The Phenomenon of Booktok and Its Impact on The Transformation of Literary Culture and The Publishing Industry

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the BookTok phenomenon and its profound effects on the reconfiguration of literary culture and the publishing industry. By analysing the impact of BookTok on book recommendations, sales, and authorship, this research seeks to shed light on the transformative power of social media platforms in shaping contemporary reading habits and the dissemination of literature. Through a comprehensive exploration of the BookTok phenomenon, this study contributes to changes in the publishing industry. It has an impact to the sales and circulation of books. The study employed a structured interview analysis. A group of two individuals who are influencer on BookTok have been chosen to serve as informants. Motivated by their fervour for reading, numerous individuals have assumed the role of content creators on BookTok, a platform dedicated to fostering interaction among fellow book enthusiasts. These individuals engage in activities such as providing book reviews or offering recommendations on beloved titles. Over the course of their careers, these content providers have accumulated a substantial number of followers, thereby establishing themselves as powerful individuals. Consequently, they have had a significant impact on popular trends and have played a role in shaping the reading preferences of a considerable portion of the community The emergence of BookTok as a thriving community on TikTok has brought about significant changes in the publishing industry and has facilitated the growth of a literary culture

Keywords: *Booktok, Literary Culture, Publishing Industry*

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Impak Fenomena Booktok Dalam Transformasi Budaya Sastera dan Industri Penerbitan

Abstrak

Kajian ini mengkaji tentang fenomena Booktok dan kesannya di dalam percambahan budaya sastera. Penyelidakan ini menganalisis tentang bagaimana Booktok telah memberikan signifikan terhadap penulisan, penjualan dan promosi sesebuah buku. Perkembangan yang transformatif di platform media sosial telah banyak memberikan kesan terhadap corak pembacaan anak muda, penjualan buku serta pengedaran buku. Makalah ini menggunakan temubual secara struktif terhadap dua orang penggiat buku. Penggiat buku ini aktif dalam memberikan reviu terhadap buku-buku di Malaysia dan melalui sosial media dan seterusnya bekermbang membentuk komuniti yang besar di dalam ekonomi pembukuan. Kemunculan BookTok sebagai komuniti yang berkembang maju di TikTok telah membawa perubahan ketara dalam industri penerbitan dan telah memudahkan pertumbuhan budaya sastera.

Kata Kunci: *Booktok, Budaya Sastera, Industri Penerbitan*

Introduction

Social media has become an integral aspect of individuals' everyday routines, prompting some to regard it as a vital companion that has profoundly transformed global communication and information exchange. According to Kim et al. (2011), with advances in technology, more information becomes available to the public through a wide range of channels . The emergence of social media platforms led to the development of virtual communities where users can interact and engage with content, providing consumers with unparalleled access to the vast range of content including radically altering the landscape of book culture. It is a transformative innovation for both corporations and individuals (Hennig- Thurau, et al., 2010).

Within this new realm of literature, TikTok became a democratic platform, connecting authors, publishers, and readers in unprecedented ways. The newfound success led the platform to become a prime gateway for all significance including companies to capitalise through supply and demand within the society. This has resulted in a number of advantages, particularly in light of the significant downturn experienced in various sectors after the outbreak of the pandemic-induced lockdown in 2020 (Feldkamp, 2021). Therefore, it is unsurprising that after the establishment of an entirely new market, this platform has subsequently emerged as a powerful marketing instrument for lots of people seeking ways to market their products(Khameraj, 2023).

TikTok has emerged as one of the leading social media platforms that professional marketers utilise to connect and engage with their intended audience (Gesmundo, et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the innovative feature continues with TikTok becoming a go-to platform with its ‘For You Page’ (FYP), as it offers a personalised content to each user based on their preferences. For instance, if a user has a strong preference for watching literary content, their personalised algorithmic feed will be tailored to include a greater proportion of videos connected to books, catering to their individual preferences.

Despite exerting a substantial impact on the field of literature, the BookTok phenomenon has not yet attained broad recognition in nations characterised by smaller population sizes, such as Malaysia. The reason for this can be attributed to the somewhat slower progress of the indigenous reading culture in comparison to other more technologically advanced countries. Based on a survey conducted in 2019 by the International Islamic University (IIUM) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), it was found that the average number of books read by Malaysians per year is two. Furthermore, a significant proportion of Malaysian university

students, almost 80%, have conveyed their disinclination towards engaging in reading activities. (Supramani, 2021).

Literature Review

Although reading has always been a favourite pastime, the catastrophic outbreak that lasted for two years of upheaval led to the worldwide lockdown of libraries and bookstores. The mandated closure had a profound impact on the publishing sector and the literary landscape, resulting in a significant decline in book sales, particularly for physical copies, due to readers' inability to acquire books (McMenemy, Robinson, & Ruthven, 2023).

Research findings suggest a significant alteration in reading patterns throughout the time period spanning from 2020 to 2021, primarily due to the emergence of BookTok. There was a rapid transformation in reading culture with the rise of BookTok, leading to a notable surge of 70% increase in reading engagement. In the subsequent quarter, the statistics altered from a -17% decline to a 53% increase (Sung, 2021).

Following this, numerous fiction books have been vigorously promoted by the creators, leading to a significant increase in sales revenue. One of the most prominent examples is the novel It End with Us by Colleen Hoover, a backlist title that gained immense popularity since 2021. The famous work, known for its compelling romance genre, has successfully captured the attention of young readers, resulting in the sale of four million copies since its first release (Cadden, 2022). The influence of the novel has been duly recognised within the publishing industry, as shown by the author's attainment of several esteemed accolades.

The rise in popularity of BookTok has led to the emergence of several influential content providers who have amassed substantial followings. One prominent figure in the BookTok community is @kateslibrary, who has garnered a substantial fanbase of over 14.2 million likes. She captivated book enthusiasts worldwide by sharing engaging book recommendations, reviews, and virtual bookstore excursions. Another account known as @alifeofliterature, is managed by two people called Mireille and Elodie, who happen to be sisters. Their content took the platform by storm, particularly a video of E Lockhart's We Were Liars, which became one of their greatest successes. Their account now has 286.1k followers with 8.5 million likes (Flood, 2021).

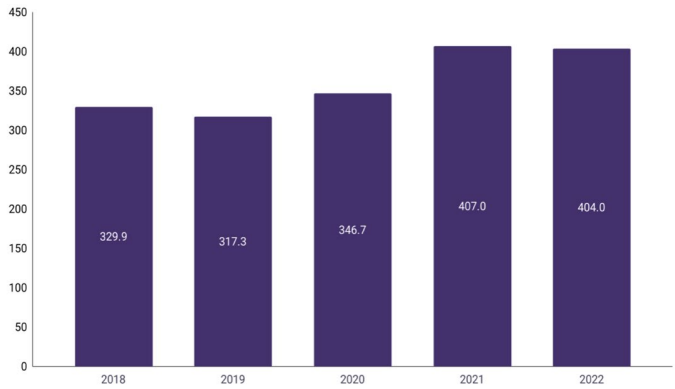

Figure 1: Fiction book sales by year (million unit sold)

In recent years, the rise of BookTok has had a profound impact on the book market, particularly in the fiction genre. Based on a report by WordsRated, fiction books have dominated book sales, accounting for over 52.88% of all print book sales in the US. The sales of the category soared from 317 million units sold in 2019 to 404 million units in 2022, indicating a significant growth of 22.4% over the last five years (Curcic, 2023).

Following this, the sales revenue of fiction books increased by 18.9%, reaching a total of $10.03 billion in 2021. The sales generated by children and young adult fiction books amounted to $4.31 billion, whilst adult fiction novels accounted for $5.72 billion in revenue. These figures reflect a significant shift in consumer preferences, with BookTok driving substantial revenue for the publishing industry (Curcic, 2023).

Moreover, an important facet of the influence of BookTok lies in its role in popularising backlist titles due to the numerous recommendations and reviews by content creators. This newfound interest in backlist titles has given authors a new opportunity to showcase their talents and gain more fans.

Aside from the fact that Colleen Hoover's books have undeniably been among the alltime bestsellers on BookTok, many other backlist titles have also made a profound impact. For instance, They Both Die at The End by Adam Silvera (2017), We Were Liars by E. Lockhart (2014), have been a constant favourite among content creators and trending topics on TikTok (Zarroli, 2021).

A survey conducted by Statista in early 2021 examined the reading habits in the United States between 2019 and 2021, revealing the significant impact of BookTok on reading interest. Among the age group from 18 to 29, there was a 2% increase in book readership, rising from 81% to 83% (Watson, 2022).

Additionally, in another recent poll conducted in May 2023, approximately 48% of TikTok users in the United States reported that they have been reading more books due to BookTok's influence. Meanwhile, 62% of TikTok users agreed that they have read books recommended on BookTok, resulting in 60% increase in their overall reading activities. Thus, the statistics demonstrated a strong correlation between BookTok and increasing reading engagement (Book Riot, 2023).

The impact of BookTok extends beyond the US, reaching countries like Malaysia, where digital book borrowing has seen a significant uptick. The Malaysia's National Library (PNM) reported a sharp increase in digital book borrowing during March 2020, from around 15,000 to nearly 40,000 (Nur Syuhada Nordin, 2023).

The burgeoning popularity of #BookTok Malaysia, with its impressive 173.4 million followers as of May 9, attests to the continued vitality of the reading culture in Malaysia. This social media platform not only facilitates the promotion of books, but also offers a convivial and engaging means of reviewing the latest literary offerings on the market.

Methodology

The main aim of this study is to investigate the phenomenon known as BookTok and its influence on the evolution of literary culture and publishing patterns. This objective will be accomplished by employing qualitative interviews performed with two individuals who are active members of the BookTok community. The selected respondents, aged 23 and 29, represent the dynamic group of adults actively engaging in the community. Through this interview, the viewpoints from both the content creator (informant 1) and readers (informant 2) provided a comprehensive understanding of the community's development and its profound influence on the users. Interviewing a content creator and a reader can certainly provide valuable insights into the BookTok phenomenon and its influence on literary culture and publishing patterns. Content creators can offer perspectives on the creative process, trends, and the impact of BookTok on their content and audience engagement. On the other hand, readers can provide insights into how BookTok has influenced their reading habits, book choices, and overall reading experience.

Together, both perspectives offer an extensive overview of the BookTok phenomenon, thereby enhancing our understanding of this leading platform. The primary focus of this study encompasses three research aims. To achieve these purposes, a comprehensive analysis of the data collected from the informants was conducted employing thematic analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Influence of BookTok towards the literary culture in the youth-focused community

Both informants, ages 23 and 29, align with the predominantly young demographic in the BookTok community. As indicated by the age representation of these findings, this community is primarily comprised of young adults. In addition, the findings revealed that informant 1 characterised her interactions with members of similar age range, suggesting that BookTok provides a platform for like-minded young adults to engage actively. On the other hand, informant 2 described how she encountered the community through a peer of the same age. This supports the conclusion that BookTok is a significant community and platform for this age group.

Moreover, the findings suggest that the community is dominated by women, as both informants were female, underscoring the predominance of women within the BookTok community. This aligns with the observation that BookTok has a substantial number of female members, indicating their active participation and influence in shaping the literary culture. The preponderance of women in the community suggests that BookTok is a safe space for female readers and content creators to convey their shared interests for books. Thus, the aforementioned findings demonstrated that BookTok is a youth-focused community where the majority of BookTok users are young women.

Informant 1 highlighted the sense of community she experiences among BookTok content creators.

> "Being a content creator on BookTok has been an incredible experience where I am able to connect with like-minded book lovers within the community. We often come together to discuss our favorite books and share our honest thoughts."

Informant 2 mentioned how she discovered BookTok through her peers.

> "I've seen tons of book recommendations appeared on my FYP TikTok. But the moment when BookTok really caught my attention was when a friend of mine posted her review of "The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo" on Twitter. Curious about the hype, I started exploring into trending books on TikTok, and that's when I came across "They both Died at the End".

Benefits of BookTok

The informants unanimously agreed that BookTok has significantly contributed positive impacts on the literary community and book sales. One of the highlights interviewed by both informants are the significant increase in the number of books on their "To-Be-Read" (TBR) lists. Through countless reviews and interesting content, both informants have added numerous books to their Goodreads lists. Informant 1 mentioned adding around 50 books, while informant 2 has a total of 281 books on their reading list.

This highlights the remarkable influence of BookTok in introducing users to a wide range of book recommendations, consolidating numerous reading suggestions in one accessible

platform. The ability of this community to recommend a vast variety of books has proven to be beneficial, enhancing their reading experiences and broadening their literary horizons.

Informant 1 highlights the extensive influence that BookTok has on expanding her 50-reading list.“My bookcase is practically filled with books, and I can confidently say that at least 50 of them were added to my TBR list by countless recommendations and promotions from various content creators, both locally and internationally. It has been a game changer for me, as the contents provided me with endless book recommendations that align with my interests and preferences. With other content creators introducing me to popular bestsellers and such, I was exposed to a wide range of genres, from romance to thrillers.”

While Informant 2 shared the extent of her reading list currently comprises over 281 books.

> “Whenever I come across an interesting book recommendation, I make sure to add it to my Goodreads list. My reading list has grown to 281 books, and I’m constantly on the lookout to adding more trending books.”

Provides a community for book enthusiasts to share their opinions.

The findings indicate that both informants value BookTok as a platform that fosters a sense of community, allowing them to share their opinions and connect with like-minded peers. As a content creator, informant 1 has observed how her posts encourage interactions among her audience through the comments section.

> “Switching from Bookstagram to BookTok has been a game-changer! I like how we can gush over our favourite characters and even have friendly debates about trending books. It’s like a virtual hub where we can freely share our love for literature, and it’s amazing to see how my content resonates with my audience and sparks conversations in the comments.”

> “Not only that, but the platform also goes beyond just the comments section. Some of my followers would even reach out to me privately to discuss my book recommendations, content insights and other related topics. The sense of community on BookTok is truly special. It’s a place where we feel safe to have honest conversations and connect with other members, including readers and fellow content creators.”

On the other hand, informant 2 expressed how she enjoys conversing with others about her favourite author, Colleen Hoover. These observations highlight the fact that BookTok serves as a natural haven for book lovers to freely share their thoughts, engage in friendly debates, and create meaningful connections with others who share similar interests. The platform’s interactive nature not only promotes healthy discussions but also strengthens the sense of community among users, ultimately contributing to a thriving literary culture.

Easier to discover book sales, book fairs, and other book-related events.

Based on the insights by both informants, it becomes evident that BookTok serves as a convenient and effective platform for both readers and marketers alike. Informant 1 shared her experience of attending various book fairs and witnessing the enthusiasm of book lovers who carry large bags even suitcases to accommodate their purchased books. Some attendees may be personal shoppers, while others are passionate readers eager to get their hands-on discounted books.

Similarly, informant 2 expressed her excitement in participating in book sales, always on the lookout for more affordable books. The platform’s promotion of book sales provides a valuable opportunity for users not only enhance the exposure of such events to a wider audience but also create an enthusiastic community that actively engages in these sales. As a result, Booktok emerges as a key advantage in promoting book sales, benefiting the publishing industry.

> "It's no wonder that this community greatly aids in promoting numerous book sales and events organised by the publishing industry. As an active member, I'm always excited to participate in book fairs and search for discounted books based on the recommendations I came across on BookTok."

Preferences towards BookTok

The interview findings revealed a common preference for romance novels among both informants. Romance, along with fantasy and historical fiction is a widely trending genre on the platform. The vast number of reviews and exposure that romance books received proved beneficial for the respondents as they discovered numerous titles to add to the TBR lists. This trend further emphasizes the popularity of young adult fiction, especially romance, mainly attributed to its predominantly young adult audience. Romance fiction is a genre that's flourishing both in terms of popularity and profits, and it's doing so on a global scale. By offering a powerful counter-narrative to what's often portrayed in the media, this genre has become a force to be reckoned with. (Fletcher, 2018)

According to interviews with the informants, both of them evaluate book covers prior to making their selections. Informant 1 typically chooses a book based on its written narrative, concentrating on its content and plot. Informant 2 has a distinct preference for book covers and also takes the genre of the book into consideration when selecting. In conclusion, it was evident from the interviews that BookTok has a significant impact on younger generations of consumers. The results suggest that romance is a popular genre, especially among women. Both sources agreed that BookTok positively impacts the dissemination of information about book events, resulting in an ever-growing to-be-read (TBR) list for avid readers. According to Redden B. (2022 The rise of BookTok, a social media platform where users share videos of themselves discussing books, has had a significant impact on book sales. It has become a major influencer in the literary world, prompting bookstores to take note of the platform's popularity and create #booktok displays in store and feature lists of books trending on BookTok in their online stores.

One of the contributing factors to the observed trend can be attributed to the influence of the TikTok algorithm, which associates the success of a content creator with the performance of their individual posts. The 'For You Page' on TikTok offers users a personalized stream of content based on their viewing, liking, and sharing habits, with the algorithm overlooking the popularity of the content creator. Consequently, users are incentivized to participate in viral trends and practices on TikTok rather than focusing on developing a consistent personal brand (Abidin, 2020).

Conclusion

In summary, BookTok has emerged as an influential and revolutionary community on TikTok, reshaping the publishing industry and nurturing a vibrant literary culture. The community has shown its efficacy as a marketing tool for creators of content, publishers, and writers through the use of its algorithm, social media influence, and captivating content. This research study has elucidated the different achievements of BookTok and its impact on readers and the literary domain.

With the ongoing digitalization of the 21st century and the steady expansion of the publishing sector, BookTok has enhanced a broader audience and extended its worldwide impact, even to smaller nations. The growing acceptance of BookTok by industry experts highlights its potential as a significant and powerful platform that is set to have a lasting impact on the literary landscape. That being said, the statistical data and research findings gathered in this

study provide strong evidence in support of the ongoing growth of the platform, highlighting its significance in shaping the trajectory of literature and the publishing industry in the years to come.

In conclusion, it is evident that the outlook for BookTok is undeniably positive, as it continues to have a significant impact in the book community. With the platform's capacity to bring together a diverse and actively involved group of young people, this growth is anticipated to facilitate the development of more innovative and effective methods for promoting books, thereby encouraging a greater number of people to engage in the literary culture. This highlights the significant role that BookTok plays, proving to be a compelling and influential force in the publishing world.

Author's Declaration

This article has not been published previously, not under consideration for publication elsewhere. This publication has approved by all authors for publication and not be published elsewhere printed or electronically in the same form or in any other language without the written consent of the copyright-holder, which is Forum Komunikasi.

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