

# BookTok Helped Us Sell It: How TikTok Disrupts Publishing and Fuels the #Romantasy Boom

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## Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic, TikTok quickly became an important source for connection and entertainment, as people made creative videos and participated in TikTok challenges. The app's affordances contributed to the emergence of sub-communities, including BookTok, which connected readers across a sociotechnical landscape, and launched backlist titles onto best-seller lists. Using interviews with publishers and booksellers in Denmark and the United States, observations of booksellers' in-store BookTok displays, and analysis of content created by publishers and online influencers on BookTok, this study examines how BookTok disrupts Darnton's (1982) Communications Circuit and its subsequent revisions. It explores the impact of BookTok on the landscape of book production and dissemination, the creation of new genres like romantasy within, and how publishers and booksellers are leveraging the organic landscape of BookTok to authentically market to readers.

## Keywords

BookTok, publishing, bookselling, reading, affordances of BookTok, Darnton, Tiktok, romantasy

## Introduction

During the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, TikTok emerged as a leading social platform for information, connection, and entertainment, as people participated in TikTok by creating and sharing videos, memes, and engaging in TikTok challenges or dances. Sub-

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communities quickly emerged, including BookTok,<sup>1</sup> which connected readers of similar interests, allowing them to share likes (and dislikes) and engage around books within a sociotechnical landscape. In this paper, we examine how BookTok is impacting the landscape of book production, dissemination, and consumption. BookTok blurs lines between professional book producers, and disseminators and the readers who provide their immaterial and affective labour (Terranova, 2000) to freely market the books they love, thereby influencing what lands on best-seller lists, from backlist titles like Madeline Miller's *Song of Achilles*, to the latest Colleen Hoover novel. Our transnational study examines how publishers and booksellers in Denmark and the United States have entered the BookTok community, and are using it to authentically connect with readers, thereby gaining deep and immediate understandings of readers' taste, but also imposing their commercial interests upon the community. Despite the expanding BookTok community, and clear success of BookTok as a tool for reader engagement, pending TikTok bans at government levels are an underlying current in our research, threatening use of this platform in both countries.

## Literature review

### *TikTok and the role of influencers*

As of this writing, TikTok continues to be among the most downloaded apps worldwide (Statista.com), and interest in TikTok as a book marketing platform continues to grow. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2022, 73% of Americans reported shopping online with smartphones, and social media often impacts what they buy. Seventy-two percent of 18–29-year-olds frequently base their purchases on recommendations from influencers and content creators, and 41% report buying something after seeing it on social media (Faverio and Anderson, 2022).

Influencers can be divided into types including nano, micro, macro, and mega, according to their number of followers and level of engagement and commitment (Alassani and Göretz, 2019). Nano-influencers have a limited reach with under 5000 followers but have a high level of commitment and authority. Micro-influencers with between 5000 and 100,000 followers, are well-known for their knowledge and interest in specific or niche topics and are viewed as highly credible by their followers (Conde and Casais, 2023). Macro-influencers with between 100,000 and one million followers may have a high frequency of posting, but a lower level of engagement with and commitment to their followers. Globally known influencers with over one million followers are mega-influencers, and often come from the world of entertainment. They engage minimally with followers but have a massive reach and create global trends.

Reddan (2022) introduces a new category, namely, 'bookfluencers'. While bookfluencers can occupy any of these levels, most are micro-influencers who use social media to share their love of books. Bookfluencers are viewed by their followers as trusted sources, and their authenticity and reliability contribute to establishing affective relationships with their followers. Influencers are a central part of the recommendation culture in online reading communities, creating both legitimacy and visibility for the books they review (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023). Some BookTokers achieve a semi-professional status, as they collaborate with publishers. Writing about BookTubers and publishers in Spain, Tomasena (2019) argues that even though most book influencers are unpaid, receiving gifts in the form of books and related merchandise can compromise their integrity and ultimately their affective relationships with followers.

### *Affective engagement and algorithmic curated culture*

Emotions of all kinds are an important part of viewer engagement with TikTok videos. For example, [Harris \(2021\)](#) describes how readers crying about books in their TikTok videos helps sell books. Based on their [\(2023\)](#) survey of 217 TikTok followers of a Spanish influencer, Barta et al. conclude that TikTok followers watch content for hedonic purposes and that humorous content on TikTok promotes pleasurable experiences. One explanation of this pleasurable experience can be found in [Zhao and Wagner \(2022\)](#), who show how TikTok's affordances relate to users' flow experience. TikTok's algorithm automatically sends content to users' For You page, where recommendation accuracy and serendipity combine effortlessly. This contributes to users' experience of flow, as one video after another leads to an immersive and enjoyable experience. This positive interpretation of the algorithm's impact on user experience is challenged by research from critical algorithm studies that examines the influence of algorithms on participatory cultures. In [Gran, Booth & Bucher's \(2021\)](#) study, the authors argue that a new digital divide is emerging between those who are aware of how algorithms work, and those who are not. In [Low et al. \(2023\)](#) study of algorithms and BookTok, the authors favour the term 'algorithmic culture' over 'participatory culture', arguing that there is a form of co-production between content creators and the algorithm ([Low et al., 2023](#)). Thus online communities such as BookTok can be characterised as created by users and curated by algorithms ([Maddox and Gill, 2023](#)). Other research on TikTok addresses problematic and even dangerous aspects of using the app, including stress, anxiety, and even addiction. For example, in their study of TikTok users, [Miranda et al. \(2023\)](#) found that flow and a sense of belonging can lead to addiction. 'If the goal of being on [TikTok] is to escape the boredom of everyday life, addiction develops through a state of flow and a sense of belonging to the community; if the goal is interaction with others, addiction develops exclusively with the development of a sense of belonging to the community'.

### *Online bookish communities*

Digitisation has impacted the literary landscape ([Koegler and Norrick-Rühl, 2023](#); [Murray, 2018](#); [Thompson, 2021](#)), blurring traditional lines between authors, publishers, booksellers, and reading consumers. Studies of bookish sub-communities on other social media such as Booktube, Bookterest and Bookstagram analyse reader identity, visual culture, and readers' relations ([Birke and Fehrle, 2018](#); [Reddan et al., 2024](#); [Rodger, 2019](#); [Thomas, 2021](#)). Research on BookTok continues to increase in relation to library marketing and advisory services ([Chiovelle and Cameron, 2023](#); [Mashiyane, 2022](#); [Merga, 2021](#); [Stephens, 2022](#)), and in relation to schools and teaching ([Jerasa and Boffone, 2021](#)). [Dezuanni \(2021\)](#) argues that BookTok is a positive tool for engaging younger readers with books and motivating them to read. [Boffone and Jerasa \(2021\)](#) describe BookTok as a safe space for teen readers to explore queer YA literature. Based on New Literacy Studies, which focus on literacy as a social practice rather than as a skill set, BookTok serves as a social reading community where like-minded people meet to discuss and share their reading experiences ([Boffone and Jerasa, 2021](#)), increasing reader engagement and motivation. [Fuller and Rehberg Sedo \(2023\)](#) define readers in the digital age as multimodal readers, who read in print or on digital platforms, and engage in online recommendation communities on platforms such as TikTok ([Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023](#)). They further describe digital environments as essential for turning readers into both fans and influencers, whose activities impact the publishing industry. Two recent publications focus on the social aspects of reading communities and reading practices as performed in a mediatised landscape. [Reddan et al. \(2024\)](#) argue that reading cultures on Booktube,

Bookstagram and BookTok and the possibilities for participation afforded by the communities and platforms, enhance the agency and visibility of readers within literary culture. [Driscoll \(2024\)](#) explores connections between the social behaviour of readers, the commercial interests of the book industry and argues that reading practices exist in both analogue and digital reading modes.

## **Theoretical framework**

Our study is based on two different theoretical approaches: (1) affordance theory in the context of the sociotechnical landscape of TikTok; and (2) [Murray and Squires \(2013\)](#) digital communications circuit, which revises Robert [Darnton's \(1982\)](#) communications circuit for the digital age. The sociotechnical approach, which engages both social and psychological elements as well as the materiality and affordances of TikTok's platform, helps us identify and analyse material and technical aspects of the app whereas the communications circuit emphasises changes in the landscape of book production, dissemination, and consumption.

BookTokers operate in such a sociotechnical landscape ([Ellison et al., 2022](#); [Sawyer and Jarrahi, 2014](#)). The concept of affordances derives from environmental psychology ([Gibson, 1986](#)) and is widely used in media and communication studies despite disagreements about the use and definition of the concept. Studies such as [Nagy and Neff \(2015\)](#) and [Evans et al. \(2017\)](#), have sought to redefine and clarify how it can be applied to theoretical and empirical studies. In this article, our use of affordances comes from [Bucher and Helmond \(2018\)](#), who explore the different layers of meaning in the concept that capture '... the relationship between the materiality of media and human agency' ([Bucher and Helmond, 2018](#): 239). They argue that different understandings of affordances including relational, perceived, technological, social, and communicative affordances tend to conceptualise them as being either high-level or low-level. High-level affordances refer to conditions enabled by social media platforms such as multimodality, spreadability, and mobility which form new modes of cultural behaviour and communicative practices. Low-level affordances include material features of the media, including buttons, screens, sounds, and more. [Bucher and Helmond \(2018\)](#) advocate for a relational and multi-layered approach which considers both the materiality of media, the agency of users and the platform-specific environments. A sociotechnical approach pays attention to the 'hidden affordances' ([Nagy and Neff, 2015](#): 3) including how algorithms work and influence what users see on the platforms. [Martens et al. \(2022\)](#) studied TikTok's affordances including hashtags, sound bites, and opportunities to like, comment and follow, which showed that while TikTok has many of the same affordances as other popular social media platforms, that have disrupted the book trade, like Wattpad, AO3, Instagram, or YouTube, compared to its competition, TikTok excels in ease of content creation ([Guinez-Cabrera and Mansilla-Obando, 2022](#)). While at first TikTok appears messy and complicated to understand, the low-level affordances of the app allows for quick and easy creation of videos ([Stokel-Walker, 2021](#)), and for sharing sound bites and video clips from other content.

TikTok is known as 'the most algorithmically driven of the social media platforms' ([Low et al., 2023](#): 3). The algorithm evaluates content with most user resonance by measuring users' watch time, likes, and comments, and uses the data to recommend similar content in their feed ([Smith, 2021](#); [Wang, 2022](#)). [Abidin \(2021\)](#) describes how the nature of virality on TikTok has changed for influencers and content creators. Fame on other social media platforms is based on people and followers, but virality on TikTok is based on the activity connected to individual posts. The more engagement creators have, defined by numbers of likes, comments and shares, the more visibility they have. In order to remain visible, creators must be quick to create content following the latest

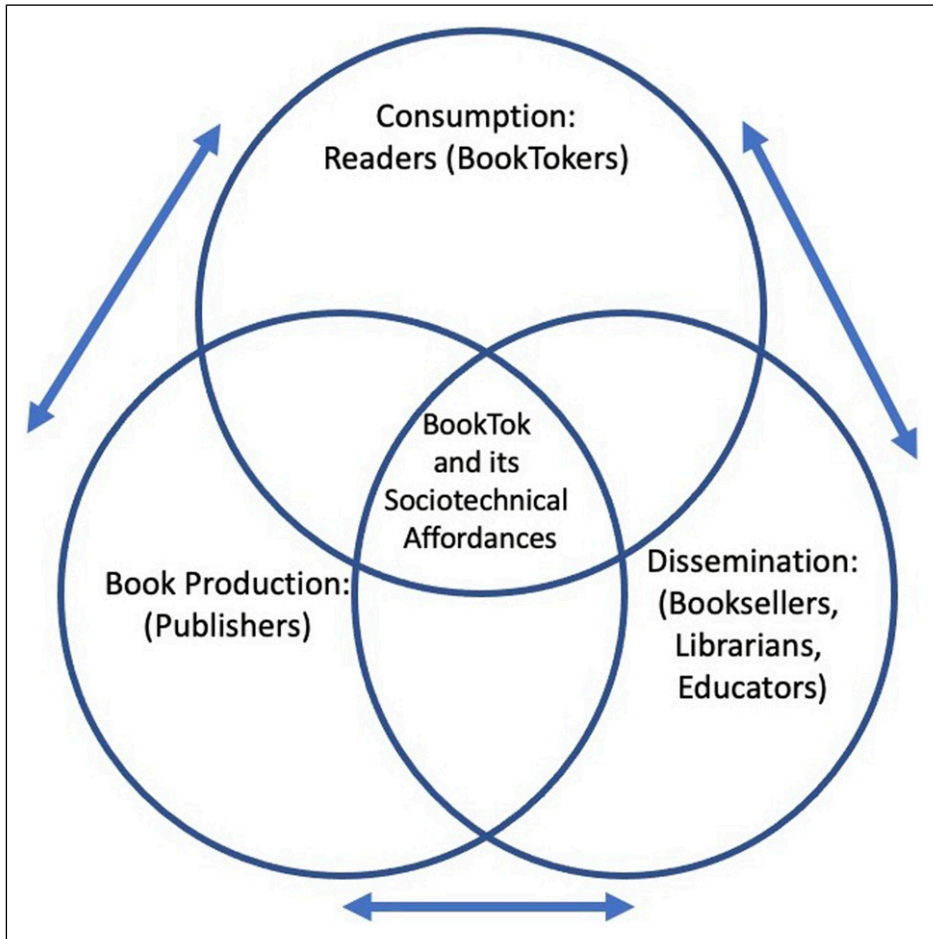
trends. ‘The platform logics of TikTok force internet celebrity aspirants to actively seek out, learn, participate in, and engage in...what is “going viral” at the moment in order to remain visible to others on the app’ (Abidin, 2021: 79).

TikTok’s sociotechnical landscape not only shapes the manner in which users engage with the platform and with one another, but the mediated community also exerts an impact on the roles of various stakeholders within the literary world, from authors and publishers, to booksellers and readers, impacting the dynamics of their relationships.

The literary landscape is famously conceptualised in Darnton’s (1982) Communications Circuit, in which authors, publishers, printers, sellers, and readers form a holistic cycle of the whole publishing process. Even though Darnton created the model to discuss 18th century literature, he emphasised that it is applicable to any period in Book History. Darnton’s model has been discussed and revised several times (Darnton, 2007; Thompson, 2021; Murray and Squires, 2013), and also in relation to digital publishing. Murray and Squires (2013) examine how digital technologies have disrupted Darnton’s Communications Circuit resulting in new business models and changing hierarchies. They revised the circuit according to new actors and practices, for example, by inserting literary agents, freelancers, and self-publishing opportunities in relation to readers and publishers (Murray and Squires, 2013: 5-6). Self-publishing and digital distribution via e-books or audiobooks reduce or even eliminate publishers’ and wholesalers’ work with print books. Murray and Squires further include the ‘device’ in relation to readers but it also connects to retailers and distributors (Murray and Squires, 2013: 16). Amazon’s Kindle and Barnes & Noble’s Nook have shifted the power from publishers to retailers and created a closer connection between readers and distribution systems. Further, digital development has enabled social reading communities like Goodreads, and paved the way for citizen literary criticism and reader-to-reader communication across social media channels. As a result, readers have far more agency in Murray & Squires circuit than they had in Darnton’s original model. Murray & Squires conclude that digital technologies ‘are affording a re-envisioned role for readers in the communications circuit, with redrawn relationships and a consequent impact on the journeys of books’ (Murray and Squires, 2013: 18).

For this article, our simplified model (below) shows four of the main actors in Darnton’s Communications Circuit: (1) authors and publishers are collapsed into book producers; (2) Darnton’s booksellers are disseminators, and (3) readers are book consumers – all of which revolve around BookTok, Figure 1 which is at the centre of our exploration of how BookTok influences interrelations between different actors in the communication circuit. Models generally present a fixed image of a reality that is more fluid and complex. In the case of our simplified model, the lines converge, as on BookTok, consumers are also producers and disseminators, producers are also consumers and disseminators, and disseminators are also consumers and producers.

When books were available exclusively in print, publishers’ marketing and publicity departments handled promotion with the goal of visibility in brick-and-mortar bookstores. The digital revolution ‘opened up the possibility of creating entirely new channels of communication between creators and consumers that would bypass the intermediaries that had hereto enabled this process to take place’ (Thompson, 2021: 15). Today book marketing takes a collaborative approach, and authors are now expected to help publishers promote their books online, and readers serve as peer-to-peer book marketing agents. Martens (2019) provides an example of how readers’ immaterial and affective labour contributed to book marketing and promotion in the case of a bestselling series, as they wrote fan fiction, participated in online fan



**Figure 1.** BookTok's influence on producers, disseminators, and consumers.

sites, attended festivals, and even engaged in charitable work related to the series – all of which collectively contributed to book sales. And now, vocal reader fans promote (or disparage) works via social media platforms, whether they are writing reviews on sites such as Goodreads, LibraryThing, and beyond (Murray, 2018). Across the Booknet (McArdle, 2016), young people promote the books they love which propels interest in and sales of books. On BookTok, books that are several years old are re-promoted via BookTokers' videos, often launching 'backlist' titles onto best-seller lists, as described later within this paper.

## Methodology

In line with recent TikTok research (Abidin, 2021; Duzuanni et al., 2022; Rodger, 2019; Thomas, 2021), we used qualitative methods in this exploratory case study in which we sought to answer our overarching research question:

**Table 1.** Methodology.

Qualitative interviews	Publishers: (3) staff at a large Danish Publisher: Publisher A (FTF); and staff (one each) at two mid-sized American publishers: Publisher B (Z) and Publisher C (FTF) Booksellers: One staff person each at a Danish bookseller Arnold Busck (AB) (FTF) and an employee of a Midwestern branch of the largest American chain store, Barnes & Noble (B&N) (Z)
Books read	A book each by fantasy author Sarah Maas (published by Publisher B in the US) and romance author Colleen Hoover (published by publisher A in Denmark)
Physical observation	AB in Copenhagen and B&N in the Midwestern United States
Online observation of BookTok videos that were created by or reposted by	1) Publishers' and booksellers' staff 2) Readers/consumers tagging authors, publishers, books and/or stores on their TikTok videos 3) Authors of books we read for this study

Legend: 'Z' = Zoom, 'FTF' = face-to-face.

How is BookTok changing the landscape of book production and dissemination, and how are publishers and booksellers channelling the organic landscape of BookTok to authentically market to readers?

Visual ethnographic observation (Pink, 2021; Postill and Pink, 2012) allowed us to immerse ourselves in BookTok to understand its impact on the publishing landscape. We interviewed publishers and booksellers in Denmark and the United States (face-to-face and via Zoom); we read popular BookTok books published by these publishers; we observed displays and customers in bookstores; and we watched BookTok videos by readers, authors, and publishers as outlined in Table 1 below.

We interviewed employees of a leading Danish publisher who publishes some of Colleen Hoover's books in Danish, and a US publisher who publishes Sarah Maas, and a third US publisher who was just beginning to experiment with BookTok. At the time of our (2023) research, both Hoover's and Maas' books were frequently featured in BookTok videos.

## Findings

From Denmark to the United States, we found many parallel examples of how publishers and booksellers are using the BookTok community to market books and authors, engage readers, and sell books, whether they are reposting videos by content creators, or maintaining staff to make their own. Our findings are organised according to the affordances of TikTok as related to: I) publishers; II) booksellers; and III) book consumption. Further, we discuss two related bestselling titles we identified at the time of our research.

### I. Publishers

The publishers we interviewed described how marketing books via TikTok differs from marketing on other social media platforms. TikTok's algorithms, along with its unique style and culture, shape the content of videos. These videos are often driven by short-lived TikTok trends including sound bites or music, dancing and choreography, or memes from pop culture. Its reliance on affect

and entertainment makes it challenging for publishers to use TikTok as a marketing tool, but very engaging for audiences. At Publisher A in Denmark, we interviewed their marketing team, including Martine,<sup>2</sup> Head of Digital, Cecilie, their Social Media Manager, and Julie, Editor. Publisher A started their BookTok presence in 2022, and Cecilie is responsible for all of Publisher A's BookTok content. Social Media Manager Phoebe1 at Publisher B in the United States is responsible for making the company's BookTok content.

On BookTok, publishers are tapping into a sub-community where readers and book influencers share their love for books. Like Publisher A and Publisher B, US-based Publisher C also has a designated social media staff member. We interviewed Publisher C's Director of Marketing, Publicity and Key Partnerships, Phoebe2, who describes BookTok as a community where readers encourage each other to read 'outside their comfort zone... [and] to explore outside their typical genres. That's the thing about BookTok. It's a way of sharing about yourself via books. It's ... not just about the books – it's also about the people' (Phoebe 2 Published, 2023).

### *Authenticity and personal style*

Phoebe1 (Publisher B) believes that humour and authenticity are key to a BookTok video's success and argues that perhaps the most important part of a job description for a social media manager is to 'have no qualms about looking ridiculous on the Internet'. Phoebe1 also stresses the importance of knowing your skills as a content creator. While Cecilie (Publisher A) frequently dances on her videos, Phoebe1 admits: 'I'm no dancer!' (Phoebe 1 Publisher, 2023), and instead, channels humour – her own strength. She has also found that videos with people in them generate more views, and regularly solicits her colleagues to participate with her: 'And while videos without a person in them can do well ... having a person in the video makes people stick on it a little bit longer ... The algorithm is very personable, and people focused' (Phoebe 1 Publisher, 2023).

Publisher A's staff also understand the value of personal videos. Cecilie identifies herself as the company's mascot, and while she tries to keep her private and public lives separate, she gets recognised at events like trade shows. Publishers' presence on BookTok gives them a new way to interact and connect with readers, and that interaction extends beyond the platform, as readers are inspired to go to bookstores and literary festivals. Martine and Publisher A (2023) described the recent scene at Bogforum, Copenhagen's annual literature festival:

[author] Karen McManus was there. It was the longest line to get a book signed [I have ever seen]. We had to shut the lines. We never saw so many young readers at Bogforum. We also had a Colleen Hoover wall where young girls hung out. The girls brought order forms and were able to buy books for their school libraries' (Martine and Publisher A, 2023).

Online and off, TikTok is a powerful tool for promoting, marketing, and selling books, but also for engaging young readers, many of whom have become readers because of the BookTok community. At Bogforum, Cecilie was inspired to make a spontaneous video with those girls, instantly connecting with them as a bookish peer. Cecilie believes that it is important for publishers to communicate authentically and spontaneously with their followers on TikTok:

'[BookTok] has changed the whole planning process and how we work with content. Earlier we were more focused on [traditional] advertising. Now we try to be more authentic in our videos, find out more about how readers feel and how we can tap into their feelings and be at eye-level with them' (Cecilie, Publisher A).



For Cecilie, authenticity means taking followers seriously and interacting with the community: ‘We care a lot about community management. We need to do that in order to know where readers are and how they feel about our content. The followers are brutally honest [and let us know], if we post something they find annoying’ (Cecilie, Publisher A).

Spontaneity and creative freedom are important to the success of Publishers’ forays into BookTok. Content and trends travel fast on TikTok, and expire even faster, so having the freedom to create content without waiting for approvals from management is crucial. According to Cecilie: ‘Trends on TikTok are fast and volatile, so we need to react fast if we want to be part of a trend. Sometimes it is a question of hours, so we need to act quickly’ (Cecilie Publisher A, 2023). Phoebe1 has similar pressures. She has worked at Publisher B for five years, and has a lot of creative freedom at work. For example, she is exempt from seeking approvals that would potentially delay release of her BookTok videos. ‘[In my case] ... it’s a trust thing. I know there are certain things that we won’t talk about [like a new book by a bestselling authors]’ (Phoebe 1 Publisher, 2023).

Using BookTok for advertising requires a publisher’s designated staff person to engage on a personal level with their audience to operate within the culture and navigate the algorithm to achieve maximum visibility (Gran et al., 2021). Disregarding the uneven relationship between the publishers who serve as commercial actors with a goal of generating profit, and the reading consumers who are in the community for engagement and entertainment, our interviewees identify as peers with their audience members, which lends authenticity to the interactions, despite the motivations.

### *Aiming for virality*

The affective relationships generated by creating, sharing, participating in and viewing videos is a central part of the fascination and popularity of the app. Within TikTok, bookish trends can also occur across the broader media landscape. Phoebe1 has had much success connecting to pop-culture trends, and often finds her inspiration by scrolling through TikTok late at night. For example, she pays attention to popular shows, and makes related videos, as she did for the Netflix show ‘Is it Cake?’

‘I did a video where I baked a cake and was trying to make people guess [between a book and a cake] which one was cake. But the cake was insanely obvious, because it was just frosting and I wrote “book” on the top in chocolate chips... I was like, let me know which one is cake? And that got like 9,000 - 10,000 views. It was a long video, but people liked the ridiculousness of it, and it was tapping into a time where people were watching the show’ (Phoebe 1 Publisher, 2023).

Combining pop-culture trends and videos on books and reading allows Phoebe1 to use hashtags to connect to a broader audience, providing a different point of entry to books. Phoebe1’s most successful BookTok video to-date is about a popular new book by author Samantha Shannon in which she used a trending line from a Taylor Swift song: ‘Damn! It’s 7 a.m.!’ (‘You Need to Calm Down’, Swift, 2019).

‘And so I opened the book in my bed and started reading it like starting a really long book, not thinking you could ever finish it in one sitting, and then there was a break in the video and me popping out of bed, with my hair all over the place, like “Damn! It’s 7 am!”. And people seem to really like that’ (Phoebe 1 Publisher, 2023).

That video (as of this writing) had 545,000 views. But on average, videos the company considers moderately successful have between 1000 and 2000 views. The publisher (and Phoebe1) have a sense of which books are going to get a lot of views with a BookTok video, and typically, high numbers of video views correlate with an author's popularity and sales record.

'Usually it's our big authors, so it's like a Sarah Maas, a Samantha Shannon, a Brigid Kemmerer – [authors who] already have an established fan base. So when people see the cover, or see a mention of it, they're already hooked a little bit. So you get them to watch for at least seven seconds – that sort of gets things pushed out further' (Phoebe1, Publisher B).

In the case of her hugely successful Samantha Shannon video, its success can best be attributed to a video about a new book by a bestselling author, combined with the affordances of TikTok – in this case, the use of a popular Taylor Swift sound bite.

According to Phoebe1, BookTok has also influenced book production. Publishers are more likely to spend money on luxury editions of books by top authors, for example, by putting an elegant jacket over a stamped cover, adding a case, or spraying, gilding, or deckling edges of pages. This increases the likelihood that these books will be displayed in BookTokers' videos, contributing to authentic, peer-to-peer marketing.

### *Collaboration with bookish media creators*

In addition to creating its own original content, Publisher B also works directly with BookTokers. Those who have over 10,000 followers can sign up for free advance review copies of books. 'And then sometimes we'll just send one-off mailings...to people who maybe didn't necessarily request it', (Phoebe 1 Publisher, 2023) which could be a finished copy or an advance review copy (galley). In exchange, publishers hope the influencers might create an unboxing video or similar post, helping to promote the book. But some publishers also work with content creators, paying them to create specific content. If they see an excellent video about a book made by a content creator: '[one] that's really funny and good, and like, has a good amount of views, or we think could really convince people to read it [the book], sometimes we will ask the creator for the link, and then we will put money behind it as a spark ad [advertisement]', (Phoebe 1 Publisher, 2023). In these cases, content appears as authentic, organic content, making it difficult for users to distinguish whether it is a BookToker's original content or a Publisher's paid advertising. For publishers, spark ads garner more views of BookToker-produced, product-related, promotional content. This represents an additional avenue for user engagement, albeit one that is less transparent and more subtly utilises the marketing opportunities that BookTok offers. Collaborating with influencers not only increases the amount of followers, but also the number of views. The following section looks at the next node in our simplified communications circuit, which is Booksellers.

## II. Booksellers

As soon as we entered Arnold Busck, one of the biggest bookstores in Copenhagen, we could see BookTok's impact. In the international section we saw three tables labelled 'BookTok', piled high with romance titles and Colleen Hoover books. The impact of BookTok on the reading community has clearly shaped the way in which books are displayed and presented. The romance table was a study in pink and purple, and the fantasy section showcased the type of special hardcover editions

with decorative covers and deckled or coloured edges as described by Phoebe1. In contrast, a nonfiction table displayed titles with more diversity in both colour and content, and according to the bookseller, these books attracted more men. The Danish bookseller is not active on BookTok but described young female customers as being: ‘loyal and good customers. They document their visit on social media, tag the shop and post pictures’ ([Danish bookseller AB, 2023](#)).

When asked how TikTok has changed the way the store organises and promotes books, the store manager said that the distributors started to label their books as BookTok-books to make it easier for readers to find them. Arnold Busck sales statistics from April 2022 to April 2023 showed that books by Colleen Hoover occupied 3 of the top 4 most sold titles in the bookstore, and the manager credited BookTok for increasing sales.

In the Midwestern United States, we interviewed Eve, a bookseller at a suburban Barnes & Noble (B&N) store, where customers seeking BookTok recommended titles are mostly women aged approximately between 16 and 35. Eve described how BookTok had taken over the store. At the time of our interview in Summer 2023, customers were confronted with ‘human-sized’ Colleen Hoover posters in the shop windows. Directly behind the customer service desk was a large table with a sign marked ‘BookTok Favorites’ and on the way there, other tables were piled high with books featured in BookTok videos, especially those by Colleen Hoover. According to Eve:

‘A lot of the times the women who come up to me, who are looking for these books, always open up with “I’m not a big reader” or “I just started reading” and those are the women that have been caught in the whirlpool of BookTok. They obviously didn’t have the access to that kind of community before, but they found it on social media and now they’re discovering this world of reading but it’s either really specifically Colleen Hoover or they’re open to exploring other titles that are on the BookTok tables’ ([Eve, B&N, 2023](#)).

Eve took issue with the quality of most BookTok titles and described the distinction between ‘spicy’ BookTok titles compared to videos of more ‘literary’ titles, that she argues are more likely to appear on Instagram Reels than on BookTok. Although she did think that for those self-described non-readers, perhaps the spicy BookToks would ultimately serve as ladders to reading other (higher-quality) books. ‘That is the natural life cycle of BookTok – that it will give you more reading recommendations outside of what you came there for’ ([Eve, B&N, 2023](#)). Alternatively, those who consider themselves highbrow readers with a taste for quality literature, actively avoid the BookTok tables for their own reading selections, and Eve noted that B&N’s BookTok tables promote mostly mass-market books which do not reflect the variety of genres and subgenres that exist in smaller subgroups in the BookTok community.

B&N has approximately 600 stores across the United States ([Barnes and Nobles, ND](#)). While B&N has a verified account (@bnbuzz) for its own original content, rather than having staff at headquarters create top-down BookToks for national distribution, individual stores have their own accounts tailored to their local communities. On such accounts, content is made by store employees based on staff taste and also on availability of books in stores. Eve previously served on her store’s social media team making BookTok videos. In terms of what they produce, local store BookTokers are ‘granted access [to the accounts] by our supervisors and then you can make whatever you want’ ([Eve, B&N, 2023](#)). Spontaneity and authenticity is just as important at B&N as it was for the publishers interviewed herein. According to Eve, at B&N ‘[videos] can be about really whatever book you want, whatever kind of medium you want to take to approach it’ ([Eve, B&N, 2023](#)). Content-wise, store employees making BookToks have a lot of flexibility,

but there is also a list of things that you can and cannot do or say: ‘You can’t swear or [post things] that would like violate company rules or hurt [the B&N] brand’ (Eve, B&N, 2023). Clearly, booksellers too, are seeing the influence of BookTok in their stores, especially around certain genres of books. The next section examines exactly some of the books that have benefitted from BookTok.

### III. Book consumption

While BookTok features genre-related sub-communities such as #classic books, #historical fiction, #nordicnoir, #cosyfantasy, #blackbookrecs, #lgbtbooks, or #climatefiction, a list of most-read titles demonstrates that romance and fantasy (popularly referred to as ‘romantasy’) remain some of the most popular and bestselling genres on BookTok (Silva, 2022). In order to gain insight into the BookTok communities we studied herein, we read illustrative examples of bestselling books popularised by BookTok and featured across the interviews and videos. We intentionally chose books that were released by two of the publishers we interviewed, were available in Danish and English, and were popular subjects of BookTok videos: Colleen Hoover’s romance best-seller ‘It ends with us’, published in Denmark by Publisher A, and Sarah J. Maas’ best-seller ‘A Court of Thorns and Roses’, is a leader in the romantasy category (Davis, 2024), and is published in the US by Publisher B.

Colleen Hoover, or ‘CoHo’ per her fans who proudly refer to themselves as ‘CoHorts’ (Whiting, 2022), tops the list of most popular authors on BookTok. Her early work was self-published on Amazon, but subsequently she has been published by publishers in the US, including Atria Books and HarperCollins. Her work is translated and published internationally, including by Publisher A in Denmark. As the *Queen of BookTok*, according to Rizer (2022), she has 1.4 million followers as of November 2023, and as of December 2022, ‘TikTok videos with the hashtag #ColleenHoover has accrued more than 2.9 billion views’ (Stewart, 2022). Her (2016) book *It Ends With Us* experienced a popularity surge in 2021 due to BookTok, and according to Publishers Weekly, as of December 2022, it had sold 3.4 million copies (Stewart 2022), and in 2022, her books collectively sold over 12.5 million copies. Of those worldwide sales, Publisher A sold about 250,000 of Hoover’s books in Danish (Julie, Publisher A, 2023), which represents an enormous number of books in this small country of 5.8 million people. Despite her enormous sales record, not all BookToks about Colleen Hoover are positive. Critics argue that she romanticises and glorifies domestic abuse scenes or fails to include trigger warnings. These negative videos include hashtags such as #colleenhoover paired with #donotread.

*A Court of Thorns and Roses* is a five-book series by American young adult fantasy author Sarah J. Maas, published by Publisher B in the US. Publisher B has published all 15 of her books published so far and has another seven titles under contract. Sugiura (2023) attributes Maas’ success at least partially to BookTok, which resulted in a 51 percent sales increase in 2022. While Maas does not maintain her own TikTok profile, fans use hashtags such as #courtofthornsandroses, #acotar, #sjmbooks, #sjmuniverse, #acotar, #sarahjmaas or #sjm to post about her and her books. As with Colleen Hoover, BookTok videos about Sarah J. Maas are not universally positive. She has been embroiled in past controversies about her books – that they feature few diverse characters, that they romanticise abusive relationships, and in October 2023 after the October 7th attack on Israel, videos emerged calling Sarah J. Maas a Zionist, including one tagged #freepalestine, featuring a young woman burning a copy of *A Court of Frost and Starlight*. How this will impact future sales of her books remains to be seen, but this emphasises the immediacy, temporality, and strong emotional components of TikTok.

## The BookTok demographic

According to [Kemp-Habib \(2023\)](#): ‘...the video sharing platform is undoubtedly making a mark on one highly influential demographic of book buyers. Females aged between 13 and 34 (F 13-34) were the biggest book buyers in 2022, accounting for 83 million sales (followed by females aged between 35 and 54, who accounted for 73 million sales)’. Further these readers were ‘also the most likely to use TikTok. In total, 49% of respondents in this category said they use the platform – more than twice the average – while 14% said they use BookTok specifically, more than three times the average’ ([Kemp-Habib, 2023](#)). New data confirms this with women aged 18-34 as the most active on the platform (in the US & UK) ([Townsend, 2024](#)). That women are most active on BookTok is not surprising, as women generally read more than men ([Stoltenburg, 2024](#)). This is true in the US and Denmark, particularly when it comes to leisure reading. Leisure reading has benefits that can potentially be of great value to the reader. Reading research shows that reading fiction allows readers to experience worlds other than their own ([Balling, 2016](#)). By gaining insight into the thoughts and behaviours of fictional characters, readers can identify with those characters and develop empathy (Mar et al., 2009; [Kidd and Castano, 2013](#); [Waxler, 2014](#); [Zunshine, 2006](#)). Stories can be a mirror for reflection, a portal for escape, and a lens that allows us to expand our understanding of ourselves and the world. A positive leisure reading experience is often associated with relaxation, absorption, the loss of temporal and spatial awareness, and linguistic and mental stimulation ([Balling, 2016](#)). This contrasts with the instrumental and analytical reading practices commonly employed in educational settings, where reading is primarily viewed as a means to an end. Readers on BookTok, particularly young people, are primarily driven by their emotional responses to texts. A recent Danish study on 15-18 year old readers indicates that emotions precede action, as evidenced by the videos on BookTok, where recommendations often are based on the emotional response a book creates. Although there is a general difference in genre preferences between genders, young people agree that emotions are important and seek out the genres that deliver (romance and suspense, respectively) ([Will and Agency, 2024](#)).

## Discussion

As shown herein, especially within certain genres such as romance and fantasy, TikTok has impacted publishers’ marketing strategies and boosted sales numbers. The BookTok community has at times contributed to unexpected sales of backlist titles, such as the (2011) *Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller, making it challenging for publishers to predict what will be in demand next.

As Phoebe demonstrated, successful BookTok activity is not necessarily related to a specific book, author, or even to reading, but instead, is about building affective relationships with readers, non-readers, and possible future-readers with entertaining videos that feature recognisable sound bites, pop cultural memes, or entertaining dances, or that connect to viewers on an emotional level. Publishers, authors, booksellers, and readers can authentically meet as if they were peers within the BookTok community, and while professional BookTok marketing is necessarily spontaneous and playful in order to mimic amateur book-related videos, it exists in a landscape that is quickly negatively impacted by expiring trends, current events, and cancel culture.

Even though publishers insist that they are not BookTokers, they adopt the style and aesthetics developed by BookTokers, and interact in the same digital environment. But because their motives are related to marketing, consumption, and profit, they are not acting purely for the benefit of audience members. In contrast, what builds credibility and trust among influencers and their followers is that they are part of the same peer community, authentically sharing values and interests

with each other. Typical of online communities is that members have varying degrees of professionalism and commitment. Terms such as pro-ams coined by [Leadbeater and Miller \(2004\)](#) as committed amateurs working to professional standards, prosumers ([Bruns, 2008](#)) and participatory culture ([Jenkins et al., 2009](#)) refer to the fact that online platforms create blended communities where the boundaries between professionals and amateurs are blurred, just as happens in the BookTok subcommunity.

### *Disruption and new roles: Consequences for the communications circuit*

Digital video sharing platforms like TikTok are largely defined by the affordances and algorithms that are part of the platform's design ([Bucher and Helmond, 2018](#); [Wang, 2022](#)). Digital media such as TikTok, by virtue of its digital structure and ease of use, transcends traditional boundaries between producers and consumers. For publishers, the existence of online communities like BookTok (and similar sub-communities on other social media platforms) force them to plan their marketing strategy around fast and volatile social media trends rather than following more established strategies. Publishers are on TikTok to market their books by attempting to infiltrate and engage with this reader-driven community, but it requires a lot of effort. As Cecilie from Publisher A said, they try to inspire readers to read their titles, but they do not always succeed. Phoebe1 from Publisher B echoed the same sentiment – that she has to try a lot of different things before something works. Thus their role changes from being formal marketing outsiders, to being informal BookTok insiders, playing along with videos, memes and trends together with their reading consumers. BookTok is not the first platform to alter the relations between the actors in the book market. As pointed out by [Murray and Squires \(2013\)](#), digital technologies have gradually disrupted the original circuit and changed business models and hierarchies. Still we would argue that BookTok further expands the possibility of interaction between producers and consumers and provides a transparent look into consumer culture, and readers' tastes. The community of readers on BookTok forces publishers to act differently, to develop a greater understanding of their audience, and to rethink and innovate their marketing strategy. Furthermore, we argue that BookTokers exert an influence on book production, wanting aesthetic designs to feature on videos, titles that align with trends, and content that moves them. The trends observed on BookTok are the result of a complex interplay between the app's algorithms, readers' creativity, and publishers' own creative efforts to hold readers' attention, which can lead to increased sales of new books, or a renewed interest in older titles.

### *The duality of BookTok*

At best, digital reading-related platforms like BookTok facilitate encounters between readers, authors, publishers, and booksellers, fostering a more democratic and dialogic book market. The accessibility of these digital spaces allows readers to engage in dialogue with authors and publishers, offering a unique opportunity for interaction and connection. At best, this symbiotic relationship democratizes the book market by providing a platform for diverse voices and amplifies readers' agency in influencing each other's reading choices.

However, within the dynamic landscape of BookTok, the convergence of professional and commercial interests along with readers' authentic content introduces complexities. While publishers and influencers contribute entertaining and informative content, their presence often aligns with financial motivations. This raises ethical questions about the potential exploitation of an authentic, participatory book culture, where the engagement of young readers is the

driving force. Undoubtedly, publishers' involvement enriches the platform by offering entertaining content and fostering closer relationships between creators and consumers. Yet, their participation is inherently intertwined with profit-motivated objectives, blurring the line between genuine engagement and commercial interests. The algorithm creates a filter bubble (Pariser, 2012) of content on users' For You Page, by curating content based on users' past likes and shares within the app. For instance, those following #romantasy, will receive an endless stream of videos related to this genre. Consequently, those getting all their reading recommendations from BookTok will receive recommendations for a specific type of reading content, as was noted by our interviewee Eve above. Since we know that BookTok sells books, a danger is that publishers will prefer to publish books that will be successful on the app, limiting their cultural output.

Navigating the dichotomy of democratisation and commercialisation within BookTok demands critical examination. Understanding the implications of professional and commercial interests on the organic exchange of ideas and recommendations among young readers is crucial for safeguarding the integrity of participatory reading cultures in digital spaces.

## Limitations and future work

While our small-scale, exploratory study does not represent a comprehensive overview of the global book market, it looked at how BookTok is influencing publishers and booksellers of popular romance and fantasy fiction for young readers in Denmark and in the United States, presenting an introductory snapshot of this hashtag community's global influence. Future qualitative research centred on BookTokers and social reading cultures on BookTok will examine young readers' inspiration, motivation, and engagement with the app, and perceptions of their own reading activities. Additionally, we aim to explore the relationship between digital and analog reading culture, with a particular focus on materiality and modality.

Despite the expanding BookTok community, and clear success of BookTok as a tool for reader engagement, pending TikTok bans at government levels in both Denmark and the United States are an underlying current in our research. In 2023, the Danish parliament (Euronews, 2023), the Danish Defense Ministry (AP News, 2023) and all eight Danish universities (Johansen, 2023) urged staff to delete TikTok on their work phones and other devices as a cybersecurity measure. Similar efforts are occurring in the United States, with Montana becoming the first state to ban TikTok (Anguiano, 2023). Obviously bans would impact the future of BookTok as an authentic, participatory, reading community. Another potential threat to the community is TikTok's own publishing plans. In July 2023, TikTok's parent company Byte Dance announced they were launching their own digital-first publishing company (Brown, 2023), which raises questions. Would this company create videos to promote its own books? Would such videos have preferential placement on participants' For You Page? Future research should examine how TikTok's publishing plans impact the affective, authentic, readerly community that exists within BookTok.

## Conclusion

This paper examined the BookTok sub-community across three nodes of the Communications Circuit: book producers, disseminators, and consumers, and demonstrated how BookTok is the latest actor to alter the circuit allowing them to overlap and interchange. Our study examines how publishers and booksellers have entered the BookTok community, and are using it to meet readers where they are, especially those of popular romance and fantasy novels, and how subsequently the

publishing landscape – especially as applied to these genres – is transformed as marketing strategies become spontaneous, authentic, and anchored in popular trends. Publishers are producing special editions of books by top authors to encourage peer-to-peer marketing in BookTok videos. Within the app, TikTok allows spark ads, which allow publishers to use BookToker’s authentic content as advertising, redefining peer-to-peer marketing.

Whether or not publishers’ efforts on TikTok have a direct impact on book sales is difficult to establish. Where the app does make a difference, is in allowing publishers to forge authentic-seeming and affective relationships with readers (BookTokers or not). By creating engaging BookTok content which expands on that created by BookTokers, from Phoebe1’s humorous, pop-culture infused BookTok videos that connect with readers, non-readers, and future-readers, to Cecilie’s TikTok dances, which establish her as Publisher A’s company mascot and a celebrity authorial presence in her own right, publishers gain insight into the reading culture they want to motivate and inspire (to buy books), and get direct consumer feedback on young people’s bookish likes and dislikes.

Ultimately, whether or not the app is as ephemeral as its videos remains to be seen, despite publisher investment, and bookseller, author and reader engagement on the platform. If TikTok bans become widespread, publishers, booksellers, and readers engaging in the flourishing BookTok sub-community would need to either transfer to other existing social media platforms, such as YouTube (BookTube), Instagram (Bookstagram), or to whatever platform emerges to take the place of TikTok. Other platforms are already adapting to welcome these users. For example, in 2020, Instagram launched its ‘reels’ feature, in part to compete with TikTok (Benjamin, 2024), and many users are already posting their videos in multiple places. While online locations may migrate, these online bookish sub-communities have already disrupted how books are created, marketed and consumed and proven their popularity with readers and those authors, publishers, booksellers, and librarians who would like to reach them.

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## Notes

1. Throughout this article, when we write TikTok, we are referring to the platform. When we write BookTok, we are referring to the subcommunity. We have dropped the use of the hashtag before BookTok.
2. NB we obtained IRB approval from our institutions in Denmark and the United States. Interviews were limited to one-hour in length and were recorded and transcribed in the respective languages of the interviews. Pull-out quotes in Danish were translated by the authors. Interviewees signed consent forms, and we received permission from all interviewees to use their first names. In the case of the two Phoebes, we use Phoebe1 as Phoebe from Publisher B and Phoebe2 as Phoebe from Publisher C to distinguish between the two.

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