Getting a feel for BookTok: Understanding affect on TikTok's bookish subculture

GETTING A FEEL FOR BOOKTOK: UNDERSTANDING AFFECT ON TIKTOK'S BOOKISH SUBCULTURE

Sonali Kulkarni

SUMMARY

In this article, I reflect on young readers' affective reader response on BookTok. The bookish subculture on TikTok is well known not only for the impact that it is having on young people's reading habits but also for the particular affective way in which young people use the platform. I argue that BookTok not only hosts affective reader response but also *generates* it. I discuss this in detail by focusing on two features of the underlying dynamics of TikTok: the attention economy and the logic of imitation. These play a crucial role in shaping young readers' practices on BookTok. I suggest that it is essential for reading promoters and educators to observe and be aware of these practices and the underlying platform logics that govern them in order to draw inspiration from BookTok. Finally, I briefly reflect on the affective practices on BookTok within the framework of "postcritical reading."

1 INTRODUCTION

The year 2023 – at the end of which this article was written – saw the institution of the first ever TikTok book awards. These newly established awards were marketed as a 'true people's choice award' voted for by the community (TikTok, 2023a). The 'community' in question is BookTok: the niche book-focused subculture on the popular social media platform TikTok that consists of a wide range of book-related posts aggregated under the unifying hashtag #BookTok. The hashtag, now used 30.1

million times (TikTok, 2024)[1], is a portmanteau of 'books' and 'TikTok' and serves as a convenient name for the thriving digital community that embodies not only love for reading but also appreciation of the material affordances of the book as an object. BookTok boasts of a wide range of bookish[2] content: from book recommendations and ratings to more creative content in which BookTokers act out parts of the book, engage in cosplay, create and share fanart, and participate in viral book-related trends.

The aforementioned awards are only the most recent example of how the power of TikTok combines with a passion for books and reading to result in a quantifiable impact on book sales, reading habits and bookishness in general. When my colleague Emilie Owens and I first started researching BookTok in 2021, the already-large impact of BookTok could be seen in the form of 'Best of BookTok' displays in bookstores that featured the most talked about books on the platform. Since 41.6% of active TikTok users are between 12 and 24 years old[3] (Dean, 2023), it is not surprising that a sizeable portion of these books has been Young Adult (YA) books. In fact, one of the most discussed BookTok success stories is Adam Silvera's novel *They Both Die At The End* (2017) which was often seen on 'Best of BookTok' displays around the world. The popularity of this book can be attributed to a BookTok trend in which young readers filmed themselves reading the book and crying to its heart-wrenching ending. In Images 1, 2 and 3, we see user @abbysbooks participating in said trend in which she films her emotional reactions while reading Silvera's novel in a day.

Such practices have evidently generated growing curiosity among reading promoters and mediators about the BookTok phenomenon that is reigniting a love for books and reading in today's digitally native youth. This curiosity has been addressed by the ever-growing body of BookTok research undertaken from a wide range of perspectives: information and library sciences (Merga, 2021; Mashiyane, 2022), literacy and education (Dera et al., 2023; Martens et al., 2022; Dezuanni et al., 2022; Dezuanni, 2021; Boffone & Jerasa, 2021; Jerasa & Boffone, 2021), social reading (Reddan, 2022), algorithmic culture (Low et al., 2023), and children's and

1 In addition to these views on TikTok, BookTok content and its overarching aesthetic and discursive logic also seeps into other platforms; there are currently 4.7 million Instagram posts tagged with #booktok.

2 Jessica Pressman (2020, p.1) defines the term as "creative acts that engage the physicality of the book within a digital culture."

3 These numbers can be considerably higher since several minors falsify their age during account creation (Owens, 2024)

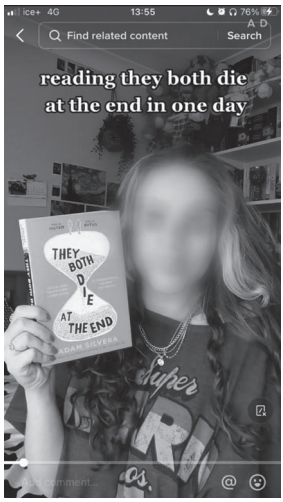


IMAGE 1 | SCREENSHOT OF A POST BY @ABBYSBOOKS FEATURING HERSELF

IMAGE 2 | SCREENSHOT OF A POST BY @ABBYSBOOKS FEATURING HER BOOKSHELF

IMAGE 3 | QR CODE FOR FULL VIDEO BY @ABBYSBOOKS

YA literature studies (Kulkarni & Owens, forthcoming). While a thorough review of the literature is beyond the scope of this article[4], it is essential to highlight that several of these studies intersect in their findings about the prevalence of affective responses and practices on BookTok. There are several academic disagreements about the term 'affect' (Draaisma, 2021), but in this paper, it is understood as a superordinate category comprising emotions and moods (Niven, 2013).

In one of the earliest scientific studies on BookTok, Merga (2021) analyses 116 BookTok videos and finds that 14.6% of these videos deal explicitly with emotional reader response while other categories such as recommendation videos have similar affective traits as well. Based on these data, she argues for granting greater consideration to emotional reader response in libraries' reader advisory services for young people. Martens et al. (2022) approach BookTok through the perspective of connected learning and assert that affect plays a central role in disseminating videos on the platform. Building on these studies, Emilie Owens and I theorize affect on BookTok through the lens of onto-epistemic injustice (Murris, 2013; Fricker, 2007). In relation to children and young adults, onto-epistemic injustice refers to unfair knowledge practices in which children are excluded in their capacity as knowers

4 See Dera et al. (2023), Martens et al. (2022) and Kulkarni and Owens (forthcoming) for more detailed reviews of current literature

simply as a function of their being a child. We argue that the use of overtly affective discourse on BookTok to talk about books signals an expansion of what it means to *know about* books; young BookTokers demonstrate dynamic and previously unrecognized modes of literary criticism blurring the boundaries between *the critical* and *the affective* (Kulkarni & Owens, forthcoming). In the present exploratory article, I place these affective practices within the larger socio-technological context of TikTok. That is, I explain how affective practices shape and are shaped by the underlying dynamics of TikTok. I conclude by framing BookTok within the context of 'postcritical reading', which is beneficial in understanding how bookish practices within and outside schools and libraries relate to one another.

2 AFFECT ON BOOKTOK: WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?

2.1 LOCATING AFFECT

Even though the above studies are promising for reading promotion, I argue that it is essential to zoom out and understand the overarching media landscape of BookTok – and its parent platform TikTok - because it not only *hosts* the abovementioned affective practices but also actively *generates* them. This argument aligns with Kopecka-Piech's (2022) claim about the internet in general:

> As an interactive, multimodal and networked medium, [the internet] is not only a platform for transmitting, shaping and facilitating emotions, but is itself a space in relation to which we nourish our emotions and which learns and responds to our emotions (p.9).

That is, technological and affective structures are engaged in a constant give and take in which they shape and are shaped by each other. This is particularly true about TikTok, as we will see, since the sheer scale of its userbase and the unique set of underlying platform logics and features bring affect to the fore.

TikTok was first launched internationally in 2017 by its Chinese parent-company ByteDance after it acquired and merged with the lip-syncing app Musical.ly in an (astonishingly foresighted and successful) attempt to break into the U.S. market. The popularity of TikTok rose exponentially during the Covid-19 pandemic owing in large part to extended periods of isolation and the lack of other forms of live entertaining (Kennedy, 2020). In the last quarter of 2023 alone, TikTok had 5.7 million active monthly users in the Netherlands, 134 million in Europe (TikTok,

2023a) and over 1 billion globally (TikTok, 2023b). This ever-growing userbase of TikTok may be attributed to the particular culture of authenticity offered on the platform by means of 'invitations to normality and relatability' (Kennedy, 2020, p.1072). As a result, there has been a perceptible change in the functioning of influencers and average users on TikTok who now have a proclivity for more personal posts in lieu of the visually enthralling aesthetic of Instagram (Abidin, 2020), paving the way for more affective content.

The invitations to normalcy and relatability are also answered by engaging with the everydayness of other pressing topics such as mental health. As mentioned above, over 40% of TikTok users are children and young people between 12 and 24 years old corresponding to Generation Z[5]. Stahl and Literat (2023) observe that this cohort – affected disproportionately by the Covid-19 pandemic – talks openly and comfortably about mental health and actively turns to TikTok for content related to the topic. Consequently, Generation Z as well as the discursive landscape of TikTok boasts of a wide affective lexicon that users are willing to use in the content they create on the platform.

I deem this discussion on TikTok as a platform important to our understanding of BookTok, in general, and affective practices thereon, in particular. As a subculture on TikTok, BookTok draws on the same 'unfiltered, messy, chaotic aesthetic of TikTok' (Reddan, 2022) and the inclination for relatability, potentially making it more accessible and affective than other fora for bookish subcultures. Moreover, it also draws on two interconnected underlying factors that merit further elaboration: the attention economy and the logic of imitation. I am presently working with both these concepts in my forthcoming collaborative research with Inge van de Ven (in relation to the phenomenon of rereading) and Emilie Owens (in relation to sound memes on BookTok) respectively. Below, I offer a brief discussion to demonstrate their relevance for understanding affect on BookTok in order to then glean insights for reading promotion and classroom/library settings.

2.2 DYNAMICS OF ATTENTION AND IMITATION

The term "attention economy" was first coined by Herbert A. Simon in 1969 to highlight how an abundance of information creates a poverty of attention. Michael

5 Debates about definitions of generations persist within academic literature but Generation Z corresponds to people born between 1997 and 2012 (ages between 11 and 26 at the time of writing).

H. Goldhaber applied this term to the internet in 1997 to account for the extremely high volumes of information and resulting scarcity of attention. He argued that in comparison to traditional media, the internet is particularly well-poised to commodify and exchange human attention. Given the primacy of attention in the process of reading, the attention economy has been used as a tool to understand contemporary developments in literature and reading (see Van de Ven, 2023). As Inge van de Ven argues:

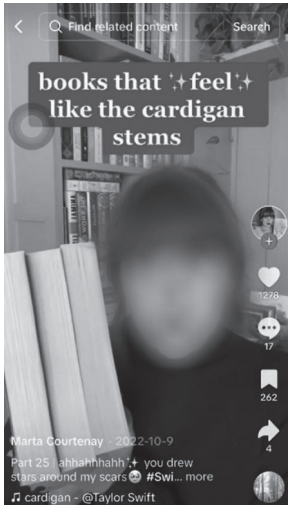
> When it comes to reading literature, the attention economy does not just influence the choice of *what* we read (a monumental novel, a long-read essay online, a number of Tweets) and *whether* we read (or devote our time to binge-watching a television series or playing a video game). The large volumes of text we have at our disposal also cause a change in *how* we read. (2023, p.2, emphasis added)

Extending this line of argumentation, I claim that the attention economy also changes how we *talk about* and *socialize around* our reading in the digital realm. As I will discuss below, the rise in affective content on BookTok is a pertinent example. Of course, it is essential to emphasise that affective response to books is not exclusive to the digital realm but is now "massively amplified through its archiving and discoverability on the Internet" (Murray, 2018, p.125) and the workings of the attention economy that commodify affect in the service of attentional and revenue flows. That is, the platform's relatable and affective nature is shaped by the attention economy in addition to the particular generational and aesthetic traits of TikTok discussed above.

Eric S. Jenkins and Monica Huzinec (2021) elaborate on the deep-rooted connection between the attention economy and affect. They state that the scarcity of attention – already well theorised in existing research on the attention economy - creates a competition for attention. That is, all the different players (platforms, organisations, individuals) vie to grab and hold our attention 'leading to tactics focused upon generating an affective response' (p.403). This is the case because users navigate media platforms in a passive state in search of content that strikes them and activates their attention. Digital platforms tap into the power of affect to grab and sustain attention, and gear their platform features or affordances toward the generation and modulation of affect. Sound (and sound memes) – the topic of my ongoing research with Emilie Owens – is one such TikTok feature that plays a significant role in mediating affect on BookTok (Owens & Kulkarni, 2023). For instance,

in a popular trend, BookTokers choose fan favourite songs (such as Taylor Swift's *Cardigan* or Celeste's *Strange*) and show books that made them *feel* the same way the song did. Through the easy integration of the sound affordance, TikTok taps into the potential of well-known sounds to grab attention. By using songs that have their own fanbase, the BookTokers participating in the above trend succeed in generating a significant amount of attention around their content. While an in-depth analysis of affective affordances on BookTok is beyond the scope of this brief piece, it suffices to say that affective practices are a function of the underlying logics of the attention economy. That is to say, when young BookTokers such as @abbysbooks discussed above post videos of themselves crying while reading a book, it is a product of the historical juncture in which they are coming of age (post-pandemic era with growing awareness for mental and emotional health) as well as the technological apparatus at their disposal on the TikTok platform that is particularly adaptive to the logics of the attention economy.

IMAGE 4 | USER MARTA COURTENAY COMPILING BOOKS THAT FEEL LIKE TAYLOR SWIFT'S CARDIGAN



This technological apparatus comprising TikTok affordances, underlying platform design as well as the algorithm also generate a unique form of sociality characterised by imitation and replication instead of interpersonal connection (Zulli & Zulli, 2022). That is, whereas other social media networks previously encouraged connecting with friends and engaging with their content personally, on TikTok, 'following any particular person for interpersonal connection is structurally

downplayed [...]' (*ibid*. p.1878). Rather, the TikTok algorithm foregrounds *virality* and curates videos based on their replicability and the users' personal preferences.

This is acutely visible on BookTok. To understand this further, we return to Silvera's novel *They Both Die at the End* (2017) that reemerged as a fan favourite owing to BookTok. In fact, the novel's marketing and publicity manager, Olivia Horrox, attributed the success of Silvera's novel not only to BookTok in general, but also the 'visceral reaction' that it can capture (Flood, 2021). In this instance, the visceral reaction was the result of the aforementioned 'trend' in which users like @abbysbooks posted videos of themselves crying to the ending of the novel. Social media trends are intrinsically imitative in that content becomes a trend only when a considerable number of people replicate it. On BookTok, we see the forces of imitation and replication at play in the form of the saturation of similar trends built around similar books. As Diana Zulli and David Zulli (2022, p.1881) find, the TikTok algorithm makes it 'particularly advantageous for users to merely remix popular videos rather than create their own' since 'copying similar features and video concepts automatically puts users in conversation with those who have obtained widespread attention.' I therefore argue that in addition to explanations outlined above, affect on BookTok is not always conceived by each individual user but is instead imitative and algorithmically mediated.

Nevertheless, individual users on BookTok find a collective identity and a forum to talk about books that are not included in recommended reading lists and in ways that are not always recognised in formal literacy and book-related institutions. It is essential for reading promoters and educators to be aware of these practices to know how young readers engage with books when left to their own devices. The dynamics of attention and imitation as well as the underlying features of TikTok discussed above add an important dimension to our understanding of young reader's online practices. The popularity of these practices understandably leads to the temptation to use the platform for reading promotion. In a recent study, Dera et al. (2023) provide recommendations for using BookTok in the classroom without further alienating book avoiders or negatively impacting the authenticity associated with BookTok. As an out-of-school and predominantly bottom-up practice, BookTokers feel a sense of ownership on their community which may be impacted adversely if it is incorporated directly in education and/or assessment. However, the socially and algorithmically mediated space for affective response is a useful point of departure to understand how BookTok can inform reading promotion and literary education. Below, I discuss this further by drawing on 'postcritical reading.'

3 AFFECT ON BOOKTOK: WHERE CAN WE TAKE IT?

Drawing on literary theory, the affective ways of responding to and interpreting books on BookTok could be understood through the framework of affective hermeneutics which constitutes ways of 'knowing through feeling' (Wilson, 2016). As discussed above, BookTokers – by consuming content and participating in affective trends of video creation – learn and appreciate a mode of reading that fosters personal attachment to the book. Of course, some more niche sub-subcommunities on BookTok also post conventionally critical content (see Dera, 2024) but mainstream BookTok videos that become viral and seep into other online and offline communities could be seen as standing in stark contrast to critical reading strategies that value objective distance from the text. Here, Rita Felski's conceptualisation of postcritical reading proves instrumental in seeing the two forms of reception as inherently linked. She argues:

> "Postcritical" refers to ways of reading that are informed by critique while pushing beyond it: that stress attachment as well as detachment, that engage the vicissitudes of feeling as well as thought, and that acknowledge the dynamism of artworks rather than treating them as objects to be deciphered and dissected. (Felski, 2017, p.4)

Such a conceptualisation serves as a useful framework for understanding how the affective practices on BookTok complement reading promotion and education. Crucially, the interconnectedness of the seemingly opposing forces of attachment and detachment, feeling and thought, is essential in today's media landscape in which (dis)information and (dis)trust are plentiful. As Inge van de Ven and Lucie Chateau clearly demonstrate in their book *Digital Culture and the Hermeneutic Tradition: Suspicion, Trust, & Dialogue* (2024), different interpretative modes can serve as complementary lenses to examine (media) texts from varying perspectives. In BookTok, reading promoters and educators can find inspiration to design programmes and syllabi that integrate attention for affective response with more analytical and critical literary response, both of which have become indispensable to navigating the current media and information landscape.

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AUTHOR BIO

Sonali Kulkarni is a PhD Researcher at Tilburg University. In her PhD, she examines the practices of and motivations for adults rereading children's and young adult literature. She conducts her research within the framework of children's literature studies and the attention economy. In addition to her PhD, Sonali has been researching BookTok since the early years of the phenomenon.