

What makes BookTok tick? Influencers or captioned soundtracked montages or mimes

Mike Thelwall¹ and Jayne Finlay²

^{1 2}School of Information, Journalism and Communication,
University of Sheffield, UK

E-mail: *m.a.thelwall@sheffield.ac.uk (corresponding author)

ORCID ID: Mike Thelwall <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6065-205X>

Jayne Finlay: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4679-0365>

ABSTRACT

Book discussions and recommendations can add to the motivation to read and the enjoyment of reading. This may be especially true for younger readers when it takes place in an easily accessible and relatively modern environment, such as TikTok. This article investigates whether BookTok short form videos provide a distinctive contribution in this regard and whether they fit traditional social media theories. A first large-scale descriptive analysis of English-language BookTok was conducted, focusing on successful BookTokers. This covered 41,392 TikToks from 107 BookTokers with 3 billion views and 4 million comments. The results show that BookTok covers a variety of book genres and video formats, frequently with humour. The most successful BookTokers are either traditional influencers (speaking primarily to camera) or creators of the newer Captioned Soundtracked Montages or Mimes (CSMM) format, a term coined here. The success of CSMM videos is not easily explained by existing social media theories. Nevertheless, they may generate parasocial relationships in an unorthodox way through music and empathy through shared book choices, perhaps engaging primarily with more empathetic readers. Its impersonal simple format may also encourage participatory culture interactions. This is the first large-scale analysis of BookTok and the new CSMM format expands on the previously observed “shelfie” video style that focuses on the books rather than the influencer. Recognising the success of CSMM videos with readers may help librarians, authors, content creators and publishers to employ this apparently effective novel format or to recommend appropriate BookTokers.

Keywords: TikTok, BookTok, Social media analysis; Parasocial interaction; BookTube.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the attractions of gaming and social media, fiction continues to be widely read by young people (e.g., Watson, 2024), but with a clear downwards trend in reading for enjoyment in recent years. For example, a survey by the National Literacy Trust showed that only 32.7% of children and young people in the UK enjoy reading in their free time, the lowest figure recorded since their annual survey began twenty years ago (Clark et al., 2025). One promising development in reversing this trend is the popularity of BookTok, which in the last decade has emerged as an alternative multimedia space of short videos about books. Here BookTok is defined to be the TikToks created by TikTokers with a substantial or complete focus on books (e.g., Bortner & Cohen, 2023).

Whilst there are other social media book spaces like BookTube, Bookstagram, Book Reddit (r/books), Booklr, and book blogs (Reddan et al., 2024), TikTok was apparently the 5th most visited social media site in 2024 (Dixon, 2024) and is much younger, having been released internationally in 2017 (the second youngest major Global North alternative is Instagram, from 2010). It specialises in short form videos for smartphones and has been seen as a fashionable way to promote reading (e.g., Dera, 2024; Mashiyane, 2022). It is therefore important to investigate whether it offers something distinctive and whether it is adequately explained by major social media theories, given that goals do not always match affordances on social media (Fauzi & Bahri, 2024).

Previous studies of BookTok have covered advocacy for its educational or other value (e.g., Jerasa & Boffone, 2021), analyses of BookTok readers (e.g., James, 2022), the books, authors, hashtags and themes discussed (Merga, 2021), or small-scale studies, often of the affordance of BookTok for specific communities (e.g., Boffone & Jerasa, 2021), or BookTokers' motivations (Guiñez-Cabrera & Mansilla-Obando, 2022). However, these have not analysed the phenomenon as a whole. Other dimensions investigated include book reviewing, community building, and reading promotion (Dera et al., 2023).

The aim of this study is to describe the content of successful English-language BookToks in general, which has not done before (see the literature review for small scale studies). Identifying characteristics of successful BookToks is important to set the context against which the phenomenon can be understood and to form the background for analysing specific communities within the genre. It is also important to assess on a large scale whether existing social media theories fit or whether BookTok requires a novel theoretical lens. The restriction to English is a pragmatic choice. Although TikTok originated in China, it is based in (partly or mainly) English-speaking countries. The following research questions therefore drive the investigation.

- RQ1: What are the main formats and topics of successful English-language BookTokers?
- RQ2: Do existing social media theories explain success on BookTok?

While not the primary aim of this study, the findings also have important implications for librarians and educators involved in reader development and reading promotion efforts, including public and school librarians and other educators. From a more theoretical level, a deeper understanding of the appeal and key elements of successful BookToks may help to inform their strategies of engaging young people with reading for pleasure (Merga, 2021).

The paper is structured as follows: Literature view of book-based social media and theories of social media success; methods, results, discussion and conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section gives a brief overview of book-based social media and then introduces three theories to explain success on social media.

BookTok, BookTube, and Bookstagram

TikTok specialises in smartphone-oriented short videos that are relatively easy to create, mix and edit, although considerable skill or luck may be needed to be successful in this highly competitive environment. Its popularity stems in part from encouraging users to participate by following viral trends and adding their own twists. Similar visual cultures exist on

Instagram (Leaver et al., 2020) and the two sites and others probably cross-fertilise each other with influencers and formats.

Book-based social media video formats

Book-based social media content allows content creators to discuss books or book-related themes for an audience of (presumably) interested readers, who may want book recommendations, a second opinion about a book, or perhaps to engage with others with similar tastes. This is part of an online social media culture of sharing, supporting and encouraging book reading (Ludwig & Sambanis, 2025).

BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok images and videos have multiple formats, both generic and book specific, and these evolve and emerge over time. The formats used include book reviews, "Haul" videos about recent book acquisitions, bookshelf tours, readalongs, TBR (to be read) lists, themed discussions, and wrap-up videos summarizing recent reads (Reddan et al., 2024; see also: Rovira-Collado et al., 2024, 2025). The variety of formats suggests that BookTok is quite a different space from, for example, the review section of a newspaper, with relatively interactive content (e.g., readalongs), more personal information about the BookToker (e.g., bookshelf tours), and publicity about unread books (e.g., TBR lists, Hauls videos). Whilst YouTube supports longer content, Bookstagram and BookTok videos are typically short, which makes lengthy explanations inappropriate unless they can be split into separate videos (e.g., daily chapter readalongs).

The term "shelfie" has been coined for apparently the only major book-specific genre of videos and images. Shelfies focus on an influencer's bookshelves, usually including their books, or a pile of books that is not necessarily on a shelf, often with artistic visual additions, such as plants (Rodger, 2019). The term suggests that the user is photographing their bookshelves rather than themselves (e.g., Cho & Ahn 2024) and serves to emphasise the physicality of print books (Thumala Olave, 2020). As a genre, shelfies are routinely used as a convenient visual form to convey book reading recommendations or information. For example, an analysis of the videos of a Bookstagram and a BookTok found that shelfies were posted by both influencers alongside other content, such as more traditional influencer-focused pictures or videos, and the construction of both was creative and varied (Dezuanni et al., 2022).

Book-based social media communities

Participatory aspects of book-based social media include reading challenges (also prominent on Goodreads) and TikTok encourages participation by allowing video responses and by supporting the creation of new TikToks with existing soundtracks. For example, a #MusicChallenge explicitly encourages participation in this way (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2021). Viral book recommendations can often emerge from this participatory environment (Boffone, 2021). For young people, BookTok can be a source of reading recommendations as well as giving them a space to discuss their reactions to books and helping them to form a reader identity (Merga, 2021).

In terms of non-human actors, the algorithm itself is an important influence and audience for BookTok creators (Balling & Martens, 2024; Jerasa & Burriss, 2024; Low et al., 2023; Wark, 2024), so is an imaginary participant in successful BookToks. Even new users have an awareness of how the algorithm shapes their overall TikTok experience (Klug et al., 2021). Publishers can also be indirect participants through support for promotional activities (Segarra-Saavedra & Torres-Huamanyauri, 2024).

In addition to direct support for reading, social capital and community membership are important motivations for followers of BookToks (Jerasa, 2024; Martens et al., 2022; Teel & Lund, 2024), but these communities can still have divisive aspects, such as an absence of fiction by or about marginalised groups (De Melo, 2024; Maddox & Gill, 2023). Participation in BookTok communities can help with the formation of reader identities (Asplund et al., 2024; Dezuanni & Schoonens, 2024), which may have a lifelong influence on reading habits. Thus they are important for librarians to be aware of.

In terms of expectations for RQ1, this brief review suggests that BookToks should appear in a variety of formats and topics, including those featuring shelfies. New formats may have emerged since the work published in this review, however. In addition, user engagement with the BookToker and their followers should also be expected through comments.

Social media theories

The success of social media has led to a range of explanatory theories and these form a useful lens from which to analyse any given format. Since there is not an obvious single major theory that is relevant to BookTok, three prominent examples are included here to give three analysis perspectives.

Influencer culture and microcelebrity

Microcelebrities, unlike traditional celebrities, build followings through sustained interaction, authenticity and niche expertise (Marwick, 2015). This is supported by video-based social media platforms that allow creators to add a personal dimension and respond to social trends, generating interest and audience loyalty (Abidin, 2018). Influencers often blur the distinction between the personal and professional spheres by revealing their lifestyles, hobbies, and style choices, building relatability and trust (Hearn & Schoenhoff, 2015; Senft, 2013). An important trend in influencer culture is the monetisation of personal interests by fostering community engagement (Marwick, 2015).

Microcelebrity for book-related content would involve individuals attracting large followings by sharing their love of books in an entertaining way. This can generate income or gifts through collaborations with publishing houses to promote books (Tomasena, 2019). This might occur through free review copies of books, book hauls, or access to authors for interviews. Libraries can capitalize on the celebrity or popularity of successful BookTokers through promotion and partnerships to encourage reading in the smartphone era (Szabó & Dani, 2024). The concept of microcelebrity does not fit well with shelfies, however, since these foreground books rather than the influencer. Nevertheless, successful BookToker influencers can sometimes post shelfies as part of their overall strategy (Dezuanni et al., 2022) and could still be successful through achieving microcelebrity status if their other content is more focused on themselves.

Parasocial relationships

Parasocial relationships are the one-sided psychological relationships that audiences can develop with media figures, consciously or subconsciously perceiving them as personal acquaintances despite the lack of reciprocity (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Although originally theorised for radio and subsequently expanded to television, social media platforms support the generation of parasocial relationships through continuous and apparently intimate engagement with content creators (Bond, 2016). Social media creators can foster parasocial bonds through speaking directly to camera in a home setting, presenting an authentic persona in natural settings, and sharing personal information, allowing audiences to feel emotionally invested in their lives (Chung & Cho, 2014). This parasocial dynamic is reinforced

by the interactive nature of social media, where viewers can Like, share, comment, and duet with creators, enhancing the illusion of reciprocal engagement (Hoffner & Bond, 2022; Thelwall et al., 2022). This also generates trust and influence, which can be used for marketing goals (Stever & Lawson, 2013) as successful creators become influencers.

By discussing fiction, which may resonate with viewers and engage their emotions, BookTokers might create parasocial relationships (Taylor & Aguiar, 2024) and a sense of shared experience between creators and followers (Chung & Cho, 2014). Fiction may be suited to parasocial relationship building because authors speak directly to readers and let them into their thoughts through the reading process, and readers can emotionally engage with storylines, especially if they focus on the inner experiences of the characters (e.g., Odağ, 2013). Narratives may also transport the reader into the fictional universe, strengthening their emotional responses to the text (Altmann et al., 2012; Green & Brock, 2000). Thus, those watching fiction-themed content may already have an emotional engagement with that content or be ready to form one, which *may* make them more open to engaging with the influencer about a current or anticipated shared emotional experience. Although parasocial interactions typically occur when a media format mimics face-to-face interaction, as it often does for the traditional influencer video, it seems possible that it could still occur around other formats, such as the selfie, because of the emotional engagement possible through book discussions.

Participatory culture

Participatory culture is the active involvement of audiences in the creation, sharing, and reshaping of media content, partially conflating producers and consumers (Jenkins, 2008). The participatory culture perspective emphasises collaboration, grassroots creativity, and the co-construction of meaning within online communities. This can generate a form of collective intelligence, where knowledge is distributed across networks of users (Jenkins, 2009).

Participatory culture also fosters a sense of belonging and shared ownership over media narratives (Literat, 2012). By empowering individuals to contribute their voices, participatory culture can also allow marginalized groups to participate in cultural production and influence mainstream discourse (Burgess & Green, 2018). This seems to be at the heart of TikTok's success.

In contrast to microcelebrity theory's focus on the influencer and the PSI focus on the relationship between the influencer and the individual viewer, participatory culture focuses on shared culture creation. This could involve interactions between viewers or between microcelebrities and less popular creators. On BookTok, the low personal barrier to creating shelfies might give more power to participatory culture than for genres based around traditional influencers, there the participation seems to be primarily restricted to commenting (and indirectly through the selection of videos/influencers to watch).

All three of these social media theories (microcelebrity, parasocial interaction, participatory culture) seem to be plausibly relevant to BookTok, with none being an obvious fit. Their relative strengths are analysed in the results.

METHODS

The study design was to harvest comments on a large set of TikToks from a set of popular BookTokers and then use topic modelling and a form of thematic analyses to descriptively

characterise the main themes in the comments. High profile BookTokers are named, with ethical approval, to illustrate the richness of the format. All named BookTokers have at least 50,000 followers and 1 million Likes, with less viewed BookTokers in the sample analysed not being named here. Since TikTok is fully public and creators attract new followers at least partly through the ForYou feature that targets any TikTok user, they are (successful) public figures not requiring anonymity in this research context.

Successful BookToks initial 123 BookToks sample selection

For this project, a BookToker is someone with a TikTok account that mainly focuses on books, especially if the user describes the account as a BookTok. There is no definitive list of BookToks so relevant accounts were found by searching for keywords relating to BookToks (books, BookTok, reading) in TikTok daily during 6-10 May 2024 from the UK and checking the top matching accounts and the accounts of the top matching videos, repeatedly scrolling through results pages until all were repeats. Google was also searched for webpages about BookTok and listing BookTokers (e.g., izea.com/resources/BookTok-accounts-tiktok/) and these were added. The inclusion criteria were as follows, which matched 123 of the 267 book-related TikTok accounts found.

- A self-declared BookToker, with either a relevant profile description keyword or use of a BookTok hashtags in videos AND
- The main focus of the account is books, with at least 75% of videos checked including books AND
- English language and predominantly English language commenting AND
- At least 1000 followers so that the BookToker is at least moderately successful and should attract a non-trivial number of comments. There were many BookToks posting photos of books with small numbers of followers, who may have been personal friends or spam accounts. This procedure avoids all these.

This primarily keyword-based strategy is imperfect because it may miss BookToks that are described with different language, potentially including older BookToks created before the terminology existed.

Successful BookToks' comments downloading and final 107 BookToks with comments sample

A list of the TikToks from each BookToker was downloaded from the TikTok API and up to 1000 comments per TikTok were downloaded, also using the API (1000 is a TikTok API limit). The downloading took place first, followed immediately by the comment downloading using the free social media analysis software Mozdeh. This was granted permission from the TikTok Research programme (<https://developers.tiktok.com/products/research-api/>) and ethical approval from the University of Sheffield. The process started on the 23rd of June 2024 and ended on the 4th of December 2024. The comment data is anonymised by TikTok and stripped of sensitive information (e.g., names, usernames, phone numbers, financial information). This was checked in the data with a random sample of comments and no problems were found.

The non-anonymous part of the data is the account names of the selected BookTokers. These are fully public and, with at least 1000 followers, these accounts are not private in any sense. The result of the above process was a collection of over three billion views on 41,392 videos from 107 predominantly English language BookTokers (Table 1), excluding the 16 BookTokers for which the queries returned no TikToks or no comments on their TikToks. This is the main BookTok (and comments) sample analysed in the paper.

A limitation of the data is that, because of the TikTok API's anonymisation, it is not possible to identify whether two comments are from the same person, so a theme in the data might be due to contributions from many people or a single prolific commenter. In addition, many comments were icons or emoticons rather than words, and these convey relatively little information. The UTF-8 option in Mozdeh was used to keep this data.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the dataset, based on querying 123 BookTokers for their TikToks and the comments on their TikToks

Aspect	Statistic
BookTokers	107 (out of 123)
TikToks	41,392
Views	3,254,850,891
Shares	5,956,742
Likes	421,749,942
Comments	4,383,429
Views per comment	743
Views per like	8
Views per share	771,850

Note: Source: Authors' own work

Formats and topics of the ten most viewed BookTokers

For each BookToker, the number of views, videos, and comments reported by the TikTok API was obtained. The ten BookTokers with the most views were then selected for a more detailed analysis. The limit to ten was a practical step to make the analysis manageable. The most viewed BookToks were chosen for insights into apparently the most successful contributions to the genre.

Each of the selected ten BookTokers' TikToks were watched by the first author and subjectively characterised for format/style. This involved viewing all of the short TikToks or the first ten seconds and then sampling the remainder for longer TikToks. The videos were sampled from home pages (e.g., <https://www.tiktok.com/@qminds.bookstore.ke>) when there were too many to watch them all, focusing on those with visually different thumbnails to reach saturation in the sense of watching all the different formats produced by the BookToker. This process was necessarily subjective, with the results partly dependant on the first author's knowledge and experience of TikTok and BookTok. At the time of the analysis, he was much older than usual TikTok and BookTok demographic and had previous experience of researching other social media. He had never posted a TikTok and was a daily or weekly TikTok user, following one of the BookTokers, but had mostly watched news and entertainment TikToks, with a focus on memes (e.g., shuffle dances). To guard against inconsistency across the large volume of data, the BookToks were revisited after the initial analysis to check that the initial characterisation was still reasonable in the context of the others classified.

To get additional insights into the unique perspective of each BookToker in their own words, the terms most characteristic of the BookToker's video descriptions and the comments on their videos were calculated and three manually selected for illustrative purposes. The terms were obtained by a word association test, identifying those that were statistically significantly (with a 2x2 chi squared test) more likely to occur for the selected BookToker

compared to the remainder (Thelwall, 2021). There were over 100 significant terms in each case, but only three are reported (an illustrative sample rather than the top terms) to avoid reporting too much information.

Topic modelling of the comments on the 107 BookToks with comments

Topic modelling (Abdelrazek et al., 2023) was used to get insights into possible cross-BookToker themes in the video descriptions. This method identifies words that tend to co-occur and forms them into “topics” that may appear to a greater or lesser extent in the video descriptions of all BookTokers. This reveals both word pattern topics and which BookTokers mostly cover each topic

Topic modelling was applied with standard stop words and an extended list of BookTok-specific stop words (fyp, BookToker, foryou, foryoupage, reading, reader, bookish, booklover, BookTokfyp, bookworm, readersoftiktok, booklovers, fy, im, tiktok, booktiktok, tbr, bookrecommendations, bookrecs, book, books, read, BookTokuk, tiktokbooks, ukBookTok, booksoftiktok, fyp ∩).

Subjective description of a sample of highly viewed BookTokers

A purposive sample of highly viewed BookTokers was selected for a brief subjective overview to illustrate the range of different types of apparently successful BookTok. Whilst the descriptions are simple and can be checked online, their selection to illustrate variety is particularly subjective. It illustrates one person’s perspective on the variety of apparently successful BookToks, and another person would probably identify other differences. Thus, the set should be interpreted as a minimal level of variety in the types of BookTok rather than a representative or complete sample.

RESULTS

i. What are apparently successful BookTokers’ formats and topics?

Half of the ten most viewed BookTokers in the dataset exclusively or often posted TikToks of themselves talking to camera in the traditional online influencer or vlogger style. The remainder typically employed montages of books or mimes with music and captions (Table 2). These are termed here *Captioned Soundtracked Montages or Mimes* (CSMM). These videos were sharply different from the typical influencer talking to camera. Some BookTokers also employ skits in the sense of short funny videos of themselves, and occasionally with others: also sharply different in the same way. The remainder of this section discusses the new CSMM format.

The CSMM format encompasses videos without an influencer talking to camera but with either (a) a montage of pictures or videos of book-related content or (b) a mime. In both cases the TikToks were accompanied by captions conveying the main message or a jokey comment as well as a musical background.

The CSMM montages were sometimes videos or sequences of pictures of bookshelves or piles of books (i.e., shelfies). For example, a TikTok might be captioned “My top 5 vampire romances” and show a stack of five books, with the title of each new book being revealed when the one above is removed, all set against romantic music. These could all reasonably be described as shelfies or shelfie-like. Some TikTok montages focused instead on a single book, turning the pages or showing pages with highlighted text and comments. These were informal book reviews or book analyses. Others were montages of book-related activities

rather than books, such as a sequence of short videos with captions about preparation for a relaxing reading session, set against appropriate background music.

Table 2: Styles of TikToks produced by the ten most viewed BookTokers in the dataset

BookToker	Videos/views/ comments	Terms in video descriptions	Terms in comments	Format/Style
AmyJordanJ	366 209,878,186 91,622	#selfhelpbooks #booksilove #sadbookrecs	Colleen crowdad ❤️ Inbox	Musical montages of books with captions; Some talking to camera. Short musical advice
qminds.bookstore.ke	1292 197,480,309 30,508	Whatsapp request #qmindsbookclub	Pseudoscience ❤️🙌	montages or book pages with post it note comments.
MoonsRareBooks	486 184,692,404 351,077	#tolkien #rarebooks #bible	Bible Collection gloves	Talking to camera about rare books.
TheBooksIveLoved	1763 174,103,814 171,224	#houseofthedragon #smalltownromance 🐉	Hating Omg u	Mime videos with captions and music. Some talking to camera.
AymansBooks	850 164,796,918 264,954	#bookishbaes #dylanobrien #bookishhumor	HBO Justice superman	Talking to camera about books; also skits.
AbbysBooks	780 138,743,040 317,480	#ya #movie #hungergames	Heartless Potter hunger	Talking to camera about books; also skits.
AdriDiaries	218 122,820,380 65,739	#girlytok #cozyvibes #nightroutine	Cozy Cute kisses	Digital diary montages including books, music and captions
Ezeekat	1843 120,647,220 299,503	#anime #onepiece #boardgames #amazonfinds	Barbie Birthday manga Nantucket	Talking to camera about books.
BradyLockerby	104,393,521 90,355	#haulvideo #nailideas #yanovels	Hilderbrand lashes Wattpad	Talking to camera about books; also skits.
AaliyahReads	102,895,278 139,365	Tehe #romance	Pisces Aries	Musical mimes with captions.

Note: The listed terms are selected from those occurring disproportionately often for the BookToker (and statistically significant with $p < 0.001$ from a chi squared test). Source: Authors' own work.

The CSMM mimes included lip syncing to songs, using captions to explain how the songs make a book-related message. Another common mime type showed the influencer's reaction to an event in a book that they had just read. Influencers in mimes also sometimes mouthed the words in the captions rather than lip syncing to the background song.

Topic modelling TikTok video themes by BookToker

A topic modelling analysis of the descriptions of the TikToks of the 107 BookTokers found 35 themes. Some of these were specific to BookTokers (e.g., their names or unique hashtags) and the remainder were predominantly for book genres. The following illustrate the main non-BookToker self-description topics.

- Book genre topics: Popularbooks, spicybooks, anime, fantasy, yabooks, thrillerbooks, gaybooks, romance, funnyBookTok, blackBookTok
- Other topics: Wattpad (story sharing site), (book) haul, readingislife, blinddatewithabook, girlythings.

It is unsurprising that BookTokers tend to specialise in one or a few book genres, as the above list illustrates. The Other topics list points to non-genre themes that are also common to multiple BookTokers.

Illustrative sample of BookTokers

This section discusses a purposive sample of BookTokers (all with over 50,000 followers and over 1 million Likes), chosen to illustrate different styles of BookTok. The first few are from the most watched set, but others illustrate different types.

@AmyJordanJ's first TikTok was from 2021. Her typical (stylish) CSMM video shows her revealing a set of books that she likes against a simple background and soft music, with short quotes as captions. For example, one 15 second video starts with the caption, "Books that made me believe in soulmates" above her hand holding four unknown books, then she reveals the books in turn, showing a short quote each time added to the video. Another similar video is "books that kept me hooked from start to finish". She seems to have become spectacularly successful (in terms of followers and Likes) on TikTok for this type of video but occasionally speaks in her TikToks, shows herself, or films outside.

Each @qminds.bookstore.ke CSMM video either gives self-help advice (e.g., 50 Short Rules For A Better Life) or focuses on a single book, showing a short video of book pages with highlighted text and a post-it note comment on the highlighted page.

@MoonsRareBooks has a traditional vtuber style, usually speaking to camera for a show-and-tell about a particular old book (e.g., 400-year old bible, the most beautiful Quran) or a theme (e.g., manga hunting in Japan, book fair treasures).

@AymansBooks combines traditional vtuber show-and-tell analyses of books that she has read (e.g., how does the abuse of power affect civilians in the book Dandelion), with short funny videos, typically with comic voiceovers (e.g., breaking into Penguin Random House to steal all their ARCs; If obsessing over fictional men in books was illegal).

@AdriDiaries and @Ezeekat are both hybrid TikTokers. Whilst @AdriDiaries is primarily a CSMM diarist that features books prominently but not always, @Ezeekat talks to camera about both books and games.

@GVHSLibrary's CSMM TikToks are shot in the library, combining humour and book recommendations against a musical background. They mostly focus on books or library shelves (e.g., New nonfiction!) but some include the librarian speaking (e.g., I have been out librarianed).

@SimKern is a bestselling indie author focusing on Jewish history (e.g., Do #wizard hats have antisemitic origins?) and collective liberation (e.g., #transrightsreadathon). They are a traditional vtuber, speaking to camera with carefully crafted analyses of others' books, queer books, the publishing industry, and leftist/anarchist politics (e.g., pro-Palestine).

@ListenWithBritt is a traditional vtuber talking informally to camera. She covers books and audiobooks. She primarily reviews fantasy and romance, often with spice (e.g.,

22% of her videos have the tag #spicybooks). She also has videos with background context (e.g., AUDIOBOOK Apps 101; How I rate my 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷).

ii. Do major social media theories explain the success of these BookTokers?

Major social media theories would fit BookTok well if they mainly used a standard format found elsewhere, but this was not the case since only half of the most viewed BookTokers used a traditional influencer format. The attractiveness of this format is underpinned by previous research covering many social media and other genres, as explained above, and particularly by microcelebrity theory (because the influencers talk successfully about personal interests that they have some expertise about) and parasocial interaction (because the videos have influencers talking to camera in informal settings).

The other highly viewed BookTokers are non-traditional (for a vtuber) in the sense of primarily using videos that do not focus on the BookToker but employ the Captioned Soundtracked Montages or Mimes format. This format may have emerged organically on TikTok as particularly suited to very short videos and triggered by the participatory nature of TikTok as a whole (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2021). Soundtracks have been hypothesised to be emotion-evoking components of short videos (Zhu et al., 2024). The success of some CSMM BookTokers does not seem to be explained well by the three theories of social media success, although each provides a partial rationale, as discussed below.

For video, parasocial interaction typically involves speaking directly to camera, whereas this is entirely absent from CSMM BookToks. Nevertheless, books generate emotional reactions from readers (Altmann et al., 2012; Green & Brock, 2000; Odağ, 2013) and so parasocial interactions may be possible through engagement with an emotional topic, heightened by the musical background. This might appeal to fiction readers, who have above average empathy (Mar et al., 2009; Usherwood & Toyne, 2002) so may decode this indirect form more capably. Whilst this suggests an emotional reaction to CSMM TikToks, it does not necessarily entail a parasocial connection with the BookToker. The comments suggest that such parasocial reactions *are* common, however. For example, 6,276 (12%) of the 52,381 comments on @AmyJordan's predominantly CSMM BookToks contained a 'you' pronoun (you, u, ur, your, you've, you're you'd). The comparable figure for CSMM-dominated AaliyahReads is 13% (11524/89869): in her typical TikToks she does not talk but shows emotions on her face. The use of you pronouns is an indicator of parasocial interaction because it suggests an attempt to directly communicate with the influencer (e.g., "how did you pick that book?") (Thelwall et al., 2022). The corresponding figure for all BookToks analysed is 15%, suggesting the possibility of widespread parasocial interaction within BookTok (unsurprising for BookToks with the traditional influencer format). This seems to be the first (albeit weak) evidence for any genre that PSI can occur in a video setting without informal talking to camera.

From the perspective of participatory culture in non-traditional BookToks, this is suggested by the numbers of Likes, shares and comments, but this evidence does not explain why people participate. Intuitively, the apparently simple and anonymous CSMM format (completely anonymous, unless a mime) may have inspired followers to create their own BookToks with the same style, thus finding a mechanism to participate. Especially for younger people for whom self-image or self-presentation may be a sensitive issue, the ability to be creative in a video format without showing themselves may be attractive. Alternatively, the simple CSMM format may lower the bar to participation compared to video discussions of content. Direct evidence of participation through CSMM creation would need a different research method, such as a survey of BookTok users.

Finally, microcelebrity theory does not fit CSMMs well because they do not allow BookTokers to apply much specialist expertise and the lack of a focus on the BookToker works against any kind of celebrity status. Nevertheless, there is expertise in the selection of books to recommend as well as in the choice of soundtrack and montage theme. This is the least explanatory of the theories for CSMMs.

DISCUSSION

The results are limited to the period analysed, the English language requirement, and the method of identifying BookTokers. Social media genres can evolve quickly, and may disappear, so the current article represents a snapshot from 2024. This snapshot is biased by the algorithm and any personalisation, given that the site was accessed from the UK in a web browser, although without any TikTok login. The qualitative analyses are subjective and someone with different social media experiences, background knowledge, interests or BookTok experience may have produced different interpretations.

Although, as reviewed above, there have been many previous investigations of BookTok, all have taken a more qualitative approach with much smaller numbers of influencers, videos and comments (if included). The findings here do not conflict with the suggestions of these studies and extend the discussion of the “shelfie” style TikTok (Dezuanni et al., 2022) to the CSMM format, which encompasses shelfies. Despite this, there is surprisingly little overlap between the main findings of previous BookTok research and this study. A factor that CSMM TikToks and shelfies have in common is a de-emphasising of the influencer, potentially lowering the emotional investment needed to create them, although there may be other underlying reasons why they are popular.

In terms of social media theories, as discussed above, none fit BookTok well although all help to give some insights into BookTokers’ success. Perhaps most significantly, the results suggest, but do not prove, that parasocial relationships may be harnessed by book videos without any of the usual triggers, such as influencers speaking to camera. If true, it is not clear how unique this is to BookTok.

CONCLUSIONS

The results confirm that BookTok is popular, with 3 billion views collectively for the 107 BookTokers analysed. They show that popular BookTokers cover a range of genres and use either a traditional influencer-focused style or a Captioned Soundtracked Montages or Mimes format. In the latter case, popularity may be due to the ability for audiences to anonymously imitate the apparently simple format or a new form of indirect parasocial engagement that may be specific to books, or at least particularly relevant to them. Unlike the book-specific shelfie format that it mostly encompasses, the CSMM definition is not book-specific and may be applicable to other domains. Whilst shelfies can also be used for anything shelf-related (e.g., potted plants, music, videos), they seem to be book-focused in practice.

Although attention in social media is highly competitive, libraries might take advantage of the influencer or CSMM formats to run their own BookToks without the need to promote individual librarian personalities, perhaps saving time or the emotional energy required for

public self-presentation. This addresses the early concern that “from a library point of view I can not see a way of using [TikTok] really well without the need for someone to appear on camera” (Potter, 2021). Alternatively, librarians may recommend BookTok types to library patrons that are interested to engage with book content on social media. In this context, BookTokers following the CSMM format should be included in the recommendations, given that they may be particularly attractive for one type of user.

More generally, the appearance of an apparently new but successful TikTok format might provide an opportunity to rethink existing theories of social media in other contexts to see if they foreground aspects of attention that have previously been overlooked.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study has not received any special grants from public, commercial, or non-profit organisations.

No AI content was used in the preparation of this manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no relevant competing interests to declare.

ETHICAL APPROVAL AND INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENTS

This study was reviewed and approved by the University of Sheffield School of Information, Journalism and Communication ethical review process (Ethics Code: 059034).

REFERENCES

- Abdelrazek, A., Eid, Y., Gawish, E., Medhat, W., & Hassan, A. (2023). Topic modeling algorithms and applications: A survey. *Information Systems*, 112, 102131. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.is.2022.102131>
- Abidin, C. (2018). *Internet celebrity: Understanding fame online*. Emerald Publishing.
- Altmann, U., Bohrn, I. C., Lubrich, O., Menninghaus, W., & Jacobs, A. M. (2012). The power of emotional valence: From cognitive to affective processes in reading. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 6, 192. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2012.00192>
- Asplund, S., Ljung Egeland, B., & Olin-Scheller, C. (2024). Sharing is caring: Young people’s narratives about BookTok and volitional reading. *Language and Education*, 38(4), 635–651. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2024.2324947>
- Balling, G., & Martens, M. (2024). BookTok helped us sell it: How TikTok disrupts publishing and fuels the #Romantasy boom. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548565241301271>
- Boffone, T. (2021). *Renegades: Digital dance cultures from Dubsmash to TikTok*. Oxford University Press.

- Boffone, T., & Jerasa, S. (2021). *Toward a (queer) reading community: BookTok, teen readers, and the rise of TikTok literacies*. *Talking Points*, 33(1), 10–16. <https://doi.org/10.58680/tp202131537>
- Bond, B. J. (2016). Following your “friend”: Social media and the strength of adolescents' parasocial relationships with media personae. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 19(11), 656–660. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2016.0355>
- Bortner, J. & Cohen, H. (2023). Novel-tea: What makes BookTok tick also ticks us off. UWIRE Text. <https://the-tartan.org/2023/02/27/novel-tea-what-makes-booktok-tick-also-ticks-us-off/>.
- Burgess, J., & Green, J. (2018). *YouTube: Online video and participatory culture* (2nd ed.). Wiley.
- Cho, E. J., & Ahn, B. (2024). Exploring the Agentive Role of Remnants (Cho 2019) in Neologisms: Focusing on the-fie Series. *Language & Literature*, 42(1), 147–162. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21084/jmball.2024.02.42.1.147>
- Chung, S., & Cho, H. (2014). Parasocial relationship via reality TV and social media. *Proceedings of the ACM International Conference on Interactive Experiences for TV and Online Video*, 47–54. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2602299.2602306>
- Clark, C., Picton, I., & Cole, A. (2025). *Children and young people's reading in 2025*. National Literacy Trust. https://literacytrust.org.uk/documents/7096/Children_and_young_peoples_reading_in_2025_bqtGfls.pdf.
- De Melo, A. (2024). The influence of BookTok on literary criticisms and diversity. *Social Media + Society*, 10(4), 20563051241286700. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241286700>.
- Dera, J. (2024). BookTok: A narrative review of current literature and directions for future research. *Literature Compass*, 21(10–12), e70012. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.70012>.
- Dera, J., Brouwer, S., & Welling, A. (2023). #BookTok's appeal on ninth-grade students: An inquiry into students' responses on a social media revelation. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 67(2), 99–110. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.1303>
- Dezuanni, M., & Schoonens, A. (2024). #BookTok's peer pedagogies: Invitations to learn about books and reading on TikTok. *Social Media + Society*, 10(4), 20563051241309499. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241309499>.
- Dixon, S. (2024). Most used social networks 2024, by number of users. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>.
- Fauzi, A., & Bahri, S. (2024). The affordances and constraints of information in crime prevention communities through social media. *Malaysian Journal of Library & Information Science*, 29(1), 107–121. <https://doi.org/10.22452/mjlis.vol29no1.6>
- Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 79(5), 701. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.5.701>
- Guiñez-Cabrera, N., & Mansilla-Obando, K. (2022). BookTokers: Generating and sharing book content on TikTok. *Comunicar*, 30(71), 113–123. <https://doi.org/10.3916/C71-2022-09>.
- Hearn, A., & Schoenhoff, S. (2015). From celebrity to influencer: Tracing the diffusion of celebrity value across the data stream. In P. D. Marshall & S. Redmond (Eds.), *A companion to celebrity* (pp. 194–212). Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118475089>.
- Hoffner, C. A., & Bond, B. J. (2022). Parasocial relationships, social media, and well-being. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 45, Article 101306. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101306>.

- Horton, D., & Wohl, R. R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19(3), 215–229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00332747.1956.11023049>.
- James, G. E. (2022). The BookTube/BookTok phenomenon: Analyzing reading habits of young readers in the digital age (Master's thesis). Ohio University. http://rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=ohiou166716860703574
- Jenkins, H. (2008). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. NYU Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2009). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*. MIT Press.
- Jerasa, S. (2024). The #BookTok effect: Unpacking the impact of identity, social media community formation, and affective experiences on reading motivation. In *The reading lives of teens* (pp. 247–269). Routledge.
- Jerasa, S., & Boffone, T. (2021). BookTok 101: TikTok, digital literacies, and out-of-school reading practices. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 65(3), 219–226. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.1199>
- Jerasa, S., & Burriss, S. K. (2024). Writing with, for, and against the algorithm: TikTokers' relationships with AI as audience, Co-author, and censor. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, 23(1), 118-134. <https://doi.org/10.1108/etpc-08-2023-0100>.
- Klug, D., Qin, Y., Evans, M., & Kaufman, G. (2021). Trick and please: A mixed-method study on user assumptions about the TikTok algorithm. In *Proceedings of the 13th ACM Web Science Conference* (pp. 84–92). <https://doi.org/10.1145/3447535.3462512>
- Leaver, T., Highfield, T., & Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram: Visual social media cultures*. Wiley. <https://www.wiley.com/en-us/Instagram%3A+Visual+Social+Media+Cultures-p-9781509534395>.
- Literat, I. (2012). The work of art in the age of mediated participation: Crowdsourced art and collective creativity. *International Journal of Communication*, 6, 2962–2984.
- Low, B., Ehret, C., & Hagh, A. (2023). Algorithmic imaginings and critical digital literacy on #BookTok. *New Media & Society. Advance online publication*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231206466>.
- Ludwig, C., & Sambanis, M. (2023). TikTok for Book Lovers? Bookfluencing in English Language Teaching. In: Summer, T., & Giesler, R., *Digital Textualities and Spaces in ELT*, Torrossa.com (pp. 33-56). <https://www.torrossa.com/en/resources/an/6045715>.
- Maddox, J., & Gill, F. (2023). Assembling “sides” of TikTok: Examining community, culture, and interface through a BookTok case study. *Social Media + Society*, 9(4), 20563051231213565. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231213565>.
- Mar, R. A., Oatley, K., & Peterson, J. B. (2009). Exploring the link between reading fiction and empathy. *Communications*, 34(4), 407–428. <https://doi.org/10.1515/COMM.2009.025>.
- Martens, M., Balling, G., & Higgason, K. A. (2022). #BookTokMadeMeReadIt: Young adult reading communities across an international, sociotechnical landscape. *Information and Learning Sciences*, 123(11/12), 705-722. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ils-07-2022-0086>.
- Marwick, A. E. (2015). Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy. *Public Culture*, 27(1), 137–160. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2798379>.
- Mashiyane, D. (2022). From the horse's mouth: BookTok as a collection development strategy in academic libraries. *College & Research Libraries News*, 83(10), 459–461. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.83.10.459>.
- Merga, M. K. (2021). How can BookTok on TikTok inform readers' advisory services for young people? *Library & Information Science Research*, 43(2), 101091. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lisr.2021.101091>.

- Muminov, H. (2024). The rise of short-form video content: How to optimize for TikTok and Reels in 2024. *Synergy: Cross-Disciplinary Journal of Digital Investigation*, 2(8). <https://multijournals.org/index.php/synergy/article/view/2060>.
- Odağ, Ö. (2013). Emotional engagement during literary reception: Do men and women differ? *Cognition & emotion*, 27(5), 856-874. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2012.751359>.
- Potter, N. (2021). *Instagram for libraries*. <https://www.ned-potter.com/blog/instagram-for-libraries>.
- Reddan, B., Rutherford, L., Schoonens, A., & Dezuanni, M. (2024). Social reading cultures on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok. Oxford, UK: Routledge.
- Rodger, N. (2019). From bookshelf porn and shelfies to #bookfacefriday: How readers use Pinterest to promote their bookishness. *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 16(1), 473-495.
- Rovira Collado, J., Martínez Carratalá, F. A., & Miras, S. (2024). Booktok: Análisis de las estrategias discursivas multimodales para la promoción de la lectura en TikTok. *Texto Livre*, 17, e51641. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1983-3652.2024.51641>.
- Rovira Collado, J., Martínez Carratalá, F. A., & Miras, S. (2025). La hora del Booktok: caracterización de nuevos vídeos para la promoción lectora en el móvil. *Pixel-Bit: Revista De Medios Y Education*, 72, 180-198. <https://idus.us.es/bitstreams/97603a7a-f07f-43c4-8495-29767954306a/download>.
- Segarra- Saavedra, J., & Torres- Huamanyauri, Y. E. (2024). Promoción de libros y fomento de la lectura a través de influencers literarios en TikTok. *Ocnos*, 23(2), 1-16. https://doi.org/10.18239/ocnos_2024.23.2.479.
- Senft, T. M. (2013). Microcelebrity and the branded self. In J. Hartley, J. Burgess, & A. Bruns (Eds.), *A companion to new media dynamics* (pp. 346–354). Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118321607.ch22>.
- Stever, G. S., & Lawson, K. (2013). Twitter as a way for celebrities to communicate with fans: implications for the study of parasocial interaction. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 15(2), 339-339.
- Szabó, D., & Dani, E. (2024). Book influencers in the library? *The Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, 47(2), 18-29. <https://doi.org/10.5206/cjils-rcsib.v47i2.17685>.
- Taylor, M., & Aguiar, N. (2024). Parasocial Relationships with Celebrities and Media Characters. In: M. Taylor & N. Aguiar (Eds.) *Imaginary friends and the people who create them* (2 ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford Academic.
- Teel, Z. A., & Lund, B. (2024). BookTok community building: dissecting fangirl behavior on TikTok. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 61(1), 1102-1103. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pra2.1198>.
- Thelwall, M. (2021). *Word association thematic analysis: A social media text exploration strategy*. New York, NY: Morgan & Claypool Publishers.
- Thelwall, M., Stuart, E., Mas-Bleda, A., Makita, M., & Abdoli, M. (2022). I'm nervous about sharing this secret with you: YouTube influencers generate strong parasocial interactions by discussing personal issues. *Journal of Data and Information Science*, 7(2), 31-56. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2478/jdis-2022-0011>.
- Thumala Olave, M.A. (2020). Book love. A cultural sociological interpretation of the attachment to books. *Poetics*, 81(101440), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2020.101440>.
- Tomasena, J. M. (2019). Negotiating collaborations: BookTubers, the publishing industry, and YouTube's ecosystem. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4), Article 2056305119894004. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119894004>.

- Usherwood, B., & Toyne, J. (2002). The value and impact of reading imaginative literature. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 34(1), 33-41. <https://doi.org/10.1177/096100060203400104>.
- Vizcaíno-Verdú, A., & Abidin, C. (2021). Cross-cultural storytelling approaches in TikTok's music challenges. *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2021i0.12260>.
- Wark, S. (2024). Platformisation and personalisation: The making of “contingent” online audiences. In A. Hill & P. Lunt (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to media audiences* (pp. 137–149). Routledge.
- Watson, A. (2024). *Share of children and young people reading fiction books outside of school in the United Kingdom (UK) from 2017 to 2023, by format*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/299071/fiction-reading-by-young-people-in-the-uk/>.
- Zhu, K., Li, J., Zhou, H., & Jang, J. (2024). Exploring the impact of music in short-form travel videos on users' emotional resonance, sharing intention and impulsive travel intention. *Springer Proceedings in Business and Economics*, 446-451. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58839-6_46.