionism and Anti-Fandom*. The first topic, *Conceptualizing BookTok and BookTokers*, explores the relevant scholarly literature that has been done on BookTok and BookTokers. I use this topic to discuss the affect and emotion that shapes BookTok, as well as the role of the BookToker. Further, I address the gap in current research and suggest that examining the engagement between BookTok commenters and BookTokers fills this gap. The second topic, *BookTok as an Affinity Space and Fan Culture*, defines how I frame BookTok as a mix between an affinity space and fan culture. This framework captures BookTok users' motivation behind participating in this space, which comes from their affinity and fannish love of books. The third topic, *Consumption and Taste*, is an important part of my research; thus, I explore the concepts and how they apply to BookTok. Finally, the fourth topic, *Fan Protectionism and Anti-Fandom*, is another important topic in my research. Here, I define the concept of "fan protectionism" and discuss anti-fandom strategies adopted by users.

### *Conceptualizing BookTok and BookTokers*

Amongst communication and media studies research, there is a small, yet growing body of literature surrounding BookTok. Scholars have looked at BookTok to examine how users discuss literature in different capacities<sup>13</sup> as well as how specific features of TikTok (like the algorithm and hashtags) shape user and content practices.<sup>14</sup> There is also research that compares and contrasts BookTok with other online literary communities like BookTube and

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<sup>13</sup> Boffone and Jerasa, "BookTok 101"; Boffone and Jerasa, "Toward a (Queer) Reading Community."

<sup>14</sup> Maddox and Gill "Assembling 'Sides' of TikTok"; Low, Ehret, and Hagh, "Algorithmic Imaginings."

Bookstagram.<sup>15</sup> From this body of work, scholars have concluded that BookTok's defining characteristic is its "messy authenticity."<sup>16</sup> BookTok videos utilize an informal filming style where videos are recorded on a phone and in the creator's bedroom. This adds an honest and personal tone to the videos.<sup>17</sup> The other defining characteristic of BookTok is its emphasis on the emotional impact of a book. BookTokers often react to books by crying and screaming, or even rating books based on how hard it made them cry.<sup>18</sup> BookTok's emphasis on emotion leads to affective motivations for reading and engaging with other users, a key point for my research.

Sonali Kulkarni briefly explores the affect on BookTok in her work, arguing that "affect on BookTok is not always conceived by each individual user but is instead imitative and algorithmically mediated."<sup>19</sup> Thus, BookTok is a space where emotional responses to books are rewarded and encouraged. Like other scholars, Kulkarni finds that much of BookTok's content is affective, as videos display emotions about how a book makes readers feel rather than focus on critical analysis. BookTok users appreciate a mode of reading that emphasizes a personal attachment to books, especially those "worth the hype."<sup>20</sup> This creates a rating system in which books are evaluated by their emotional impact. In *Social Reading Cultures on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok*, the authors suggest that these kinds of books appeal to a "non-reader," an individual who seeks a direct route to emotional response without wasting time.<sup>21</sup> They find that the "cut-out nature" of these works provides a kind of "stupid fun" for readers.<sup>22</sup> In other words, trope-heavy or emotionally impactful books appeal to BookTok users.

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<sup>15</sup> Dezuanni et al., "Selfies and Shelfies"; Reddan, "Social Reading Cultures on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok"; Dezuanni et al., *Social Reading Cultures on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok*.

<sup>16</sup> Wiederhold, "BookTok Made Me Do It," 158.

<sup>17</sup> Dezuanni et al., "Selfies and Shelfies"; Reddan, "Social Reading Cultures"; Dezuanni et al., *Social Reading Cultures*.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Kulkarni, "Getting a Feel for BookTok: Understanding Affect on TikTok's Bookish Subculture," 82.

<sup>20</sup> Maddox and Gill, "Assembling 'Sides' of TikTok," 8.

<sup>21</sup> Dezuanni et al., *Social Reading Culture*, 65.

<sup>22</sup> Dezuanni et al., *Social Reading Culture*, 71.

These books are fun, easy to read, and evoke strong emotional reactions. This is especially important when considering how BookTok commenters use BookTok or why they seek out BookToker's recommendations.

In defining the BookToker and their role, they can be understood as any content creator on TikTok who regularly posts content about books and literature. Scholars have conducted in-depth interviews with bookish influencers—like BookTokers, BookTubers, and Bookstagramers—to conceptualize what being a book influencer entails.<sup>23</sup> This research is crucial to understanding how BookTokers shape digital social reading and recommendation cultures like BookTok. In their book, Dezuanni et al. characterize bookish influencers as microcelebrities who share their enthusiasm for books and reading.<sup>24</sup> To establish their role as a trusted literary recommender, bookish influencers engage in relational labor that develops affective relationships with their audience.<sup>25</sup> One major way that bookish influencers engage in relational labor is by sharing their reading tastes and preferences, which partly explains why book recommendations and reviews are popular on BookTok. Sharing reading tastes and preferences strengthens the bookish influencer's connection with their audiences. To further play into this affective connection, bookish influencers adopt a personal style of talking about books that emphasize passion and emotion. Bookish influencers' passion for reading is the source of their cultural authority because it invites others to connect and share a similar passion for reading and books.<sup>26</sup> By sharing their passion, bookish influencers appear genuine, authentic, and relatable. Thus, if

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<sup>23</sup> See Guíñez-Cabrera and Mansilla-Obando, "Booktokers: Generating and Sharing Book Content on TikTok"; Dezuanni et al. *Social Reading Cultures*; Fuller and Sedo, *Reading Bestsellers: Recommendation Culture and the Multimodal Reader*.

<sup>24</sup> *Social Reading Cultures*, 16-7.

<sup>25</sup> *Social Reading Cultures*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> *Social Reading Cultures*, 17.

the audience sees a bookish influencer as an “expert reader and trusted other,” they can exercise their cultural authority in relation to book recommendations.<sup>27</sup>

This research demonstrates how BookTokers play a huge part in shaping the BookTok community. Their review and recommendation videos and how they talk about books invite affective engagement and interactions from their audience. Dezuanni et al. specifically explore the question “How do bookish influencers establish social connections with their bookish audiences?”<sup>28</sup> This question and their larger work are crucial to conceptualizing the BookToker as an influencer who plays a role in shaping the BookTok community. As mentioned, Dezuanni et al. only examine the bookish influencers’ perspective on this relationship with their audiences, which excludes a discussion of how the audience connects with bookish influencers. My research will inspect how BookTok commenters establish and negotiate a connection with BookTokers, thus filling this gap in current research.

### *BookTok as an Affinity Space and Fan Culture*

Previous research on BookTok has framed it as an online community,<sup>29</sup> a subculture,<sup>30</sup> an affinity space,<sup>31</sup> and a “side” of TikTok.<sup>32</sup> The range of these descriptions illustrates the difficulties in defining online social media communities while at the same time showing their versatility in how users organize and participate in these spaces. BookTok is especially difficult to define as a community because of TikTok’s ephemeral nature, which comes from the short-lived and transient content on the platform.<sup>33</sup> The ephemerality of TikTok creates very

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<sup>27</sup> Fuller and Sedo, *Reading Bestsellers*, 45.

<sup>28</sup> *Social Reading Cultures*, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Martens, Balling, and Higgaso, “#BookTokMadeMeReadIt: Young Adult Reading Communities across an International, Sociotechnical Landscape.”

<sup>30</sup> Kulkarni, “Getting a Feel for BookTok.”

<sup>31</sup> Boffone and Jerasa, “BookTok 101”; Boffone and Jerasa, “Toward a (Queer) Reading Community.”

<sup>32</sup> Maddox and Gill, “Assembling ‘Sides’ of TikTok.”

<sup>33</sup> Caliandro, Gandini, Bainotti, and Anselmi “Ephemeral Content and Ephemeral Consumption on TikTok,” 210.

blurry, ever-changing boundaries between communities, or “sides,” of TikTok. Further, the presence of lurkers, or TikTok users who rarely (if ever) post and comment on videos, makes it difficult to gauge who is a part of BookTok. These lurkers and other users can move in and out of BookTok with ease, making it unclear who BookTok’s community is apart from those posting under the *#BookTok* hashtag.

In my research, I follow in previous literature<sup>34</sup> and conceptualize BookTok as a mix between an affinity space and a digital fan culture. Gee posits that affinity spaces are formed around common interests, endeavors, goals, or practices rather than only the people using the space.<sup>35</sup> In affinity spaces, knowledge of all levels is highly valued, and sharing knowledge is important for newbies, masters, and everyone else to learn and participate.<sup>36</sup> Gee acknowledges that fans create and sustain affinity spaces, but his work centers on how affinity spaces contribute to learning environments rather than taking an explicit fan studies approach.<sup>37</sup> Regardless, his theory of affinity spaces mirrors how digital fan cultures and fandoms operate. Driessen, Jones, and Litherland discuss how social media platforms like TikTok now largely resemble fandom. They note how users are highly active in these spaces, from their affective and repeated engagement to their highly creative textual productivity.<sup>38</sup> On BookTok, the object of the fan culture is books. Of course, there are individual fan cultures for specific series of books, like the ACOTAR series; however, as a wider collective, the books that users read constitute BookTok as a digital fan culture. Thus, BookTok is an affinity space and a fan culture where users come together over their shared interest and love of books.

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<sup>34</sup> See Boffone and Jerasa, “BookTok 101”; Boffone and Jerasa, “Toward a (Queer) Reading Community”; Curwood, “‘The Hunger Games’: Literature, Literacy, and Online Affinity Spaces.”

<sup>35</sup> Gee, *Situated Language and Learning: A Critique of Traditional Schooling*, 77.

<sup>36</sup> Gee, *Situated Language and Learning*, 77-9.

<sup>37</sup> Gee, *Situated Language and Learning*; Gee, “Affinity Spaces: How Young People Live and Learn Online and out of School,”; Gee, “Affinity Spaces and 21st Century Learning.”

<sup>38</sup> Driessen, Jones, and Litherland, “From Fan Citizenship to ‘Fanspiracies’: Politics and Participatory Cultures in Times of Crisis?” 305-6.

### *Consumption and Taste*

Consumption and taste are important themes that emerge from the analysis. Pierre Bourdieu argues that taste is determined by an individual's cultural capital.<sup>39</sup> Those who possess more cultural capital—often based on education or owning specific consumer goods—define “good taste” in society. Individuals with less cultural capital look to those with more capital as the definers of taste. As briefly mentioned above, BookTokers accumulate cultural capital by purchasing, displaying, and discussing the books they read. This is also how a BookToker is viewed as having “taste,” simply by presenting their books. A BookToker is seen as the “expert reader and trusted other”<sup>40</sup> who defines taste by displaying their books.

Fan studies and cultural scholars have built off Bourdieu’s work on taste, consumption, and cultural capital. Carolyn Stevens argues that fandom is a specialized consumption where “you are what you buy,” especially in post-industrial late capitalist societies.<sup>41</sup> To highlight this point, Stevens writes “Branded consumption is a powerful identity-constructing tool— if we are what we buy, then we choose to buy objects that project our identity in ways that please us.”<sup>42</sup> Cornel Sandvoss argues similarly, writing that a fan’s consumption is both identity-building as well as a symbolizer of taste (which adds a further layer of distinction).<sup>43</sup> Fandom is both identity-building and a solution to the overwhelming abundance of choices consumers face in modernity and media-saturated environments. Consumers are therefore more follower-like in their tastes, and fandom provides a way to overcome this consumer fatigue.<sup>44</sup> Thus, BookTok commenters seek book recommendations not only as a way to shape their identity through their reading choices but also to navigate the overwhelming number of books available to them.

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<sup>39</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, xxix.

<sup>40</sup> Fuller and Sedo, *Reading Bestsellers*, 45.

<sup>41</sup> Stevens, “You Are What You Buy: Postmodern Consumption and Fandom of Japanese Popular Culture,” 200.

<sup>42</sup> Stevens, “You Are What You Buy,” 209.

<sup>43</sup> Sandvoss, “Ch 2 The Dominant Discourse of Resistance: Fandom and Power,” 34-5.

<sup>44</sup> Stevens, “You Are What You Buy,” 210.

Comparing a BookToker's consumption habits to their commenters reveals a kind of conspicuous consumption. As Thorstein Veblen proposed, conspicuous consumption is consuming valuable goods to symbolize a certain level of status.<sup>45</sup> This consumption is uneven between higher and lower economic classes; the higher an individual is, the more likely they will partake in conspicuous consumption. Veblen writes that conspicuous consumption only works with goods that are considered a "waste," or rather, goods that do not serve human life on a broader scale.<sup>46</sup> Thus, conspicuous consumption refers to buying unnecessary goods simply because one has the financial means to do so, thereby showcasing their social class and status.

Lucia Bainotti takes Veblen's initial theorization of conspicuous consumption and argues for *conspicuousness*, wherein consumption practices both display and produce social status.<sup>47</sup> She applies this idea of conspicuousness to the logics which underpin micro-influencers' social media strategies, ultimately arguing that conspicuousness becomes productive instead of wasteful.<sup>48</sup> In other words, micro-celebrities who showcase their purchases/goods in social media posts use conspicuousness to their advantage because displaying purchases/goods accrues social status that makes them desirable to an audience. I use Veblen's idea of conspicuous consumption to explain how BookToker's and commenters' consumption habits are distinct. I further use Bainotti's idea of conspicuousness to illustrate how a BookToker's book review or recommendation benefits from this conspicuousness.

### *Fan Protectionism and Anti-Fandom*

Jonathan Gray originally proposed the figure of the anti-fan, writing that anti-fans are "not necessarily of those who are against fandom per se, but of those who strongly dislike a

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<sup>45</sup> Veblen and Mills, "Conspicuous Consumption," 64.

<sup>46</sup> Veblen and Mills, 78.

<sup>47</sup> Bainotti, "How Conspicuousness Becomes Productive on Social Media," 343.

<sup>48</sup> Bainotti, 343.

given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel.”<sup>49</sup> Gray gave fan studies scholars the language to discuss anti-fans and anti-fandom on a vast spectrum.<sup>50</sup> One area of work that extends this spectrum of anti-fandom is *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* anti-fandom,<sup>51</sup> which strikingly resembles much of the concerns, criticism, and negative discourse surrounding BookTok. In Bethany Jones’ chapter “If Even One Person Gets Hurt Because of Those Books, That’s Too Many,” she looks at how bloggers engage in close reading of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. These bloggers exert their cultural capital built on knowledge of the BDSM community—earned through lived experience and/or affective relationships with the community—to sub-culturally gatekeep others from reading the text. She notes how many of these bloggers do not engage in outright antagonistic criticism of *Fifty Shades*, but rather use humor to educate or disparage the book.<sup>52</sup> I use this point in my work because BookTokers often avoid antagonistic criticism and instead opt for humor to talk about criticisms of the book, which commenters still pick up on as ridicule, much like the *Fifty Shades* fans.

Vivi Theodoropoulou’s framework of anti-fandom is particularly important for understanding the interactions of BookTok commenters with BookTokers. Theodoropoulou argues that anti-fandom is triggered by fandom wherein “the hatred for something is dictated by the love for something else and the need to protect the ‘loved one.’”<sup>53</sup> “Protection” has been discussed elsewhere in fan studies, especially concerning fans protecting the parts of fan culture that are special or important to them.<sup>54</sup> Theodoropoulou further explains that the anti-fan hates

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<sup>49</sup> Gray, “New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans,” 70.

<sup>50</sup> See Click, *Anti-Fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age*.

<sup>51</sup> See Jones, “‘If Even One Person Gets Hurt Because of Those Books, That’s Too Many’: Fifty Shades Anti-Fandom, Lived Experience, and the Role of the Subcultural Gatekeeper”; Sheffield and Merlo, “Biting Back: *Twilight* Anti-Fandom and the Rhetoric of Superiority”; Harman and Jones, “Fifty Shades of Grey: Snark Fandom and the Figure of the Anti-Fan.”

<sup>52</sup> Bethan Jones, “If Even One Person,” 281.

<sup>53</sup> Theodoropoulou, “The Anti-Fan within the Fan: Awe and Envy in Sport Fandom,” 318.

<sup>54</sup> Scott, “A Fangirl’s Place Is in the Resistance: Feminism and Fan Studies,” 46.



the object of another fan because it is in direct competition with their object of admiration.<sup>55</sup>

Although Theodoropoulou's work draws on sports fandom, I use her idea of fan protection to explain how BookTok commenters employ a similar anti-fan, protectionist response against BookToker's opinions. The commenter acts against the BookToker to "protect" their loved object, which is their opinion of a book, character, series, author, or genre.

Scholarship on social media influencers and celebrity anti-fandom is particularly useful for BookTok. Mardon, Cocker, and Daunt explore direct actions of anti-fandom, wherein social media influencers fail to keep up a personal and intimate parasocial relationship with their audience, resulting in once-fans turning into active anti-fans.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Jurg, Tuters, and Picone explore how fans take up cancel-culture and call-out culture practices if their favorite celebrity figure displeases them or violates the constructed "character" and "narrative" that fans associate with the figure.<sup>57</sup> Examples of these practices include directly addressing or challenging a celebrity, unfollowing a celebrity, or ignoring media with their celebrity.<sup>58</sup> I use these practices to draw similarities between BookTok commenters and call-out/cancel culture behaviors.

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<sup>55</sup> Theodoropoulou, 318.

<sup>56</sup> Mardon, Cocker, and Daunt, "When Parasocial Relationships Turn Sour: Social Media Influencers, Eroded and Exploitative Intimacies, and Anti-Fan Communities."

<sup>57</sup> Jurg, Tuters, and Picone, "'Alex, DO NOT BACKPEDAL ON SANDY HOOK!': Reactionary Fandom, Cancel Culture, and the Possibility of 'Audience Capture' on YouTube," 58.

<sup>58</sup> Jurg, Tuters, and Picone, 59.

## Methods

In my research, I use a combination of digital ethnography and thematic analysis. Digital ethnography allows researchers to address questions of the social in digital spaces where the primary goal is to understand relationships and behavioral patterns.<sup>59</sup> I adopt Postill and Pink's approach to digital ethnography, particularly their strategies of "catching up, sharing, and exploring."<sup>60</sup> These three steps require the researcher to deeply engage and immerse themselves in their social media platform of study. Translating Postill and Pink's approach to my research on BookTok involved liking and/or saving BookTok videos, watching videos multiple times, and exploring the pages of highly active, highly followed BookTokers. In addition to digital ethnography, I also conduct a thematic analysis of BookTok and Goodreads comment sections. My goal with this method is to identify specific themes or patterns from commenters and their messages under BookToker's comment sections. Thus, I take an exploratory qualitative approach<sup>61</sup> with my thematic analysis. This approach is aimed at the development and identification of codes and themes, which emerge from the interaction between the researcher and their research subjects.<sup>62</sup> The combination of a digital ethnography and a thematic analysis is well-suited for my research because the patterns and themes allow a closer examination of the relationship between commenters and BookTokers.

The digital ethnography and thematic analysis of BookTok comment sections are drawn from 50 recommendation and review videos since these are the most abundant and popular genres of videos on BookTok. I discovered these videos by scrolling through the TikTok For-You-Page, looking at videos under the keywords "BookTok," "book recommendations," and

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<sup>59</sup> Kaur-Gill and Dutta, "Digital Ethnography," 1-3.

<sup>60</sup> Postill and Pink, "Social Media Ethnography: The Digital Researcher in a Messy Web," 128-9.

<sup>61</sup> Guest, MacQueen, and Namey, *Applied Thematic Analysis*, 7-8.

<sup>62</sup> Guest, MacQueen, and Namey, 36.

“book reviews,” and watching videos under specific BookTok creators. The digital ethnography involved immersing myself in BookTok and exploring the different videos and creators. Field notes, thoughts, observations, and reflections were recorded. In addition, I kept an extensive log of comments that would assist in the thematic analysis. These comments were collected based on recurring ideas, thoughts, and discussions, especially if they were addressed to the BookToker or were in response to a BookToker’s question or thought from the video. The number of comments on videos varied, but the lowest observed was 10 and the highest observed was around 2,000. The earliest videos in the analysis were from 2022 and the most recent videos were from January 2025, although the bulk of the videos were from 2024. All the creators I analyzed spoke English in the videos and were most likely from Western countries, mainly the United States. The demographics of the BookTok audience are unclear, but based on profile pictures and usernames, there were more female-presenting commenters than male. However, male commenters are present, especially under male BookTok creators’ videos.

To further understand the relationship dynamics between BookTokers and their followers/commenters, I analyzed the Goodreads account of six BookTokers. I chose six BookTokers whose videos were suggested during my ethnography of BookTok. These six BookTokers were Eden Yonas (edensarchives), Marianna Moore (mariannasreads), Smitty1423 (vinopapi23), Jay (literarycorner), Moly (molysbookclub), and Jack Edwards (jack\_edwards). I analyzed their Goodreads book reviews and updates, and any comments left by other Goodreads users. I chose Goodreads because all six BookTokers had accounts and used them. The purpose of analyzing Goodreads in addition to BookTok is to examine how commenters interact with BookTokers on a platform where they are unrestricted by character limits. Choosing the six BookTokers from my ethnography ensures consistency by looking at commenters’ interactions

with the same BookTokers. It is unclear whether these Goodreads commenters are from BookTok because the BookTokers have multiple, active platforms. As a result, I frame Goodreads commenters as an extension of BookTokers' online presence and space where commenters can interact with them.

To highlight my research results, I created a 12-minute desktop documentary-style video essay. The short video demonstrates how commenters engage with BookTokers, specifically how opinion-sharing shapes the interactions on BookTok. The film goes through three primary themes in the following order: *call-out culture and anti-fandom behaviors*, *literary consumption*, and *trust*. The video recreates comments that appeared in my analysis and highlights the multi-platform experience of users (moving back and forth between Goodreads, TikTok, and Amazon/Kindle). Exemplary TikTok videos and comments highlight the themes that emerged from the comment sections. The video piece answers the larger research question I pose in this paper, demonstrating how BookTok commenters establish and negotiate a connection with BookTokers. A few scholarly articles that I use in my literature review and in my final discussion I also use in the video to underscore specific themes. The overall style and editing capture the research process in a semi-fictionalized way, treating the final desktop documentary as a "research diary."<sup>63</sup> I used my phone and computer screen, OBS (a free screen-recording software), and Adobe Premiere Pro to make this video. The link to watch the video is located in the Appendix.

One critical point to note is that I use comments from BookTok and Goodreads comment sections to highlight the themes and support my overall conclusions. In the following sections, I quote these comments verbatim, which includes typos and grammatical errors. In comments with lots of grammatical issues, I add footnotes with my interpretation of what the user is attempting

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<sup>63</sup> Galibert-Lainé, "What Scholarly Video Essays Feel Like," 2.

to say to assist in clarification. Finally, all commenters' usernames will remain anonymous since they are not semi-public figures like the BookTokers. I format these exemplary comments using "commenter" or "comment." I specifically use the word "commenter" for a conversation between a BookToker and a commenter, between a commenter and other commenters, or when two comments come from the same comment thread. I use the word "comment" to highlight particular examples of the themes I discuss. A few examples use multiple comments to demonstrate my points, which I designate with numbers (Comment 1, Comment 2, Comment 3...). Examples with multiple comments indicate that the comments come from different videos or comment sections and are unrelated.

### BookTok Analysis

My analysis of BookTok comment sections confirms findings from other research on BookTok and online literary cultures. The videos on BookTok continue to rely on or display affective, visceral responses to reading books.<sup>64</sup> Further, BookTok commenters write that their primary motivations for reading are for fun, escapism, and/or hobby.<sup>65</sup> These findings were clear in both the videos and the comment sections. However, my analysis also revealed new themes about BookTok that have been unexplored by scholars thus far. The following three themes emerged: “Getting into Reading,” “Passionate and Trustworthy Opinions,” “Defining and Defending Reading”, and “Commenters’ Consumption Practices.”

#### *Getting into Reading*

A major theme that emerged from BookTok comment sections was the number of commenters new to reading. Many commenters wrote that a BookToker’s recommendation and review videos inspired them to get into reading or helped them develop a new hobby. Two example comments demonstrate this,

**Comment 1:** “Your breakdowns here have fed a new hobby for me these last few months”

**Comment 2:** “thank you for this, want to start reading as waste to much time on social media and want to replace bad habit with good one. this is really helpful.”<sup>66</sup>

Both commenters view reading as a hobby or a pastime. Comment 2 even views reading as a constructive, useful way to spend their time. Thus, some commenters engage with BookTokers to get into reading. BookTokers provide a starting point that commenters can easily turn to to help

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<sup>64</sup> Kulkarni, “Getting a Feel for BookTok”; Wiederhold, “BookTok Made Me Do It”; Dezuanni et al. *Social Reading Cultures*.

<sup>65</sup> Dezuanni et al. *Social Reading Cultures*; Taylor, *Why Women Read Fiction: The Story of Our Lives*.

<sup>66</sup> I interpret this comment to say “Thank you for this, I want to start reading as I waste too much time on social media and want to replace a bad habit with a good one. This is really helpful.”

determine which books they might like or how they would approach reading. This is further supported by two more comments:

**Comment 1:** “Would you recommend the suneater series to someone who’s never read sci-fi before and wants to get into it?”<sup>67</sup>

**Comment 2:** “I am a beginner reader and...i’ve been feeling like i need to finish a book as fast as i can, any tips?”

Both Comment 1 and 2 seek explicit advice about reading, Comment 1 about a particular series they want to try and Comment 2 about how to finish books faster. Because the BookToker has already read *The Sun Eater* series, Comment 1 trusts that they can give them insight into whether or not they should read the book. This idea of trusting the BookToker leads to the next theme.

### *Passionate and Trustworthy Opinions*

The most apparent themes that emerged from the BookTok comment sections were passion and trust regarding a BookToker’s book reviews, recommendations, and opinions. The most common interaction between BookTokers and commenters was their discussion of and evaluation of books. The BookTokers’ reviews/recommendation video involved rating a book, reviewing what made it good or bad, and whether they would recommend it. This video prompted BookTok commenters to interact with the BookTokers about their favorite books, discussing their mutual love (or dislike) of characters, books, series, authors, and genres. Despite the 150-character limit for TikTok comments, commenters optimized this space for both emotional and more critical remarks of books. Most comments centered around how a book made the commenter feel or respond emotionally. Other comments discussed literary conventions, elements, and techniques that they thought improved the book or made it worse.

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<sup>67</sup> This commenter refers to *The Sun Eater* series by Christopher Ruocchio

A key part of a BookToker's reviews and recommendations is how passionate or enthusiastic a BookToker talks about a book. Commenters often expressed their appreciation of this passion. One comment that demonstrates this is,

**Comment:** "The passion with which you describe these books makes me want to eat them all up! I'm so excited to explore them all, following you because reading is something that makes me so happy."

Not only does this commenter appreciate the BookToker's passion for books, but this passion forms a connection between the commenter and the BookToker. The commenter writes that they followed the BookToker because both have a mutual love of reading. As Dezuanni et al note, sharing enthusiasm and passion for books helps BookTokers gain followers and develop their cultural capital.<sup>68</sup> However, commenters view this passion and enthusiasm as a way to determine which BookTokers are worth engaging with.

Passion and enthusiasm also factor into how commenters talk about their favorite characters, books, series, authors, and/or genres. Commenters discuss their attachments to their favorites, as well as how impactful they are in the commenter's life. A few example comments include,

**Comment 1:** "I tell literally everyone i meet about the rage of dragons. One of the coolest protagonists ever"<sup>69</sup>

**Comment 2:** "SOK is my baby & I'm reading the well of ascension & loving it!... I think about Misaki every day."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Dezuanni et al., *Social Reading Culture*, 16-7.

<sup>69</sup> The book mentioned here is the fantasy novel *The Rage of Dragons* by Evan Winter. The protagonist in the books is Tau Tafari.

<sup>70</sup> SOK in this comment is referencing the 2019 military fantasy novel *The Sword of Kaigen: A Theonite War Story* by M.L. Wang. Misaki Matsuda is one of the main characters in the book. The comment also talks about the 2007 fantasy novel *Mistborn: The Well of Ascension* by Brandon Sanderson.



All three commenters write passionately about their favorite characters and books, highlighting their continued investment and attachment. Comment 1 demonstrates that their passion for *The Rage of Dragons* carries into their life outside of BookTok, likely sharing their love and passion for this book. Comment 2 also suggests this commenter is not only attached but feels a sense of loving possession and protection over their book. Thinking about the character every day and using the words “my baby” allude to this loving possession and protection.

Finally, commenters were passionate about not only discussing and sharing their thoughts, but they were excited to hear a BookToker’s opinion from a current read. Two comments that highlight this are,

**Comment 1:** “I cannot wait to see what you think of the second arc of Red Rising. So good. So devastating”

**Comment 2:** “YES! I’ve been waiting too long for you to get into Robin Hobb.”

Both comments share their anticipation for a BookToker’s reaction to a particular book or author. This suggests that commenters perceive a connection between themselves and the BookToker. Not only are BookTokers a source for recommendations and reviews, but they are a friend with whom commenters can share their bookish opinions and love. From this perceived connection between the commenters and the BookToker emerges the next theme.

Another major theme in the analysis was commenters’ trust in a BookToker. As briefly mentioned, whether a commenter trusts a BookToker’s opinion somewhat depends on how passionate or enthusiastic their review is. More enthusiasm equals a higher chance of the commenter taking the recommendation and reading the book. The other part of this trust is based on the BookToker’s opinion of the book. Two comments that best exemplify this are,

**Comment 1:** “I love the way you talk about books. i trust your taste even though this is the first video of yours i’ve seen. Idk why”

**Comment 2:** “I trust your opinion based on the books you said yes to”

**Comment 3:** “The absolute blind trust I have in your recommendations is unmatched. I know if you love it, I will love it.”

All three comments trust the BookToker, each with varying reasons why. Comment 1 of course suggests that the way the BookToker talks about books is why they trust the BookToker. This comment also suggests that BookTokers can make an immediate impression on commenters just by how they talk about books. For context, Comment 2 came from a video in which the BookToker holds up a book and says whether or not they recommend the book. Therefore, Comment 2 trusts the BookToker because this commenter agrees with the BookToker on what books are recommendation-worthy. This suggests that a commenter will only trust recommendations if their opinions about books align with those of the BookToker. Comment 3 supports this, as the commenter says any book the BookToker loves, the commenter will love. Comment 3 has the utmost trust in the BookToker’s recommendations.

Of course, trust works both ways; if a BookToker does not align with a commenter’s opinion, the trust is revoked and any book recommendation is disregarded. This revocation of trust can be based on how a BookToker feels about a book, character, or series. Two comments that highlight this are,

**Comment 1:** “I will never take book recs from someone who’s favorite series is fourth wing”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> The commenter is referencing the 2023 high fantasy romance (or romantasy) novel *Fourth Wing* by Rebecca Yarros.

**Comment 2:** “Nah cause the second you said you hate xaden I knew your book judgments weren’t for me.”<sup>72</sup>

**Comment 3:** “your opinion is wrong”

Comments 1 and 2 both write that they will no longer take book recommendations based on the BookToker’s opinion about a series and character. All of these comments illustrate the weight that BookToker’s opinions hold for commenters. The actual opinion of the BookToker determines whether a commenter trusts or disregards the recommendation. Further, these differing opinions often lead to tensions in the comment sections, which I explore in the next theme.

### *Defining and Defending Reading*

This second theme highlights the kinds of disagreements that occurred between commenters. These disagreements provide insight into how commenters define and defend their reading habits and what they love to read. This has implications for the kind of standards or expectations that commenters hold BookTokers to regarding review and recommendation videos. It also shows what types of characteristics commenters value in BookTokers. I explore these ideas using two key examples. The first example touches on normative ideas of reading and the second example highlights the normative ideas about taste in literature.

This first example starts with a comment about the amount of books read and engaging with them critically, the commenter writing:

**Commenter 1:** “Not sure if anyone else can relate but I find myself immediately trusting anyone a bit more who says they read 50 books or less last year. To me it means you read more deeply/critically.”

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<sup>72</sup> This comment is also referencing *Fourth Wing*, specifically the lead male character, Xaden Riorson.

This comment invited further discussion about reading habits and engagement with books, with some commenters agreeing and others countering the point. Those who agreed with Commenter 1 felt that reading fewer books was *more* realistic and gave the BookToker *more* credibility with respect to recommendations. Two more comments from the same conversation demonstrate further points about reading habits:

**Commenter 2:** “No because I recently learned people SKIM! They skim books and say they read them. One person I saw admitted to only reading the dialogue.”

**Commenter 3:** “I just found out that sometimes when people say they “read” they actually listened to the audiobook? which is fine except thats not reading and listening is a different experience imo”

The underlying assumption from these comments is that reading more books, skimming, or only reading dialogue violates reading “the correct way.” What emerges from this conversation is a normative idea of reading—that readers must adhere to one specific way of reading or it discredits them as readers. These types of comments do not account for nuance in the individual motivations, practices, and needs behind reading; the comments assume that readers have the same time in a day, the same motivations to read, and that everyone reads at the same speed. Further, these comments do not account for disability regarding reading. A comment separate from the ones above says:

**Comment:** “I’m not a reader (dyslexic) but your reviews of these [books] makes me want to start reading (or more accurately listening)!”

Discrediting audiobooks as a form of reading fails to incorporate how disability might factor into a reader’s needs, further assuming a normative or “correct” idea of reading. It is important to remember that BookTokers have different motivations for making content. BookTokers who are

paid to make content (or even to gain followers and likes) are motivated to read books *in order to* produce content; thus, they are likely to read more books and read them faster to keep up with the demand for new content. This is different from a BookToker who is not being paid and posts for fun. Thus, commenters hold BookTokers to certain standards and expectations in relation to what the commenter deems “acceptable” ways of reading.

The second standout example involves a debate about romance books ruining reader’s brains. I include a long but illustrative conversation between two commenters:

**Commenter 1:** “Booktok booktok booktok...y’all should stop just reading romance \*or mostly romance\*. Go read some classic.”

**Commenter 2:** “you reading one or two books that maybe arent all that ‘intelligent’ and have a silly story doesnt ruin or ‘poison’ your mind or change it like what”

**Commenter 1:** “are you joking - I literally just said i read books w smut exc. But it is - FOR EXAMPLE! Just recently, there were people sipping<sup>73</sup> over a serial killer because of booktok specifically. Look it up. it’s honestly f\*\*\*ing disgusting- The fact of the matter is, there’s way too many people that read romance and smart<sup>74</sup> ONLY. It does ruin your mind.”

**Commenter 2:** “yes again, i now<sup>75</sup>, all the zade meadows hype for example is literally so crazy and disgusting but not every romance reader reads these type of books and...only reading romance books doesnt ruin your mind bsfr.<sup>76</sup> its like wanting mostly to watch romance movies, like why would that POISON your mind? you reaching”

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<sup>73</sup> This word should most likely be “simping” but could also be “sipping.” Regardless, the commenter is saying that there are people who are attracted to a serial killer

<sup>74</sup> The word “smart” is interpreted to mean “smut”

<sup>75</sup> The commenter means “know”

<sup>76</sup> The acronym “bsfr” means “be so for real”

**Commenter 1:** “yeah tell that to all the people saying that a serial killer was hot because of book tok. Don’t try to act like what you consume doesn’t affect you”

**Commenter 2:** “i never said thats was okay?? i was talking about actual romance books, and those type of books just romanticizing literal abuse...my overall point is that reading silly books that arent maybe all that educational doesnt ruin your mind (obvi dont mean haunting adeline ect) or poison it...and idk why you even brought up that type of books since this tiktok wasnt even promoting that ‘genre’ and we were talking about the books in this creators tiktok.”

The primary concern from Commenter 1 is that reading romance and smut is ruining readers’ brains, and that only reading romance is a problem. Commenter 1 is suggesting that romance readers should switch to classics instead, as this literature will not “ruin your brain.” Further, the conversation suggests that the dark romance genre is the actual concern, based on the reference to the book *Haunting Adeline* by H.D. Carlton and its lead male character, Zade Meadows, the serial killer the commenters discuss. Commenter 2 defended more traditional romance genre books, stating that they are “silly” books that might not be intelligent, but they certainly do not ruin the reader’s brain. What this conversation highlights is a hierarchy surrounding books that are “intellectual” and what counts as “real” literature. Reading romance and dark romance novels “ruins” or “affects” a reader’s brain whereas classics will not do that. Of course, this also sidelines the reality that many classics could be considered romance novels. Comments like these assume that romance novels cannot help develop intellectual abilities, but rather, that romance novels regress a reader’s mind. This demonstrates how romance readers are looked down upon for their reading choices, while setting up a hierarchy of taste in which readers who select certain books are not reading what is considered “real” literature. Finally, these comments highlight how

popular genres on BookTok can be highly contested, and commenters will even defend these genres and books.

### *Commenters' Consumption Practices*

The third and final theme highlights the discussions around BookTok commenters' consumption practices. Before exploring this theme, I want to bring attention to the unbalanced consumption between BookTokers and commenters. Based on the analysis of review and recommendation videos, a form of conspicuous consumption<sup>77</sup> arises between the commenters' consumption practices and the BookTokers' videos. BookTokers have easier access to advanced reader copies, often receiving free books or writing off purchases as business expenses, which sets their consumption habits apart from those of commenters. However, under Bainotti's idea of conspicuousness, BookTokers display their books in their videos because it accrues their cultural capital.<sup>78</sup> Thus, BookTokers have significant power in shaping the consumption practices of commenters.

Commenters often stated that they purchased a book based on the recommendation of a BookToker. Two exemplary comments include:

**Comment 1:** "You made me buy city of gods and monsters lol"

**Comment 2:** "I will be buying all of these bc I trust you with my life."

These are just two of the many comments stating that the BookToker had a direct influence on a commenter's book purchase. Another common statement across the review and recommendation videos was that commenters added a recommended book to their To-Be-Read (TBR) list. These kinds of statements imply that if the book is not already bought, it likely will be in the future. In other words, the thought of future consumption is present. Part of this decision to buy books

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<sup>77</sup> Veblen and Mills, "Conspicuous Consumption."

<sup>78</sup> Bainotti, "How Conspicuousness Becomes Productive on Social Media."

based on a recommendation is because of the BookToker's cultural capital, making them an "expert reader."<sup>79</sup> However, I also argue that these consumption practices of commenters are also driven by curiosity or desire to experience the recommended book, to be in the "know" about why the BookToker loved (or disliked) the book, and to participate in conversations about the book. Two comments that support this are:

**Comment 1:** "I started the Stormlight Archive because of your recs and it's changed my life"

**Comment 2:** "every time i read a book that you recommended i always love it. you have immaculate taste queen."

This ties into the earlier discussion about passion, enthusiasm, and trust in recommendations. Comments 1 and 2 highlight how reading a book based on a recommendation is personally impactful to the commenter.

When commenters discussed their book-buying habits, they most frequently stated that they were buying, finding a copy, adding to an online shopping cart, and ordering books. Some even wrote that they already bought or ordered the books. These kinds of comments do not identify specific places where the books are bought from, only indicating that the books will be or have been purchased. However, other commenters do specify where they buy or access their books. These places include Kindle, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Audible, local bookstores, Thriftbooks, Libgen, Libby, the library, and second-hand bookstores. Most commonly, Kindle and Amazon were the specific places commenters said they got their books from. Some commenters used lower-cost and sustainable options like using Libby and the library to access their books. Only a few comments discussed pirating their books. One commenter stated that they got their books from Libgen, an online shadow library that archives downloadable books

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<sup>79</sup> Fuller and Sedo, *Reading Bestsellers*, 45.



and articles. Many commenters describe “downloading” their books without specifying where they downloaded them from. While it cannot be assumed that “download” means “pirate,” it does invite further questions and research on where and how commenters are accessing their books.

While not a recurring discussion, spending money came up in the comments. Two commenters remarked on their bank accounts:

**Comment 1:** “My bank account hates to see me coming,”

**Comment 2:** “checked my bank account and SIGHED.”

Commenter 1 suggests that they frequently spend money, likely on books, whereas Commenter 2 implies they are upset because they do not have enough money in their bank account to buy more books. Commenter 2 received a response from the BookToker whose video Commenter 2 posted under, saying that they always encouraged spending money on books. Overall, these commenters and BookTokers view spending money on books as something worthwhile and not a waste.

### *Conclusion*

The analysis highlights how BookTok operates as a blend between an affinity space and a digital fan culture. BookTok is a space for lots of affective connection and bonding for commenters. Many commenters turn to BookTokers to talk about and share their favorite characters, books, series, authors, and genres. BookTok is home to many new and long-time readers, making it a space for all kinds of readers to participate. When it comes to review and recommendation videos, commenters are won over by how passionately BookTokers talk about books. However, passion is not always enough for a commenter. The opinion of a BookToker can be the ultimate make-or-break for a commenter, especially when it comes to trust. By having the same opinion, a commenter views the BookToker as trustworthy. Differing opinions cause

tension for the commenter, impacting their willingness to take the BookToker's recommendations. Further, the level of trust that a commenter has for a BookToker is often what determines what books a commenter does or does not consume (both reading and purchasing). Whether a commenter buys the book or adds it to their TBR list, some BookTok commenters scroll through BookTok videos to explore and shop around for what books they might want to buy next.

### **Goodreads Analysis**

The six BookTokers I chose are all active on their Goodreads account, using it to keep track of the books they are currently reading, books they have read, and books they want to read. The BookTokers rate the books they finish reading unless they do not finish a book (which results in a DNF). Not all the BookTokers left a written review on their finished reads. It is unclear why, but one BookToker's comment suggests that for some books, an in-depth review posted on BookTok takes priority over an in-depth Goodreads review. This is likely because a BookTok video has a better chance of receiving more engagement and financial gain. Goodreads reviews cannot make money the same way a TikTok video can. Another feature on Goodreads that BookTokers utilize is the "update" option for books they are reading. The update feature shows two statistics: the amount of pages read and the percentage towards (book) completion. There is also an option for the BookToker to write a comment on their update, allowing them to share their thoughts, reflections, or reactions. Some BookTokers used the update feature more often than others. A book review and an update post are the best places for followers to comment and directly engage with the BookToker. Thus, the more a BookToker posts updates or reviews, the more opportunities they create to engage with their followers. One BookToker, Marianna Moore, heavily utilized the update feature, posting every time she progressed on her current read. Marianna also responded to her followers' comments more frequently than others, creating a personal, interactive environment.

A few BookTokers in the Goodreads analysis had very few comments on their account. The two highest-followed BookTokers out of the six, Marianna and Jack Edwards had the most comments on their Goodreads; therefore, these two accounts are where I draw most of the comments from. Analyzing Goodreads as an extension of a BookToker's account revealed

similar dynamics to those discussed in the BookTok section. I will explore the following themes: “taste and the one ‘true’ opinion,” “reviews and consumption habits,” and “commenters’ protectionism.”

### *Taste and the One “True” Opinion*

Like in the BookTok analysis, taste was a big component of the dynamic between commenters and BookTokers. More often than not, commenters praised a BookToker’s taste in both their reading choices and opinions. They cheered on and even encouraged BookTokers to read new books or series. This creates a more personal and interactive environment for discussing books, especially considering that commenters get updates about the BookToker’s progress as they read. Similarly, commenters responded to BookToker’s reviews stating their agreement or disagreement with the BookToker’s opinion. Most of the comments I observed agreed with the BookToker’s opinion, whether it was a five-star review or a one-star review. Two comments under the same 1-star review exemplify these responses to opinions:

**Commenter 1:** I agree with every word!! I had to drag myself to 40% of this book and I physically couldn’t do it anymore. So disappointing because I was so excited for this one too!

**Commenter 2:** I have never agreed with a review more. You hit every single thing I could not stand about this book and articulated it way better than I ever could as I am still grieving the loss of my time spent reading it.

Commenters 1 and 2 directly stated their agreement with the BookTokers opinion. Other commenters under this same review disagreed with the BookToker’s opinion, saying things like “I liked this book” or “I disagree.” Although most commenters only talked about whether they

agreed or disagreed with a BookToker's review, these kinds of comments suggest that there can only be one "true" opinion.

The one "true" opinion results from a tension that arises from differing opinions between BookTokers and commenters. When a BookToker reviews a book and gives their final rating, their opinion is often considered the "true" opinion by commenters. As discussed above, the commenters most often agreed with the BookToker. Some commenters went even further than their agreement, as the following comment demonstrates:

**Comment:** "LOL tbh I love to see other people who don't like this book bc it makes me feel validated"

The review that this comment came from was a one-star book review. This commenter agrees with the BookToker's rating and opinion of the book and even says they feel validated in their dislike. This highlights how a BookToker's review can uphold or validate a commenter's opinion as the "correct" one. This kind of comment further suggests the power and influence of a BookToker's opinion when it opposes a commenter's opinion. Two comments exemplify this:

**Comment 1:** "I loved this book lmao maybe something is wrong with me"

**Comment 2:** "NO WHAT, I GAVE THIS 5 STARS now I'm doubting myself??? Is my taste trash??? AM I TRASH?"

Comments 1 and 2 came from two separate book reviews from two different BookTokers; however, the books were rated 1-star and 2-star respectively. Rather than simply posting about where their opinion differs from the BookToker's, Comments 1 and 2 question their taste and opinions of the book. These comments highlight the high level of trust and regard that commenters have for BookTokers' opinions. The BookTokers' opinion is the "correct" one that determines how others should think about the books—any different opinion means there is

something “wrong” with the reader’s taste. Comment 2 even questions their self-worth rather than just their taste in books. While Comment 2 is likely exaggerating, this commenter suggests how personal taste can be, and that any slight contradiction or criticism against one’s taste puts their intellectual abilities into question.

The opposite can be true, too, in the case of a commenter criticizing the BookToker’s taste because the opinions on a book do not align. One comment specifically demonstrates this:

**Comment:** “Oh my god I thought you have some taste but I was wrong.”

This commenter wrote this under a BookToker who gave a book a 5-star review. The commenter considers the BookToker to have poor taste because they enjoyed a book that the commenter disliked. This comment further supports the level of trust in BookTokers’ opinions and reviews of books, because the commenter believed the BookToker to have taste before posting a “wrong” opinion. This comment also indicates that commenters can have their own “true” opinions, and any other opinions are not valid.

Finally, the Goodreads comments revealed the role of the BookToker in the community, which is further intertwined with the role of trust and the power of their opinions. A majority of the commenters, especially under Jack Edwards’ reviews posted comments like the following:

**Commenter 1:** “Thank you for your service”

**Commenter 2:** “Thank you for saving me from reading this series. I appreciate you, good sir.”

These two comments came from a review of a book that Jack gave a two-star rating.

Commenters 1 and 2 solidify the BookToker’s role as someone who reads books and determines whether they are worth reading. This also plays into the power of a BookToker’s opinion and the trust that commenters put into the BookToker’s review. As Commenter 2 suggests, if a

BookToker reads a book and gives it a bad review, it is perceived by commenters as a service to them, saving them from reading a book that is not worth it or not enjoyable.

Further, giving critical reviews of books lends the BookToker more credibility in relation to whether a commenter trusts their reviews and powers. This can be seen with comments like the following:

**Comment:** “I would be shaking as an author if Jack gave me a two stars review...anyway adding this to see how bad is it [sic]”

This comment came from a different Jack Edwards book review, in which he gave the book a two-star rating. The comment illustrates the power of a BookToker’s opinion in the online literary community, especially opinions from popular or prominent figures like Jack. Because of the trust that commenters put into BookTokers, a BookToker’s review/opinion can have a huge influence on whether commenters read a book or series. It also influences the commenter’s opinion of a book before they have even read the book. As the commenter writes, they want to see how “bad” the book is despite not having read the book to determine their own opinion.

One final dynamic between the BookToker and the commenters was the sharing of opinions. A few commenters tried to predict what a BookToker would think of a book, or even talk about a shared “chemistry”:

**Commenter 1:** “Ooooo, and 1 star rating...I’m interesting [sic] as to why? Usually our book chemistry is on point”

**Commenter 2:** “I’d bet this won’t be your cup of tea. I fear the MMC is too tame for your taste. Would love to be wrong, though.”

These two comments came from separate book reviews from two different BookTokers.

Regardless, they both indicate that the commenter believes in an understanding or connection

between them and the BookToker, in which they share similar tastes or opinions in books.

Commenter 2 suggests that they know how the BookToker will react or respond to the book, likely based on previous reviews.

### *Commenter's Protectionism*

As discussed, commenters either agree or disagree with a BookToker's opinions and reviews. When the BookToker shares a different opinion than the commenter, most of the commenters accept that opinions can differ. However, some commenters responded to protect one of three things: their opinion, the book being reviewed, or against extremely critical reviews. The BookToker's review (Marianna) and three comments under the review are included to highlight this "protectionism":

**Marianna:** "You ever accidentally get hand sanitizer in a paper cut? That's what reading this book felt like."

**Commenter 1:** "Life is too short to try and convince people a book is terrible just because it wasn't to your personal taste"

**Commenter 2:** "Instead of hating on a book every few pages you could literally. just. dnf. it."<sup>80</sup>

**Commenter 3:** "I liked this book but okay pop off I guess? Just cause something isn't for you doesn't mean you have to trash it."<sup>81</sup>

All three comments indicate that the BookToker's review is too critical, even bordering on hatred of the book. Because Commenter 1 does not share their own opinion of this book, the comment suggests they are protecting against extreme criticism of books. Commenter 1 also suggests that the BookToker shapes other commenters' perception of the book before they read it. This

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<sup>80</sup> "dnf" means did not finish

<sup>81</sup> "Pop off" means to go crazy or to perform/do something extremely well.



re-emphasizes a BookToker's role as someone who defines and determines literary taste and what books are worth reading. Given that the other commenters under this review said they would not read the book or removed it from their TBR list, BookTokers do play a role in shaping opinions of books.

Commenter 2 criticizes Marianna for her choice of continuing to read a book that she does not enjoy. Whether Commenter 2 liked or disliked the book is unclear. Regardless, Commenter 2 perceives Marianna's review as "hate" towards the book. Commenter 2 feels that Thus, Commenter 2 is also protecting against extreme criticism of a book that borders on spreading hatred. Finally, Commenter 3 protects their own opinion of the book, as their comment suggests that Marianna is "trashing" a book that they enjoyed. The comment also suggests that not everyone will like every single book. However, based on Commenter 3's response, there is a (blurry) line between trashing or hating a book and valid criticism. If the commenter perceives the BookToker as being too harsh towards a book that they enjoyed, they respond in a way that protects their own opinions. This is similar to what was discussed above, with taste and opinion being a very personal matter. Any differing opinion, especially ones that seem like hate, is perceived as an attack on not just the book but an attack on the commenter as well.

Some commenters feel personally impacted by opinions that differ from their own and perceive them as a threat, prompting them to respond or take action. The following comments highlight this:

**Commenter 1:** "Your last update had me stressing cause I want your updates for this so bad it's one of my god tiers, enjoy!!"

**Commenter 2:** "I'm gonna have to block these updates out bc Lukas was - and is - EVERYTHING"

Commenter 1 is responding to a book update where the BookToker did not like the book at first but was slowly getting into it. Based on their response, Commenter 1 was worried that the BookToker would not like one of their all-time favorite books. Although Commenter 1 is not necessarily reacting or responding to anything negative, it is clear that the thought of the BookToker not liking their favorite book is worrisome and stressful. Not only does this highlight the desire for other readers to enjoy the same books but it further suggests that not having the same opinion can cause a personal disruption, evoking that protective response. Commenter 2 responded to another one of Marianna's book updates in which she expressed a dislike for a specific character (Lukas). Commenter 2 displays a protective response in favor of their favorite character, which the BookToker dislikes. Commenter 2 is even going so far as to block or ignore Marianna's updates for this specific book because their opinions of this character do not match. This comment demonstrates how opinions become a personal matter, and even creates a need to take action to protect themselves and their opinions about the character from perceived attacks or threats.

Finally, commenters' protection extended to the genre of a book, which in this case was the romantasy genre. Jack Edwards posted the following review for a popular romantasy book:

**Jack Edwards:** "so this is what they meant when they said "fast fashion books" rushed, lazy, just carbon-copies the blueprint of book 1 in the series... but doesn't work."

One commenter posted a lengthy response to Jack's review, asking him to consider how such a short, "rushed" review might impact other readers' opinions, especially when the review included "negative criticism." This opened a much bigger conversation in which other commenters began poking fun at the initial commenter for defending the book so adamantly. One comment even stated that this commenter was fighting so hard to "protect" the book. Jack

responded to the initial commenter, stating that he was confused by their points which seemed misdirected. Jack said that he was only commenting on the craft of the book and his in-depth review was posted on YouTube. The commenter responded to Jack in another long comment, from which I include a particularly illustrative point:

**Commenter:** “I think that if you were more comprehensive in your Goodreads reviews, someone seeing your book review there could form a more complete critical opinion...I realize that for you this might be a minor issue and that in your work as an influencer, you need to balance clicks with completeness and content. It would just be more educational and comprehensive if your entire review was complete here without needing the video to complement it”

This interaction demonstrates how particular genres are also included when it comes to protective comments. The commenter was respectful in their interactions and thoughts about Jack’s review, but was affected by Jack’s branding of the book as “fast-fashion.” Other commenters supported Jack’s review, using this book and the review to criticize the romantasy genre more broadly. This particular interaction is further complicated due to Jack’s considerable following, status, and respect in online literary communities like BookTok and BookTube. The commenter recognizes Jack’s status in the community and the effect that his opinions have on his followers; thus, the commenter may have felt the need to call attention to Jack’s review, and “protect” this book and others like it.

### *Reviews and Consumption Habits*

Because Goodreads is a platform designed for book reviews, one of the most common ways to engage with BookTokers is by checking their reviews. How much a commenter trusts a

BookToker can influence the consumption habits of the commenter. For example, if a BookToker gave a book a great review, commenters often posted comments like,

**Comment 1:** “Just ordered!”

**Comment 2:** “The book buying ban is over. time to get another book brb”

These kinds of comments generally came from five-star reviews or book updates in which the BookToker talks about their enjoyment and love of the book. Comments 1 and 2 indicate how influential a positive book review is on their purchasing habits. Comment 2 is also noteworthy because this commenter was trying not to buy books, but the BookToker’s review ended the “ban” and inspired the commenter to purchase another book.

On the other hand, a BookToker’s influence on what books a commenter purchases can have the opposite effect. If a BookToker gives a critical review or says they did not enjoy a book, commenters will post comments such as,

**Comment 1:** “\*removes from tbr list\*”

**Comment 2:** “\*deletes from cart\*”

Comments like Comment 1 are common under negative or critical book reviews, whereas comments like Comment 2 are less frequent but do appear occasionally. Both of these comments were dissuaded from purchasing a book based on the negative or critical review. Comment 1 removes a book that would be read and/or purchased in the future. Comment 2 had the intention of purchasing, but reconsidered after the BookToker’s review.

One of the ways that commenters use Goodreads is to check the reviews of a book before purchasing it. In particular, the commenters checked a BookToker’s review to help them decide whether to purchase the book. Example comments include,

**Comment 1:** “I had this is [*sic*] my hand at Walmart and I said ‘let me check my Goodreads, see about the reviews’ and trusted Marianna’s 1 star review was first so it’s a no go”

**Comment 2:** “Was just at the Ripped Bodice NY and picked up a different book instead after reading your review, thank you!”

**Comment 3:** “If you like it or not is gonna be the deciding factor if I end up buying it or not lmao”

All of these comments come from different book updates from Marianna’s page. Comments 1 and 2 show how the commenters were at a physical store to purchase a book, checked Marianna’s review, and did not purchase the book based on her review. These commenters use Goodreads to vet a book before purchasing it. Further, these commenters demonstrate how trust in a BookToker’s review plays out in consumption habits. Comment 3 is similar in that the commenter will eventually end up trusting the BookToker’s opinion to decide on purchasing the book. Further, all three of these comments hint at an underlying theme of books being good enough or worth spending money on. These three commenters trust the BookToker’s review rather than reading and making their own decision. If the BookToker gives a positive review, the book is worth purchasing and reading. However, if the BookToker gives a negative or critical review, commenters will pass on the book and trust the BookToker’s taste in what to read or not to read.

This theme of books being “worthy” of reading and purchasing was most commonly stated when commenters were upset or regretted purchasing a “bad” book. The following comments are the four best examples:

**Comment 1:** “Wait I’m scared now, it’s crazy how reviews for this are either 1 star or 5 stars lmao, I wish I hadn’t already bought this in print”

**Comment 2:** “i knew you wouldn’t like this lol. this is exactly how I feel about this book! so mad I wasted my money on it”

**Comment 3:** “I borrow books from the library so I won’t be wasting money if I don’t like it...”

**Comment 4:** “Nooo don’t say this I just paid £16.99 for the hardback”

All four comments indicate that buying a book considered “bad”—whether they think so or the BookToker does—is a waste of money. These comments also highlight that only “good” or “enjoyable” books are worth buying physical copies of. This is clear from Comment 3 because this commenter reads books through the library and therefore does not waste their money on books they do not like. The BookToker’s review caused Comment 1 and Comment 4 to worry about whether they would like the book. Despite not having read the book to form their own opinion, both commenters express their regret in spending money and buying the physical book. Comment 2 is different as this commenter has already read the book and agrees with the BookToker’s negative/critical review. This commenter did not like the book and felt as if they wasted their money by purchasing a book they did not enjoy. These comments illustrate that only enjoyable books are worth spending money on or purchasing. “Bad” books or unenjoyable books are not only a waste of time reading but also a waste of money. Further, these comments all demonstrate the power that BookTokers have in shaping commenter’s opinions about books, both on the decision to purchase as well as how the commenter approaches the books (with a pre-formed expectation of liking or disliking the book).

*Conclusion*

On Goodreads, reviews and recommendations are the sole focus of a commenter's interaction with a BookToker. Thus, the role of opinions and taste when it comes to interactions between commenters and BookTokers is intensified. Opinions hold more weight for commenters on Goodreads, so much so that BookTokers are seen as "the" opinion. No other opinion exists outside of this BookToker's opinion. Even when the commenter's opinion differs, the commenter questions if their opinion is "wrong" rather than agreeing to disagree. Commenters conceptualize a BookToker's job as determining what books are worth reading and which are not. This is also important when commenters purchase books. Commenters trust BookTokers to help them make a decision on what books they will want to read and which they do not, so they do not waste their time or money. When BookTokers deemed books "bad" or criticized them, commenters would respond by protecting the book or their own opinion. This illustrates that opinion and taste are so personal that criticism cannot be accepted.

## Comparing BookTok and Goodreads

### *Platform Experience*

Comparing Goodreads to BookTok revealed differences in platform use and features. The current features of TikTok do not provide adequate space for broader group discussions or forums. Users can only engage in discussions via individual TikTok video comment sections, where individual comments are further restricted to a 150-character limit. For BookTok, this means that commenters must leave their comments, reflections, and opinions in the individual videos of BookTok users. It provides limited opportunities for commenters to engage deeply in discussions with BookTokers. Goodreads is not restricted by a character limit for BookToker's review and update posts, allowing commenters to write their reflections and opinions in as many or few words as they would like. Further, Goodreads allows for both commenting under BookToker's posts and pages as well as larger group/forum discussions. Goodreads users can join different Groups, all with unique topics. There is even a Group called "BookTok," described as "A place for booktokers to interact with each other and share the love."<sup>82</sup> Goodreads Groups like "BookTok" encourage interaction between users where they talk about personal recommendations, book-reviewing apps, and broader observations or concerns about BookTok.

Comparing the two platforms also highlights the blurry, always-shifting boundaries of BookTok, solidifying its likeness to an affinity space or digital fan culture rather than a definable community. BookTok comment sections were more varied in what commenters wrote whereas Goodreads comments were solely focused on the BookToker's reviews and opinions. This is likely due to the ease at which BookTok users (and TikTok users more broadly) can move between different kinds of content. On Goodreads, it takes more effort to search and find specific book reviewers, making their profiles more intimate and not as visible. This highlights the

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<sup>82</sup> Goodreads, "Booktok  Group."



ephemeral and short-lived nature of a space like BookTok.<sup>83</sup> The never-ending scroll through BookTok videos makes it easier to sift through creators, and users must curate their content through follows, likes, and comments to continue seeing the same creator. The differences between BookTok and Goodreads likely come down to the purpose and use of the platform. What remained the same between the two is that the discussions generally centered around commenters' love and interest in books. Most comments on BookTok and Goodreads expressed their thoughts and feelings about different books, characters, and series. Commenters of all kinds, whether they were new to reading or had already read the books being discussed, shared their knowledge and opinions with the BookToker and other commenters. In this sense, BookTokers and their videos are centers for affinity and fannish engagements.

*BookToker as a “knowledgeable, bookish friend”*

My analysis of BookTok and Goodreads confirmed other literature that characterizes and defines BookTokers as a “knowledgeable, bookish friend.”<sup>84</sup> Commenters often considered BookTokers to be their “BookTok bestie.” Passion played an important role in the commenter's perception of the BookToker, primarily for trusting or being persuaded by a book review/recommendation. The intensity of a BookToker's passion was especially important for inspiring commenters new to reading or getting back into it. Commenters also interacted with BookTokers by expressing their enthusiasm for them to explore specific books, series, authors, or genres, further supporting the idea of BookTokers being seen as ‘bookish friends.’ Many commenters shared their desire and excitement to hear a BookToker's thoughts and opinions, suggesting a larger desire to share in the experience of reading a specific book. A few commenters even tried to predict the BookToker's opinion, suggesting that the commenters feel

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<sup>83</sup> Caliandro, Gandini, Bainotti, and Anselmi “Ephemeral Content and Ephemeral Consumption on TikTok,” 210.

<sup>84</sup> Reddan, “Social Reading Cultures,” 9.

as if they know the BookToker on an intimate level. Commenters cheered on the BookToker or even wished them luck on their journey while reading a book. At times, this even turned into commenters motivating or encouraging BookTokers to keep reading a book because the commenter says it is worth it. These kinds of comments indicate a role reversal between BookTokers and commenters since BookTokers are the figures who encourage or recommend others to read. Overall, previous research on BookTok that describes the BookToker as a “bookish friend” is consistent with how BookTok and Goodreads commenters view BookTokers. However, the role of the BookToker as a friend and their ability to influence their audience is somewhat contingent on the BookToker’s opinion and reviews, which has not been explored from the perspective of BookTok commenters.

#### *BookToker’s Cultural Authority and Opinions*

When BookTokers share their tastes and preferences, they establish themselves as an “expert reader and trusted other,”<sup>85</sup> giving them cultural authority on BookTok. This was also true from the perspective of the commenters because their interactions with BookTokers position the BookToker as the trusted source for recommendations. Not only did commenters use the recommendations to guide their reading, they were curious about why BookTokers gave a book a specific review, or to experience a similar reaction as the BookToker had. This further demonstrates how commenters see BookTokers as the ones who ultimately decide whether books are “worth” reading, which supports other research on BookTok.<sup>86</sup> Commenters even thought their opinion was “wrong” because it was not the same as the BookToker’s opinion. All of these discussions from commenters reveal that BookTokers have a large influence over commenters’ opinions about books before they even read them. I argue that this is why BookToker’s

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<sup>85</sup> Fuller and Sedo, *Reading Bestsellers*, 45.

<sup>86</sup> Maddox and Gill, “Assembling ‘Sides’ of TikTok,” 8.

recommendations and reviews appeal to commenters. Commenters want to know which books are good or bad, enjoyable or unenjoyable, and exciting or boring before they invest time into reading them. They use a BookToker's opinion to determine this.

While the BookToker's opinion was mostly viewed as one that commenters could trust, for some commenters, it largely depended on whether their opinion aligned with the BookToker's opinion. When a BookToker's opinion of a book aligned with the commenter's, the commenter felt an immediate connection and trust in the BookToker's other opinions. If the commenter's opinion did not align with the BookToker's, the commenter questioned whether they could trust the BookToker's other opinions. Not only did opinions determine a commenter's trust in a BookToker, but the amount of books a BookToker reads and reviews also determined trust. For a few commenters, BookTokers who read fewer books in a month/year were more trustworthy and authentic than BookTokers who read more books. The commenters felt that reading fewer books means the BookToker is thinking critically and deeply engaging with a book. This only appeared a few times out of the video samples. However, it demonstrates how the number of books a BookToker reads and reviews can factor into how "authentic" or "trustworthy" a BookToker appears to commenters.

#### *"Protectionism" and Call-Out Culture on BookTok*

The overall analysis revealed that a majority of commenters' discussions with BookTokers involve their affective connections to books, characters, authors, and book series (their "favorites"). Oftentimes, how the commenters connect with and trust BookTokers is by having the same opinion about their favorites. Commenters expressed a sense of possession over their favorite books and characters, referring to them as their "babies," thinking about them constantly, or getting upset when BookTokers expressed their dislike of them. This intense

affective connection sometimes resulted in commenters protecting their favorites. If a BookToker expressed criticism or negative opinions about a commenter's favorite book or character, they interpreted the criticism as hate or trashing. This could be a BookToker saying they do not like a character, making satirical jokes, or posting a review with their criticisms about the writing and storyline. Commenters take these criticisms personally and defend against them by, for example, unfollowing the BookToker, blocking the BookToker's posts, telling the BookToker they are wrong, or calling out the BookToker for "hating."

These interactions with BookTokers mirror broader observations by fan studies scholars about anti-fandom, call-out culture, fan protectionism, and backlash against any form of criticism towards entertainment media. While commenters' discussions were not as intense or explicit in their anti-fandom or cancel culture behaviors, the strategies that commenters alluded to (unfollowing or blocking) are similar to the strategies employed by anti-fans of celebrities. By addressing the BookToker's criticism, BookTok commenters more closely resemble call-out culture practices that Katie Herzog observes. She claims that nowadays, any opinion shared online is subject to criticism and being told one is "wrong" or "trash." Herzog writes, "I can see why people are afraid to voice their opinions if their opinions are even slightly outside the tide of contemporary thinking."<sup>87</sup> Similarly, aca-fans like Stitch note how fans, especially Black and queer fans, receive backlash or hate for expressing concern, hesitation, or criticism of media narratives, characters, and representations.<sup>88</sup> Stitch identifies a "panicked misreading"<sup>89</sup> of criticism, which is automatically interpreted as being anti: "Anyone who speaks/thinks critically or airs dislike of something or someone in fandom in any capacity or at any volume is an anti

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<sup>87</sup> Herzog, "Call-Out Culture Is a Toxic Garbage Dumpster Fire of Trash."

<sup>88</sup> Stitch, "Applied to Fandom: Critical Consumption/Analysis."; Stitch, "The Evolution of Anti-Critical Consumption/Thinking 'Anti-Anti' Fandom."

<sup>89</sup> Stitch "Applied to Fandom."

and explicitly a bad person in fandom no matter what.”<sup>90</sup> Herzog and Stitch’s observations are relevant to BookTok commenters who “call out” BookTokers for their opinions or commenters who consider a BookToker’s criticism about books as being anti. Further, this kind of behavior points to a normalization of polarizing opinions. Having the opposite opinion is automatically deemed as “wrong” and there is little to no room for debate. Although not all BookTok commenters participate in call-out or anti-fan behaviors, those who do mimic the much wider issue of polarizing debates in online spaces. Regardless, this theme from my research requires additional analysis but could benefit future fan studies research on anti-fandom and call-out culture.

### *Literary Consumption*

Finally, the BookTok and Goodreads analysis revealed the key role that BookTokers play in influencing what book commenters do and do not consume (both reading and buying). Most commenters added or removed books from their TBR based on a BookToker’s review, but commenters also stated that they bought or did not buy a book because of a BookToker’s review. This highlights how a BookToker’s review and opinion have significant power and influence over commenters’ consumption habits. In other words, BookTokers are a crucial part of commenters’ decisions when it comes to deciding on what books to read and buy. BookTokers are the commenters’ decision makers in an abundance of books to choose from.<sup>91</sup> This is further supported by commenters’ discussion of books being “worthy” of consumption. The BookToker is often the deciding factor on whether or not a book is worth reading and therefore a justified purchase. Commenters indicated that spending money on books that are “bad” or “unenjoyable” is seen as a waste of time and money, whereas spending money on a book that is “good” or

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<sup>90</sup> Stitch “The Evolution of Anti-Critical.”

<sup>91</sup> Stevens, “You Are What You Buy,” 210.

“enjoyable” is highly encouraged. As Stevens argues, consumption is identity-building.<sup>92</sup> This suggests that commenters want their identity to be associated with the “good” and “enjoyable” books, and not associated with “bad” or “unenjoyable” books. Overall, BookToker’s opinions have significant power in shaping commenters’ consumption practices and opinions (especially before they read a book). The extent of a BookToker’s actual influence on commenters’ consumption practices is unknown; thus, future research should explore this relationship.

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<sup>92</sup> Stevens, “You Are What You Buy,” 209.

## Conclusion

Future research would greatly benefit from interviews or surveys with active BookToker users. These methodologies would give better insight into BookTok users' perspectives and perceived relationships with BookTokers. Further, interviews and surveys would address some of the issues that arose in my research, which include the difficulty in determining who the commenters are, whether they are active followers of BookTokers, and whether they are one-time commenters or comment frequently. Interviews and surveys would also better capture the experience of BookTok "lurkers," those who participate in BookTok but usually do not make their presence known. Due to time constraints and the scale of the research, my work did not benefit from the use of interviews and surveys. Regardless, my research explores the relationship between commenters and BookTokers since there is little to no published research examining how BookTok users interact and engage with BookTokers.

Additionally, future research must look more exclusively at how gender, race, and/or disability factor into the relationship and interactions between BookTokers and their followers. My sample of BookTok videos did not reveal any noticeable differences in how male and female BookTokers interacted with commenters/followers and vice versa. Further, research should examine if the race and ethnicity of commenters and BookTokers (as well as the authors they recommend) play a role in how BookTokers and commenters interact. Finally, future research could benefit from looking into how disability on BookTok is represented and discussed. A few commenters in my analysis thanked BookTokers for inspiring them to try reading despite having a disability that might impact how they read. While there were no BookTokers who disclosed having a disability in my analysis, further research might look into BookTokers who center

discussions of disability and how this challenges normative understandings of reading, analyzing, and literature.

This thesis has explored how BookTok commenters interact and engage with each other and BookTokers, addressing the current gap in BookTok research. Broader themes emerged from these interactions, such as passion, opinions, trust, taste, consumption, and criticism. These themes explore some of the power dynamics at play in these communities between bookish influencers and their engaged audiences. Ultimately, I argue that BookTok commenters engage with BookTokers to seek the experience of discussing and reading books. Commenters trust that BookTokers will lead them towards an enjoyable reading experience, or away from a reading experience that will waste their time. Reviews and opinions on BookTok are complicated by commenters' protection over their own opinions, which makes criticizing books and literature more complex and personal on BookTok. Overall, the themes that emerged from this exploration of BookTok comment sections present new opportunities for future research to look at previously unexplored areas of BookTok, such as anti-fandom on BookTok and the purchasing habits of BookTok users. It is unclear what BookTok might look like in the future, as TikTok is highly ephemeral and fleeting. Nonetheless, it is important to look at spaces such as BookTok to understand how online users engage with literature.



## Appendix

Below is the link to the desktop documentary video that was made to highlight the results of the research:

[https://youtu.be/Y7Y\\_0xBb1NE](https://youtu.be/Y7Y_0xBb1NE)

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