Does Crying Sell Books on TikTok: How Does BookTok Help to Turn Backlist Titles into Bestsellers?

The Journal of Publishing Culture

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Abstract

BookTok is a sub-community of users on TikTok who post videos that review and recommend books. It has grown in popularity in recent years and has the potential to launch the careers of new authors and return old (backlist) books to the top of the bestseller list. BookTok's impact on the book industry has been remarkable, prompting many publishers and booksellers to use it as a promotional tool. This journal article aims to fill gaps within the scholarship concerning BookTok's mechanics, how backlist books become bestsellers many years after their first publication, and whether emotional reader response plays a key role in this process. It will also provide recommendations on how BookTok should be taken seriously by publishers and authors.

Keywords

TikTok, BookTok, young readers, sad books, emotional reader response

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Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of human life. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals became increasingly dependent on digital spaces to connect with peers and other like-minded people. More recently, young people around the world have congregated on TikTok, the latest social platform where users can interact with short, self-created videos. The platform consists of many sub-communities that allow people with similar passions to interact and share interests. One of these sub-communities, known as BookTok, has become a recent phenomenon, and is having a roaring impact on the publishing industry due to its influence on the reading trends and preferences of young people.

Digital literacy communities, such as BookTok are changing the way that young people approach literary culture. Individuals use the platform by posting short videos that review and recommend books, with the aim to reach out to people that share common interests, also known as "vertical communities" (Clark and Phillips 2020, 21). TikTok's algorithm makes the process more accessible because it suggests new videos based on the user's previous interactions. For instance, if an individual liked or shared a video that recommends sad books, they are likely to get similar videos. Thus, making TikTok an ideal marketing tool for publishers who always seek to increase and strengthen their "vertical community" as it "offers the opportunity to provide new product type and related services." (Clark and Phillips 2020, 21).

The technological developments in communication are "linked to a new model of consumption, generation, and socialisation of literacy content" that is controlled and generated by users themselves according to their own interests. (Paladines-Parades and Aliagas 2020)

The research questions that inform this study are as follows:

1. What recurring themes are explored and promoted in the videos shared in the BookTok community?
2. To what extent does TikTok help backlist titles to come back as bestsellers?
3. Should publishers use emotional reader response as a promoting tool?

Literature Review

Peer Influence

Some argue that the emergence of digital technology has decreased reading habits of younger generations. However, others might say the reading experience has become dynamic, as readers are encouraged to interact with others and create intimate social relationships in the wake of the rise in social media. Many people use digital spaces and enjoy the freedom it offers to create content and communicate with others who share similar passions, without fear of being judged. According to Albrecht et al. (2017, 20), these are the "digital natives," a generation characterised by their constant use of digital media, who connect content consumption "intimately, if not inextricably, with social networks and friends."

It is only logical for young people to share their reading habits and passion for books on the Internet, as they already share aspects of their lives on social media. Reading discussions can be a remarkable mechanism of active peer influence, as they are linked to the formation of social connections around books and reading, while supporting reading comprehension and making recommendations to support further reading (Merga 2021). More recent research suggests that in digital reading cultures, "like-minded readers are virtually connected to express their reading experiences, negotiate literary value and meaning, and construct individual as well as collective identities" (Grøn and Albrechtslund 2020, 122).

When considering peer influence, it is important to note the rising evidence concerning micro-influencers and their influence on purchases by consumers. Duong (2019) explains that micro and mid-level influencers are users with between 2,000 and 20,000 followers, and are more popular than celebrities and macro-influencers, who are individuals with between 200,000 and 500,000+ followers. The reason is that "they have that more personal touch and still feel like authentic, accessible people with whom other users can connect and relate." (Johnson 2021, 124) When it comes to social media platforms like TikTok, it is these micro-influencers who promote and recommend books to their followers, potentially boosting sales of the books they mention.

Due to their smaller size, micro-influencers are less likely to have a meaningful brand relationship and are less likely to be paid for the content they publish, which indicates to consumers that their recommendation is transparent and authentic. The impact of influencers on consumerism is particularly evident in the Digital Marketing Institute (2021), which states that 49% of consumers rely on influencer recommendations, while 40% bought something after seeing it on a social media platform such as YouTube or Instagram. This

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suggests there is a significant relationship between consumers and influencers when it comes to purchasing advice. It is also important to note that 70% of teenagers trust influencers more than traditional media sources (Digital Marketing Institute 2021). Publishers must therefore make more use of the micro-influencers, who are becoming the new gatekeepers of the mass population when it comes to reading trends and recommendations. (Vu 2014; Albrecht et al. 2017)

BookTube and Bookstagram

Since TikTok is a considerably newer social media platform, the reading community within it has not been researched as much. However, there are similar platforms, such as BookTube or Bookstagram, subcommunities within YouTube and Instagram that fulfil a similar role. Research and knowledge found on these platforms can also be applied to BookTok due to their similar nature.

For instance, BookTubers "represent growing online communities of readers where feedback and comments become just as important as talking about the text. Interactions between the creators and their followers make the videos even more powerful, as they open new avenues of engagement with print text" (Mora, Semingson and Gomez 2017, 63). BookTube also represents "a networked attempt to learn and discover literature in today's digital and multimodal spaces. As a global phenomenon, the cross-cultural implications of BookTubing are multidimensional." (Thomas, Jayagopi and Gatica-Perez 2020, 147)

TikTok and BookTok

TikTok is "known for its upbeat music, lip-syncing duets and viral dance challenges, [...] and has appealed to those seeking a friendly, fun-loving social media experience" (Delemos 2021). According to their study, the Pew Research Centre (2021) found that people aged 18 to 24 are likely to use TikTok (55%). BookTok is a sub-community within TikTok of writers, book fanatics, avid readers and content creators that review and recommend new books in new and exciting ways that fit the app. The videos range from 30 seconds to 3 minutes, and the content can range from compilations of mood board images to the creator's real reaction to reading a book they recommend. But it is the algorithm that makes TikTok the most attractive to its users. The algorithm works differently for each user, as it depends on the user's interaction with different videos. For example, if a user likes and shares videos that recommend sad books, they are more likely to receive similar videos that also make recommendations for sombre books.

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The reason TikTok is such a hot topic within the publishing community is its ability to launch the careers of new authors or bring back titles to bestseller lists. BookTok's impact on the book industry has been remarkable, prompting many publishers and booksellers to use it as part of their marketing campaign. Since TikTok is considered a relatively new social media platform, there is a significant lack of academic writing on its subject. As it stands, the current research focuses on how TikTok can be used to encourage young people to read in the educational environment (Merga 2021, Jerasa and Boffone 2021; Dezuanni 2021). However, there is a definitive lack of a comprehensive look at how the mechanics of BookTok work, and how the platform promotes backlist titles and forces publishers to bring them back into their current reading lists. Research will broaden TikTok's scientific knowledge by specifically looking at how publishers can use certain trends to drive their sales.

Methodology

Content analysis

To answer the research question of whether emotional reader response, such as crying, sells books on TikTok, a newly created account was used instead of the researcher's account to eliminate potential influences from the researcher's personal preferences. The books for this study were chosen from a TikTok video titled "Books That Left Me Heartbroken and Shattered for Days" by user @amyjordanj.

The books in question are:

- *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller (2011)

- *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid (2017)

- *It Ends With Us* by Colleen Hoover (2016)

It is important to note that the mentioned books were the most talked about at the time of this research, but due to the fast pace and ever-changing trends on TikTok, that may no longer be the case. This highlights the difficulty of researching social media platforms like TikTok, as another researcher could replicate the study but would not yield similar results.

Once the books were selected, the following hashtags were searched separately on TikTok's "Discovery" section: #thesongofachilles, #thesevenhusbandsofevelynhugo, and #itendswithus, to see what the "top" videos were under these specific hashtags. "Top" videos refer to videos that received the most likes and/or views, regardless of the statistics of the content creator. The first ten videos that appeared under each book title hashtag were picked from the "top" section, yielding a sample of 30 videos for this study. Tables 1 and 2 show the username, number of followers and likes on the profile of the content creator, as well as the number of views and likes on the video, and the hashtags used. The rows highlighted in yellow indicate the videos that TikTok labelled as "top videos". Tables 3 and 4 present the recurring themes from the overall sample, as well as the Top Liked videos.

Table 1: Overall Statistics (n=30)

BOOK TITLE		USERNAME	DATE POSTED	NO. OF FOLLOWERS	NO. OF LIKES	NO. OF VIDEO VIEWS	NO. OF VIDEO LIKES
The Song of Achilles	104.4M views	letstalkaboutbooks	11/08/2021	202,000	12,000,000	1,667,000	341,000
		miidoriko	03/04/2021	444,000	54,000,000	188,000	279,000
		emmyslibrary	08/04/2021	622,000	21,000,000	4,466,000	714,000
		xomasi	05/07/2021	653,000	19,000,000	232,000	52,000
		readwithhen	10/09/2021	5,226	5,612,000	23,000,000	5,022,000
		tamllama	14/11/2021	428,000	6,701,000	4,671,000	1,469,000
		buckysbooks	05/05/2021	2,613	1,501,000	4,132,000	763,000
		benbarnacle	24/07/2021	589	3,130,000	15,000,000	3,127,000
		kazzledazzlesteponme	19/08/2021	233,000	25,000,000	7,194,000	1,282,000
		kazzledazzlesteponme	17/02/2021	233,000	25,000,000	6,157,000	1,251,000
The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo	36.4M views	katiiemcdougall	19/06/2021	1,287,000	49,000,000	16,000,000	3,016,000
		thebooksiveloved	25/10/2021	4,719,000	170,000,000	1,445,000	169,000
		theangelworered	28/10/2021	167,000	7,813,000	11,000,000	2,789,000
		bookishwithb	10/06/2021	381,000	22,000,000	1,163,000	126,000
		nicklcage	11/08/2021	521,000	58,000,000	3,248,000	860,000
		stephsstoriess	09/09/2021	327,000	33,000,000	993,000	153,000
		kazzledazzlesteponme	07/06/2021	233,000	25,000,000	2,716,000	362,000
		bootyschooldropout	29/10/2021	401,000	12,000,000	343,000	6,867
		.bookmarkit	21/09/2021	549	261,000	318,000	3,224
		kadijascorner	06/10/2021	3,142	2,249,000	2,897,000	534,000
It Ends With Us	201.1M views	rbpbooks	23/07/2021	6,568	4,078,000	21,000,000	4,037,000
		paigemevans	05/07/2021	14,000,000	340,000,000	17,000,000	2,754,000
		lupitareads	12/10/2021	6,030	4,953,000	1,098,000	200,000
		larryreads	05/10/2021	1,182,000	57,000,000	707,000	1,337,000
		gracedoesbooks	14/11/2021	146,000	12,000,000	1,361,000	293,000
		mculz	16/09/2021	150,000	40,000,000	1,076,000	153,000
		kazzledazzlesteponme	23/03/2021	233,000	25,000,000	888,000	982,000
		booktokbrynn	23/09/2021	3,868	5,329,000	3,417,000	578,000
		ktsbookz	04/11/2021	628,000	33,000,000	4,171,000	837,000
		charleys.chapters	28/08/2021	148,000	8,519,000	9,909,000	2,028,000

Table 2: Hashtag Use

Hashtag Use*	In Sample (N=30)	In Sample (%)
#booktok	23	77%
#books	12	40%
#bookish	11	37%
#thesongofachilles	10	33%
#fyp	10	33%
#thesevenhusbandsofevelynhugo	10	33%
#itendswithus	10	33%
#colleenhoover	8	27%
#tsoa	6	20%
#evelynhugo	6	20%
#patrochilles	5	17%
#bookworm	5	17%
#achilles	4	13%
#foryoupage	4	13%
#fyp:)	4	13%
#taylorjenkinsreid	4	13%
#reading	3	10%
#rylekincaid	3	10%
#madelinemiller	2	7%
#bookquotes	2	7%
#bookclub	2	7%
#lgbtq	2	7%
#achillesandpatroclus	2	7%
#sadbooks	2	7%
#bookrecs	2	7%
#celiastjames	2	7%
#samsclubscanandgo	2	7%
#wlwbooks	2	7%
#lilybloom	2	7%
#atlascorrigan	2	7%
#uglylove	2	7%
#coho	2	7%

*only includes hashtags that were mentioned in at least 2 videos

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Table 3: Recurring themes

Theme*	Incorporated in theme	In Sample (n=30)	In Sample (%)	Example video plot description
Emotional Reader Response	Explores the range of emotions that reading may evoke in the reader.	10	33.3%	The video shows the user's end result of reading *The Song of Achilles*. There are various clips of her crying, picture of her crying, as well as a clip of her using an inhaler as proof to show the scale of trauma the book has caused her, emphasising the dramatic sadness of it.
Character Cosplay	Creators dress up as characters in the book to recreate their favourite scenes.	5	16.7%	The video presents the creator dressed up as Evelyn Hugo, reeanacting a scene from the book in which the main character goes through something colloquially called "the gay panic", in which an individual has a sudden realisation that they may be attracted to persons of the same sex. The clip is even more emphatic because at the moment in which there are captions "pale skin PANIC freckles" the words in the soundtrack are "ehhh sexy lady".
TikTok trend	A funny viral video.	5	16.7%	The video shows a pane of glass falling to the ground, suprisingly not breaking, and then someone throwing a hammer onto it and the glass shattering, emphasising the state of the creator while reading "the last mf page".
Fanart	Celebrates the characters and their relationships in books.	4	13.3%	The video is a montage of #patrochilles fanart with the captions: and historians will call them close friends, besties, roommates, collegues, anything but lovers, history hates lovers.
Aesthetic Shots	Demonstrates the appeal of the book through a montage of moodboard pictures.	4	13.3%	An aesthetic shot of the book and its pages being flipped, followed by a montage of moodboard pictures made by the user.
Recommendations	Recommends books using various quotes.	3	10.0%	The video start with the close up of heavily bookmarked and annotated copy of the book and the creator is flipping though the pages. Then the book is closed and the caption and soundtrack align, saying "first I didn't get it now I understand"
Real Life Experiences	An event that happens in real life, relating to a book.	2	6.7%	This video shows the creator receiving a Morse code necklace that says "this this and this" from The Song of Achilles". The captions before are narrated by automatic siri voice.

* % greater than 100% as some videos could be classified with multiple themes.

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Table 4: Top Liked Videos and Themes

Theme*	In Sample (n=8)	In Sample (%)
Emotional Reader Response	3	42.9%
Character Cosplay	2	28.6%
TikTok trend	1	14.3%
Fanart	1	14.3%
Aesthetic Shots	1	14.3%

Nielsen BookScan

To determine whether there is a link between the viral status of the selected books on TikTok and the increase in unit sales for the period 2020-2021, lifetime sales data for each book was collected from Nielsen BookScan Data (2021). (Figures 1, 2 and 3).
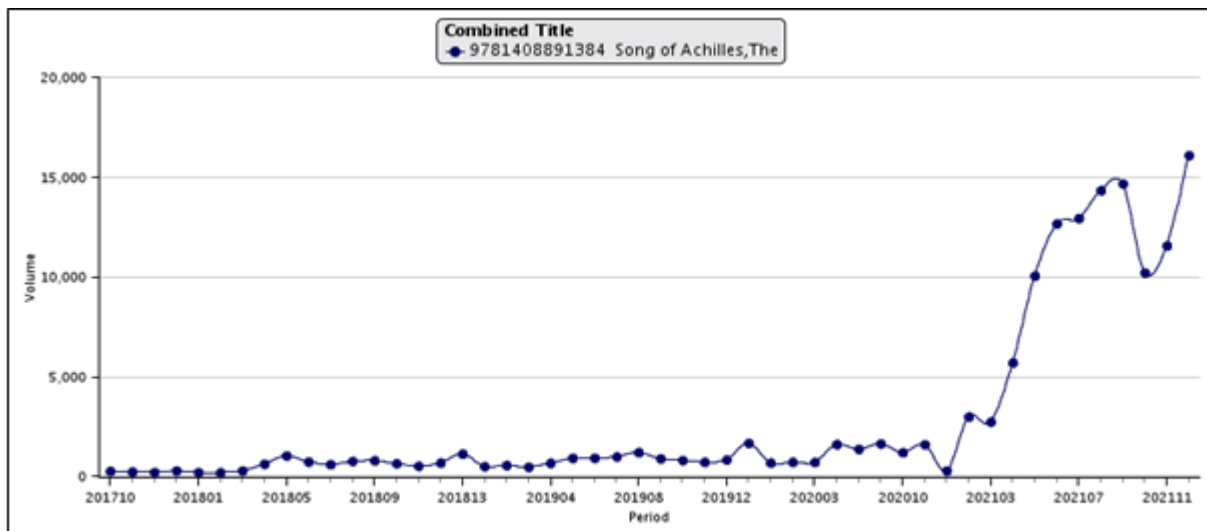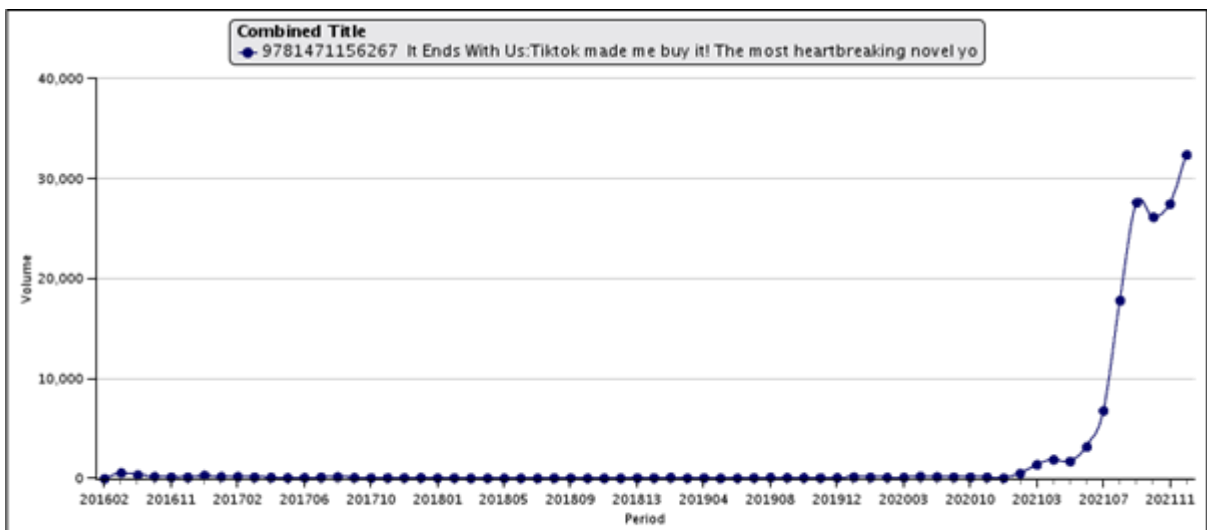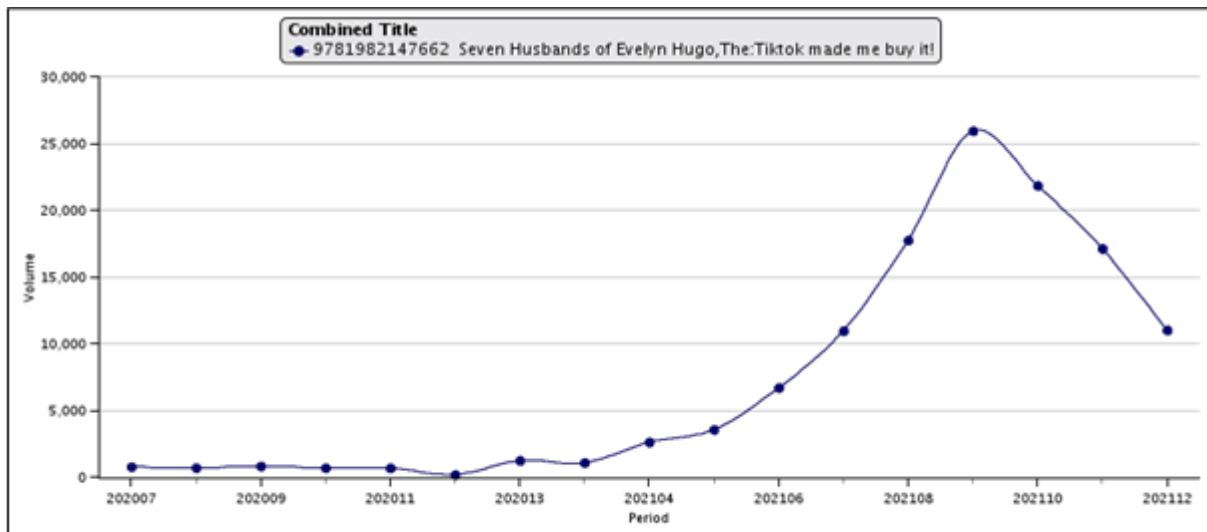

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Results

The videos that form the focus of this study come from creators that have followers between 500 to 14,000,000, showing that TikTok's algorithm pushes out videos based on their contents and trafficking, rather than the content creator's status.

Content Analysis

Recurring User

A user with the handle @kazzledazzlesteponme appears in all three book titles. Within the sample of 30, she has 4 videos. In three of the four videos, she exhibits an emotional reader response, and in one, she receives a gift related to *The Song of Achilles*, which falls under the category of real-life experiences.

Recurring Themes

The most frequent theme appears to be e   motional reader response (33%), followed by character cosplay (17%), TikTok trends (17%), fanart (13%), aesthetic shots (13%), recommendations (10%) and finally, real-life experiences (7%). The data provided in Table 3 gives the reader an example of a video plot description to show how it relates to the theme.

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TikTok Picks

Out of the 8 Top Liked videos, 3 represented emotional reader response (42.9%), 2 character cosplays (28.6%), 1 each of TikTok trends, fanart and aesthetic s hots (14.3%).

BookTok hashtags

The most frequents hashtags used are #booktok (77%), #books (40%), #bookish (37%), #fyp (33%), as well as the title hashtags for each of the book - #thesongofachilles, #thesevenhusbandsofevelynhugo and #itendswithus (33% each).

Nielsen BookScan

Figures 1, 2 and 3 show the majority of lifetime for each book. The starting point in the graph might differ from the publishing date due to change in editions, thus the ISBN number is updated. The data in each graph show that sales increased dramatically during the period 202103 and have continued to rise steadily ever since.

Discussion

What recurring themes are explored and promoted in the videos shared in the BookTok community?

The most frequent theme in the findings was Emotional Reader Response. Due to the content of the books, the main emotional response found in the research of videos was sadness, resulting in the creators often weeping from the emotional stress. For instance, one video depicts a content creator completing *The Song of Achilles* book, and afterwards are various clips of her crying, as well as a clip of her using an inhaler because she was so traumatised emotionally, to the point where she could not breathe. The fact that people choose to read such books raises the question of why they choose to read such books.

Research suggests readers who gravitate toward books that move them and evoke feelings of sadness do so for both eudaimonic motives ('insight' and 'personal growth') and meta-emotions (liking to feel various emotions while reading)" (Koopman 2015, 27). What this means is that the preference for sad books comes from the human need to learn something through struggles and personal growth of characters, and to experience actual feelings. When discussing sombre books, it does not necessarily suggest the nihilistic despair from trauma, but rather the real life struggles that humans can overcome by the end of the book. Individuals often opt to read those books, because if a book can evoke such a strong reaction from the reader, it indicates that the book is well written.

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As mentioned before in the findings, the user @kazzledazzlesteponme, real name Eloise Hampson, appears under all three book titles. In her interview with *Publisher's Weekly*, she recognises that certain books become viral because of the emotional intensity they deal with. For instance, *It Ends With Us* discusses topics such as domestic violence and abusive relationships. (Steward 2021) Hampson recognises that sharing unfiltered and raw reactions to books allows creators and users to share profound feelings, as readers, within the digital space.

Therefore, suggesting that the reason for repeated use of crying to promote books is because content creators recognise that many readers want to read sad books to experience meta-emotions, as highlighted in the previous research. It also highlights the sense of community within BookTok – creators publicly post their emotional response to reading books to see if anyone else felt or reacted similarly to them. While it may be the case that crying gets more views for the creator, it is the authenticity behind those tears that speaks volume to other users. By seeing micro-influencers in such a vulnerable state, the viewers get heightened sense of connection that would be difficult to get on any other social media platform (Apple 2021).

It is also important to note that other themes were repeatedly suggested, such as character cosplay, recommendations and fanart. This kind of content is different from the emotional reader response because they pay homage to characters and show a deeper connection between the reader and characters in the book. For future research, it would be interesting to investigate the other recurring themes in detail as there is a strong presence of the LGBTQI+ community within BookTok. For instance, fanart relates to art created by fans to celebrate their favourite characters and relationships. One example of a video is a montage of Patrochilles pairing – the official name for the main pairing in the book, Patroclus and Achilles, joined together. The caption within the video highlights the issue of queer erasure in historical literature. Thus, identifying another area of interest and potential to study within the BookTok community.

Does TikTok help backlist titles to come back as bestsellers?

Based on data provided through the Nielsen BookScan (Figures 1, 2 and 3), there is a pattern where the sales of all three books, which are the focus of this study, increase dramatically. One could assume that the sudden increase in sales is due to the viral spread of books on TikTok, because the increase abruptly occurs when the sales were flatlined until that point. During the research for this study, no other justification or event appeared that could explain the unexpected boost of sales. It is also evident that the high sales will continue for longer,

especially for *It Ends With Us* and *The Song of Achilles*. On the other hand, the number of sales of *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* is declining, which may mean the book's viral status on TikTok has passed and there is another title to take its place.

The power of TikTok on book sales is felt by everyone in the publishing industry, especially booksellers, who are constantly receiving demand for some backlist titles. For instance, Victorville Barnes & Nobles shared a video of restocking *The Song of Achilles* "for the 1,000th time" because of the BookTok demand (Hue 2021). The fact that booksellers have special counters and shelf space dedicated to BookTok indicates that the publishing industry understands the influence TikTok has on consumers' patterns and exploits that for their advantage to boost sales and increase profit.

As already mentioned, the proposed algorithm works based on the previous interactions of the user. The app tracks what kind of videos the user likes, comments, and shares, and then presents various other videos with similar content or themes. Consequently, the consumer receives endless recommendations and other book titles relevant to the subject. The repetitive consumption of similar videos classifies them as viral - everyone sees them everywhere.

Furthermore, there is also the risk that the algorithm will become repetitive: if a person repeatedly views the same content, they tend to get bored. In this case, TikTok gives its users the option to change the algorithm by deciding that certain videos are not something they are interested in and do not want to see anymore. Therefore, it shows a potential danger and power that consumers have when books become viral. Just as quickly as consumers can boost sales of a backlist title and help it return to the bestsellers, they can also kill it off the charts and move on to the next best thing.

Should publishers use emotional reader response as a promoting tool?

While BookTok began as a casual community of readers, it definitely is paving the way for an economic phenomenon. When BookTokers share their recommendations, they subsequently widen the market for those books. Through self-made content, users share their raw emotions and opinions about the books and convince others to read them to experience the similar emotions. Many argue that "authenticity is TikTok's greatest appeal, and its most powerful engagement tool" (Apple 2021) because of the way the content feels more unfiltered and honest, compared with other social media platforms, such as Instagram, which is "heavily filtered, [and] edited". Rather than passively consuming the content they are

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viewing on TikTok, the users feel more intimately connected, as they are exposed to the content creator's raw response to reading a sad book.

Another factor that also helps is that the content producer is most likely to be a micro-influencer (Johnson 2020), meaning that their videos are less likely to be paid content, thus more honest. Young people are "especially drawn to promotion done by peers with no financial stake in the product" (Steward 2021) because it highlights the realness of emotions portrayed in a reaction video, thus the consumer believes that the reaction caused by the book is real and honest. The micro-influencers are the new middlemen between the booksellers and readers. They are in the position of power as literary mediators because they influence the consumers' reading choices based on the review that they leave on their social media platform.

Therefore, publishers need to tread lightly if they are hoping to incorporate TikTok into their marketing strategy. Authenticity within TikTok is what draws the consumers into the platform, thus publishers need to remember to carry on this organic relationship between the creator and the consumer, if they want the creator to promote their product. It is important to note that monetizing BookTok may compromise the integrity of honest recommendations, and it has been observed, through personal experience, that paid advertisement receives less interaction than non-paid content.

Especially if the content in question is anything to do with emotions – if the viewer notices that a creator is reacting emotionally, but the video is tagged as a paid advertisement, then they are inclined to believe that the emotions portrayed are dishonest and are only used as a marketing tactic. To avoid such reactions, publishers should perhaps either work closely with the authors to capitalise on the organic content (Steward 2021) and if they wish to work with a BookToker, perhaps sending them free copies of the new releases might work out better rather than paying them for a reaction video – as long as the advertisement does not include personal feelings.

Conclusion

Despite industry concerts that young people have replaced books with social media apps, a selection of BookTok videos reveals that this is not the case. The resurrection of backlist titles such as *The Song of Achilles*, *It Ends With Us* and *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, demonstrates that there are a lot of young readers who are looking for books that will move them. Rather than separating digital spaces and literary culture, platforms such as TikTok show that it is possible for them to coexist together within the same space. Not only that, but

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social media improves the reading experience for young people as it allows them to interact and communicate with other like-minded individuals, transcending time and place.

Youngsters create their own safe space where they can make content and recommendations to other readers, without the feeling of being judged. Therefore, demonstrating another use of BookTok as an excellent marketing tool where readers promote books to other readers, while still holding onto the authenticity that BookTok is well known for. It is now up to publishers and the industry to respond to such intensely dedicated online communities, but one thing is known for sure is that platforms, such as BookTok are here to stay, and traditional publishers will need to keep up with the ever-changing developments.

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