Let's BookTok About It: The Impact of Book-Focused Social Media Spaces on the Literary Community

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Deep in the wide world of the web, book-focused social media spaces are on the rise. Some downloadable apps, such as Goodreads, have been specifically invented to let readers interact through writing reviews and joining online book groups. Social media apps like YouTube and Instagram have entire sub-communities, named BookTube and Bookstagram respectively, devoted to sharing opinions on literary topics. However, it was not until the rise of BookTok, a sub-community of the app TikTok that emerged in 2020, that these spaces really took off. The recent spotlight on these apps begs the question, how have book-focused social media spaces impacted the literary community? Current research has shown dramatic impacts on how books are being read, published, and written based on the influence of social media. In this literature review I will explore how book-focused social media spaces have popularized reading through community building, influenced the purchase of books, sparked a debate on diversity in literature, and required authors to maintain a social media presence.

Popularizing Reading Through Community Building

A chief way that book-focused social media spaces have transformed the literary community is by simply bringing more attention to it. According to "BookTok 101:TikTok, Digital Literacies, and Out-of-School Reading Practices" by Sarah Jerasa and Trevor Boffone, social media spaces, mainly BookTok, have drawn new readers in and made reading "cool" by allowing for communities "with books not considered 'appropriate for academic spaces.'" Book-focused social media spaces have gained popularity among younger age groups, mainly teenagers and people in their 20's. They are able to interact with one another by recommending books, participating in reading challenges, and joining online book groups. Reading, an activity that has previously been thought of as a solitary activity, has now been introduced to the aspect of community.

This aspect of community has been repeatedly mentioned in research conducted on these social media spaces. In "Sharing is Caring: Young People's Narratives about BookTok and Volitional Reading" by Asplund Stig-Börje, BookTok was defined as "a community of literary video-bloggers or vloggers" that promotes reading for pleasure. To identify how BookTok influences reading for pleasure, Stig-Börje's study interviewed eight female students aged seventeen to eighteen years old who use BookTok. Interviews were conducted, followed by an analysis of their narratives and experiences with this social media community. Participants commented on how BookTok

reinstated their love for reading. They referred to BookTok as a "community" that turned reading into a trend. One participant also commented on how "it was 'most enjoyable' to read BookTokers' comments if she had read the book" (Stig-Börje). BookTok also allows people to see others' reactions to books, increasing their drive to read them.

This sense of community is not just present in BookTok. "Faraway, So Close: Seeing the Intimacy in Goodreads Reviews" by Beth Driscoll and DeNel Rehberg Sodo takes the previous research on community and applies it to Goodreads reviews. Goodreads is an app that was created in 2007. Readers can keep track of the books they have read, write reviews, and even interact with authors through live author chats. Driscoll and Sodo analyzed 692 Goodreads reviews of 7 bestselling fiction and nonfiction books to showcase the specific intimacy present in bookish social media communities. They recorded the usage of the word "you," finding that "more than one quarter (27.5%) of [the] reviews addressed a future reader" (Driscoll and Sodo 254). Readers can interact with one another in a digital space, allowing for a connection and community building.

However, arguments about what one must do to truly be a part of this community have been called into question. These social media spaces seem to emphasize the importance of owning and collecting physical books, a luxury that many cannot afford. Christian Ehret and colleagues in "The Role of Affect in Adolescents' Online Literacies: Participatory Pressures in BookTube Culture" interviewed Emma, a prominent BookTuber, who commented on how huge book hauls and perfectly arranged bookshelves have become a staple within the BookTube community (155). This intimidates those who want to join it and potentially become a big-name BookTuber. The book-buying phenomenon was referred to as a "participatory pressure" and a possible "economic barrier to entry into the BookTube community" (Ehret et al. 156). More research on the type of reading that social media is pushing would be beneficial to fully understand the scope of this issue.

Influencing the Purchase of Books

This popularization of reading has resulted in research on how book-focused social media communities are impacting the publishing industry through the purchase of books. Through book influencers marketing the latest releases and publishing houses taking to the current trends, social media has dominated the way users approach buying books. Hoan Viet Nguyen and colleagues conducted a study titled "The Role of Social Media in the Purchase of Books: Empirical Evidence from Vietnam's Publishing Industry." This study took place in Vietnam, a country with a rapidly growing book market, and interviewed 313 people outside of bookstores. The study found that "81.2% of

respondents sought user-generated content such as reviews, comments, and posts" when buying books (Nguyen et al. 706). Information from everyday readers is viewed as more trustworthy and reliable compared to the more specialized content of authors or publishing houses. Additionally, 33.2% said they used social media to get introduced to new books, and 26.5% commented on how social media helps them decide what book to purchase (Nguyen et al. 707). While social media helps in purchasing books, the study found that it is most important in the post-purchase stage. Participants rated the importance of social media at every stage of purchasing books, with one being not important and five being very important. The mean for the post-purchase stage was 4.12. Users rated this highly because they can "share opinions and satisfaction about the chosen books as well as compare their experiences with others" (Nguyen et al. 707).

This phenomenon of readers posting their reviews online has given way to book influencers, which are people who post their reviews and bookish opinions online and gain a following from it. This has provided a new avenue for publishers to market and sell their latest releases. In "Negotiating Collaborations: BookTubers, The Publishing Industry, and YouTube's Ecosystem," José M. Tomasena outlines the possible exploitation of book influencers turning into advertisements. Publishing houses have faced drastic changes. Using Spain as an example, the number of books edited and sold "has dropped by 34.67%" in the last 8 years, yet many new books are still being published yearly (Tomasena 2). Publishing companies have been utilizing book influencers to revive the practice of buying books. Traditionally, publishing companies will send the influencers free books in exchange for reviews. However, in more grandiose cases, publishers will "invite them to special events, like movie premieres or meetups with their authors" (Tomasena 6). Book influencers also plan giveaways with publishers, in which the influencers give away books to their followers through social media contests. This allows influencers to get engagement whilst the publishers get exposure.

While this practice has generated more income for publishing houses, critics are beginning to question the legitimacy of using book influencers as marketing tools. The chief concern is that these book influencers do not have any kind of credentials to qualify them as trustworthy sources for book reviews and general content. Additionally, the insincerity of book influencers promoting books that they may or may not love on account of an agreement with a publisher has been called into question. Oscar Leal, a Mexican BookTuber, sparked controversy with this take in 2015 when he "proposed the hashtag #Prostitubers ("prostitutes + BookTubers") to discuss how BookTubers were faking love and passion in exchange for free

books" (Tomasena 7). Book influencers have generated more revenue for the publishing industry at the potential expense of leading their followers astray.

Diversity in Literature

Sources are mixed on whether these book communities are fostering a key aspect of literature: diversity. Trevor Boffone and Sarah Jerasa analyze the popularity of Cemetery Boys to show the diversity of the communities in their article "Toward a (Queer) Reading Community: BookTok, Teen Readers, and the Rise of TikTok Literacies." They point out that social media has made a space for queer readers to meet each other and recommend queer and POC (person of color) literature. Cemetery Boys, a story about a trans boy written by the trans-Latinx author Aiden Thomas, quickly went viral on TikTok. Many BookTokers included this book in recommendations for "Fantasy Books with Latinx Main Characters" or "LGBTQ+ Books: MLM Version" (Boffone and Jerasa, "(Queer) Reading Community," 12). Other videos took the book and fit it into current TikTok trends, such as Lisa Huang using the "please don't be ugly" sound to show off the book's intricate cover (Boffone and Jerasa, "(Queer) Reading Community," 12). They argue that book-focused social media spaces make it significantly easier for marginalized communities to flourish and prosper, as well as promote books with diverse characters at the forefront.

However, others have commented on how outside of queer and POC-specific sub communities, the general, most popular books and influencers do not celebrate diversity. According to "The Influence of BookTok on Literary Criticisms and Diversity" by Alysia De Melo, BookTok in particular tends to preach diversity, yet "creators of color have reported anecdotal evidence that their videos are more likely to go viral when they stitch (combine a part of another creator's video to your own) a White creator's content." Additionally, many of the books highlighted on BookTok are by white authors or feature characters that are white and cisgender. This study analyzed the top 15 videos under the "BookTok" and "BookRecommendations" hashtag and the five most recent videos from five popular BookTokers. The study found that the top BookTokers showed their faces, establishing a personal connection to the audience, and most of the creators were white. The study noted that "out of the 134 authors [recommended], there were 94 white authors" (De Melo). The study found it difficult to determine the races of characters in the books but determined that "every single Black author wrote about a Black main character" while white authors did not disclose a specific race for their characters (De Melo).

Authors on Social Media

Finally, the writers within the literary community have been impacted by the rise of book-focused social media spaces, though scholars are split on whether the impact has positive or negative implications. Authors are realizing now more than ever that they need to utilize and build a social media platform for themselves. Fidela Shaumi Suryadi and Deni Suswanto point out in their article "Influence of Digital Media on Creative Writing" that digital media can facilitate "collaboration, feedback, and support across geographical boundaries," which contributes to spotlighting diverse voices as writers are exposed to different "cultural narratives and storytelling techniques" (1784). Writers can discuss their ideas with each other instantaneously. Writers can also have direct contact with potential readers and build hype for their books. The comment, like, and share buttons make it easy for writers to engage with potential readers worldwide. Authors can receive prompt feedback on their work, talk with others about their writing, and easily promote their new releases (Suryadi and Suswanto 1785- 1786).

However, it is important to note that authors having a social media presence is not always beneficial and is not always their choice. Publishing companies have begun to force writers to create and maintain a social media platform, which disturbs what Kim Wilkins calls "resilient writing." The practice of resilient writing is "writing that can stand up to demands, distractions, and setbacks" (Wilkins 68). A major threat to resilient writing is the publishing industry pushing authors to create platforms, "a digital authorial identity that can be leveraged to build markets and increase sales" (Wilkins 68). Authors are expected to create social media accounts and spend time and energy on their development. While a social media platform does increase visibility, it also causes authors to lose time that could be spent writing, distorts their self-image, and introduces distractions. Writing promotional materials for social media uses up valuable time that could be spent writing, with authors needing "to spend 80% of their social media writing on topics unrelated to selling their work in order to keep their followers on-side" (Wilkins 69). Authors also find themselves turning to social media for feedback and reassurance. Social media is easily accessible, so anytime writers experience a slowdown in their ideas, they pop over to social media. In a survey of 271 writers, 86% said they get distracted by the Internet, hindering them from meeting their writing goals, and 63% said that "they felt pressure to maintain an online authorial presence" (Wilkins 71).

Conclusion

Book-focused social media spaces are continuously on the rise and are impacting many areas of the literary community. By creating specific spaces for readers to convene and unpack their bookish opinions, reading has been re-popularized and has been exposed to the aspect of community. However,

these social media communities seem to be pushing a specific type of reader by highlighting the act of having books. More research on what one must do to fit into online book communities is needed to fully understand this issue. Feeding off this popularization, publishing industries have noticed the sway book influencers have and therefore used them as advertisements. It is now unknown whether influencers are promoting books they like or promoting based on a publishing partnership. When it comes to diversity in literature, some argue that it is easier for marginalized communities to find spaces online and promote diverse books, yet others argue that the literary community is still overtaken by books by white authors about white characters. Finally, authors have been exposed to social media by developing a platform, which aids in sharing ideas with other authors and potential readers. However, some authors are forced to create a platform and have realized that creating and maintaining one results in a loss of time, as well as a distorted self-image and distractions from writing.

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