BookTok Reading Practices. Intensive and Extensive Reading in Display Mode

Ann Steiner
Uppsala University, SWE

Abstract

The influence of BookTok on reading among young people has been highly debated in the last few years. The social media platform seems to have changed reading practices, the popularity of certain genres, and even the book and publishing industry. In the millions of videos on BookTok, books and reading practices are shown and idealised. The article argues that reading practices visualised, displayed, and recommended on BookTok includes a wide variety of ideals and modes swaying between what can be termed *intensive* and *extensive* reading. These book historical concepts have previously been applied to eighteenth century reading but, in the article, they are used to analyse a present reading phenomenon. By applying perspectives from sociology of literature and book history, this article offers a deeper understanding of present-day reading culture and reading industry. The main research question is how can we analytically understand and frame reading practices as presented by users on BookTok?

Keywords: BookTok, Digital reading, Reading industry, Bookishness

Introduction

TikTok has created a reading movement among young people through the popular BookTok hashtag. Genres, authors, and single titles have been made popular, which is visible in sales numbers and dedicated shelves in bookstores (Wiederhold, 2022; Denny, 2024). It has even been suggested that half of the American TikTok-users read more than before due to videos they had watched on BookTok (Book Riot, 2023). This increased reading among young people has been met with a mixed response; among teachers and librarians the reaction has mostly been one of curiosity but among critics, journalists, and cultural commentators, on the other hand, there has been a strong concern that BookTok is 'ruining reading' (Browne, 2024). The influence of young women that recommend books and reading was unexpected and unpredictable and have thus raised concerns in many places that BookTok is changing the economy, marketing, and sales of books and accordingly which books are being written and published (Milliot, 2023; Currenti, 2023; Creamer, 2024). The reactions towards BookTok book and reading videos can be described as a moral panic over what is happening to reading that has been seen many times before when it comes to new young cultural engagement, and especially to young women's reading and subcultural consumption (Steiner, 2011; McRobbie, 2000).

The criticism against the BookTok-videos is against dominant popular genres (romance, fantasy, feelgood, and crime), reading mode (too fast and shallow), reading practices (as a superficial coating), as well attitudes towards physical books (as a colour coded home decor). As Andreas Schellewald (2021: 1439) has observed, the 'short-video content can be characterized through its ephemeral nature' which has led to criticism of algorithm-control and mindless content. The disparagement is also gendered. BookTok as an activity performed mainly by women is criticised for being non-intellectual and non-analytical. Reading by women has historically often been derogatory scorned as uncontrolled, emotional, non-intellectual, and even dangerous to the female mind (cf. Lyons, 1999). The reading trends on BookTok seem to be no exception and the reading practices shown and recommended are rebuffed. There are many interesting issues raised in these debates related particularly to genre and gender but also towards reading modes. Who is the ideal reader? What is an ideal reading practice? And of what books? In established critique, there is a strong bias towards genres and reading practices customary within higher education and high-end literary culture. Some of these critiques of BookTok seem to have only a rudimentary knowledge of social media and others, like myself, are academics analysing what is really a playful and engaging activity related to books and reading.

In this article I argue that reading practices visualised, displayed, and recommended on BookTok includes a wide variety of ideals and modes swaying between what can be termed *intensive* and *extensive* reading. Different kinds of approaches to and modes of reading are recommended and displayed. By applying book historical concepts on a contemporary reading trend, this article offers perspectives and a deeper understanding of similar and dissimilar patterns in comparison with previous reading practices. The main research question is how can we analytically understand and frame reading practices as presented by users on BookTok?

Not only has BookTok as a phenomenon exploded, with the ensuing influence on reading, book buying, and publishing, but researchers on digital reading cultures are also not far behind. This study has been an ongoing project for almost two years and within that time

frame new studies has been popping out constantly. I want to acknowledge all the work that is being done on BookTok and digital social reading at this very moment and the fact that a constantly changing material is both challenging and engaging at once.

Method and material

The methodological and ethical issues of social media research require precision but also openness about the limitations of TikTok-research practices. Melanie Walsh (2023: 202) has, in her useful article 'The Challenges and Possibilities of Social Media Data', pointed out that the kind of material that TikTok offers is both a rich source and a major drawback. It is a complex material to handle methodically, analytically, as well as ethically. So far, some research on BookTok even forego method discussions on BookTok-data collection (Reddan et al., 2024), while others have acknowledged methodical limitations. When Margaret Merga (2021) published an early BookTok analysis she claimed that a basic method of data gathering was possible, but today with the amounts of material and the difficulties in any kind of data scraping method I do not believe it is. It is not possible to be a neutral observer gathering material that would provide a full image of BookTok or a data sampling that can be accurately described as consistent with the overall content. An attempt to scrape metadata from BookTok was done by Lindsay Thomas (2023) but her study has other methodological issues related to the concept of 'top-videos' as there is no such thing on TikTok. The 500 videos that Thomas retrieved is as random as any other selection method. As Currenti (2023: 27) argues: 'TikTok's algorithm is hyper-personalized to cater to each user's needs'.

With this critique in mind, the TikTok algorithm skews any attempts to make general sense of the videos I am shown. Still, one can perform TikTok research through observational methods but with an awareness of the constraints of algorithms, country IP, and other data effects. The limitations can also be an opportunity to explore, and I use Crystal Abidin's (2020: 78) 'digital ethnography' on TikTok, where she over a longer period of time observed 'platform and user cultures and norms'. The method is combined with the concept of the algorithm as a culture 'composed of collective human practices' developed by Beth Driscoll and Claire Squires (2023) which is a playful ethnographic approach to book recommendation algorithms.

A first pilot study was performed by gathering material from BookTok in March and April 2023 and this practice was repeated in March 2024 but more extensively in terms of data collection. Individual book titles appeared and disappeared between 2023 and 2024, but the patterns of reading practices were much the same. The material that I have collated derive from a large number of videos, but this is not a quantitative survey that can provide statistics, averages, or say anything on exactly how common a feature is. This is a qualitative analysis of many aggregated videos from 2023 and 2024 – a combination of distant and close reading.

There is also an ethical dimension to this research. BookTok videos are created by individuals to be seen by many people but not necessarily to be analysed by an academic. Thus, in this article I do not cite specific videos, instead I paraphrase typical expressions and repeated words and phrases commonly used. The reason for this is both to make sure individual rights to privacy are maintained, but also that single quotes and examples are not very useful. Instead, the examples of phrases, video-visualisations, as well as general descriptions are used as tools to exemplify a general pattern. References to BookTok material in the article are representative of a large group of similar videos, phrases, and comments.

The methodological drawback of this practice is apparent, without citations it is difficult for anyone to verify references. Still, I argue that the method as a distant reading offers a wide perspective (rather than single quotes or references to individual accounts). Furthermore, the nature of TikTok with its constantly changing material makes links quickly devoid and by that the verification will be gone.

The observations were made by viewing and collecting information and data from a large sample of videos with the hashtag BookTok. These videos had mixed content with the most common being:

- reading recommendations,
- best books of the year or the month,
- cover presentations,
- reading journals,
- planned and performed readings of individual texts,
- bookshelves,
- how to physically read a book,
- identity performing videos,
- reading events (e.g., readathons, summer reading).

Some of the videos were created by well-established BookTok influencers, i.e., people who post videos with regular intervals, have many followers, and a wide reach. Other videos are produced with less regular intervals by individuals with fewer followers. Many videos are generic and follow a standard formula with a non-visible or non-personal creator (e.g., a hand and/or music). The content I have been able to access is, as far as I can make out, produced by individuals who are predominantly white, English-speaking (although not necessarily as their first language), and from Europe or North America. TikTok's hyper-personal algorithm provided me with little less despite attempts to influence the system through specialised searches. It is important to stress that there are other kinds of content than I was able to see, partly due to linguistic limitations and geographical location. In what Boffone and Jerasa (2020: 10) calls 'affinity spaces' likeminded on BookTok find each other. What can be termed an infinite personalisation is in contemporary technology defined by infinite limitations. The balance, or control over, the individual and the platform is a dominant feature of TikTok but also one visible on other platforms. As Schellewald (2024: 909) notes, there is a 'shift toward personalization as a dominant logic of social media'. The media rationale of these platforms gives the impression of being a mirror of my interests and desires, 'the algorithmized self' (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022).

Theory

The study is based within a framework of book history and sociology of literature. Book history as a research field has in recent years become more inclusive of contemporary phenomena and markets (Noorda and Marsden, 2019). The theoretical concepts have long been around but were previously mainly developed for older material and periods, mostly pre-twentieth century. However, methods, perspectives, concepts, and theories have by now also proven useful in analysing contemporary phenomena. In what has sometimes been termed twenty-first-century book studies 'a mixture of shared affinities with and departures from the methodologies and objects of study of book history and contemporary literary studies'

(Noorda et al., 2024: 4) has been cultivated. What is clear from studies within this field (e.g., Murray, 2018; Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023b; Driscoll, 2024) is that while platforms, technology, and global social reading systems are new and changing, other patterns in reading behaviours prevail.

In this study, the book historical concepts of *intensive* and *extensive* reading are applied on the BookTok material. The German book historian Rolf Engelsing examined changing reading behaviours in Germany in the late eighteenth century, what he called the reading revolution, in his study *Der Bürger als Leser* (Engelsing, 1974). Engelsing argued that there was a shift from intensive to extensive reading in the mid-eighteenth century. Intensive reading was the dominant reading mode pre-1750 and ultimately meant repeated reading of the same book, or books, over and over again. Intensive, or repeated, reading can from a book historical perspective be explained by low access and availability of books but also by low literacy and educational levels. Books were expensive and hard to come by until the second half of the eighteenth century when what is termed the modern book market developed (Feather, 2006: 85-86, 97-102; Van Vliet, 2007). Extensive reading, on the other hand, argued Engelsing, became increasingly common during the second half of the eighteenth century due to rising literacy, greater access to books, a larger variety in produced (inexpensive) reading material and thus many times people began reading books only once and with an awakened interest in new books. The concept of reading new books developed in tandem with a commercial market for books and a larger production of varied titles. The two reading modes in this simple version can be understood both as practical realities of eighteenth century reading and as a theoretical concept for analysing historical change.

The material and economic conditions of the book and society changed how and thus what people read. Engelsing's concepts suit this study, but discussions on class and gender are more or less absent in his work. Historically there has been a reading class but in the late eighteenth century a more wide-reaching reading culture developed (Griswold, 2001: 4) where reading for entertainment and enjoyment became a widespread mass activity. Wendy Griswold's concept of a reading culture encompasses the often-conflicting ideals of reading modes and reading practices visible on BookTok and in the debates surrounding it. As a researcher within sociology of literature, she combines social and cultural perspectives on reading. Sociology of literature has at times been regarded as such a wide approach that any kind of critical, social, and material perspective has been included, which has led to the field being 'everywhere and nowhere' (English, 2010). In this article, I merge the book's historical perspective with a social and cultural analysis from sociology of literature (Berglund and Steiner, 2024).

The twenty-first century digital reading culture and the reading industry

The contemporary reading culture is framed by both older notions of reading as self-transformation and self-actualisation and a contemporary digital convergence culture (Collins, 2010). It is a world where books and literature are circulated on a global scale of digital dissemination and constant availability (Steiner, 2018). In a context of corporate global tech companies such as Amazon, Google, and Storytel, the reading industry has become a space where symbolic and economic capital coexist but also fight over money and influence over

people's reading culture. On Goodreads, Bookstagram, BookTube, and BookTok literature has turned into a commodity and reading lists and reading recommendations created by amateurs are the goods. People provide content, time, and engagement on BookTok which can be seen as exploiting free labour. However, as Federico Pianzola (2025: 20) has argued in his study on digital social reading:

> in order to fairly assess the potential benefit or harm of digital media, it is important to consider the context in which they are used (e.g. leisure, or education), the skills and familiarity of the people using them (e.g. tech geek but novice to social reading, or passionate fan), the motivations (e.g. intrinsic, or school assignment), the individuals involved (e.g. teenagers, or cultural workers) and their relationships (e.g. informal hanging-out, or teaching-learning)

In this study on reading practices on BookTok it became obvious that it is both an algorithm-managed commercial platform and a space for a large variety of contexts, motivations, readers, and content creators (cf. Murray, 2019; Parnell and Driscoll, 2021). The activities on BookTok can be described with emphasis on reader engagement and a participatory culture (Jenkins, 1992) but others, for example Low et al. (2023: 2337), argue that the algorithm is a co-producer, a 'cultural (co-) production between humans and machines'. Algorithms, tech companies, readers, book influencers, publishers, and other agents are all a part of the system. Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo (2013: 17) label the early twenty-first-century book leisure reading culture a 'reading industry', which is a framework to conceptually understand all the agents and agencies active in a reading culture, whether commercial or not.

TikTok is a commercially successful app feeding on consumer content but also a device for young readers to express their joy and desire for books and reading. One aspect of the reading culture on BookTok is its gendered character. Overall, on Tiktok the gender balance both in consumption and production of content is fairly even (Ceci, 2024) but when it comes to BookTok it is a female zone. Perhaps, most visible in the concept known as 'hot girls read'. The phrase encompasses stylish young women on BookTok but it is also an identifier with merchandise such as clothing, bookmarks, and tote bags. Despite the rather sexist sound of the phrase, it is an expression of young women finding their own attitude to reading but also asserting themselves as women. The idea is that you can be physically attractive and at the same time a reader (in many videos the young women are well groomed and prepared to be in the public eye). As a symbol for being a hot girl reading is the character Rory Gilmore, from the tv-series *Gilmore Girls* (2000–2007). Rory is defined in the series as an avid reader and was an attractive it-girl of the 2000s and though the series is old it is still popular and remains high on viewer lists. *The Rory Gilmore Reading Challenge* has been around the internet since 2014 and has gained renewed popularity on BookTok. To complete the challenge, participants should read all the books mentioned in *Gilmore Girls,* anywhere from roughly 350 to 500 books depending on the list readers follow (Wilson, 2023). Most BookTok-recommendations tend to be of romance, fantasy, crime, and similar easy read popular titles, the Rory Gilmore reading list, on the other hand, is one of classics, the Western canon, and European titles in translation. Fyodor Dostoevsky rather than Colleen Hoover. It is thus alluring to focus on the contradictory nature of reading challenges, to-be-read-lists, and the daily lives of young girls as shown on BookTok, but as Rachel Wilson (2023) observes, Rory Gilmore give us hints of ideals in

contemporary reading culture: 'Rory represents a specific paradigm of bookishness: an auto-didactic young white woman with the time, lack of responsibilities, and focus to read for hours on end'. The ideal reader is hence unachievable like most social media hypes and social media influencers.

Despite the varied reading recommendations on BookTok the critique of young readers and their book choices is heavy. However, disapproval of young women reading has to be placed in an historical perspective of similar critique going back at least to the nineteenth century when fiction-reading became more widespread among women. The concerns at that time were that novels could evoke romantic notions and unreasonable expectations. Reading of low-quality novels was 'associated with the (supposedly) female qualities of irrational and emotional vulnerability' (Lyons, 1999: 319). The criticism and concerns over young women's reading culture has a long history. Janice Radway (1986) once wrote that 'reading is not eating' and meant that the metaphor for mass consumption of literature is full of derogatory views of the female reader's inability to think critically or have a creative response to their reading. When books are of a popular genre, easy to read, and with a thrilling or emotional content the reading of them tend to be associated with leisure and stuffing myself with unhealthy snacks and texts. But reading is a much more complex private, social, and cultural activity.

Extensive reading on BookTok

Reader interaction and book reception on any social media platform involves, as Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo (2023a) have pointed out, 'repetition and similarity'. BookTok follows this pattern, and many videos have similar content, style, aesthetics, and basic character. The most typical videos will in various ways present and recommend several books in a short video, alternatively show many books that have just been read, are on a reading list (to-be-read), or have just been bought (book haul). The piles of books or swift showing of covers signal extensive reading practices. The value of reading many books is apparent: it has both cultural and social capital despite BookTok not being acknowledged in every social and cultural context.

Extensive reading has been the dominant reading practice in the last 200 years and potentially offers knowledge, social values of being part of literary culture, and emotional value (Felski, 2008). The turn to a more varied and extensive reading in the late eighteenth century can historically be explained by higher literacy and educational levels, access to books, free time, and lower prices on books. In the present-day book market, literacy in most countries is very high, prices are low, and people have easy access to books. None of this explains how people deal with what has been referred to as an overflow of books, an over-production, or simply put, 'so many books' (Zaid, 2003). The publishing of new fiction is enormous, and no one can expect to read even a small part of all the new books of fiction in a year. Instead, it is the selection of books on one's reading lists and bookshelves that defines you as a reader. It is a balance between large lists and curated ones. On BookTok, videos that display a reader of many books are common. The numbers are high in these claims to be a big reader; 'I read 200 books in 2023', or by someone who just got into reading; 'I read 63 books in 2023 and I never read a book before'. The number of books these readers claim to have read is staggering. Indeed, not every content creator is guaranteed to be completely honest. However, for this analysis it does not matter if someone actually read 200 books in a year or

simply claimed to have done so. The interesting aspect is that these women recommend reading many books as a goal and ideal.

Similar posts present someone recommending the best books read – lately or possibly ever. These videos display much lower numbers; 'of all the books I read in 2023, these are my top five or top ten'. Still, the videos suggest that there were many more books to choose from. These kinds of posts furthermore often include invitations to the viewer to become a part of the reading community; 'If you don't know where to start here are my top recommendations' or, 'if you are in a reading slump, this is where to start'. It is an outreach to new and established readers to join in.

A function of extensive reading is to increase reading by setting reading goals. Such ambitions can have varied focus, either just as a way to read more books (I will read a book per month), or it can have as goal to read more diverse books (I will try new genres, books from different countries, etc.). Some also suggest other kinds of reading practices as a goal – reading faster or reading slower. Reading to remember and to learn something or reading everything in my library. Videos on reading goals are similar to many other types of BookTok-videos inviting the viewer in to imitate and try as a reading experiment.

To increase reading speed and the number of books one can read in a year, it seems to be essential that a book has the quality to be a fast and easy read. Phrases commenting upon the speed and ease one can read a book are commonplace. Comments such as 'I read this book in one day', is a way to give the BookToker an aura of a great reader but is also a quality of a book. Not only that the book was easy to read, but that it enticed its reader to keep on reading. A page turner is a book that is not only linguistically easy to read but also one that has a narrative that is gripping, exciting, emotionally powerful, suspenseful, or some other kind of sensation that will hold the reader in a hold. What Rita Felski (2008) would call enchantment or shock. A page turner is defined by its ability to be driving a reader onwards and it is a common phrase used on BookTok. These are often combined with recommendations for someone who wants to read more: 'If you want to get into reading', 'if you want to get back into reading', or 'if you're in a reading slump'. Such comments are inclusive and bring people into the reading community by acknowledging how hard it can be to start reading.

Setting reading goals and finding good books that will get the viewer into reading can be done in a variety of ways, one is different versions of Readathons. A readathon is a time period for focused reading, generally twenty-four hours, when you do nothing but read (there are school version readathons as well). It can be a solo event but for most part it is a social activity either by doing it as a friendship event (sleepover and food binging included) or it is an online event with other people participating.

A general pattern of the extensive reading videos is that many different titles will be displayed, but at the same time these mostly belong to the same short list of books. According to James F. English et al. (2023) reading patterns in social media context are to some extent surprising. Based on a large-scale study of Goodreads they conclude that the 'actual circumstances of cultural consumption, including the new forms of its technological mediation, appear to discourage eclecticism, at least where reading is concerned' (English et al., 2023: 58). On the other hand, as English et al. (2023: 59) critically reflects, why should an eclectic and varied reading per definition be formed by reading a large variety of genres and types of books. Thus, readers on Goodreads, and similarly on BookTok, are encouraged to read extensively but they tend to conform to specific genres or types of fiction.

The quantitative aspects of extensive reading practices are most palpably visible in book hauls, 'tbr's' (to-be-read lists), book trolleys, and bookshelf showing-off. Book hauls are unpacking (unboxing or from a shopping bag) new books bought and talking about them. These videos display large stacks of books in a variety of ways. There are also book trolleys – popular BookTok furniture for books that are to be read or that are ongoing. It is a way to organise books that are in present circulation. The full power of extensive reading is videos showing off the bookshelves, or in some cases, the private library. As Dezuanni et al. (2024: 370) have shown, 'shelfies', pictures and videos of one's bookshelf are ubiquitous online, but these are more varied and less banal than they first appear to be. A common feature imported from other social media, is what on Pinterest was termed 'bookshelf porn' (Rodger, 2019: 481). The same desire for a large set of books led to a particular BookTok-trend – *bookshelf wealth*. Early 2024 the *New York Times* declared bookshelf wealth to be a major trend of the year. Not only does someone with bookshelf wealth have a lot of books in large bookcases (preferably built-in) and are able to stage the right kind of look. But the books cannot simply be owned and displayed, they should be read and curated into a collection (Kircher, 2024). Only an avid reader would know how to create the right look and bookshelf wealth is hardly for anyone, the opposite is the case.

Intensive reading on BookTok

The BookTok display of older notions of intensive reading practices underscores a complex relationship between readers and texts. Extensive reading is unsurprisingly the norm on BookTok, but it does not account for all different kinds of recommended reading practices. The resurgence of intensive reading practices within BookTok presents a counterpoint. This part of the analysis explores the implications of intensive reading practices, such as tabbing, annotating, rereading, book art, and emotional engagement. These examples of how single books are meaningful to the reader and of dedicated bookish reading practices.

Underpinning intensive reading is *rereading*. The repeated reading of the same title provides engagement and a deeper understanding. The videos are in these cases explanations of why a book was worth reading many times over and the gains a reader can achieve from rereading. Having read many books might have high value but so does being an engaged reader that invests time and effort into one single book. The books that are worthy of such attention are read not only repeatedly, but slowly, carefully, and analytically. Much like the reading practices taught in literature courses at the university, these readers talk about details, metaphors, hidden meanings, narrative elements, tropes, time frames, and character development (cf. Murray, 2024). In such videos, the BookToker will give ample examples and sometimes in longer clips they will also talk about the value of slow immersive reading. The popularity of extensive storyworlds on BookTok has been observed by Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo (2023b: 78) as such can grant 'an extended immersive reading experience'. The full scale of BookTok popular series such as Sarah J. Maas' *A Court of Thorns and Roses*-series (2015–) or Rebecca Yarros' Empyrean-series (2023–) can provide a world to stay in for a long time often including fan activities. However, single books that have been an immersive experience are also common. Being engaged is not linked to a specific narrative or publishing format or genre.

Immersive reading is closely related to being emotionally engaged. Reddan et al. (2024: 80) argue that 'BookTok appeals to readers who want to get swept up in emotion'. That is the case, but emotional engagement can take on different forms and there are plenty of other kinds of videos. Furthermore, BookTok is hardly the first social media where emotional responses to books are a primary expression. Online reviews and online book communities recommending books and reading have had for almost twenty years a tone of being personal, intimate, and affective (cf. Steiner, 2008) which is linked to the online media format rather than the relative – professional, print-based, and educated reviewer. The reader interaction online is a non-judgemental place where emotion is allowed to bloom and in online review culture affect, emotion, and immersion is often foregrounded (Birke, 2023: 472; Murray, 2018: 125). One conclusion to be drawn is that in these environments being personal is essentially a prerequisite.

The intensive reading practice might be immersive and emotional in their approach, but these often have material and physical output. Loving a book means showing the affection in material ways; through tabbing, annotating, and book covers. Tabbing is when a reader places post-it notes or index labels in a book for important passages to return to. Simple enough one would think, but tabbing is most often done through a complex and personally developed system. The videos on how to tab are many: 'How I tab my books'; 'My tabbing system'; 'How to tab correctly'. Either one may want to use markers and pens in line with the cover of the book, or create a 'tabbing key' that has different colour tabs according to a pre-created system (love intense, sex, emotional, important quote, etc.). Annotating is comments on the pages of the book and is often combined with tabs. Many videos display a well-annotated book with tiny letters on every page. Tabbing and annotating are physical ways to show engagement and commitment as a reader. When BookTokers talk about books that are important to them they will always show a book full of tabs and annotations, the physical trace of engagement.

It is not literature in general that is recommended on BookTok, it is print books. The presentation of a title is rarely done through e-books, audiobooks, or other means. Reading on BookTok is of print books and the possession of the book is essential especially in the case of intensive, close, and engaged reading. Jessica Pressman (2020: 1) calls it bookishness: 'creative acts that engage the physicality of the book within a digital culture'. To love a book will take on specific meaning when readers create a new cover, some which were traditionally published and the cover replaced and others are fanfiction which is properly printed and bound. It is a new materialism where the physical object of the book receives a new meaning in digital context: 'the aesthetic of bookishness' (Pressman, 2020). In a study based on several social media Reddan et al. (2024: 42) observe that 'the socio-material practices involved with embodying the book through' making book covers are a form of identity performance that associates reading for pleasure with bodily labour connecting books with pleasure, body, and aestheticism. In some ways, the book cover creation has more to do with similar creative projects such as scrapbooking and other kinds of arts and crafts. The material engagement is part of being immersive in an artefact or cultural experience.

Discussion and conclusions

In this article I have argued that recommended and displayed ways of reading on BookTok include a wide variety of modes and models, which I label intensive and extensive reading

practices. In 'the digital literary sphere' (Murray, 2018) there has long been room for all sorts of ways of reading, genres, authors, and texts. The variety and the possibility of finding one's affinity space has for some time had its lure. The difference now is not the content on BookTok, but rather the impact of one single social media on the book world. Jim Collins (2020: 213) has argued that digital technology has changed contemporary reading culture: 'The advent of *passionate* readers, as opposed to *close* readers, who could take their literary pleasures in a variety of different media, marked a new phase in the history of reading cultures'. Passionate reading is arguably made visible everywhere on BookTok but it is not per definition opposite to close reading. Rather the reverse, they are intertwined and what BookTok shows us is that previous distinctions between reading practices of high and low culture are mixed and related.

The magnitude of the fast rise of BookTok in 2020–2021 and the impact the social media has had on reading, publishing, book sales, and possibly literature can easy lead to the conclusion that the phenomenon is something completely new. However, different forms of online reviewing and digital reading communities have been around for some time. Already at the start of Amazon in 1995 they added space for customers to review books and by the early 2000s there was a widespread use of different online review systems and reading communities. Thus, by now there has been thirty years of online reviews and online bookish communities and some patterns are well established and tend to be repeated. The main difference, I would argue, is the high impact on book reading habits and book choices, combined with the strong visual character of Bookstagram, BookTube, and BookTok.

Research on digital platforms like Goodreads and LibraryThing (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023a), book blogs (Steiner, 2010; Murray, 2018), online commercial reviews such as Amazon (Steiner, 2008; Murray, 2018), and social media bookish culture (Murray, 2019; Thomas, 2020) is by now abundant and providing a variety of aspects on what is generally termed a convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006). As Simone Murray (2018: 62) observes, the digital platforms in the contemporary literary sphere are in essence a combination of capitalist commercialism and individual idealism. It is a commodification of attention, a resource that marketers compete for, that has placed BookTok right in the centre of the global publishing industry (Davenport and Beck, 2001; Steiner, 2018).

Social media platform users are a mix of those who participate by small-scale interactions (likes and comments), those who create and post videos irregularly, and those who create content on a regular basis, so called book influencers. The book influencers exercise authority and have a 'a significant role to play in reading recommendation culture by lending both legitimacy and visibility to the books they review' (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023b: 33). For the reading industry these influential BookTokers have high social capital that is transferred into economic capital by driving readers into bookstores. In this context, there is a blurry distinction between professionals and amateurs, what has come to be called Pro-Ams (Leadbeater and Miller, 2004). Book influencers existed early on in the online bookish world, to begin with as bloggers and later on as popular reviewers on Amazon and Goodreads. Already when I studied Amazon reviews in 2009 it was apparent that amateurs were promoted as authentic readers and more real than the professional critique (Steiner, 2010). Parasocial relations between book influencers and their followers has for long been an established part of online bookish communities.

This study has analysed the reading practices as shown on BookTok but how these are perceived is another matter. An interview survey of adolescent BookTok-viewers came to

conclusions that are comparable with the content on display. For example, the interviewees showed a strong affinity to the book: 'the physical book had a special value among the participants, both as an aesthetic object and as an identity marker' (Asplund et al., 2024: 644). The study confirms that the content displayed, visualised, and recommended on BookTok are reflected among young viewers: 'the volitional (pleasurable) reading practices described by young readers are strongly characterised by the social, physical, and emotional dimensions for which the book as a physical artefact is crucial' (Asplund et al., 2024: 648). Thus, the BookTokers that produce content and the ones viewing and liking seem to be aligned with each other in what can be described as shared acts of reading. The hyper-personal character, or the algorithmic self, that I discussed in the introduction seems to be only an imaginary individuality. The paradox lies in the content 'for you' combined with videos watched and liked by millions. In analysing BookTok videos the media platform and algorithmic situatedness thus has to be taken into account. Would the results of this study have been the same if performed on other social media online bookish communities, e.g., Bookstagram and BookTube? Without the evidence to back it up, it is hard to tell, but related research show that many patterns are similar across platforms (cf. Reddan et al., 2024; Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023a; Birke, 2023). The difference lies in the impact BookTok has had on a generation, although they might soon be moving on to new formats and platforms.

Research on BookTok brings in notions from book history, media studies, literary studies, and reading studies. Reading in a digital social context can be addressed with different perspectives but through using book historical concepts I wanted to understand digital reading culture in a long perspective. Bronwen Thomas (2021: 9) has pointed out that there is a risk that the online book community enforces itself in a 'romanticised, nostalgic conceptions of reading'. However, this is a nostalgia shared in many other contexts where print book reading has a strong position in itself. The content on BookTok that I have gathered and analysed does show a romantic notion of books and reading, but it is also a place for different ideas and tastes and where reading can be many different things.

Biographical Note

Ann Steiner is Professor in Sociology of Literature at Uppsala University, Sweden.
Her research interests are mainly reading studies, book culture, and book markets in the 20th and 21st centuries in Sweden and internationally. Recent studies include articles on audiobooks ('Is Backlist the New Frontlist?', 2021 and 'Talking about Audio', 2023), children's audio ('Hybrid books', 2022), and global book markets ('On a World Market for Books', 2025 and 'The Impeccable Taste of a Publisher', 2025).
Contact: ann.steiner@littvet.uu.se

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