

BookTok Through Austin's Lens

By Alexis Austin

We are in the “reading renaissance” era. The Barnes & Noble director of books, Shannon DeVito, describes this term as “where people either discover or rediscover a love of reading through interaction with a print book.”

As technology evolves and changes, so does the way people read. With a single click, all desired updates and news can be instantly found online. The internet's quick scrolls and swipes raises the question of how the growing media has affected books.

According to Statista, a database company, “on average, the daily time spent reading among American adults was just over 20 minutes in 2020— an increase from previous years.”

Additional data was found showing that “over 70 percent of adults had read at least one book in any format in the past year.”

Digital alternatives for books, like ebooks and audiobooks, are becoming more popular because of their accessibility and convenience. Ebook sales increased, reversing a long decline, and audiobook downloads rose 16.5 percent compared to 2019 according to the Association of American Publishers.

However, Statista says “survey data revealed that print was still the preferred book format.”

Even NPD BookScan, a data service, found that print book sales had their best year in a decade.

Although there are contrasting opinions on whether the digital world is a positive or negative influence on books, it can be argued that social media creates a bridge between readers and physical books.

The New York Times' “How the Pandemic Changed the Way We Read” article explores the public's reading tastes through examining the best-seller lists. With popular books about subjects such as the pandemic, racism, police violence and the Trump administration, it is apparent that current news influences the subjects people read about.

Similarly, what is trending on social media also influences the content people read. The digital app, TikTok, impacted the book community the most.

The Neighborhood of BookTok

The growing platform, TikTok, is popular among younger generations for its easy and consumable content. With videos no longer than three minutes, users mindlessly scroll through the app.

Every scroll produces endless options as video after video flutters through the screen. Each scroll glimpses at another part of the world. Day-in-the-life vlogs, beauty product recommendations, cooking, life advice, and sometimes personal information that probably shouldn't be shared on the internet, all these topics and more makeup TikTok's content. TikTok is as niche as its users.

TikTok's algorithm creates curated “for you page's” for each of its users. Each heart, comment, share, any interaction produces the perfect “for you page” for every single user.

Navigating TikTok becomes the hustle and bustle of walking through New York City for the first time. After cutting through the noise and chaos of the “for you page,” you view your map and check out some of the neighborhoods: foodtok, cleantok, planttok, arttok and booktok.

You navigate one of the neighborhoods: BookTok, the book community of TikTok.

A long day pulls you into the direction of the Search bar. After taking a seat, a bartender welcomes you. Your wandering eyes and careful observations make it apparent that it's your first time in BookTok.

“Would you like to hear the specials?”

You nod and take a look at the messy handwriting on a large chalkboard sitting above a collection of colorful books.

“This week’s specials include: best romance books, trending books of TikTok, enemies to lovers books, must read books, and books that changed my life.”

Listening to all the options makes the information go in one ear and out the other, it’s like trying to order a drink for the first time once you’re 21.

You are not the only new face to the growing neighborhood. Newcomers scroll past BookTok regularly, some visiting and others deciding to move in.

The TikTok Newsroom’s article, “TikTok made me read it: #BookTok”, says the BookTok community has been on TikTok since early 2020, but did not gain an initial boost till March of 2020.

“Users turned to TikTok for entertainment and discovering #BookTok recommendations, helping reignite a passion for reading that has grown through the app,” said TikTok Newsroom.

BookPeople, Backlists and Bestsellers

When it comes to the book community in Austin, Texas. A variety of independent bookstores reside in the city: Malvern Books, BookWoman, Black Pearl Books, and more. Each store focuses on a niche and curates their books for a specific audience.

“It’s cool to see the amount of bookstores, hopefully due to there being so many booklovers in Austin,” said Ali Goodwin, an Austin-based Youtuber and TikToker, “It definitely feels fitting to Austin's culture.”

However, BookPeople is the largest indie bookstore in Texas and carries a little bit of everything for everyone. Magazines, graphic novels, romance novels, self-help books, historical fiction, you name it and they have it.

BookPeople is one of the many stores that has embraced the new attention brought to the book community by BookTok.

The staff of BookPeople create book displays in their store for various occasions.

“I got to make a lot of displays.” said Gina Carra, BookPeople’s marketing coordinator, “The fun thing about being an independent bookstore is that we get to make a lot of displays that are very timely, so being able to jump on, ‘hey this is happening and we need to talk about it.’ It’s been a really satisfying and great experience.”

Last October, a book display in the store read: “As Seen on TikTok.” Similar displays gain attention at bookstore chains such as Barnes and Noble and Amazon’s physical bookstores. All of them jumped onto a trend in hopes of attracting BookTok lovers. It worked.

“I feel like even if I haven’t heard of the book, but it’s in that section then I trust that it’ll be good. I will buy anything that TikTok recommends, for better or worse,” said Goodwin.

From the bookstore’s perspective, keeping up with the demand of popular BookTok titles proved to be difficult.

“Every single book that was popular on BookTok, we could not get enough in stock.” said Carra, “So, the display was almost our way of saying this doesn’t fit on the shelf because we have to order such a high quantity. Where can we put them? We want to display these books that BookTok has been highlighting, but also there’s nowhere else they can go. They don’t fit on the shelf.”

BookTok focuses on trending books, popularity, increased interest in books and the search for specific titles at local bookstores. However, Carra brings up an important detail that fails to be highlighted among the BookTok community.

“The first thing I find really interesting about TikTok for the book industry as a whole is that it’s bringing light to backlists,” said the marketing coordinator.

The term backlist refers to authors’ older books that are not being promoted anymore. On the other hand, the term frontlist refers to authors’ new and recently released books.

“It’s always been true in bookselling where the old books just fall aside and the new books get all the marketing, but TikTok broke through that and started promoting a lot of backlists without knowing they were doing it.” said Carra, “And that’s been the most interesting bestseller trend: backlists have been making bestsellers.”

Backlists becoming bestsellers is a rare occurrence and only happens under special circumstances, such as a celebrity death. It appears that BookTok has created a trend within itself by focusing on backlists, rather than new releases.

The Relationship between BookTok and BookTube

Influencing not only the physical world of books, TikTok impacts other forms of media. TikTok influences Youtube and Youtube influences TikTok. A mutual relationship forms between the two platforms when it comes to book related content.

Goodwin, a content creator on both platforms, goes by the user @JustAli on Youtube and @justaliii on TikTok. Goodwin grew an obsession with reading in August because of the booktubers (youtubers who create book content) she followed.

“I watched Haley Pham a lot on Youtube and she started making book videos and so I was like ‘maybe I should get into reading again.’” said Goodwin, “So, I impulse ordered a book and then it went from there.”

Originally focused on fashion and college life content, Goodwin felt inspired and decided to make the switch to become a booktuber.

“I have a full time job too, so it was hard to also make Youtube content on top of that, so I decided that I needed to find a niche and then also something that is fairly easy to film.” said Goodwin, “For example, sit down book recommendation videos are pretty quick to film and then because I was obsessed with reading, it definitely fit what I was into. It was more fun to decide the topic I was gonna do as opposed to randomly coming up with video ideas.”

Creating video content became a passion of Goodwin’s. Everything started moving after publishing her first successful book-related video titled “Going To Every Bookstore in Austin”.

“A lot of people have found me since switching to book content..it’s cool because with a topic like that, you don’t need to just market your own personality like when trying to make vlogs, because people are already searching for books and authors, so it’s a lot easier I think for videos to do well when they’re around a topic,” said Goodwin.

Goodwin’s newfound passion for books and sharing her love for them allowed her to have two successful platforms on Youtube and TikTok to create content she’s happy with and allows her to grow. The many similarities between booktubers and booktok, often makes her find inspiration from watching other people’s videos on both platforms.

When it comes to books, Youtube and TikTok intertwine through their communities. Both platforms speak on the same book titles and create similar content (ratings, recommendations and reading challenges). The major difference is the format and length: Youtube videos last 15 minutes and TikTok videos last 1 minute.

Without scrolling through BookTok often, Tatiana Flores, a second year student at UT Austin, says she is still familiar with popular book titles because of booktubers.

“I wasn’t staying consistently on Booktok.” said the college student, “ Instead, it would flash on my “for you page” and then go away for a couple of weeks. But on Youtube, I kept getting videos about BookTok suggestions.”

A lot of the book content on Youtube and TikTok were overlapping and merging into the same topics, getting inspiration from each other.

The Quarantine Book Club

Rewinding back to March 2020, a national pandemic and call for lockdown happened throughout the United States. Quarantining at home led to more free time, which also led to boredom for some.

While I played the newly released “Animal Crossing” game and whipped up endless amounts of dalgona coffee, others chose to pick up a book.

Statista found a higher average of daily time spent reading among American adults in 2020, likely driven by the increased media consumption during the COVID-19 outbreak. In addition, Global English Editing found 25 percent of internet users read more books/audiobooks due to Coronavirus.

While a pattern appeared between new readers and the pandemic, I never picked up a book unless it was a textbook required by my professor.

I walked in late to the quarantine book club.

Even during my fully online sophomore year, I picked up any other hobby than reading. I was consistently on TikTok, I scrolled day and night. Yet, I had never heard of BookTok.

December 2021 was when I found a video recommended for me on Youtube. It was Ali Goodwin’s “Going To Every Bookstore in Austin” video. Ultimately, curiosity and boredom led me to press play. I learned of Austin’s variety of independent bookstores and received nostalgia of the first time I walked into BookPeople with my highschool best friend.

Seeing someone talk passionately about a novel and the books they were reading struck a chord with me. It motivated me and I picked out my first book (in years) later that week.

During winter break I cracked open a book and read for enjoyment. I have not had that experience since middle school. When I came back for the spring semester, my roommates also had books in their hands and we went book shopping together to create our own stack of books to sit in the corner of our rooms.

Slowly making my way through my book stack, I still scroll through BookTok looking for my next book.