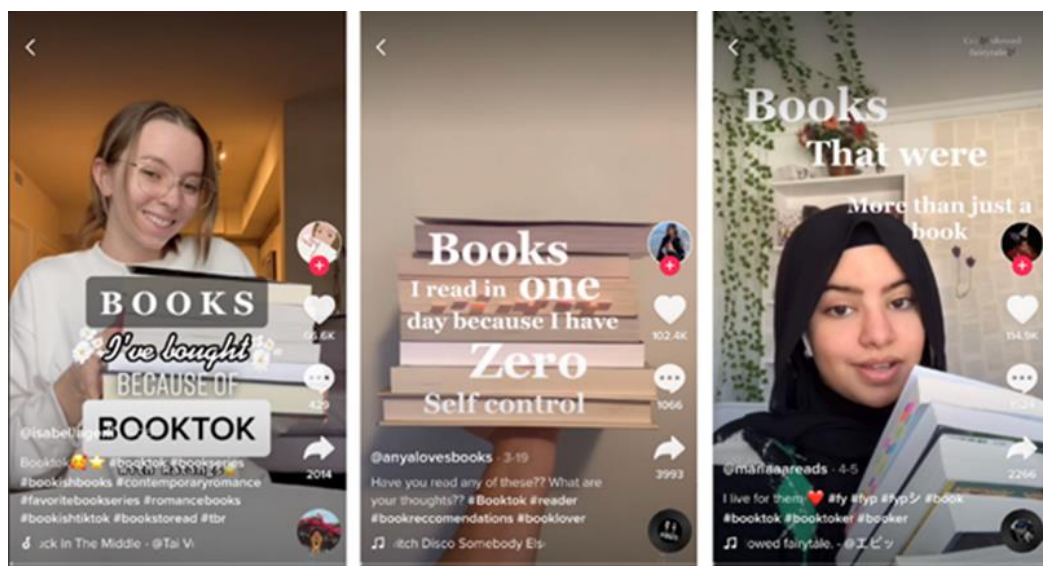


## The Effect of #BookTok on Publishing and Marketing

Over the past couple of years, we have witnessed the rise of TikTok, from the former lip-sync app *Musical.ly*, to a worldwide sensation. Launched in 2018, TikTok gained significant popularity during and after the lockdown of 2020, with over 3 Billion downloads as of January 2022. TikTok is known for its fast-changing trends, mini-vlogs, comedic videos, memes, film and book recommendations etc. We have all spent too much time that we will never gain back aimlessly scrolling through TikTok, with minutes turning into hours. With TikTok being one of the most influential apps right now, its trends affect the whole world and especially young people; According to a 2022 article by Brandastic, 60% of TikTok's users are between the ages of 16 and 24. There are many sides to TikTok, with its carefully constructed algorithm showing different videos to each person depending on their interests. Personally, I have a love-hate relationship with TikTok. I tend to be very judgemental of TikTok's capitalistic nature and damaging qualities, but it is always there to entertain me any time I need it. Do I feel like I have wasted my time after hours of scrolling? Absolutely. But I have to admit that some aspects of TikTok are not all that bad, and I want to talk to you about my favourite part of it.



Types of videos on #BookTok

The side of TikTok I want to talk about is all about literature, book aesthetics, bookish memes, and recommendations, also known as #BookTok. The book community on this app is much more than I had expected, with new, refreshing takes on many Classic novels, much different from the ‘BuzzFeed’, Millennial point of view. The Generation Z point of view is all about the emotional side of reading. For example, a popular trend right now is filming yourself when you first start reading a book, and then filming yourself once you have finished it, in order to show how the story has affected you emotionally. Others post themselves crying while reading a specific part of a book, or they present their book collection in order to show a specific aspect of themselves. Certain types of tiktoks are titled as ‘convincing you to read *x book title* based on its aesthetic’, where people include different photos that represent the vibe and feeling of the book. For example, if the video is about Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, creators will show photos of castles, vampires, dark forests, people in historical dresses etc. Gen Z is widely known for romanticising life so they can enjoy it better, so they do the same with reading.



#BookTok content

Just like TikTok, #BookTok also has sides. Some are happier than the others, with wholesome memes of books like *Harry Potter* or *Lord of The Rings*...and then comes the

*darkness*. Books that centre around women who are suffering from mental health problems like depression have recently gained much popularity with young girls who are identifying with the female protagonists. Great examples of this are: *My Year Of Rest And Relaxation* by Ottessa Moshfegh, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, *The Virgin Suicides* by Jeffrey Eugenides etc. Although I can see why girls relate to the main characters of these novels, I am not sure if idolising suicidal women is a good thing for the younger generations. On the website of WHSmith, the very first thing that is said to describe *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is ‘the TikTok sensation’, showing the effect that a few 30 second videos can have. Within the same trend, it is popular for young girls to post their collections of these types of novels, with a popular song on the background, like Lana Del Rey or Mitski, and label themselves ‘sad girl’, ‘depressed’, ‘coquette’ etc. In



Book buying trend

general, people view the books that they read as part of their identities. If you read Classics or books that fit the vibe of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Secret History* or *If We Were Villains*, you fit the ‘Dark Academia’ aesthetic. If you read Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, you are hyper feminine and a little depressed. If you read books like *American Psycho*, *A Clockwork Orange*, or authors like Dostoyevsky and Kafka, you are *very* depressed, based on the TikTok diagnosis. This is another element that I am not a big fan of, as I think people on TikTok focus too much on identity and not on the actual enjoyment they get from the books they read.

TikTok greatly influences people’s book buying choices, as they want to connect with their peers and join their conversations. I am personally a big victim of this, with some of my favourite books having been recommended to me through #BookTok. There is something about

seeing tiktoks about a specific book that makes you want to be part of the discussion, to understand the jokes and memes about it. 2021 was a big year for publishing, and a lot of the credit is attributed to TikTok. According to the UK Publishers Association, book sales rose by 5% in 2021, reaching a new high of £6.7 billion. Export sales also rose 2% to £3.8 billion, and Fiction was up by 7% to £733 billion. Stephen Lotinga, Chief Executive of the Publishers Association said that: ‘2021 was another tremendous year for UK publishing. Our outstanding authors provided readers with the entertainment and comfort they so badly needed as the pandemic continued. It’s been particularly interesting to see TikTok communities driving new interest in books – particularly of fiction and Young Adult titles.’ So even though the success of 2021 for publishing is not fully attributed to TikTok, it is certain that it had a big influence among young people.

I am particularly interested in the rise of the ‘Dark Academia’ aesthetic, a movement that romanticises reading and knowledge, which I think is a major contributing factor to the increase of book sales. The purpose of Dark Academia is to show the beauty that can be found in old buildings, schools and universities, libraries, cups of coffee and books. Many people have adopted the ‘Dark Academia’ fashion, that consists of blazers, plaid skirts and trousers, vests, jumpers, and of course, carrying books. Generally, Generation Z pays much attention to aesthetics, which motivates most of the things they post. If a book can appeal to them in terms of that, it is certain that they will find interest in it and use it as an aspect of their personality.

Bookshops all over the world have caught on with TikTok’s influence and used it to their advantage. In most big bookshops like Waterstones, there is almost always a section named ‘#BookTok’s favourites’ or ‘#BookTok made me buy it’, where you can find many of the titles that are currently trending. Marketers have jumped on the trend, creating their own tiktoks in order to promote books.

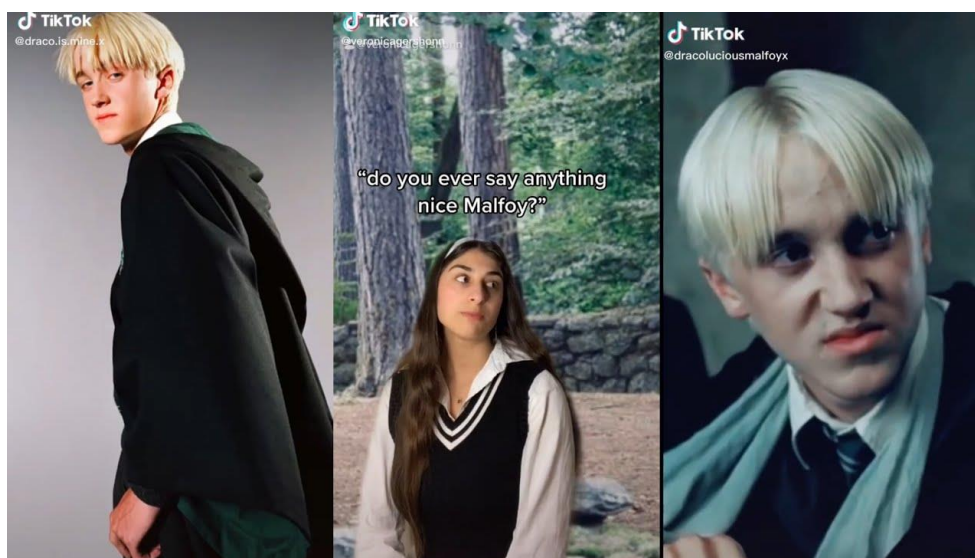


*A table at Barnes & Nobles dedicated to ##BookTok recommendations*

Staying on top of the trends is the best things for publishers and marketers to do in order to stay relatable to young readers, although they can be hard to follow. ‘You can’t take credit necessarily, but you post something and then you can almost see in real time the sales go up on Amazon,’ says Jack, a #BookTok content creator, ‘But, to take off on bestsellers, it needs to be organic. You can’t predict when that’ll happen – it just does.’ Publishers started catching up with what was happening mid-2020, when they noticed that books that had been published years ago suddenly skyrocketed in sales. *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller was originally published in 2011 and sold 20,000 copies. After an 18-year-old girl mentioned the book on a TikTok in 2020, the novel sold more than 2 million copies, while it also shot up to the New York Times bestseller list. Marketers view TikTok as a way to attract new and younger audiences, so they tailor their promotional videos to fit the #BookTok trends. Penguin Teen’s TikTok account is a great example, promoting books in a fun way by taking part in trends. In most cases however, marketers do not have to do much, as the #BookTok hashtag does their work for them. It is usually teenagers and young adults that cause books to blow up. In my opinion, it is much more effective to get a book recommendation from someone that has

nothing to gain by it, rather than a publishing house that wants to up their sales. For this reason, publishers tend to send books to popular #BookTok creators, in order for them to review them. Publishing Director of *Harper Voyager*, Natasha Bardon says: ‘There's no better marketing than word-of-mouth buzz and TikTok marks a return to that, but on a global level,’ says Natasha. ‘It's such a brilliant source of book discovery’.

It is no wonder that both TikTok and book sales saw a rise during the pandemic, a time when people were searching for ways to keep active and entertained. Reading can be viewed as a way of escapism, and since the past couple of years were spent in isolation due to Covid-19, it makes sense that young people wanted to find something stimulating. I think the need to escape is one of the biggest factors that have led to the fanfiction side of #BookTok, like the 2021 #DracoTok phase, when people would fantasise about themselves being in romantic situations with Draco Malfoy, the popular Harry Potter character (not our proudest moment).



TikToks of the #DracoTok hashtag

However, it is surprising that people got so invested in reading, as it is something that requires a long attention span, which cannot be said for TikTok; It has been discovered that the average

length of tiktoks is 21-34 seconds, which is expected to have long-term impact on the users' attention span, especially the one of young people, according to Dr. Julie Albright. In an interview with Forbes, she stated that: 'It's almost hypnotic, you'll keep watching and watching.' while she also said that it has the same effects as gambling. However, the short attention span of TikTok users can be used to the marketers' advantage, says Jenn Watson, owner of Social Butterfly PR. Three to seven seconds is all that is needed to grab the viewer's attention, which can be easily done through TikTok, proving to be a great new way of promoting books. It has never been this easy for marketers to reach their audience, with TikTok's great algorithm showing people specifically what they want to see. It is easy to see why this works good with YA novels, being addressed to a young audience, but it is also great to see that Classic literature has a big audience on TikTok. I assume that for the new generation, getting Classics recommendations from young, curious people is more effective than getting them from their 'boring' teachers at school.

Personally, I stand by my opinion that TikTok is damaging people's attention span and is promoting consumer culture, but I do admit that it has some positive qualities that educate and help young people express themselves and their interests. Generation Z has found a way to make reading cool, in a way that is engaging and interesting to them. I would never have picked up a Sally Rooney novel or started viewing my reading habits as part of a certain aesthetic movement if it were not of the influence of #BookTok. Now, Sally Rooney is one of my favourite authors of the time, and it is impossible for me to read Dostoyevsky without thinking that I fit into a sort of category by doing so. It is clear that reading is back, whether people are using it as a trend or are actually interested in it. Even if the trend does not last, I still believe that some will have found genuine interest in reading and will carry on without the help of #BookTok.

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