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BookTok and the Commodification of Books: Overconsumption and Shifting Literary Standards in the Age of Algorithm

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Abstract- This paper aims to discuss the debate across various social media platforms on the impact of "BookTok," which is a side of TikTok dedicated to readers sharing their opinions, recommendations, reviews, and experiences with books. Many individuals and influencers have made a claim that during and after COVID-19, there has been a compromise on the quality of books to meet the demands of consumers, which has led to books being commodified. Critics find it problematic as new releases flood the market, and the characteristics such as longer writing period and meticulous editing process, are replaced by books that are written, edited, and published within the span of a year. The question that any reader should ask themselves is the outcome they get out of reading by this shift in literary standards.

Keywords - BookTok, overconsumption, influencers, performative reading, anti-intellectualism

I. INTRODUCTION

BookTok has pushed the idea that reading is accessible and available for every reader based on any of their favoured genres. It has also persuaded many non-readers to read and the platform serves as an introductory guide for beginners. But due to the focus on specific genres like fantasy, romance, young adult, dystopian literature etc, readers have become apprehensive in exploring different genres as it will not attract attention and get internet traffic, and as they are paid for it. It becomes their job where they are restricted according to the taste and demands of the consumers and lose the pleasurable side of reading and end up losing their personal taste.

It starts to be driven by a motive to reach a wider audience, gain sponsorships, and reach more publishers. Although, it has created a platform for people to read what they want and feel secure in deciding about what they read, it has also created groupism among readers where some are ostracized in the online reading community as they have not read a particular book, which negatively influences people as it would diminish the momentum to continue reading. Although a major part of the community is pigeon-holed to consumer-centric books, there are influencers who educate people in an open and constructed way.

Research Question
Has BookTok normalised overconsumption and how has it shifted the preference of literary standards?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

As the impact of social media on reading is a contemporary field of study, which has gained popularity, particularly after COVID-19. Although there are no published research journals, there are numerous articles, blogs, and video essays, available on the issue. This gap is important as full-length research is yet to be explored on the subject and this thesis aims at constructing research on the subject as it is a matter in question and has a large impact on the present and future generation of readers.

Main Body
Book content on platforms like TikTok has caused many young people to rekindle and even generate a love for reading. "BookTokers" have played a major role in shaping the public"s literary preferences, which has influenced the market sales of authors mostly popular on social media, rising them to immediate fame and making their every new release a best-seller, even though many of their works apparently lack true character development, and contain rushed and blatant writing. Ultimately, the phenomenon of fast fashion has incorporated itself into the world of literature, changing the way books are produced, consumed, and valued, making them solely about aesthetics, book covers and specific tropes. There are differences of opinion among people, some view TikTok as a catalyst for societal collapse, whereas others think that it is just an app and it is our individual responsibility to stop giving it so much influence over our lives. But there is a mutual agreement that it promotes an enormous level of overconsumption.

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There are many genres of books available in the market, so that readers can read whatever they want, which is the sole purpose of books. But it starts to become an issue when the aspect of consumerism and overconsumption comes in between reading, which makes it performative rather than pleasurable, and ends up creating an unhealthy cycle of books being commodified and it has reached a point where it has become unachievable. Influencers are paid for promoting products and are sent PR packages, which is also the case for books.

This incorporates a major part of their job. Publishers and writers send their books to influencers who can help in promoting their books, but it becomes unhealthy when they receive books at such a frequent pace. BookTokers usually end up making haul videos regularly with 100-150 books and sometimes even more in a one-minute video. This huge influx of sending and receiving books ends up just about being about getting products and not so much about the actual reading aspect. People buy copious numbers of books and do massive haul videos, although such videos do get views, but that ties back to chasing the virality of something as opposed to the concrete foundation of the intention, which starts as an actual genuine passion and ends up focusing on the financial aspect of it.

Book review and book recommendation content which BookTok used to primarily consist of has been gradually replaced in recent years by videos, where content creators show a huge number of books in parts and even book hauls according to seasons which they may or may not read. Although this can be reasoned that it can be the case with every social media platform, TikTok is the most famous for promoting overconsumption and because it consists of short form content, it is more accessible to the current generation. It is a worrying factor that people who are a part of the online book community, refuse to engage in critical thinking when it highlights the flaws.

Many statements are made by both influencers and the public that „at least people are reading" or „buying lots of books is good for the literary landscape," these opinions may not necessarily be negative but they are incomplete takes.

Social media has contributed to the growing popularity of books in translation, for example, in the recent months Asian literature and authors have become very popular. Books like „Days at the Morisaki Bookshop" by Satoshi Yagisawa or the book series „Before the Coffee Gets Cold" by Toshikazu Kawaguchi are seen at every bookstore, book street vendors and even on online shopping platforms. John Self writes in an article that, "The figures, from a broad survey of book buyers, showed that sales of translated fiction increased 22% last year, compared to 2021 – and that it is most popular among readers under 35, who account for almost 50% of translated fiction sales." 2 Although the article mentions the survey done in 2023, the trend is still ongoing. BookTok videos have also made authors viral on TikTok who then started to receive massive publishing deals after years of being rejected by publishers. Sarah Do Cuoto, in her article, writes about Lloyd Devereux Richards, an author, that, "Amid his career as a lawyer and role as a father raising three children, Lloyd Devereux Richards took 14 years to complete his passion project: a 343-page serial-killer thriller titled Stone Maidens. Though Richards spent over a decade hoping his novel would take off, it never did. That is, until his daughter Marguerite posted a TikTok in February encouraging people to buy her father"s novel." She further states that, "since posting the video, her TikTok has been viewed

43.3 million times. With a rush of support, Stone Maidens surged to the top of Amazon"s Best Seller list. As of this writing, Richards" novel is the No. 4 book on Amazon." 3 It is a positive aspect that people feel encouraged to read and discover more books through BookTok. But social media 6 and specifically, BookTok does not have the democratizing effect that people on BookTok want to believe that it has, on the contrary the overconsumption practices of books end up alienating people. In her YouTube video, Mina Le talks about the fact that to gain attraction on TikTok, creators are encouraged to post at least once a day. She talks about fashion creators who feel that they must create a new outfit and buy enough items for a haul, every single day. This results in people opting for fast fashion brands where they can get variety for the same amount of money that would get them two or three from a more sustainable brand. 4

The same phenomenon is starting to spread in the book space as well. To please the algorithm and grow their platforms to make a living as a content creator, book influencers also try to churn out as much content as possible. Reading books and articulating your thoughts about it takes time and effort, which could be one of the reasons why book hauls are now one of the preferred types of content. The outcome however, is adverse. People who want to participate in the community, but cannot or do not want to spend hundreds of dollars on new books every month, feel like they do not have access to the community. This excessive consumerism leads them in having shelves and shelves of books that serve more as a decorative piece than actual books meant to be re-read, and these books end up being thrown away and replaced by similar books. As it has only been in the recent years that BookTok has started

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to have a significant impact on book sales, we do not know the environmental impact it has. But these massive book hauls are followed by a corresponding rise of book un-hauls, where creators clear away dozens of books to be donated, which was supposed to be positive, but as they are categorized into specific type of books, the same argument applies, as donating fast fashion clothes, as Giada Nizzoli titles her article “No, Donating Clothes Won‟t Make Up for Fast Fashion Hauls!” 5 If these books were bought because they were in trend then why would people buy them from charity shops or thrift bookstores, when the trend for those books were over?

A few BookTokers made videos, telling their followers that they skim through a lot of the books they read, which many general readers may or may not do, but people who have made it their entire personality to read hundreds of books a year, claiming that they dodge through books is an unethical practice and is also unfair to the readers who rely on their opinions to purchase and read books, and as the public consuming and appreciating such content are teenagers to middle-aged, it devastatingly shortens their attention span. Rose Horowitch, wrote an article titled “The Elite College Students Who Can‟t Read,” in which she quotes, Nicholas Dames, the director of undergraduate studies for English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, as saying that college students “now seem bewildered by the thought of finishing multiple books a semester.” 6

This raises a concern that despite the overconsumption of books, how much of the world population is reading and how many are only concerned with the performative part of it, which is leading to the anti-intellectualism, online and how BookTok facilitates it.Content creators end up burning themselves out by trying to keep up with posting schedules that are not compatible with the act of reading and appreciating a book. Another criticism of BookTok is the impossible reading targets which is an aspect of BookTok and book haul culture. It promotes the idea that to be a real reader, you must constantly produce huge monthl wrap-ups, which is a post in which a creator shows all the books that they read that month. There is also an idea that the current year‟s reading goal must be more than the previous year. Setting a personal goal while performing any task can be helpful. It helps people in feeling a sense of achievement, through their little but qualitative goals and eventually getting better at the task, without feeling burdensome. But over the last five years, there has been a rapid increase in people doing reading challenges and readathons and forcing themselves to read a book a day. These unrealistic reading goals feel forced and destroy the true essence of reading and readers may even end up feeling repulsive towards books. Anna Fitzpatrick, an author, wrote a thread on X (formerly twitter) where she puts forth an argument that, “I saw a book influencer give tips on how to read more books a year. They were: listen to audiobooks on 1.5 speed, skim long passages of texts, read novellas and graphic novels to hit your „reading goals‟ faster. Which is fine, if your goal is to consume as much as possible.”

She goes on to state further that “hitting arbitrary metrics you set for yourself (i.e. reading x number of books a year) can be satisfying. But isn't literature about so much more than conspicuous consumption?” 7 Her point about the arbitrary metrics and reading as a quantitative exercise is especially relevant to the online reading community. There has increasingly been an overlap between productivity, hustle culture, and the book community.

People are even forcing themselves to finish the books that they did not enjoy, simply to improve their stats on apps like Goodreads and story graph. Anna Garrison wrote an article titled “Goodreads Stopped Working for 24 Hours and Readers Everywhere Lost It” on when the Goodreads website and app stopped working on June 26 2023. She writes that, “A surprising number of people reacted vocally online to Goodreads not working, posting memes, pleas for updates, and funny reactions to the glitch. One user wrote, "wanted to update my progress on the book I‟m reading only to find out Goodreads is down" while another user wrote “so you're telling me Goodreads is down when I spent the whole day binge reading a book and was about to get the satisfaction of checking it as read?” 8

People have started to associate reading with productivity in ways that are not so common with any other hobby. There is never a marathon on how many songs listened to in a day or how many films are watched in a month, whereas there is an entire genre of content on how to read more, which gains virality on platforms like TikTok, YouTube with a ranging view of anywhere between 384,000 to even more than 5 million views. 9 These content creators may range from BookTubers to even self-improvement and productivity coaches.10 In one of the most popular videos on increasing reading limit by YouTuber, where the narrator confesses that they struggle to read and conducts interviews with productivity specialists who give them advice on how to read more. 11

These could be useful advice on forming new habits and the benefits of discipline, but the central conflict is that the narrator, themselves, is not an avid reader. Then why are we forcing ourselves to do more of something, when we are

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already struggling with the bare minimum of it? Because we have equated reading with intelligence, self-development, and success. A YouTuber made a video on the topic, "How to Talk About Books, Understand What You Read, and Sound Smarter Doing It" with the thumbnail of the video reading "Trick People into Thinking You‟re Smart" 12 emphasizes the argument. This contemporary discourse between types of reading was already addressed by Francis Bacon, in his essay, "Of Studies" first published in 1597, where he writes that, "To spend too much time in studies is sloth; to use them too much for ornament, is affectation; to make judgment wholly by their rules, is the humor of a scholar." He further advises that, "Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider." Contracting the purpose of books, to being solely about productivity, which only includes non-fictions, literary classics, and books in general which are considered to be „more‟ intellectual is an extremist opinion, which may or may not be suitable for everyone and fails to find a balance.

Philosopher and literary critic George Henry Lewes states that "The object of literature is to instruct, to animate, or to amuse." Ironically, BookTok has helped people return to a casual type of reading as most of the books on the platform, fall in the category of YA, romance, fantasy, mystery etc which the other group of readers who claim themselves to be academic and serious readers are against, as they feel that such books do not fall into the literary genre. Readers may have their personal preference on the type of books they want to consume but since these books fall in the category of genre fiction which is comparatively easier to read, than literary fiction, people on BookTok are constantly looking for the next similar books to consume, which makes both writers and readers trapped in a vicious cycle of redundancy, which opposes the entire objective of being a writer or a reader.

III. CONCLUSION

There is a limit to what healthy consumption is, both when it comes to the amount of texts that a person reads in a certain period and the physical books that a person owns. Creators have started to put out content on „BookTok burnout,‟ where they confess that they were a part of the mass consumerism of BookTok, and to be successful they believed, that they must purchase, read, and recommend several books each month, which ended up in them having filled shelves of books that they did not even enjoy reading. Haruki Murakami, in Norwegian Wood writes, "If you only read books that everyone else is reading, you can only think what everyone else is thinking." If the trend keeps continuing, we may be heading towards a more homogeneous literature, due to the influence of social media trends on the publishing industry, which is already happening with other art forms, like films and music, for example in recent years, the Bollywood industry has been perceived as majorly producing films that feel repetitive with similar themes and prioritizing commercial visibility over artistic integrity. Such a commodification of any art form, pressurizes artists to produce art, rather than make art. If BookTok keeps driving book sales, and authors themselves join in the race to promote their books, ends up becoming a new standard, we may risk missing out on a lot of good books, as not all books may be algorithm friendly, and the art of writing may end up becoming like the other creative pursuits that are being enslaved to algorithm

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