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### #Booktok: Social Media's Influence on Literature

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#Booktok: Social Media's Influence on Literature

by

Madison Hyatt

Honors Thesis

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English Department  
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## Introduction

Social media is a phenomenon that has introduced our society to the world of faster communication, other cultures, and my personal favorite, #BookTok. This hashtag, #BookTok, derives from the newest, and one of the most popular, forms of social media called TikTok. In today's digital age, multiple social media platforms have shaped cultural trends and redefined societal norms. The emergence of #Booktok is just one of the many trends that stands as a testament to the transformative power of online communities. TikTok, a platform known for its short-form video content, has become an unexpected champion in fostering a renaissance in literature and reading.

When first exploring the realm of #Booktok, the new, digital way of finding a book to read, I was particularly intrigued by the role academia was playing in the suggestions of books to read through the app. As an English major myself, I have a deeper appreciation for the "classics," like Melville, Dickens, and Bronte. However, when exploring this #Booktok community, I found nothing of the sort. This is when I became curious about how my academic background might influence my engagement with this platform, compared to those who are non-English majors, or those who are not as enthusiastic of readers, and whose interests in literature stem from different motivations. This contrast in perspectives and interests is what led me to write this thesis. I wanted to explore in more depth how the varying perspectives of the non-English majors perceive and interact with literary content in this digital space; thus, creating a diverse community discussing a different type of literary discourse, and consuming books in this new, non-traditional way.

This thesis is composed to analyze the #Booktok phenomenon through a multifaceted lens, employing historical, technological, and literary approaches to provide a comprehensive

understanding of its impact. In section one, through a historical lens, the research examines the roots and historical context that paved the way for the emergence of #Booktok, while additionally touching on genres, and how genre has been impacted and changed since the emergence of this community. Furthermore, this study will shed light on how #Booktok has contributed to the ongoing distinction between “high” and “low” literature, offering insights into the evolution of online book communities and their impact on contemporary reading culture. These different aspects have led to the most popular #Booktok books, and the trends that readers see the most on #Booktok as well. Overall, this section helps us see that certain dynamics of literature that we have today are not completely new.

Moreover, in section two, a technological approach will be applied to analyze the role of TikTok’s platform features in facilitating and amplifying #Booktok’s influence. The study will scrutinize the algorithms and user engagement strategies that make TikTok a unique medium for the promotion of literature. I think that being able to understand the technological groundwork to this social media app is crucial in unraveling the mechanics behind the virality of #Booktok books and its transformative impact on the consumption of literary content. In other words, this section will help us see how the dynamics discussed in the first section have now been amplified or changed because of this app today.

In addition to historical and technological analyses, in section three of this thesis I will delve into a literary examination of one of TikTok’s most popular #Booktok books, written by the famously known #Booktok author, Colleen Hoover: her contemporary romance novel *It Ends With Us*. Through critical literary analysis, my study will explore the themes and narratives of the selected work that has gained prominence through #Booktok, as well as give a brief synopsis of the novel, in order to give my full analysis of the book and its plot. By closely examining the

content of this particular book, my research aims to uncover what makes this book so popular, specifically, with this author's artistry.

Finally, while I was doing my research, I noticed two common themes across all of my areas of research pertaining to novel-reading and novel distribution. Those themes were: the repetitive desire of genre and the ability for novels to have "reach" (or go viral). What I noticed, specifically, was that these two themes— or "key ideas" – have been continuous throughout the earlier versions of the novel, dating all the way back to the eighteenth century. However, through Tiktok, these key ideas have changed/molded, or have been amplified, through the use of the app of the literature we see today.

By combining these three approaches, along with focusing my attention closely on these two key ideas I've noticed have been consistent throughout history after the invention of the novel, my research aspires to contribute a more nuanced understanding of how TikTok, and more specifically, this phenomenon of #Booktok, is reshaping the literary landscape both culturally and technologically. With that being said, as we embark on this comprehensive journey, the pages of this thesis will unfold to reveal not only the profound influence of #Booktok, but also the intricate interactions that can be traced through history, technology, and my own literary analysis, from these two prevalent themes, in the evolution of literature within the digital age today.

### **What is TikTok? What is #BookTok?**

According to an article called "Analysis of the Reasons and Development of Short Video Application," the TikTok application has been at the forefront of "the rise of mobile internet technology, [because of] the variety of short video software that has opened up a new era for the

audience...” (Yang et al. 1). This is mainly due to the fact that TikTok’s users are among the younger generation, with 68.97% less than 24 years old, and 73.69% less than 30 years old (Yang et al. 2). With this social media app, users are able to watch, as well as create, shorter videos for informational purposes, advertisement, and (mostly) entertainment. It is also one of the newest, and easiest ways, to create content as an influencer. In Yang’s article, they explain that the reason it has become so popular is because it is simple to make and it spreads fast (Yang et al. 1). More specifically, short video applications have “simplified the complicated operation process of video production in the past, and added some practical and instrumental functions, so that users can fully exert their creativity” (Yang et al. 1). Additionally, Yang states that, “short videos are rich and engaging” (Yang et al. 1).

Therefore, TikTok has become preferable to the younger generation when it comes to getting their information online. Especially because “TikTok is based on the personality traits and life tastes of young people, and highlighting the desire of contemporary young people to express themselves...” (Yang et al. 1). This is due to the fact that TikTok was designed with an algorithm that helps the app know what videos you like and what videos you skip. Insofar that “TikTok will implement the function of accurately pushing content according to the user’s preferences and needs” (Yang et al. 2). So, what first started with young adults dancing and singing to music on the app, has now turned into sharing the newest products from stores, amusing stories in a way that makes you feel like you’re on FaceTime with your best friend, and of course, sharing the latest books you’ve read. And with continued likes and searches such as “#bookrecs” or “#booktokromance,” the algorithm will continue to give users what they want. This is ultimately where #BookTok came from, to which the article titled, “Booktok 101: TikTok, Digital Literacies, and Out-of-School Reading Practices” describes it as, “the

sub-community within TikTok specifically for readers and book lovers... featuring short videos in which users talk about their favorite books, recommendations of titles, authors, genres, and theatrically make inside jokes about literature (Jerasa et al. 221).

## **Section One – The Historical Approach**

This section will explore the historical approach of literature that ultimately provides background context of early distinctions between high and low literature, and how this has impacted the evolution of literature today, as well as how we still see these distinctions in #Booktok. By examining different genres showcased on #Booktok, it will uncover the diverse range of literary works that have gained prominence within this digital space, especially more unconventional and niche works, rather than just the promotion of traditional literary genres. Finally, through this historical lens, this section will help better clarify how Amazon's early impact of digital sales of books has helped TikTok become a dynamic platform influencing literary trends and redefining literature in today's digital age.

### **1.1 – High and Low Literature**

A central focus of the analysis of historical aspects of literature is an examination of the dichotomy between what has been considered “high” and “low” literature, and determining the distinctions that have historically distinguished these two realms of literary expression. The concept of high and low literature has not only shaped critical discourse, but has also been instrumental in determining societal hierarchies of cultural value over thousands of years. Furthermore, these societal “hierarchies” have changed over time, as well as the pieces of work that are considered to be “high” literature and “low” literature. By delving into this dichotomy,

one will be able to see the implicit biases and cultural prejudices that have informed the categorization of literary works into these respective domains. Moreover, through this historical analysis of what was traditionally deemed “high,” and those relegated to the realm of “low,” we will be able to see where these attitudes toward certain pieces of literature came from. We also will begin to see how, curiously enough, the attitudes began to shift over time, and how we have media like #Booktok to thank for that.

Since the very invention of the novel, there has always been a serious distinction between what is considered “high” literature, as well as what has been considered “low” literature. All of the most popular books that the people of this generation read today were looked at as “cheap,” and just a fast way to make some money. Novels in the 18th century weren’t taken seriously as an art form, they were more seen as just entertainment. A.O. Scott from *The New York Times* claims in their article “Ideas and Trends: High and Low, Seizing the Literary Middle” that, “Since its beginnings in the 18th century, the Western novel was a bastard form, the chaotic hybrid of art and commerce as likely to offend norms of high literature as to uphold them. The “high-art literary tradition” was, in Augustan England, the preserve of Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton and the great figures of antiquity...” (Scott 1). At one time in history a few centuries ago, in order for one’s work to be taken seriously, it was required to be like the work of William Shakespeare, Milton, and many other great writers of the early times. To be considered “high literature,” the work had to be in “grand themes,” and normally was written in verse rather than prose. In other words, rather than the writing being arranged in a metrical rhythm, novels were written in an ordinary language. In earlier centuries, if you could read, it could be assumed that you were of the higher society to begin with, and “ordinary” language wasn’t high literature. Instead it was cheap, unserious, and irresponsible. In William Warner’s book, *Licensing*



*Entertainment*, he shows how the earliest novels, often published in small-format printing companies/medias provoked anxieties of new media on consumers. As he states in his book:

“...Often published anonymously, by parvenu authors supported by no patron of rank, novels seemed irresponsible creations, conceived with only one guiding intention: to pander to any desire that would produce a sale. Like the slighter and cheaper chap books sold by peddlers (Spufford), novels were “disposable” books written in anticipation of their own obsolescence, and in acceptance of their own transient function as part of a culture of serial entertainments” (Warner 6).

Warner explains that most of the authors writing these novels were not supported by wealthy patrons, because these patrons saw the work as cheap, and only catered to any desire that would make them sell. They weren’t “educational,” rather they were foolish, and overall, pointless. But these authors knew already that these novels were going to be tossed aside after a month or so, and wrote them more for consumption rather than high art. This is when coffeehouses were created. According to Charlotte Sussman, and her chapter on *Print Culture and the Public Sphere*, “Coffee houses provided a place for people to meet, exchange news and gossip, and conduct business” (Sussman 44). Coffeehouses encouraged lively, public discussion and intellectual exchange about the themes and merits of these works that were frowned upon in high society. This, once again, showed an early distinction between what was considered “high” versus “low” literature through the way the works were discussed and distributed.

Additionally, Scott and Warner were not the only ones to make this claim. In an article called, “What Was Literary Fiction?” written by Dan Sinykin from *The Nation*, also alludes to the idea that the novels we love and are the most popular today, would have been looked down on in early society. Sinykin explains that between 1970-1990, there was still a label of “high” and “low” literature, but in a different form. Writers started producing more novels of genres like fantasy, fiction and thriller. Sinykin points out that around this time, writers started to change

their style, and to many people's surprise, this new style of writing grew in popularity. Sinykin wrote:

“One of the most successful tactics by which literary fiction accommodated commercialization was by adopting the techniques of its counterparts in genre fiction. In the 1990s, we saw even esteemed veterans trying their hands at what scholars have come to call “literary genre fiction.” Joan Didion wrote a thriller. Cormac McCarthy wrote a trilogy of westerns. By the late 1990s and 2000s, younger writers like Michael Chabon, Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Lethem, Karen Russell, and, most prominently, Colson Whitehead wrote novels that played with the tropes of genre fiction...” (Sinykin 1).

With authors now playing with the idea of writing different genres, Sinykin mentions that there was a movement that began, through Oprah's book club, that tried to bridge these works of “high” and “low” literature together. He describes what Oprah had done as, “...casually mixed middlebrow culture (Pearl S. Buck, Ken Follett, Anita Shreve, John Steinbeck) with high culture (William Faulkner, Gabriel García Márquez, Cormac McCarthy, Toni Morrison), thereby diminishing the distinction between them, making all of it literary fiction and turning literary fiction into mass culture” (Sinykin 1). However, even though this book club included works that were seen as very distinguished and works that weren't seen to be as serious, there was still very much a distinction between the pieces of literature, and there were still a lot of people that criticized these so-called “low” literature books.

Although there is still a distinction between what is considered “high” and “low” literature (especially in higher educational settings) today, one thing for certain is that readers have the same preferences and desires of “repetitive” genre in literary culture. The most popular *today* being the most popular genre in the eighteenth century as well: romance novels. All thanks to media outlets like the ones Sinykin mentioned in his article: Amazon and Oprah's book club, as well as a new, more “gen z” social media outlet: Tiktok and #Booktok. The findings in the following section should be a wake-up call to those in academe and studying contemporary

literature without attending in any serious way to romance. As the article “Genre Juggernaut: Measuring Romance” makes the claim, “Far from being just one genre of fiction among others, romance is the genre of genres, a veritable genre ecosystem in its own right. In its scale and internal complexity alone, it warrants more study than it has received” (Porter et al. 1). A large portion of that has to do with social media, and the popularity it has received from Tiktok, that has surged this rebirth of romance being the “fan favorite” genre.

## 1.2 – Genre

Genre in literature refers to the categorization of literary works based on shared characteristics, themes, and stylistic elements. It serves as a way to classify and understand different types of writing, allowing readers to navigate the vast world of literature more easily. Genres provide a framework for readers to anticipate certain conventions and expectations within a particular type of work; it has a predictable likeness and service to give people.

Reinforcing the key idea that repetitive desire has been around since the birth of the novel, in Mark McGurl’s book *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon*, he explains that with genre “...our desires are fundamentally generic in nature...” and, “...according to Amazon, *all fiction is genre fiction* in that it caters to a generic desire” (McGurl 14-15). Therefore, if you desire genetically, you will desire repetitively, insofar that if you like one book, you will continue to go back and read more books like that. What was once the job of coffeehouses in the eighteenth century (spreading positive word of mouth of certain genres to the public sphere), is now the job of #Booktok! #Booktok has become the most popular in suggesting these generic desires. In fact, it has become *the* social media outlet for a few genres in particular. The most popular? Romance. *Why, though?* They cater to familiar desires, they are

repetitive/predictable, and they can be easily thrown away and replaced, but lots of people love them, and continue to read them.

In a magazine called *Public Books*, there was an article written in November 2023 under the “Culture Industries” section titled, “Genre Juggernaut: Measuring Romance.” In it, the writers discuss how a quick search on Goodreads, one of the best apps for tracking people’s most wanted books of the month, most popular books of the year, and readers’ opinions through their reviews, showed that there was an enormous amount of romance books shelved - more than ever in the past. Out of the 600,000 books the team pulled from Goodreads for their research, 216,830 of them were categorized as romance – not too far behind the number one most-shelved genre, fiction. Their response: “Romance is not only the largest genre category but, according to our analysis, the most distinct and well-defined” (Porter et al. 1). They further explain their own algorithm that they created in order to make this claim: “We constructed a network based on the top 10 genre-shelf assignments of all our books, including everything from Australia and college to gothic, road trip, and football. We then ran a community-detection analysis, which helps us find shelves that tend to cluster together: for instance, college and football connect to each other more often than they connect to Australia. We used a computational tool called Louvain detection to look at all of these connections and

cross-shelvings, studying each closely to see what sorts of shelves comprise the detected groups” (Porter et al. 1).

Backed by a computational device to cross-shelve and connect multiple genres together from Goodreads from the most-shelved genres they pulled, their results were striking.










Color	Group	Number of shelves
	Fiction	177
	Historical Romance	127
	Fantasy	103
	Young Adult	89
	Contemporary	81
	M M Romance	64
	Mystery	33
	Romance	20
	Christmas	11

Table 3: Subcategories of Romance

What they discovered was a gigantic collection of romance shelves, to which they say in the article, “In this respect, romance is the first kind of fiction we can separate from the rest” (Porter et al. 1). However, even more striking than that, with this algorithm, they discovered “...romance isn’t just easy to find; it also stands out as the major genre that most readily divides up into its own distinct subgenres... In fact, romance divides up into distinct types or groups nearly as well as the entire nonfiction network, with its well-established subcategories of self-help, cookbooks, biography and memoir, etc.” (Porter et al. 1). The article includes an image of a table where some of romance breaks down into subgenre categories. Above is *Table 3: Subcategories of Romance*, with the full breakdown of categories listed. The question now is: how did this happen? #Booktok.

One of the most liked subgenres of romance is fantasy. In recent years, it has cross-pollinated heavily with romance. In fact, the term “romantasy” was coined on Goodreads, and then widely spread on social media platforms like Tiktok, and popularized by the #Booktokers. The “romantasy” group the *Public Books* magazine team and their network created contained 103 shelves, including urban fantasy, paranormal romance, werewolves, dragons, and vampire hunters. This sprawling community is shaped by shelving data for books such as Deborah Harkness’s *All Souls* series of clever witch-and-vampire novels, and especially by such massively popular epic fantasy series as Sarah J. Maas’s *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, which is #Booktokers number one favorite on the “romantasy” list.

Additionally, the mystery subgenre of romance has also become a popular category on Goodreads and #Booktok. Although it only consists of 33 shelves according to the algorithm, it is supported for the most part by romantic suspense novels like Colleen Hoover’s *Verity* and Nora Roberts’s *The Obsession*. This comes as no surprise, though, as *Verity* has become one of

the most talked about and recommended books in the #Booktok community, and will be further discussed later in my own literary analysis as well. The article states that by their count in the computational device, mystery has become “one of the powerhouse genres of contemporary publishing” (Porter et al. 1); and now with romantic suspense on the rise as one of the most popular subgenres, it might just become more popular than fantasy one day.

With that being said, a genre that has been long dismissed as “narrow” by scholars and teachers, has now become, quite literally, the juggernaut of contemporary literature. As the article puts it, “Standing out from all other genres in its sheer scale and in the wild diversity of its new-found subgenres... romance is a vital part of the literary system: large, complex, and dynamic” (Porter et al. 1). This subsection, once again, reinforces the key idea of repetitive desire of genre, because romance was not only popular in the eighteenth century (especially among women), but now even more so in today’s society. This is especially true in the realm of mass consumption and the digital age, because of how crucial the new mode of spreading through “word-of mouth” of the romance genre has become to the selling of books in today’s society– especially on well known platforms such as Amazon, and more recently, TikTok.

### **1.3 Amazon discussion**

As most are familiar, Amazon is a multinational e-commerce company founded in 1994. What most of my generation doesn’t know, is that what has now evolved into one of the largest and most diversified retailing companies, initially started out as an online bookstore. This section will delve into the historical influence of the major platform on literature, and draw parallels between Amazon’s early impact on the rise of books, eventually influencing TikTok, and how this new social media platform has emerged as the contemporary equivalent, particularly through

the phenomenon of #Booktok. Amazon revolutionized the way books were distributed and consumed, democratizing access to literature and challenging traditional publishing norms. Fast forward to the present day, TikTok has become the new frontier for literary exploration, thanks to Amazon's pioneering role as an early, and important, mode of book distribution and understanding the early uses of how #Booktok came to be.

McGurl's book discusses the "Age of Amazon," and the idea of why Amazon was created. He says, "It is sometimes thought that Amazon started as an online bookstore purely as a matter of convenience, the book market having certain qualities made it the ideal means to Jeff Bezos's larger entrepreneurial ends. Most important was an extreme number and diversity of distinct titles, a tiny fraction of which could be displayed in even the largest brick-and-mortar store, matched with the rigorous trackability by way of their International Standard Book Number (ISBN)" (McGurl 4). As mentioned in the High vs. Low Literature section, this was around the time that the distinctions between high and low literature began to diminish, and a lot more books considered "low" literature became more popular and more liked than the prestigious "high" literature. Additionally, as McGurl adds, "Reading for pleasure is predominantly a phenomenon of the educated middle class in the broadest definition, and so is Amazon" (McGurl 4). With that being said, not only did Amazon make it more easily accessible to get the books that were becoming so popular at this point in time, it also made it easier for everyone to *enjoy* reading, at a reasonable price, all around the world, and with more options than you could possibly imagine. Even today, McGurl states, "Greater still is Amazon's dominance of the market in popular genre fiction. It has proved especially amenable to electronic consumption and is at the core of the \$9.99 per month Amazon Unlimited ebook subscription service, now with several million subscribers" (McGurl 34). Now, nearly thirty years later,

Amazon is still one of the biggest platforms for selling books, especially because of its easy accessibility, and the simple click of a button to buy a new book or become part of a subscription.

Furthermore, Amazon not only makes books more readily available through a very easy process for readers, but also for authors as well. McGurl goes on to talk about what an author is. He says, “For Amazon, authors should consider themselves a kind of *entrepreneur* and *service provider*. They are the opposite of the aloof or absent modernist god who, in James Joyce’s telling, recedes from his work to pare his fingernails, letting the reader make of it what she will” (McGurl 12). This is especially true of authors in today’s present society when writing books, one in particular who has paved the way for all other authors: Colleen Hoover. The author of the best-selling novels *It Ends With Us*, *Ugly Love*, *Verity*, and many, many more romance novels that people continue to buy from her every day, “CoHo” as she is referred to, has taken advantage of the consumerism and uses platforms like Amazon to help her title of “service provider.” This is because, as McGurl explains, “All but wholly marginal to the contemporary literary fields as seen from the perspective of academic literary studies and adjacent organs of literary journalism, the romance novel is absolutely central to popular literary life in the Age of Amazon, where readers are understood as customers, and the customer is queen” (McGuire 119). The romance novel has become so popular on Amazon’s bookstore, and CoHo understands this as well, making sure to give the customers what they want: more romance novels. Colleen Hoover, who began writing books in 2012, put out two books alone in that first year of writing. Following that year, she wrote four books in 2013, and according to *People Magazine* between the years of 2020-2023 she published six books (People 1). With a total of 26 books published right now, she announced on her Instagram page that another one will be out later this year. This



is largely due to the fact that Amazon has helped make her job as “service provider” and selling her books to everyone on a larger scale most effortless.

It is hard not to see the parallels of Amazon’s mass consumerism and the new phenomenon of the social media platform known as TikTok. Contrary to Amazon’s launch in 1994, TikTok has only been around since 2016. However, TikTok’s community known as #Booktok has made for just as much mass consumerism as Amazon in such little time. Much like Amazon allowed for a broader range of voices to be heard, #Booktok has become a space where niche genres thrive alongside mainstream literature. The literary promotion on TikTok mirrors the inclusive nature that Amazon introduced to the book industry. #Booktokers use the social media platform as a way to promote books that they’ve read and really enjoyed, didn’t enjoy so much, and also talk about new books that have just been released. When other people of the #Booktok community sees these videos, it automatically makes them want to read these books as well, going to places like Amazon and Barnes & Noble to buy them. In this aspect, Amazon and #Booktok works hand-in-hand to sell readers favorite genres of books, new books that have never been heard of, or bring rise to old books that used to be popular ten years prior. This is also how best-selling authors, like Colleen Hoover, are able to keep giving readers what they want, by listening to the #Booktokers and then putting her published work on mass markets like Amazon to sell to her readers all over the world. In conclusion, both #Booktok and Amazon embody the transformative power of digital platforms in redefining how books are sold and consumed, creating an expansive literary community, and contributing to the evolution of new mass consumerism in the realm of literature.

Overall, this historical section has helped show the continuity concerning novel-reading, novels being considered “low” literature, genre, and mass consumption between the birth of the

novel in the eighteenth century and present day. This proves that these themes of repetitive desire and the ability for a novel to have viral capacity is not completely new, but because of Tiktok and #Booktok, it has now been amplified and changed to meet society's needs in literature today.

## **Section 2 – Technological Approach**

In this section a technological approach will be used to analyze the role of TikTok's platform features in amplifying #Booktok's influence on literature today. TikTok has emerged as a powerful tool for content creators to reach vast audiences, and its impact on the promotion of literature, through the #Booktok community is particularly noteworthy. By exploring TikTok's algorithms and user engagement strategies, this section of research will enlighten others on the unique qualities of TikTok that make it a compelling medium for the promotion of literature. Furthermore, this section will also highlight the two key ideas I touched on at the beginning of the thesis, and how the app, and #Booktok specifically, has amplified word-of-mouth and user engagement dynamics of novel-reading and novel distribution.

### **2.1 The Algorithm**

As I mentioned earlier, Tiktok was created on an algorithmic system that, as Yang states, "... implements the function of accurately pushing content according to the user's preferences and needs" (Yang et al. 2). This can be done in a couple of ways. One way that users continuously get the same type of videos to show up on their "For You Page" (very suitably named) is through hashtags that are present in the comments. For example: #cooking might come up every time a user sees a cooking video on Tiktok, and therefore, will get more videos similar to the first cooking video they liked. Another way that this can happen though, is if a user likes

two or three cooking videos in a row, with no hashtag or any mention of cooking. Eventually, the algorithm that was invented for the app will *only* put cooking videos on that user’s For You Page. This is, ultimately, how the community of #Booktok was created, too. In time, the users who continuously liked the videos of other content creators (either with or without hashtags) recommending books, giving reviews, etc. ended up only getting these short videos on their For You Page, and therefore, grew the community to a widespread media that now promotes some of the most popular books of our generation! A student named Elisavet Rozaki wrote and researched #Booktok for her dissertation, and created a method to collect data on what kind of videos showed up the most on #Booktok, and how this has influenced a rise in literature and book promotions in the past five years. She explains how she approaches the research in order to understand the algorithm better. Rozaki’s sample was out of one hundred videos from her Tiktok’s For You Page:

“The data I gathered from my sample was: username, date posted, link, content description, views, likes, and comments. I placed the data in a spreadsheet, assigning each category of data into a column, as seen in Figure 3. Then, I watched the videos again and assigned a code to each one of them that most accurately represented their content. For example, I assigned the code “do it yourself,” or most referred to as “DIY,” to a video that showed how to make a book cover from scratch. Some videos were assigned more than one code. For example, a video on which the user was reviewing the book included her intense emotional reaction, therefore I assigned both “emotional reaction” and “review” codes. The next step in the process is categorization, which means that I needed to identify common themes that emerged from the codes I assigned to the data... Once I had these categories established, I then brainstormed potential themes that could encapsulate each category” (Rozaki, 21-22).

To make the research easier to understand, Rozaki also created a table to show the themes she came up with to

Codes	Theme
character analysis, themes	These codes fall under <b>literary analysis and interpretation</b> , as they involve examining the characters, themes, and point of view in a piece of literature.
DIY, visual edits, POV	These codes fall under <b>creative expression</b> , as they involve creating something (such as a craft or visual artwork) using one's own skills and materials.
movie adaption	This code falls under <b>film and media</b> , as it involves adapting a book or other work of literature into a movie.
community	This code falls under <b>social interaction</b> , as it involves engaging with others who share a common interest or passion.

*Table 2: Book Engagement Themes Description*

reviews, recommendations, criticism, emotional reaction	These codes fall under <b>response and evaluation</b> , as they involve providing one's opinion and analysis of a work of literature or other media.
personal library, annotation	These codes fall under <b>organisation and documentation</b> , as they involve keeping track of one's own collection of books or other media and annotating them for personal reference.

encapsulate the different categories from her one hundred video sample. Out of one hundred videos, sixty four of them were a part of the #Booktok community. Rozaki created very generic themes to simplify all of the categories created, as well as described each theme, so that it is clear how the themes were chosen. This is seen in *Table 2: Book Engagement Themes Description* (Rozaki 23-24).

Rozaki then used the same process to describe how each of these themes from the sixty four videos in her sample ended up on her For You Page, shown in *Table 3: Codes Assigned to Book Discovery Sample and Their Descriptions* (Rozaki 26). What is the most interesting about these findings is how many of these videos showed up on Rozaki’s For You Page without any #Booktok related hashtags in the caption, thus proving that Tiktok’s algorithm is working to keep users engaged and on #Booktok.

Code	Count of videos	Description
Hashtag related to books/reading	57	These videos included hashtags that are related to reading, such as #booktok, #bestbooks, and #ilovereadng
No hashtags (algorithm)	6	These videos did not include any hashtags and the caption did not include any element that pointed to the topic of reading or books.
No hashtags but book-related caption	1	This video did not include any book-related hashtags, but it did include a book-related caption.

*Table 3: Codes Assigned to Book Discovery Sample and Their Descriptions*

Finally, Rozaki wanted to simplify the data collected to see what kind of videos keep users most engaged on the app. The four most generic categories to split up the videos are categorized below in *Table 4: Frequency of Book Discovery Videos Per Book Engagement Theme* (Rozaki 27).

These findings from Rozaki are what I am most interested in, because it is clear in Table 4 that most videos, over 70 percent of them, fit under the theme of response/evaluation. Based on the

Theme	Count of videos
response/evaluation	46
organization/documentation	11
creative expression	4
social interaction	3

*Table 4: Frequency of Book Discovery Videos Per Book Engagement Theme*

description of this theme on Table 2 listed above, it is reasonable to suggest that the majority of BookTok videos are a way of book discovery for users! Even Rozaki claims that according to the

tables, it shows that, “If 70 percent of a user’s feed includes creators talking about and recommending books, the chances of the user discovering their next read are bigger. Therefore, the best method of book discovery on TikTok is to simply let the algorithm do its work” (Rozaki 27). This research is immensely important because it proves that on TikTok, book discovery becomes more passive than ever. The users just simply have to scroll and let the algorithm do its magic in order to find their next read! And for many users who are not avid readers, this makes finding a book easy and fast; thus, it has the potential to make reading seem more appealing.

Another part of Rozaki’s research that I would like to make note of is her “Books Mentioned” section. During her research and data collection, she mentions,

“In the sampling process I also kept track of all the books that were mentioned in each video. It is particularly interesting that out of 218 books mentioned, 129 belong to the romance genre. That is almost 60 percent! Also, *It Ends With Us* [by Colleen Hoover] was the book that appeared the most times, in eleven videos to be exact. This must not be a coincidence, since searching the hashtag #itendswithus was the first thing I did when I accessed the new TikTok account. The algorithm noted that I am particularly interested in the book *It Ends With Us* and, subsequently, that I am interested in the romance genre. Thus, it makes sense why the books I gathered during my scrolling session belonged to the romance genre in their majority” (Rozaki 27).

This, again, proves the point of how the algorithm on Tiktok has majorly contributed to the rise of reading and literature today. It also proves, as I mentioned in *1.2 Genre* and *1.3 Amazon discussion*, that Tiktok has had the greatest influence on the rise of the contemporary romance genre in the past few years, a continuity and evolution of (what used to be) recommendations through Amazon, and even more suggestions of the “generic desires” readers fall back to when they like a specific type of book for entertainment.

## 2.2 User Engagement

When using the words “user engagement” on TikTok, I’m referring to the level of interaction and interest users have with the content on the platform. It includes actions such as likes, comments, shares, and just the amount of time users spend watching videos on the app in general. It serves as the contemporary equivalent of the traditional “coffeehouse” described in section 1.1, expanding the concept of “word of mouth” through actions like replying, commenting, liking, and reposting videos, which contribute to and engage in discourse on a broader scale. Clearly, high user engagement indicates that the content is resonating with the audience, sparking conversations, and encouraging participation on the app. As mentioned in section 2.1, TikTok’s algorithm works off of high user engagement, often prioritizing content that suggests that the content is relevant and engaging to a broader audience, and putting it onto other users For You Pages. Creators and brands often strive to increase user engagement to boost their visibility and reach on the platform.

Another student named Emma Grace Kirby, from the University of Alabama, wrote a thesis titled, *From Penny Dreadfuls to Booktok: How Technology Influences Reading and Publishing Practices*. Her thesis (in a similar vein to my own) examines the effects of changing technology, especially on readership and literature today. In it, she writes:

“As of January 2023, the hashtag BookTok on TikTok has had almost thirty billion views (Macready). It is the latest technology influencing both the publishing industry and readership of books. Unlike previous technologies, BookTok has not affected how books are printed, but it has affected the popularity of certain books and reading as a hobby through marketing and promotion” (Kirby 21).

Thirty billion views for a single hashtag on an app! I think it is safe to assume that kind of engagement can be referred to as high user engagement. Obviously, as I discussed in 2.1, this, in part, is due to the algorithm in which Tiktok was created. However, that is not the only way that

user engagement skyrocketed. The rise of #BookTok coincided with a shift in the publishing industry. As a result, this industry underwent, and is still undergoing, a period of transformation and experimentation. This means that a lot of publishers and authors are looking for new ways to reach and engage with readers. For example, John Green, the author of the famous romance, *The Fault in Our Stars*, is active on Tiktok where he talks about his novels for users and also lets the users in on fun facts about some of his books. Another (more famously known) author with high engagement on the app is Colleen Hoover. She is active on Tiktok, as well as other social media like Instagram, announcing progress with books she is currently writing, or engaging in the fun trends of the #Booktok community– including book hauls, what is on her “Want to Read” list, and more! As Rozaki states in her dissertation, “Being active on Tik Tok helps authors to build a personal connection with readers, leading to increased book sales and visibility (Bennett et al, 2023, para. 19).” (Rozaki 7).

With this generation being very innovative with technological advances to begin with, it works to an author’s advantage to engage through social media, in order to reach the greater community quicker. This is also beneficial for emerging authors who have limited access to traditional marketing channels too. With Tiktok’s algorithm, a new, self-published author can expose these readers to their new pieces of work and content! As Kirby puts it, “BookTok is the only technology that has had a profound effect on the publishing industry and readership without having affected the mechanics and printing process of both physical and electronic books. It increased readership and book sales through word-of-mouth promotion and recommendations” (Kirby 24). Content creators simply throwing the title of a new book out in a video, and giving a brief summary of it, piques other users of the #Booktok community’s interest. She also adds, “...the publishing industry and bookstores have mainly profited from BookTok without really

having to change anything about the printing or making of books. Their increase in sales came from readers recommending books to other readers on a highly viewed platform. The most work that was done was bookstores featuring BookTok favorites on tables or as staff recommendation cards...” (Kirby 24-25). This is, indeed, the truth of the promotion of #Booktok. I have inserted a picture of my own experience walking into a bookstore with this kind of advertising as well:



In conclusion, this once more proves the weight of influence that #Booktok has over the readers’ community as a whole. On one hand, this technological section shows the key idea of repetitive desire of genre, especially on this app that pushes content (in this case, book recommendations, “top five reads,” etc.) based on that user’s specific preferences and needs. On the other hand, it underscores the key idea of the ability for novels to have the “reach” (or viral capacity) that they do, just based on this specific platform, and how fast this new version of “word-of-mouth” spreads the virality of the novels through “fyp” content. Thus proving Tiktok’s algorithm, as well as through the engagement of the consumers and the content creators, these key ideas are not necessarily “new,” but this app has changed and molded these ideas to fit the preferences of what society needs in literature today. Additionally, as this engagement continues to drive the popularity of #Booktok, its impact on book sales and reading habits demonstrates the power of social media in shaping cultural trends and promoting literacy.



### **Section 3 – Literary Analysis**

In the following section, I will provide my own detailed literary analysis of *It Ends With Us*, first focusing on a detailed plot summary of the book, and how this relates to its viral capacity and meme quality within the context of #Booktok. This novel by Colleen Hoover has garnered immense popularity on the social media platform, with readers sharing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to the book in creative and engaging ways. By examining the plot, characters, and narrative technique used in “It Ends With Us,” I will also be able to discuss and explore how these elements contribute to its viral appeal and meme-worthy content. Moreover, I will discuss the impact of #Booktok on the book’s success, highlighting how user-generated content and community engagement – as talked about in Section 2 – have played a crucial role in its widespread recognition.

#### **3.1 Summary of *It Ends With Us***

*It Ends With Us* by Colleen Hoover is a contemporary romance novel that delves into the complexities of love, relationships, and personal growth. The story follows Lily Bloom, a young woman who recently moved to Boston and owns her own business. She meets a man named Ryle Kincaid, and they quickly develop a connection. However, readers also learn that Lily is haunted by her past relationship with her father, who was abusive to her mother, and tries to emotionally close herself off from love and relationships because of it. Not to mention, the only boyfriend she has ever had, that she just can’t quite seem to get over, Atlas. Additionally, throughout the novel, Hoover adds a more complex aspect that readers get to learn more about Lily’s past with. In the novel, there are small glimpses of young Lily writing letters to her favorite celebrity, Ellen DeGeneres, about what is happening in her life at that moment. She never sends these letters, but

she does keep them, and reads the letters throughout the entirety of the book, helping readers learn more about this relationship with her father and with Atlas.

As Lily and Ryle's relationship progresses, she could not be happier, and she admits it's almost too good to be true. After some time together, they start to face challenges that test their love and commitment to each other. Ryle begins to show signs of being an abusive partner, as her father did, when he would lose his temper and try to control Lily, causing her to confront her feelings about Ryle and her fears about relationships. As this part of the story unfolds, and Lily is still learning how to navigate being with Ryle during this time, Atlas makes his way back into Lily's life as well. Now, Lily must also try to avoid her past love while facing the abuse of her current love. And only to make matters more complicated, Lily finds out she is pregnant with Ryle's child. Lily must make even more difficult decisions about her future and the kind of life she wants for herself and her child; all while beginning to reconnect with Atlas, adding yet *another* layer of complexity to her journey.

In the end, Lily must confront her past and make a choice that will change her life forever. When she finally sees a way out for herself and her child, and after staying at Atlas' for some time, she leaves Ryle. She addresses this abuse by telling her infant daughter, Emerson, "it ends with us," giving the story an emotional ending of love, resilience, and the importance of standing up for oneself.

### **3.2 Viral Capacity and Meme Quality**

While reading this book, it made me curious: what about this book makes it so popular? What qualities, specifically, of the book make it so popular? Why is it so widely popular that when I search the word "It" in the Tiktok search bar, the title of the book is the first to show up?

Additionally, when I mention “meme quality,” I am looking at the overall relatable content this book has, as well as “wholesomeness,” “edginess,” and cultural relevance – all qualities that objectively people laugh at, or people repost, when it comes to a meme or other content on social media. So, after reading and annotating the book, I’ve made some notes on my own personal literary analysis of the book, and what I find makes it the most popular, as well as what I think makes it most relatable or culturally relevant.

To begin, and not necessarily a part of the literary analysis– just something I noted– physically, the book is very appealing to all ages and audiences. The first time I picked up the book, I read it in its entirety within six hours. I am also an avid reader and an English major, so I read all the time. However, looking at it from the perspective of those who do not read all the time, or want to start reading and they do not know what to pick, this could be the perfect book for them. The font is big, the chapters aren’t too long and can be read at a fast pace, and the language isn’t complex. This makes this enjoyable for readers of any level, especially if you just need a “beach read” or something to do on a long car ride.

As for the story itself, I really wanted to focus on what it was about Hoover’s artistry as an author that made her books so widely popular across this app. As I said at the beginning of this section, all I had to do was search for the word “It,” and the title of Hoover’s book popped up right away– which proves how viral it really has become. What I wanted to know was *how* did she do this? Among a few things that I compiled that were repeated in a lot of the videos, and a few things I noticed myself while reading, one aspect of the book stood out the most to me as the reason why her books are so popularized: the investment of complex characters in the story.

The storyline and the structure of the book keep readers engaged and attached to the characters in it. This seems to be specifically geared towards the two love interests in the story:

Atlas and Ryle. Hoover first does this by splitting the novel into two separate parts. In the first part of the story, Ryle goes from being a character that everyone loves, and wants Lily to marry/eventually does marry, to slowly showing his true colors about just how abusive he can be. Then in the second part of the novel, Ryle turns into the one character that readers start to root against, and begin to really despise. On the other hand, for Atlas, in the first section of the story, we only know a little about him as a teenage boy in love with Lily, and only through Lily's letters that she wrote in a journal that she keeps revisiting and rereading when she first moves to Boston. As the story unfolds, we learn more about Lily's past relationship with Atlas, and then readers find out that Atlas currently lives in Boston, too! This leads to the second part of the novel, where readers begin to root for him instead, because he helps Lily try to get away from Ryle after she realizes how abusive he is. Splitting the novel into two parts helps readers see the character development of both Ryle and Atlas, and gives the book more of a "slow burn," because it takes almost through the whole novel to learn all about these characters' pasts. This also leaves the readers torn throughout the story, and keeps them reading until the end of the book to find out who Lily will pick.

Additionally in the story, Hoover addresses the topic of domestic abuse. The topic is extremely emotional, and does a few things for Hoover's artistry and the people of the #Booktok community as well. Tackling a heavy topic such as domestic abuse, and emphasizing how hard it is for someone to leave even in an abusive relationship is not easy, and this makes readers love Lily even more for her resilience and strength that she shows throughout. However, there are also moments in the novel where Hoover's writing makes it seem like she is romanticizing the idea of domestic abuse. This raises a lot of eyebrows among the Tiktok app, because half of the people criticize Hoover for writing about such a topic that she "doesn't take seriously," and the other

half commend her for taking on (a very real) issue that people face. Especially in recent years, this subject has become more widely talked about. This also opens up a more cultural conversation about the discourse, and allows people to share their thoughts and feelings on it (mainly through Tiktok), which has caused a lot of controversy– a modern day coffeehouse for the people!

This is where Hoover has perfected her art of writing. Presenting two characters like Ryle and Atlas as polar opposite as they are, and also pinning them against each other– or better yet, making the readers choose: Team Ryle or Team Atlas– causes a lot of discussion around the book to begin with. Moreover, Hoover adds to that discussion a contentious issue, which makes readers talk even more, because she has realized that controversy is what gets people talking. Controversy is what gets books to sell. This is a huge contributor to how Hoover’s novels have become so popular on #Booktok, because everyone has a stance on the issue, and everyone wants to put their opinion on the situation. Hoover invites readers to do so by her artistry and the way she writes, because she knows more people will read her book, which is why she has continued to give readers what they want! This emphasizes both the idea of repetitive desire of genre (based on the formula that Hoover has perfected her writing on to sell more novels), and the idea of the viral capacity of novels, because of how widely popular this one has become just around the discussion of its discourse.

### **3.3 Author as Celebrity**

When referring to “author as celebrity,” I am referring to the phenomenon where an author becomes famous not just for their literary works, but also for their public persona, lifestyle, and personal brand. In the world of social media, this is known as an influencer:

someone who promotes a product or service that is being highly recommended via social media platforms. Further, in the world of literature, this often involves an author actively engaging with their readers and fans through social media, book tours, and public appearances. Thus, cultivating a dedicated following beyond their written work. Their recommendations and opinions about all products carry significant weight among readers. This can lead to increased book sales, media attention, and opportunities for collaboration with other artists and creators.

In an article from the online publishing platform, *Medium*, titled “Influencers are Becoming Publishers” by Aisha Yusuf, she explains how the rise of social media has influenced authors to become “influencers” themselves. She writes, “The dawn of social media platforms like [Booktok] has significantly reshaped the publishing domain, ushering in a new era of digital influence over traditional book-reviewing paradigms. These platforms have democratized the literary sphere, facilitating a diverse array of book influencers whose endorsements wield the power to catapult titles into viral stardom. Unlike traditional reviews, these endorsements are infused with a personal touch (usually crying videos), often resonating deeply with audiences...” (Yusuf 1). This helps an author build a public persona with their fans via social media, and create a following of people that assists in making their name very recognizable as they release more books.

Colleen Hoover has achieved this celebrity status through a combination of factors, including some aspects discussed earlier, and most importantly, through her engagement with her fans. Hoover has actively engaged with her audience through social media, particularly on platforms like TikTok. By sharing behind-the-scenes glimpses into her writing process and participating in book-related trends, Hoover makes it feel more personal, as if she is talking to her fans one-on-one. Therefore, this has cultivated a strong and loyal fan base. Due to this

engagement, her fans see her not just as an author, but as a relatable and approachable figure— a friend, even. This keeps her followers excited about new books, by releasing teasers on her platforms, or giving updates about progress with her writing, making fans eagerly anticipate each new release. Furthermore, the viral capacity and meme quality/relatability of her narratives have propelled her into the spotlight, making her a prominent figure in the new, contemporary literary world. Through a combination of her social media presence and engagement with her audience, Colleen Hoover has successfully established herself as a celebrity author in the digital age. This is also a huge reason why *It Ends With Us* has gained so much popularity and viral capacity: positive word-of-mouth; especially from the positive reviews the book receives through Tiktok. This is different from what you might find in a newspaper, or on Amazon, left by a critic or NYT subscriber. These are all types of people (young and old) giving their thoughts on why they liked Hoover’s book— and even Hoover herself adding to the mix. This is how Hoover gained her fame, and continues to grow her fame, as she continues to write more books and promote them on social media.

Therefore, by looking at this one novel in particular, it is apparent that Hoover’s artistry caters to Tiktok, and the audience on Tiktok. Hoover is aware that the app is her best mode of distribution. She continues to keep this in mind while writing, because she knows that the #Booktok community has a continued desire for a repetitive genre, and the viral capacity that her novels hold on the app, is what continues to sell her books!

## **Conclusion**

#Booktok has become a phenomenon that can be explored through a variety of approaches, including historical, technological, and personal literary analysis. Through a

historical lens, the platform highlights the evolving nature of “high” and “low” literature, and the nature of change; as in, what readers prefer now, versus what they preferred centuries ago. With that being said, the genre dynamics on #Booktok, and the new surge of popularity of contemporary romance, showcases the diverse reading interests of its users, reflecting the evolution of “high” and “low” literature. Additionally, the platform’s similarities with Amazon illustrates the varied landscape of book distribution. Technologically, TikTok's algorithm plays a pivotal role in amplifying book recommendations and fostering user engagement, creating a new era of digital literary discourse through the user’s preferences. Finally, after a close analysis of #Booktok’s most popular book, *It Ends With Us*, it is apparent that, not only does celebrity author, Colleen Hoover, encourage the rise of sales through her engagement with the app; but also, the viral capacity and relatedness of this famous book, through its connection with characters, difficult topic of discourse, and positive word of mouth, has catapulted the experiences of reading through this app as well. Therefore, the platform has encouraged readers to find their next reads through #Booktok, expanding this online community and, in general, interest in reading.

All this to say, it is unclear where literature will go in the next decade or so, especially with the ever-changing technology that we have today. However, it is evident that desire for repetitive genres, as well as the ability for a novel to “sell well” and have the viral capacity that it does, have been continuous themes throughout centuries of the novel. Nevertheless, Tiktok—especially the community of #Booktok – has become the new mode of distribution for these themes since the creation of the app, as well as the way of changing/amplification of literary trends at this time.



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