

# Social reading cultures on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok

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## Snapshot

What opportunities do readers have to engage with books on the digital social media platforms YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok? As part of an ARC-funded project investigating how Australian teenagers choose leisure reading material, we are mapping the digital ecology of teen reading in Australia. One aspect of this mapping is to examine the reading practices and book talk in the digital reading communities on online social media networks. In this article Bronwyn Reddan examines the fascinating development of different social reading cultures on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok.

## Introduction

The social aspects of reading have long been an important part of book culture. Readers use book talk to engage in social interaction and identify themselves as book lovers. Examples of 'bookish self-fashioning' can be found in sources as diverse as Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and celebrity book clubs such as Oprah Winfrey's television book club and WH Smith's Zoella book club (Birke 2021; Branagh-Miscampbell & Marsden, 2019). The increasing popularity of social media accounts dedicated to books and reading has given rise to the development of a new category of cultural intermediary: bookfluencers. Bookfluencers are passionate readers who use social media platforms to share their love of books and connect with fellow readers. They are microcelebrities who develop a public identity or brand as a reader, which they leverage to gain attention and social status (Marwick 2017). The most important feature of a bookfluencer's brand is their reputation as a trusted source of book recommendations. They build this trust by sharing their own reading tastes and preferences to define themselves as 'authentic' and 'relatable' book lovers (Albrecht 2017). Although Albrecht's analysis focuses on BookTube, her discussion of the role of authenticity and relatability in development of a relationship of trust between social media creators and their follower is equally applicable to bookfluencers on other social media platforms (2017). These parasocial interactions with their followers aim to develop an affective relationship with their fan community (Khamis, et al, 2017; Baym, 2018; Marwick, 2017).

**The increasing popularity of social media accounts dedicated to books and reading has given rise to the development of a new category of cultural intermediary: bookfluencers.**

What opportunities do readers have to engage with books on the digital social media platforms YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok? We know that the consumption of social media content is an increasingly important aspect of the digital lives of young people, but we have little data about

what impact this is having on their reading lives. As part of an ARC-funded project investigating how Australian teenagers choose leisure reading material, we are mapping the digital ecology of teen reading in Australia. One aspect of this mapping is to examine the reading practices and book talk in the digital reading communities on online social media networks. This paper examines the development of different social reading cultures on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok.

## Developing the booklover brand: Book enthusiasm on BookTube

YouTube is a digital video platform designed to share original content created by users. Since it was launched in 2005, the new media site has evolved from a television alternative supporting the creation of ‘user-generated content’ into a key player in the ‘social media entertainment’ space (van Dijck, 2013; Cunningham & Craig, 2019). With more than 2.5 billion active monthly users, YouTube is the second most-used social media platform worldwide, behind only Facebook and its 2.9 billion users. More than 500 hours content are uploaded every minute, the majority

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of which can be classified according to three content types: vlogging (video blogging), gameplay, and style tutorials (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). In Australia, YouTube is the most popular social media service used by teenagers, however, the percentage of users aged 12 to 17 declined 14% between 2017 and 2020 (see figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Comparison of the usage of YouTube, Instagram and Facebook in Australia

	YouTube	Instagram	TikTok
Parent company	Google LLC	Meta Platforms, Inc (formerly Facebook, Inc)	ByteDance, Ltd
Date launched	February 2005	October 2010	August 2018*
Media format	Video	Image and video	Video
Active monthly users (April 2022, worldwide)	2.56 billion	1.45 billion	1 billion
<b>Usage in Australia</b>			
Active monthly users (Feb 2022)	21.30 million	12.75 million	7.38 million (18+ only)

Average time spent per user, per month (2021)	17.1 hours	8.3 hours	23.4 hours			
Change in average time spent (2020-2021)	+5%	+2%	+40%			
<b>Usage by Australian teenagers (12-17)</b>						
Current users (2020)	72%	57%	38%			
Change in users (2017-2020)	-14%	-9%	+26%			
Gender breakdown of users (2020)	Female 70%	Male 75%	Female 60%	Male 54%	Female 43%	Male 32%
Age breakdown of users (2020)	12 to 13 66%	14 to 17 76%	12 to 13 39%	14 to 17 66%	12 to 13 30%	14 to 17 41%

\*This is the date TikTok became available worldwide after merging with Musical.ly

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BookTube is the online reading community on YouTube. This community of literary vloggers began to form around a shared love of young adult literature as early as 2009, but it was not until 2011-2012 that the popularity of BookTube began to grow exponentially (Scolari et al, 2021; Perkins 2017). Although BookTube channels have a small audience compared to the most popular YouTube channels, a number of have a significant number of subscribers. For example, Jack Edwards, who rebranded as a BookTuber in 2021, has 966,000 subscribers. Other popular BookTube channels include withcindy, formerly readwithcindy (467,000), polandbananasBOOKS (423,000), jessethereader (399,000), abookutopia (339,000). (See José M. Tomasena (2019) for a comparison of the most popular Ibero-American YouTuber and BookTube channels.) The types of content found on BookTube channels include book reviews and discussion of reading practices, as well as videos that follow conventions specific to the BookTube community: 'book

tags/challenges', responses to creative prompts such as 'my unpopular book opinions'; 'wrap ups', brief summary of books recently read; 'book hauls', display of recent book acquisitions; 'TBR', discussion of books that are 'to-be-read'; 'unboxing', opening packages of book purchases, book subscription boxes or books received from publishers; 'bookshelf tours', discussion of bookshelf organisation and personal book collection; 'read-alongs', live reading events; 'readathons', reading challenges involving reading for a dedicated period of time; and collaboration with other BookTubers (Tolstopyat, 2018; Perkins, 2017).

One of the most interesting features of BookTube is its place in the world of popular screen entertainment. According to Cunningham & Craig (2017), this is an 'emerging proto-industry', in which innovative content is produced by amateur creators who position themselves as more 'authentic' than legacy media professionals. BookTubers seek to establish their 'authenticity' through interaction with their fan community, such interaction being a continuous dialogue with fans affirming their identity as authentic book lovers through the performance of 'affective'

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(Papacharissi, 2015) and 'relational' (Baym, 2015) labour. The types of relational and affective labour performed by BookTubers are audience engagement activities that seek to produce feelings of belonging and connection among their followers. Examples include asking questions about what books people are currently reading, responding to comments on their videos and sharing personal information about their own lives in Q&A videos. For example, the most popular Australian BookTube channel, Little Book Owl (180,000 subscribers), which is run by Catriona Feeney, regularly posts videos encouraging her followers to participate in her reading life. Such videos include livestreamed reading sessions featuring audience participation in live chat on YouTube as well as discussion on a Discord server; participation in the book club #nameofthebook, a monthly science fiction/fantasy book club run in collaboration with fellow BookTubers Piera Forde and Happy Indulgence (Jeann) from 2018 to 2021; reading vlogs and readathons; and live reading sprints (figure 2). These social reading invitations involve a significant amount of labour directed at providing ways to help Little Book Owl's followers to read more and feel connected to a community of fellow readers.

Figure 2. Examples of social reading videos posted by (Little Book Owl)

- a) 'READ WITH ME | live' (2020) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrHWwiHbabI>
- b) 'some new faves!? | 30 hour readathon' (2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRspeo10b-E>
- c) 'read with us | live reading sprints #botwathon' (2021) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLTMyVtD71U>

BookTubers use several strategies of self-presentation to develop their personal brand as authentic, relatable book lovers. Their videos are characterised by a confessional or diary aesthetic, with creators directly addressing to the camera using informal language. They are often recorded in intimate domestic settings, such as the creator's bedroom or other private space within the home (Albrecht, 2017). In offering their opinion on the books they have read, BookTubers emphasise their identity as readers talking about their personal taste rather than critics or professionals. This is key aspect of BookTube's appeal, as it is the personality of the creator and the way they perform their passion for books that keeps viewers watching (Horton, 2021; Birke & Fehrle, 2018). For example, booktuber Cindy Pham, withcindy, has developed a distinctive style that uses sarcastic humour to critique popular book trends and comment on #drama in the BookTube community. She does not shy away from expressing controversial opinions and is a polarising figure within the broader bookish social media community. Unlike many bookfluencers, she does not purchase books and her video on BookTube consumerism was viewed over 250,000 times and is accompanied by an extensive comments feed (figure 3a). Her most popular videos tend to feature books she did not enjoy reading, and her passionate reaction to these books show how that the production of compelling BookTube content does not celebrate all books as worthy of a reader's time (figure 3b).

Figure 3. Examples of YouTube videos posted by withcindy

a) 'why i only own 4 books 🗨️ a chat on booktube consumerism' (withcindy 2018) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82aYuS6SNrU>

b) 'THE WORST BOOKS I READ IN 2019 aka I wasted showering on this???' (withcindy 2020) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9t8BWLtgsg>

## Curating a bookish aesthetic: Celebrating books as visual objects on Bookstagram

Instagram is a mobile social networking app that allows users to share photos and videos. It started out as a photo-sharing service known for its retro aesthetic and distinctive filters, but video drives an increasing proportion of traffic to the platform following introduction of the 'Stories' and 'Reels' features. 'Stories' is a Snapchat-like feature that was launched in 2016. It gives users the ability to share a slideshow of photos or videos that disappears after 24 hours. 'Reels' was launched in 2020 in response to the popularity of TikTok. It allows users to upload short videos of up to 60 seconds. This shift, from photo to video, is unsurprising given the demographics of Instagram's audience, more than two thirds of whom are aged 34 and younger, and the growing popularity of short video formats with this demographic. In Australia, Instagram was the second most popular social media platform among teenagers aged 12 to 17 in 2020, but the percentage of users in this age group has declined by 9% since 2017 (see figure 1 above).

Bookstagram is the bookish community on Instagram. The hashtag #bookstagram has been used on more than 75 million posts and is typically applied to content such as images of books (flat lays, book collections, bookstacks, colour displays, cover reveals, and TBR piles). #Bookstagram is also applied to posts featuring objects and scenes associated with reading, the most recognisable being images of bookshelves, 'shelfies', and people holding and reading books. This visual content is accompanied by text designed to spark a conversation with other readers including book reviews and discussion questions. As well as functioning as displays of aspirational consumption, a carefully curated #bookstagram feed, as Thomas observes, is an act of creativity demonstrating the technical skills and aesthetic judgment of the creator (2020). An example of this is the #bookstagram feed of @paperfury (91.9k followers), which is run by Australian book blogger and YA author C.G. Drews. Her feed is characterised by a distinctive

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rainbow aesthetic featuring books arranged in visually striking patterns (figure 4). These sumptuous images, in which books are decorated with flowers, candles and other colour coordinated decorative objects, celebrate the materiality of books as visually pleasing objects while simultaneously showcasing the artistic flair and literary taste of their creator.

Figure 4. Example Instagram post by @paperfury

'is there a book you changed your mind about later?' (@paperfury 2022) <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ca18y-EB-c7/>

Bookstagram is known for its luxurious aesthetic celebrating the materiality of books (Rodger, 2019; Thomas, 2021). This bookish aesthetic is developed in posts that feature beautifully styled books and bookish objects as well as posts that celebrate reading as desirable activity. For example, posts by @realmyfriendsarefiction (158k followers) feature a rich colour palette that matches the bookshelves displaying her extensive fantasy fiction collection. Her bookstagram feed is populated by an abundance of books, with a particular focus on striking cover art and fantasy themed props including crowns and swords (figure 5).

Figure 5. Example Instagram post by @realmyfriendsarefiction

'Happy midweek!' (@realmyfriendsarefiction, 2022) <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cbc2Mf8LeY/>

Posts by @hayaisreading (123k followers) feature beautifully styled interiors that frame reading as part of a 'hygge' aesthetic, often with the description #simplethingsmadebeautiful. Her content focuses on reading as part of an aspirational lifestyle; books do not always appear, and when they do, they form part of an assemblage of objects that evoke a cosy domestic scene (figure 6).

Figure 6. Example Instagram post by @hayaisreading

'#QOTD can you guess which movie this is?' (@hayaisreading 2022) <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbdGBrZsjRK/>

These aspirational images are an example of the glamorous iconography Marwick identifies as a crucial element of Instagram's visual lexicon. This iconography reproduces conventional status hierarchies of luxury and celebrity, with images of conspicuous consumption and glamorous selfies designed to attract 'likes' and attention (Marwick 2015). They also share the sensory and sensual pleasures of reading with their followers by posting images that recreate the affective experience of reading (Thomas 2021). Such posts invite viewers to imagine themselves reading the books curated by the creator and experiencing their literary lifestyle (Rodger 2019), a critical ingredient in the development of a parasocial relationship between bookstagrammers and their followers (Dezuanni et al, 2022).

## Sharing reader reactions: Reading as a visceral experience on BookTok

TikTok, the short-form video sharing app formerly known as Musical.ly, has skyrocketed in popularity among teenagers and young adults over the past few years (Reich 2020). After reaching the milestone of 1 billion global active monthly users, TikTok is rapidly increasing its market share in Australia. Figure 1 shows a 40% increase in the hours spent on TikTok by Australian users since the start of 2021. There has also been significant growth in the number of teenage TikTok users: 38% of Australian teens aged 12 to 17 reported using TikTok in 2020, up from 12% in 2017.

BookTok is a TikTok subgenre dedicated to videos about books and reading. The hashtag #booktok has more than 50 billion views worldwide on TikTok, but the influence of BookTok extends far beyond the app. The BookTok effect has had a significant impact on book sales and many bookstores have #booktok displays in store and feature lists of books trending on BookTok in their online stores. Nielsen BookScan data shows a notable increase in the Australian sales of genres popular on BookTok with romance titles up 16% and science fiction and fantasy up 9% in 2021 (Books+Publishing, 2022).

BookTok content is frequently shared across other social media platforms with more than 800,000 #booktok posts on Instagram, and growing number of #booktok compilations and content inspired by BookTok on YouTube. GoodReads has a BookTok shelf and a search of #booktok on Twitter brings up a stream of bookish content from authors, readers, publishers and booksellers. The types of content featured in BookTok videos is similar to the bookish content posted on BookTube and Bookstagram, with book reviews and recommendations, piles or stacks of TBR, book cover reveals, discussion of current controversies (#bookdrama), as well as commentary on the BookTok community itself. One of the most popular categories of BookTok videos are ones that show the creator's emotional reaction to books. For example, the 'books that will make you sob' video posted by @moongirlreads in August 2020 (figure 7) caused a spike in sales for titles including Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (Harris, 2021). Posted in March 2021, @abbysbooks video titled 'reading they both die at the end in one day' is her most popular post with 5.6 million views (figure 8).

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Figure 7. Example TikTok post by @moongirlreads

'books that will make you sob' (@moongirlreads 2020) [https://www.tiktok.com/@moongirlreads / video/6858731924865797381](https://www.tiktok.com/@moongirlreads/video/6858731924865797381)

Figure 8. Example TikTok post by @abbysbooks

'reading they both die at the end in one day' (@abbysbooks 2021) <https://www.tiktok.com/@abbysbooks/video/6935836878096583942>

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BookTok videos reflect the playful, unrehearsed aesthetic of TikTok. They are short, fast, and loud, most often filmed and viewed in vertical view on a smartphone, with the creator in close up focus. These features contribute to the establishment of an unfiltered, messy, chaotic aesthetic, which is more

'relatable' than the carefully curated high-concept, glossy Instagram aesthetic (Kennedy 2020; Abidin 2020; Jeresa & Boffone, 2021). In particular, Abidin argues that the increasing popularity of TikTok influencers has accelerated a shift in the social media attention economy: 'The 'staging' of an 'Instagrammable' lifestyle that was aspirational and pristine, seemed to give way to the 'crafting' of a relatable performance that was entertaining and accessible' (2020; p. 83). This shift has been accompanied by a change in the development of parasocial relationships between influencers and their followers, which are now more dependent on the performance of relatability through the creation of content that tells a personal story, rather than the creation of aspirational or 'picture perfect' content (Abidin 2020). One of the contributing factors to this trend is the influence of the TikTok algorithm, which ties creator success to the performance of individual posts. On their 'For You Page', TikTok users see a personalised stream of content based on the posts they have viewed, liked and reposted. Creator popularity does not have a significant influence on the recommendation algorithm, which allows content by any user to go viral. This incentivises creators to engage with TikTok trends and viral practices rather than spend time cultivating a consistent personal brand (Abidin 2020).

Anecdotal reports from booksellers have credited the popularity of BookTok with sparking a resurgence in reading among young people (Dexter, 2022). Significantly, any trending books on BookTok are back list titles rather than new releases. Interesting examples are, Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us*, Adam Silvera's *They Both Die at the End*, and Taylor Jenkins Reid's *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, which were published in 2016 and 2017. BookTok creators also praise the bookish community for renewing their love of books. Teen creator Mireille Lee, who runs @alifeofliterature with her sister Elodie, says 'I started reading again after six years when I came across BookTok for the first time' (Flood, 2021). But what is it about BookTok that inspires young people to read? Is it different to the bookish communities on BookTube and Bookstagram, or simply the latest example of evolution in sociable reading practices? One of the distinctive features of TikTok is video length, which started at 15 seconds, then increased to 60 seconds, and now videos of up to 10 minutes can be uploaded. Despite this change, most BookTok videos are short, with creators making use of the TikTok embedding features that allow use of audio content including popular songs, trending videos, audio memes, or original audio. The



combination of books and music is another important element of BookTok's popularity with teen readers (Merga, 2021). Teen creator Mireille Lee identifies this combination as the reason for her success on BookTok: "we showed them [her friends] loads of images with some really popular music, and that was a huge success. People loved it, and we've continued doing it." (Flood, 2021).

## Conclusion

The past few years has seen significant increase in the amount of time Australians spend online. At the same time, the sale of print books has also increased, especially in genres trending on BookTok, namely young adult, romance, fantasy and science fiction (Books+Publishing, 2022). In this context, the popularity of BookTok reflects the zeitgeist of the COVID-19 pandemic era both in the type of books popular on the platform and the turn to reading as an escape (Wiederhold, 2022). However, as Michael Dezuanni observes, BookTok also provides a space for teenagers to engage with books and reading in a 'youth friendly way' (Herther, 2022). The playful, relatable TikTok aesthetic is less intimidating than the filtered perfection expected on Instagram, and short, micro-vlogs requires less time than creating YouTube content (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021; Wiederhold, 2022).

BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok provide many different ways for readers to engage with books and connect with communities of readers. BookTok appeals to readers who want to get swept up in emotion. Bookstagram evokes the sensory pleasures of reading through curation of beautiful displays of books and bookish objects. BookTube offers the impression of conversation with a knowledgeable bookish friend. But what impact does this have on the reading habits of Australian teenagers? Our national survey of secondary school students aims to find out how Australian teenagers use bookish social media, and whether they read the books recommended on these platforms. While much of the hype around BookTok credits it with making reading 'cool again' (Dexter, 2022), similar comments were made about BookTube and Bookstagram at the peak of their popularity (De León, 2018; Piazza, 2017). Our previous research found that a small group of passionate teenage readers participate in discussion of books on social media (Rutherford & Johanson, 2017). Whether the advent of BookTok is changing how the majority of Australian teenagers engage with books and reading online remains to be seen.

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