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## **Marketing Through Microcultures on Social Media: An Examination of BookTok and Independent Bookstores**

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MARKETING THROUGH MICROCULTURES ON SOCIAL MEDIA: AN  
EXAMINATION OF BOOKTOK AND INDEPENDENT BOOKSTORES

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Marketing

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## Introduction

Two of the primary uses of social media are sharing and communication. This can be sharing from users about something they enjoyed or sharing from businesses about a new product. Whatever this may be, both sides have found social media to be beneficial. Book lovers use social media to share their love of reading and bookstores use it to promote their businesses. On TikTok, a short video social media platform that rose in popularity, users went on it to share content about their latest reads and more book-related content. This side of TikTok is commonly referred to as “BookTok,” and it has had a profound impact on the publishing industry. For 2020, many of the digital marketing trends for the publishing industry have been traced back to BookTok (Dalrymple, 2022). At the time, many independent bookstores were faced with the difficulty of connecting and engaging with book lovers as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Many independent bookstores decided to join TikTok as a means of reconnecting with their target market. This community of book lovers on BookTok has greatly impacted the publishing industry, with books that are popular on BookTok appearing on bestsellers lists and showcased in many bookstores (Dalrymple, 2022). BookTok grew into an important group that surrounded books and reading, leading to its growth as a microculture with a significant influence on the publishing industry.

At their core, microcultures are the set of beliefs, ideas, interests, or trends that are not a part of mainstream society (Arkalgud & Partridge, 2020). Microcultures are called such not because of their physical size but rather their size in relation to society and what is considered to be the norm. Microcultures are often formed by consumers and often focus on a particular industry, leading to them being key influencers in said industry. Studying microcultures allows businesses to focus resources on understanding what consumers want and what could become the

next big thing. With the growth of the digital age, it has become easier for microcultures to meet and share their ideas not only with themselves but with larger crowds. Hence, bookstores focus on BookTok to find more information about readers in today's society.

TikTok is a video social media platform that originates from a lip-syncing platform called Musical.ly—which was bought by Chinese tech corporation ByteDance in 2017—and ByteDance's own video-based platform called Douyin, TikTok was first released to international markets in 2018 but has been in the Chinese market since 2017. TikTok videos range from fifteen seconds to ten minutes. There are many reasons why TikTok works as a successful platform to use in marketing, for instance, the ability to go viral with limited resources easily. Content marketing, influencer marketing, and word-of-mouth marketing have risen as top strategies on TikTok. Each of these tactics can bring value to the consumer in their own unique way while at the same time all working off of one another. The old days of newspaper ads are over as short, eye-catching videos take their place.

This thesis explores the role of microcultures in social media marketing, by focusing on the BookTok microculture and its significant role in the marketing strategies of independent bookstores. The research includes an examination of microcultures and their impact on businesses, the effectiveness of the key social media marketing tactics used on TikTok, what BookTok is, how independent bookstores engage with BookTok, and an interview with an independent bookstore on their uses of BookTok.

## I. Microcultures and Businesses

Culture, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is described as “the set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal

characteristic” (“Culture”, n.d.). For marketers, target markets often align with different cultures that exist within society, however, choosing specific cultures to market toward can be too general for some marketing campaigns. Many businesses fail to recognize the smaller cultures that arise within larger ones, and as a result, those smaller cultures do not get much attention. These small cultures are called microcultures. Microcultures are “the nuanced and particular sets of meanings that substantially sized groups of the most dominant consumers attribute to an idea, trend, or topic at any given point in time” (Arkalgud & Partridge, 2020). The marketplace can be divided into two parts then: microcultures and practices and ideas that are established to be cultural norms. What makes microcultures so unique is that they represent an idea that has not yet become a large part of the public eye, making it an optimal spot to take advantage of because very few businesses would have broken into those markets.

When businesses utilize microcultures, they are focusing on a consumer-led strategy instead of an industry-led one (Arkalgud & Partridge, 2020). Microcultures are often a small segment of consumers within a certain industry. If a business focuses on a product or an attribute of a product that is a part of a microculture then they can become more consumer-focused instead of allowing the industry to control how they operate. Microcultures can have an immense amount of power and influence over businesses if they choose to become consumer-focused because the actions the microcultures take can be reflected in business plans and operations (Arkalgud & Partridge, 2020).

A successful example of the power consumers can have to influence a brand is the microculture that grew around Velveeta. With the rising trend of organic and natural products, Kraft was struggling with their plans to drive sales for Velveeta. Diving into market research about the product and the consumers who purchase it, Kraft was surprised by their discoveries.

During their research, Kraft found a “hard-core group of Velveeta fans” (Yoon, Carlotti, & Moore, 2016). These fans were given the name superconsumers as research revealed that although they made up 10% of buyers, they “accounted for 30% to 40% of revenue and more than 50% of profits” (Yoon, Carlotti, & Moore, 2016). Without this consumer research, Kraft might have never found this microculture of fans who had such a strong influence over their profit for Velveeta. Having this information on the superconsumers, Kraft was able to remarket Velveeta to generate more than \$100 million in profits for their new products (Yoon, Carlotti, & Moore, 2016). They did this by engaging with the superconsumers, and learning about their uses and needs for Velveeta products. Velveeta superconsumers are an example of a microculture around the Velveeta brand and product. These fans engage with each other in a variety of ways, including sharing recipes and ideas, and even expressing their feelings about Velveeta in a very creative way through fanfiction on popular fanfiction sites like Wattpad and Fanfiction.net (Kelly, 2022). The benefit of engaging with brand microcultures goes beyond sales, Kraft is boosting their customer loyalty with Velveeta superconsumers by working with them to target them in their marketing campaigns and product launches, therefore, becoming an example of how businesses can utilize microcultures.

Many societal norms once started as microcultures and then grew in influence and power until society accepted them as a norm. Microcultures emerge as something new because people have beliefs, interests, trends, or ideas—intangible things—that are not mainstream in society and want to join with like-minded people. When microcultures form, they “[give] direction to—and indicate broader shifts that will happen in—the marketplace” (Arkalgud & Partridge, 2020). These small trends can become more and more popular until they become mainstream (Arkalgud & Partridge, 2020). Microcultures are constantly emerging and growing because society is

always on the move and often looking for the next big thing. What is considered to be a microculture one day can be part of mainstream society the next, but it is not always this way. For example, the fashion industry has trends that have become mainstream and others that have not. Something like high-rise jeans might be a microculture and then suddenly becomes mainstream, whereas trends like Emo fashion continue to remain a microculture and will likely stay that way instead of becoming mainstream.

In the digital world where online sharing has become one of the primary means of communication, members of microcultures no longer need to gather in physical groups. Consumers have the ability to create online communities to share and discuss their beliefs, interests, ideas, and more. These are important to market researchers because they can study the behavior behind the consumption process of consumers in these online communities (Kozinets, 2002). In the beginning of the digital era, online communities typically formed on boards, independent Web pages, lists, or multiuser chat rooms, with chat rooms usually providing more social information compared to the others (Kozinets, 2002). Boards are electronic bulletin boards that surround news, lifestyle, products, or services, typically centered around one topic and proving valuable to market research as a “consumer-based newsgroup” that surrounds their product, services, or that of a competitor (Kozinets, 2002). Web pages and webrings are the sites like Yahoo that “provide online community resources for consumer-to-consumer exchanges” (Kozinets, 2002). Social media has changed the way online communities can form and operate, making it easier for people to communicate. With social media, marketers can find these groups faster and no longer have to search the internet for online communities that exist on their own websites. A popular example of online communities on social media can be found on Facebook with Facebook groups. These groups are created by people about a specific topic, whether it be

the neighborhood they live in or people who love to bicycle, and they are used as a means of communication. Businesses can often ask to join the group and learn more about their products and brand through these consumers.

Analyzing microcultures, five patterns emerge that can be used to characterize them and predict how they might change the marketplace. The first pattern is the introduction or emergence of something brand new in the marketplace (Arkalgud & Partridge, 2020). For example, before the cell phone came out there was no way for people to call someone while they were out without using a pay phone or a landline somewhere else. Now, cell phones are an essential part of mainstream society. The second is taking old ideas and interpreting them in new ways (Arkalgud & Partridge, 2020). For example, repurposing an old t-shirt to create a tote bag interprets the t-shirt in a new way. It was not originally designed to be a tote bag but was made one anyway. This second pattern shows how microcultures can give products a new life simply through the meaning they attach to them. The third pattern focuses on the habits of consumers and when they form new habits around consumption that become normalized (Arkalgud & Partridge, 2020). For example, many cookie dough products are created to allow consumers to safely eat it raw because many consumers were eating it raw instead of cooking it first. The fourth pattern emerges when different cultures or classes of people take over a norm of a different group (Arkalgud & Partridge, 2020). For example, chefs and food lovers have started to take basic and common food and make it gourmet, thereby inserting them into a higher-class culture. This can be seen when these people take mac and cheese or hamburgers and re-making them to include high-end items like truffle oil or use special cooking techniques or tools like a homemade clay oven. Finally, microcultures can be recognized when they break down barriers (Arkalgud & Partridge, 2020). For example, the sharing economy breaks down barriers of



ownership, with the emergence of libraries of things, bike sharing, and car sharing in major cities. Knowing the characteristics of microcultures can help businesses recognize them and thus predict future trends in the market, giving them insights into how they can strategize to be successful in the marketplace.

### **The Importance of the Meaning of Consumer Goods in Microcultures**

An important part of microcultures is the symbolic capital associated with them. Symbolic capital can be described as a “resource that is acquired by exhibiting or drawing on particular forms of knowledge, competencies, or skills and interpersonal relationships that, like money, provide access to things” (Arkalgud & Partridge, 2020). This can then transform into other intangible and valuable assets like honor and prestige. At the core, symbolic capital is about the meaning that society gives something physical that then gives that item power and influence that it did not otherwise have. Consumption can thus be influenced by the symbolic capital of microcultures.

The meaning that consumers give to products and brands goes beyond utilitarian value because symbolic capital gives consumer goods the “ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning” (McCracken, 1986). When microcultures form around a product or brand, they give it meaning and value, which is why those consumers choose to attach to said product or brand. Meaning can be brought from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods to the individual consumer (McCracken, 1986). Meaning, for the most part, is not derived from the physical attributes of the product, rather, it is some intangible feature of the product that gives it meaning. Products become symbols and representations of beliefs and ideas. For example, in fashion, a certain clothing style can represent a certain belief. Gangs in the 50s would often wear leather jackets to feel cool and tough, thereby giving the leather jackets meaning. The physical

jacket does not make them tougher, but it is the meaning that is associated with the jacket that was given by these gang members that makes it tough. Therefore, if someone were to wear one, they would be perceived as tough. Products and consumer goods can be a physical representation of meaning for a microculture and because of this, they can also be drawn back to the different microcultures and cultural segments that gave them the meaning (McCracken, 1986). Marketing research can focus on microcultures to understand what consumers want and what generates meaning and value for them based on consumer goods.

### **Brand Pages and Online Communities**

When looking to reach out and communicate with microcultures and online communities about their brand, many businesses find that consumers have created brand fan pages. These brand fan pages that exist within online communities provide a way for businesses and marketers to interact directly with consumers without the need to hide (De Vries, Lisette, et al, 2012). It can be a great way to form connections and gather valuable intel because these consumers are heavily involved in the business' brand. Businesses can also take the extra step to create their own online communities for consumers and microcultures to communicate and learn from them.

One example of a successful brand community is LEGO Ideas, created by LEGO. Originally perceived as a children's toy brand, LEGO has changed tactics to grow the microculture of adult fans of the brand. LEGO Ideas was originally created to support Adult Fans of LEGO, or AFOL, with the goal of sharing the love of building and creating with LEGO products (Lukey, n.d.). Now, it has over 1.8 million people who come from a wide range of ages. It has grown into a "hub for co-creation, innovation, and collaboration" (Lukey, n.d.). Taking this involvement from the community, LEGO has been able to launch fan-created products. This tailoring to the consumer has led the online community to be such a success. LEGO can share

communications with members of LEGO Ideas through blogs and learn first-hand knowledge of how consumers perceive LEGO and use the products.

Microcultures provide valuable insight into consumer behavior and consumption patterns. Marketers can gather this information on consumers using online communities, social media, and many other ways. The trends that emerge within microcultures can be spread more efficiently and effectively through social media and online communications. Microcultures can change the industry in the blink of an eye. Social media offers a unique form of communication and learning for businesses about different microcultures, especially the ones that take rise quickly because of social media trends. Therefore, marketers have the opportunity to research these microcultures on social media. Microcultures wield power and influence over marketers because innovation starts with the consumer when businesses focus on studying microcultures, especially the ones that have a presence on social media.

## II. Social Media Marketing

Social media marketing has evolved over the years and is used primarily as a means of direct communication between brands and consumers. Creativity, originality, and engagement are just some of the foundations for what makes for a strong and well-executed marketing plan. Three key tactics in businesses' social media marketing campaigns include content marketing, influencer marketing, and word-of-mouth marketing.

Content marketing is a marketing strategy that utilizes focused, valuable, and attractive content like graphics and videos to attract a target audience and it is "a powerful instrument for creating product engagement" (Dewi, 2021). With the rise and fall of Covid-19, businesses have had to adapt to the changes and restrictions imposed on society, although, one positive that

businesses were able to see afterward was how “people are looking for value, respect, and personalization” (Content Marketing Evolution in 2021, 2021) when it comes to resonating with advertisements. Through the creation of new content to push consumers on social media, businesses can increase their engagement.

TikTok’s format makes it a great fit for content marketing. Content that focuses on short videos with quality information, as well as stories and GIFs, resonates better with audiences today, generating revenue for marketers (Content Marketing Evolution in 2021, 2021). Customer engagement and customer value are linked together on TikTok and understanding this can help businesses increase brand and product engagement on TikTok. A study on customer engagement and customer value on TikTok found that having creative content that speaks for a company’s brand and reaching out to customers in an individual manner—rather than reaching out to a larger segment—allows for a positive impact on customer engagement and customer value (Dewi, 2021). TikTok allowed for an emotional connection between businesses and consumers during a time when an in-person connection was not available. It continues to allow this connection to grow as well as giving the consumers opportunities to engage with businesses.

Content marketing does not just stop at the business level; user-generated content, or UGC, allows people to share and create their own content and this has become a large part of TikTok. It allows users to directly interact and engage with products or support brands (Geysler, 2021). TikTok does not restrict people from expressing their thoughts about brands and products through the videos they create and share about them. UGC is a larger part of TikTok since people have turned to TikTok as a means of self-expression and a desire to interact with others, leading to a large number of user-generated content about products and businesses to be created and shared (Dewi, 2021).

Influencer marketing has been widely used across social media marketing and has especially found a presence on TikTok. Influencers are people “with a large and engaged follower base on social media platforms” (Haenlein et al., 2020) and they emerge due to reaching the right audience, encouraging them to follow them, and working hard to be known—not just riding on the chance to go viral. Influencers form a relationship with their audience, leading their audience to feel like they can trust the influencer’s input. Influencers can be used as a spokesperson to increase awareness of a brand or product for a business.

Influencer marketing and social media are inherently intertwined, as influencers need social media for exposure and social media reaches a part of its appeal through influencers (Haenlein et al., 2020). With the use of influencers, businesses can further increase their reach on social media. However, it is important to remember there is more to influencer marketing than asking someone to make a post. Businesses need to incorporate many factors like the influencer’s own brand image, their relationship with their audience, the communication channels used to find success with influencers, and the overall message that will be sent with the influencer for the business (Haenlein et al., 2020). There are a lot of choices that factor into the decision to use influencers but supporting and promoting brands remain key (Pophal, 2021a). A large number of firms are planning to increase their budgets for influencers, dedicating around 10% of their marketing budgets to it and as of 2020, “influencer marketing represents a \$10 billion industry” (Haenlein et al., 2020).

Influencer marketing has become a key tool to use on TikTok. The diverse and genuine environment on TikTok has allowed influencers to become popular through performances that are both relatable and accessible compared to those on Instagram who show an “Instagrammable,” or picture-perfect lifestyle (Abidin, 2021). The attention economy on TikTok

is a key factor for influencers to know because they need to reach their audience and know what is trending to get views. During the pandemic, intimacy and communication caused shifts for influencers and businesses (Abidin, 2021). Influencers have become increasingly popular on TikTok because they often “inspire, encourage, and motivate their audience” (Haileyesus, 2021). The natural feel of TikTok allows influencers to lean away from the “perfect” lifestyle seen on other social media platforms and instead move towards more genuine content through the use of storytelling and personalized disclosures (Abidin, 2021).

Word-of-mouth marketing is when a customer shares their experiences or thoughts about a business with another person. It is the most organic form of marketing because it is derived from the consumer experience, although, there are ways for a business to amplify their word-of-mouth marketing. However, it is considered to be one of the most untapped and inexpensive marketing channels because it is hard to master (Big Commerce, n.d). As one of the most valuable forms of marketing, word-of-mouth marketing is trusted above other types of advertising by 92% of consumers (McMillen, 2021). Therefore, the challenge for businesses is to get customers to speak positively about their experiences with the brand. That is why businesses launch certain campaigns to control what is being said and to boost buzz-worthy content.

Generating positive customer experiences is one of the best ways to ensure a business has positive word-of-mouth marketing. Businesses that want to do this need to spend more time forming connections with consumers to leave a lasting impact rather than merely collecting them just to have them (Whitler, 2019). Creating something buzzworthy about a brand is a great way to use word-of-mouth marketing; customer reviews and testimonials are also two tactics that can be utilized (McMillen, 2021) Customer reviews are especially important because 85% of

customers believe in customer reviews as much as they believe in personal recommendations (Big Commerce, n.d).

TikTok's community allows for word-of-mouth marketing to excel thanks to the algorithm and amount of information users share on the site. On TikTok, 58% of users persuaded someone else, like a family member or a friend, to go and purchase a product or item (Harsh, 2022). Due to the community on TikTok, businesses can get free advocates for their brand, not only increasing customer lifetime value but also gathering a larger pool of potential customers (Harsh, 2022). TikTok pushes users to engage with friends, influencers, brands, and other users on the platform whether it be by watching the video, liking it, commenting, or sharing it, which is why it works so well with word-of-mouth marketing.

Content marketing, influencer marketing, and word-of-mouth marketing are all intertwined, especially on TikTok. User-generated content is a form of word-of-mouth marketing because users create content about a business's brand, product, or service and then share it. The influencers are the ones that give their opinion of a business, and their followers are listening and spreading that even further. Influencer marketing is not always organic word-of-mouth marketing because they can be paid to create content about the brand, but it still generates conversations about the brand or product. When it comes to these strategies, around 70% of social media users found influencers as trustworthy as friends and family and around 85% of social media users trust UGC more than branded content (Big Commerce, n.d.) All three of these marketing tactics are connected, which is why all three of them are important and useful for marketers on TikTok.

## **The Growth of TikTok**

TikTok has become one of the fastest-growing social media platforms, with Figure 1 showing its rise in popularity since its international launch in 2018.

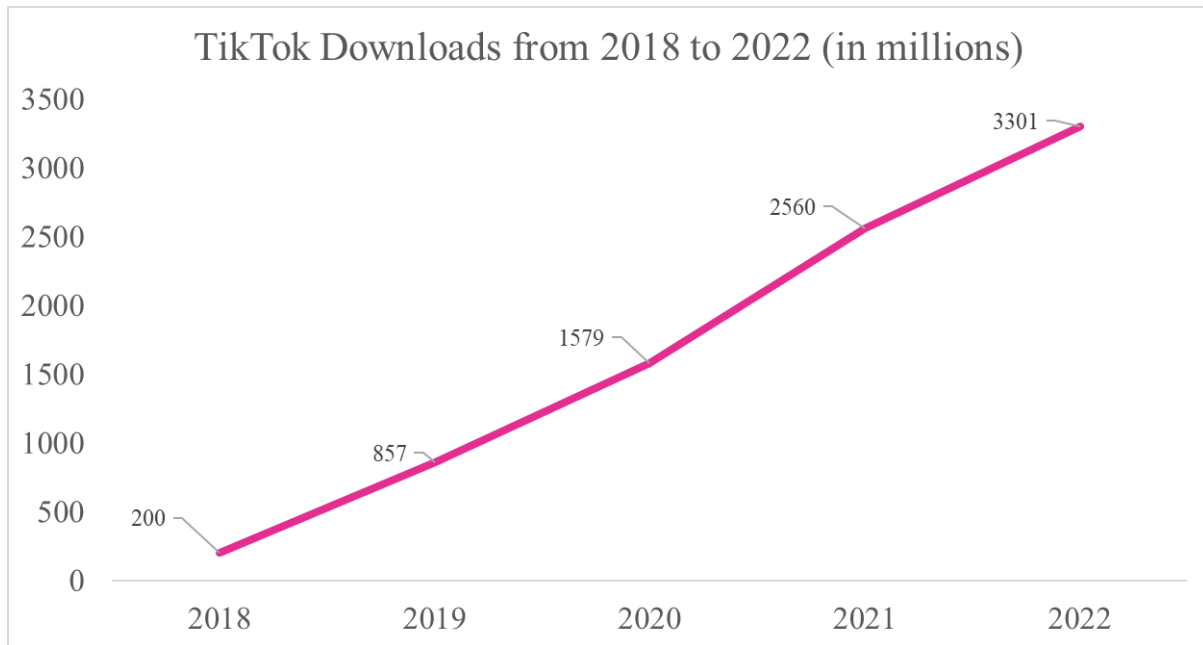


Figure 1: *TikTok Statistics - Everything You Need to Know [Aug 2022 Update]*, 2022

There are many reasons for the rise of TikTok, but three of them are the Covid-19 pandemic changing means of communication, the “For You” page, and the use of hashtags. The age demographic for TikTok users are primarily teenagers, but it has started to become more popular among adults, see Figure 2 for a full breakdown.



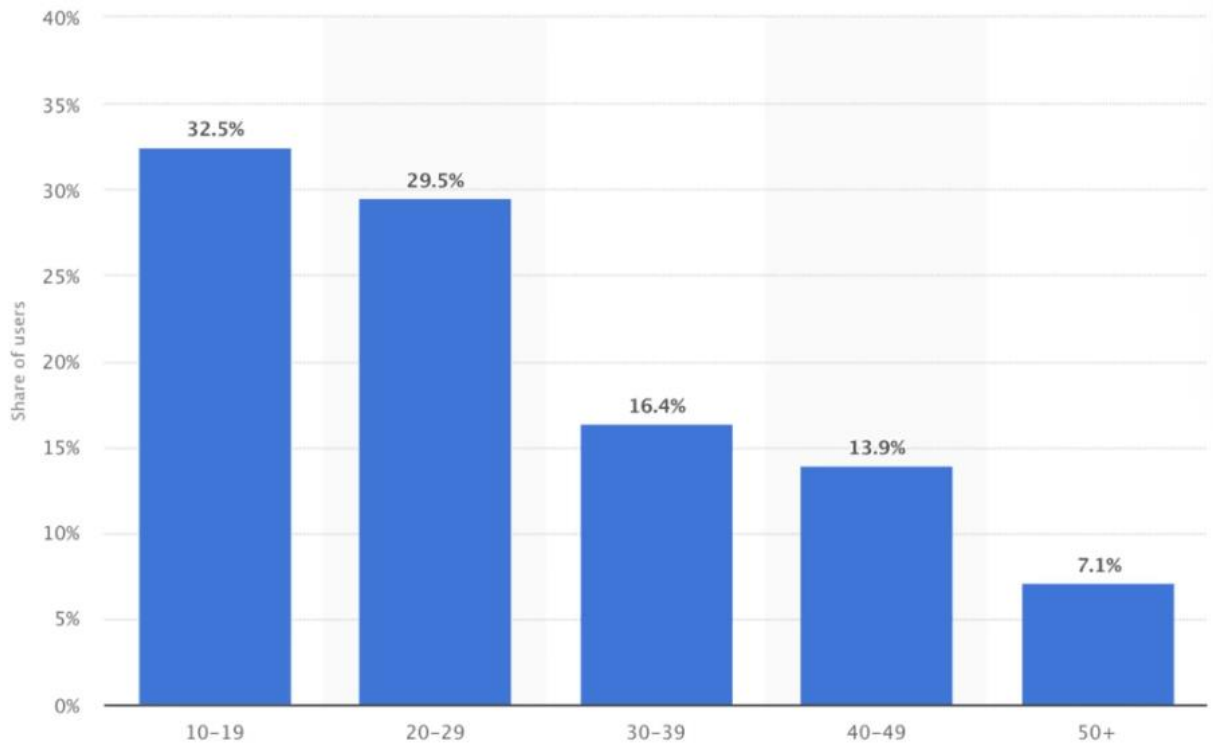


Figure 2: Age Range of TikTok Users (*TikTok Statistics - Everything You Need to Know [Aug 2022 Update]*, 2022).

In March 2020, when the coronavirus reached the United States and led to the country shutting down, there was a lot of confusion about what was going to happen now that the norm had drastically changed. No longer being able to communicate in person, people started to find other ways. Now being home and no longer having busy schedules, people found themselves with more spare time, leading to around 318 million installs of TikTok in quarter 1 of 2020 (Iqbal, 2022). Figure 3 shows the quarterly breakdown of TikTok downloads.

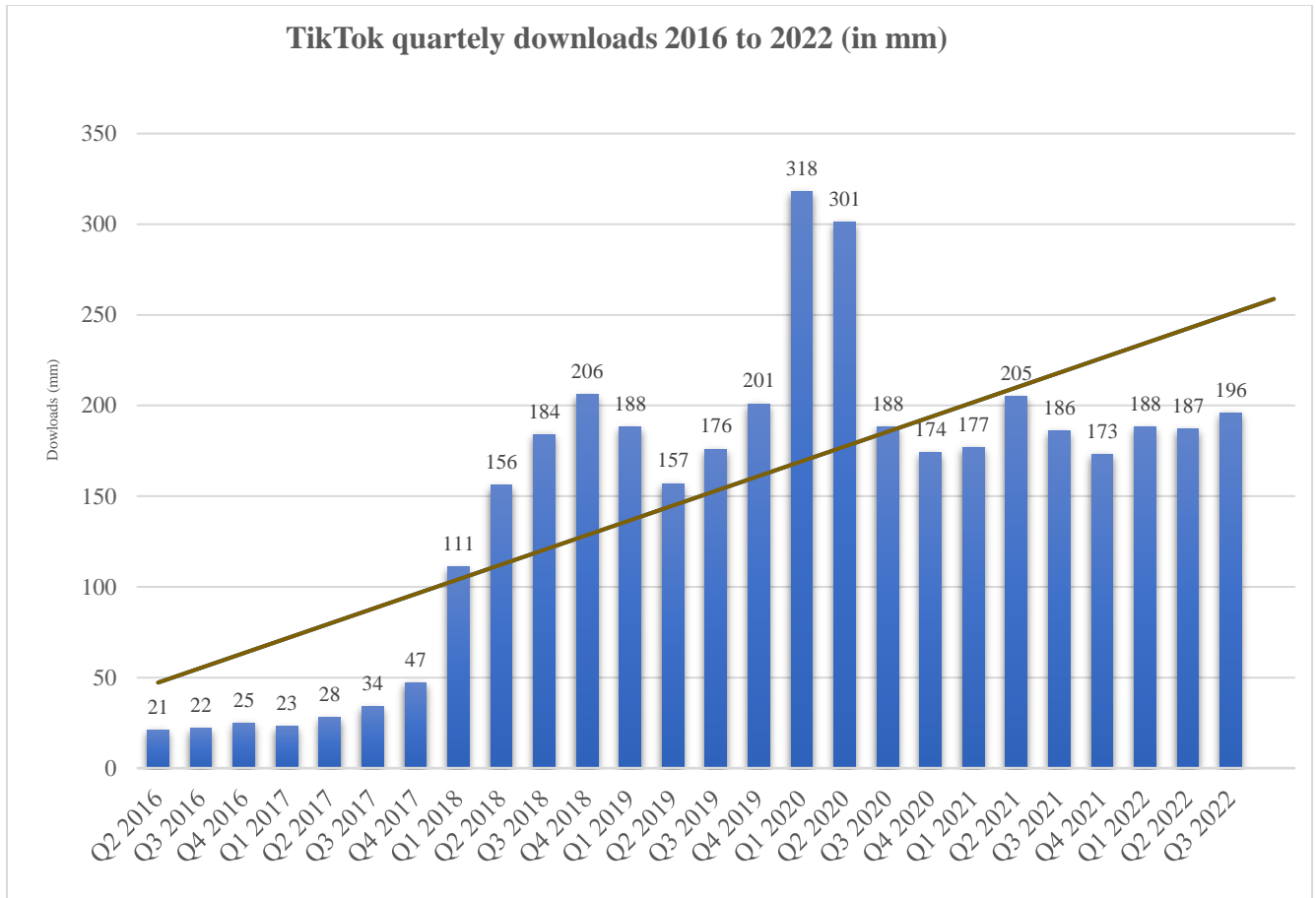


Figure 3: TikTok Quarterly Downloads

However, there are many reasons why people use TikTok and other social media platforms, not just boredom. A study examining personality traits and user motivation on TikTok—specifically the motivating factors and key personality traits behind the use of TikTok—found that “social media users consume or watch TikTok for escapism, social interaction and archiving purposes” (Omar & Dequan, 2020). These users wanted to escape from the reality of everything going on, but they also wanted to interact and engage with people.

TikTok is used as a means of communication, which has further developed into many different forms of communication, and each form is used to achieve a different purpose. The six forms are comedic, documentary, communal, explanatory, interactive, and meta (Schellewald,

2021). Each of these different forms of communication expresses the diverse nature of TikTok and how it can be used to reach users. For example, a video that wanted to communicate something explanatory could be a tutorial video about how to use a certain product.

One of the unique aspects of TikTok is the “For You” Page, or the FYP. TikTok has a feature where “each user views an individually-curated home feed” (Battisby, 2020). The algorithm behind the feed works to show the users videos TikTok believes will interest them. The content users watch is studied, and “the platform selects content it deems both interesting and highly engaging for each unique user, and places that content within the “For You” Page (Battisby, 2020) to fully develop the home feed. The FYP allows creators to get in front of audiences based on these factors since TikTok’s algorithm does the work and outputs videos for users. Knowing what audios and hashtags are trending can also help a TikTok user to have their video appear on other’s FYP because the algorithm includes factors such as “personal settings (i.e., language, country, device), video information (i.e., hashtags, captions, sounds, genre), and user interactions (i.e., the types of videos you interact with, accounts you follow, who you engage with)” (Battisby, 2020).

Hashtags are used on a variety of social media platforms as a means of finding and sorting information about a theme or specific content. For example, #BookTok is the hashtag used for book-related content on TikTok and it can be used to represent that side of TikTok. There are many different sides to TikTok, meaning there is a diverse culture on the app. As explained, people use it for varied reasons and the rise of TikTok has allowed all these reasons to grow and develop within the app. This helps to create strong engagement with certain categories, for example, if people go on there for fashion tips or cooking videos, they will be more likely to interact with hashtags related to those topics.

In response to the popularity of TikTok, competing social media platforms have created similar styles of short video elements. Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and Snapchat Spotlight are just a few. However, none of these have achieved the fame that TikTok has. According to internal Meta research, “Instagram users cumulatively are spending 17.6 million hours a day watching Reels, less than one-tenth of the 197.8 million hours TikTok users spend each day on that platform” (Neill, 2022). Despite both Instagram Reels and TikTok having similar layouts and functions—short videos that users can scroll through with ease and interact with—TikTok still comes out on top because of the community and active environment it has. The popularity, use of hashtags, the FYP, and the engaging atmosphere are some of the primary features of TikTok that make it stand out compared to its competitors and make it so viable for businesses.

### III. BookTok: a TikTok Microculture

TikTok as a social media platform has allowed many microcultures to rise to gain a voice within their respective industries. The unique features of TikTok allow for the sharing of information, ideas, and other content to be easily accessible to others. Microcultures especially benefit from this because they represent ideas, beliefs, and emerging trends within society. The use of hashtags and the algorithm of TikTok itself allows for different sides to emerge where subcommunities and microcultures can congregate. These microcultures are not only able to communicate with others who are a part of it, but also able to communicate with the enormous crowd of users on TikTok. One specific case of a rising microculture on TikTok shaping its respective industry is BookTok.

#### **Book Content on Social Media**

BookTok refers to the section of TikTok that book lovers, bookstores, authors, and publishers use for their book-related content. It is a side of TikTok and a microculture that has become popular primarily due to book lovers who post user-generated content about the books they love and enjoy. These TikTokers wanted to find a place where they could share their thoughts and feelings about books and other related content (Cortez, 2021). These fans form a microculture around specific genres and other book-related content. Reading itself is a widely enjoyed hobby, however, the content that is seen on BookTok primarily focuses on young adult novels, contemporary romance novels, fantasy novels, and similar genres. Microcultures need some form of symbolic capital to form around, and, in this case, it is books. The rise of BookTok is impacting the publishing industry by increasing the sales of certain books that go viral on it. To get a glimpse of its impact, Bloomsbury Publishing reported a sales increase and a 220% rise in profits, attributing part of it to BookTok (Wiederhold, 2022).

Social media has had a significant impact on the sale of books, but TikTok is not the only social media platform that is used for promotion and marketing. Fans and microcultures have been using social media, online chats, and other online resources as a means of communicating with one another since the internet came about and before then microcultures existed as physical groups or just ideas and beliefs people had (De Vries, Lisette, et al, 2012). Although BookTok has promoted and increased sales and attraction for many books, it is not the first time book lovers have carved a part of social media out for themselves (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021). They have used Instagram, also referred to as Bookstagram, and YouTube, or BookTube, for many years now, but each platform is unique and is used in separate ways. Where YouTube is often used for lengthy and detailed videos about books, TikTok is used for short and attention-grabbing videos (Delemos, 2021). Instagram is often used to post aesthetic pictures of books and

book-related content (Delemos, 2021). Influencers on each platform also use diverse ways to attract readers, especially when it comes to recommending books to read. Although all these other platforms are utilized, nothing else seems to grab the readers the way TikTok does and get them to act and purchase more books (Harris, 2021).

For example, Christine Riccio, a popular YouTuber, or BookTuber, who has around 429K subscribers, released a 12-minute-long video on the book *The Toll* by Neal Shusterman about her in-depth analysis of the book (polandbananasBOOKS, 2019). An example of a book recommendation on TikTok shows the creator, Vanessa, her handle being @vanessaamanrique, talking about *A Dance of Thieves* by Mary E. Pearson in one minute, highlighting key features of the book and why someone should read it (Vanessa <3, 2021). Comparing these two videos, the TikTok is shorter and straight to the point, whereas the YouTube video is more detailed. Regarding Instagram, book recommendations are often artsy pictures of the book and have a brief description in the comments, as seen on Bridey Morris's Instagram page where she posts an aesthetically pleasing picture of the book *Defy the Night* by Brigid Kemmerer and comments on her excitement about the book to prompt the audience to read it (Morris, 2021). Each of the different platforms has resulted in different formats and ways of reaching out to audiences. However, the short video format, as mentioned, is rising because it is “quick, educational, and attention-grabbing” and therefore, it has been working the best to increase popularity with certain books and genres (Pophal, 2021b).

### **The Growth of BookTok**

On TikTok, the use of hashtags is a crucial element in gaining views, and we can chart the growth of BookTok by looking at the growth in use of its hashtag. BookTok's hashtag—#BookTok—had around 85.1 billion views as of October 2022 and it has an array of videos

concerning the subject of books and reading. The use of the BookTok hashtag has grown exponentially over the past year, as depicted in Figure 4.

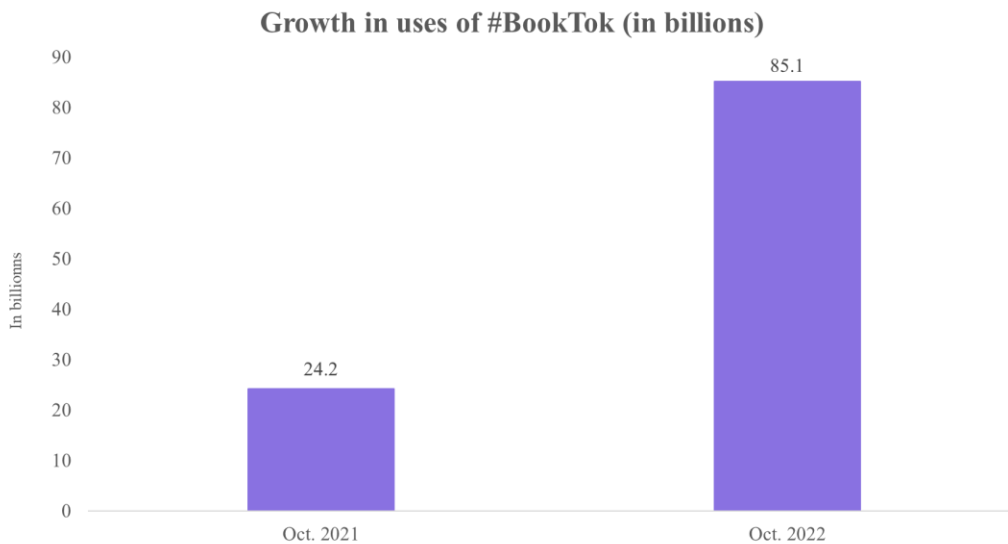


Figure 4: Growth in Uses of #BookTok from TikTok

This rise in popularity is due to book lovers posting and sharing organic content about what books to buy, the reasons why they love certain books or characters, and more. Businesses have recognized BookTok as a microculture and have adapted to respond in a consumer-focused way instead of pushing paid advertisements on the platform. That is why many publishers and bookstores have found creative ways to market and use TikTok, from reaching out to influencers and sending them copies of books to read and promote to making fun videos about their books based on current trends (Cortez, 2021). Users of BookTok have become aware of its popularity and influence, and many have even created TikToks about it.

The force of BookTok has paved the way for a change in the publishing industry and a change for book lovers and their consumption patterns. With the Covid-19 Pandemic, people were forced to stay at home, changing the daily life of many people. BookTok allowed for a

digital space where book lovers could congregate and talk about books without having to leave their homes and along the way, users “found solace in the unity the platform could provide within what is otherwise a solitary hobby” (Wiederhold, 2022). What was originally only seen as an individual activity was now able to be brought together by TikTok, allowing the microculture to grow. Talking about books and sharing content on them is not a novel idea that started with BookTok, however, this microculture did get a revamping and a new spin with the use of TikTok. This new interpretation paved the way for users to interact with books in a new way, which ultimately led to BookTok and specific books going viral. One such case is *We Were Liars* by E. Lockhart, which had “sold more than 308,000 copies since the start of 2021” and had gone back to press over 24 times since November 2020 (Stewart, 2021).

### **A Look into the Content on BookTok**

Based on research on BookTok, these videos are often very diverse, some of them being informational and others being for pure enjoyment. BookTok TikToks include book recommendations, comical skits about characters, fan art for books, reactions to reading books, general thoughts about reading, cosplays for characters from books, and so much more. Hashtags help sort content for users to find, therefore, different hashtags can represent different content. Some of the popular content on BookTok can include specific character types like faeries and feature popular tropes—a trope being a plot device or character device that is commonly used in stories—like enemies to lovers. This type of content would then be posted with #BookTok, #enemiestolovers, and #faeries to help each video find the right audience.

Diving further into what might pop up on someone’s FYP who is a part of BookTok, it is important to remember the information behind TikTok’s algorithm that feeds people videos that



are trending, they are interested in, and more. Below are three examples of TikToks that represent typical content and how each represents different parts of BookTok and its success.

The first TikTok is by @abejareads and is a comical video that says, “when you just read the most intimate, scream-inducing, world shattering love confession and you have to remind yourself that men like that don’t really exist” (bianca 🇺🇸, 2022). What makes it even funnier is the audio she paired with the video says, “reduce your expectations to zero” (bianca 🇺🇸, 2022). The hashtags she included are #booktok, #bookclub, #bookmen, #bookworm, and #readersoftiktok. This BookTok user has around 33.5K followers and often creates funny videos like this but also creates videos about her reactions while reading and videos about what books she has read during certain months. This video is not about a specific book but still falls under BookTok because she is sharing her experiences and feelings about reading, encapsulating the diverse nature of the content that is created. Since the video is not about a specific book, she also keeps her hashtags generic instead of using ones that would include a trope or character from the book.

Another TikTok example is by @rosesareread\_ and it is a video of the character Oscar from the TV show *the Office* dancing to an audio clip of *Karma* by Taylor Swift. The text for the TikTok reads “Me at 2:45am when a man in a romance book leans against the door with his arms crossed and says “oh yea?” (Mary 🇺🇸📖, 2022). Mary has around 21k followers on TikTok, giving her a wide audience, but following certain trends can help her increase that. This is an example of how people can jump on trends quickly because her caption is “i love this trend lol” (Mary 🇺🇸📖, 2022). The hashtags she uses also correlates to the video because she is talking about a romance book, so she uses #booktok, #romancebooks, and #booktropes as some of her

hashtags for the video. Creating content for different trends that arise helps the trends to go viral and the likelihood of the video that someone created that follows the trend to gain a lot of views, as many of her videos vary in likes from 100k to 10k, but this one got 1.6 million likes. If a user goes to the sound that is used, they can see how many TikToks have been created following this viral trend.

Finally, a third example is by @adeleighbreads and it is about the anticipated third novel in the *Crescent City* series by Sarah J Maas. Adeleigh only has around 1,800 followers, showing how regular people can create content just to share it and talk about it. The TikTok used a clip from the song *I'll Make a Man Out of You* from the movie *Mulan*. In the TikTok, she says “Look at me in the eye [right now] and tell me this isn’t going to be Aelins theme song in CC3 when everyone comes to her for help” (Adeleigh, 2022). Since this video talks about specific book series—the *Throne of Glass* series and the *Crescent City* series both by Sarah J Maas, she made sure she included not only them in the hashtags but also the characters from the series. She uses a total of 24 hashtags and some of them include #throneofglassseries #aelingalathynius, #houseofskyandbreath, and #booktok (Adeleigh, 2022). The large number of hashtags she uses can help her video appear in front of others who interact with all those hashtags.

These examples are just a brief glimpse into BookTok and all the diverse videos that are seen and diverse conversations. Content creators can have an enjoyable time creating these TikToks and it shows.

### **BookTok’s Influence on the Publishing Industry**

TikTok has led many books to become popular again throughout the pandemic and afterward. Book publishers and bookstores were unexpectedly met with surges of demand for

books that were backlisted—books publishers have printed less as a result of demand slowing over the years. They were unsure of what was going on until they hopped on TikTok and saw how these books were going viral (Stewart, 2021). Research has shown that sales for backlist titles that have trended on BookTok increased exponentially overall (Zara, 2022). These books were printed anywhere between one year ago to even ten years ago, but one thing that draws them together is TikTok resurging their popularity. Figure 5 shows the rapid increase of the sale of 20 backlisted books that were researched.

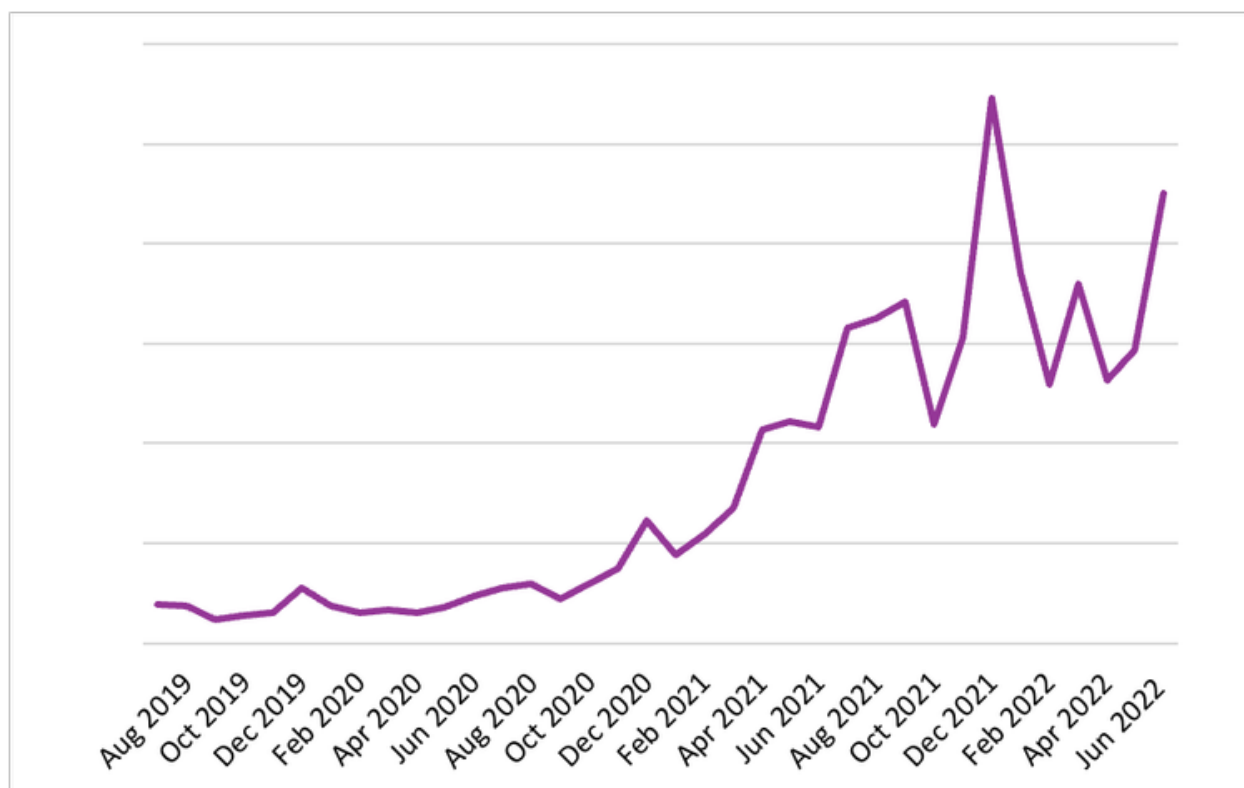


Figure 5: The Rise in Sales of Backlisted Novels as a Result of BookTok (Zara, 2022)

One case of a backlisted novel becoming popular again is *We Were Liars*, which was spoken about briefly above. It was first published in 2014 and during the summer of 2020, it boomed in popularity—surprising the author until her daughter explained it to her (Harris, 2021).

The novel's popularity was the result of TikToks being created depicting readers crying due to the sad and tragic ending (Harris, 2021). Since then, there has been a trend of "soul-crushing", "tear-wrenching", and "major tearjerkers" books going viral. In response to it, book publishers have been working fast to print more copies of these books, and bookstores have put up tables and endcaps displaying all the books that are going viral (Stewart, 2021). Other books that have become popular again include *It Ends with Us* by Colleen Hoover, *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller, and *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid (Stewart, 2021). It is not only sad books that have been trending on TikTok, other genres and tropes have shown to be immensely popular. In the TikTok by Vanessa about the book *Dance of Thieves*, the trope of enemies to lovers is mentioned early in the video since it attracts readers. These widely talked about and loved tropes and genres have been utilized to prompt readers to purchase and read books.

In summary, TikTok has allowed reading and book lovers to grow as a microculture by providing a social media platform for communication and awareness. The publishing industry has seen a tremendous change since the pandemic and since BookTok came about. Analyzing the different features that make up a microculture—specifically the fact that it is a present force that changes the mainstream future—it is evident that what once started as book lovers sharing content about books grew into a force that changed the publishing world. Reviews of books from people are no longer just a paragraph of text on an Instagram post or a long YouTube video, it can now be a short and engaging video that with the ability to go viral can now reach thousands of people organically. The elements of TikTok aided this expansion and businesses have since joined as a means of connecting to book lovers. Bookstores, publishers, and authors have all witnessed the impact and have worked to change their strategies to incorporate BookTok as a means of

communication and direct contact with book lovers. BookTok is an incredibly diverse and influential microculture that was created by book lovers and continues to shape the industry and pave the way for new ideas, stories, and strategies within the publishing industry.

#### IV. How Independent Bookstores are Making Use of BookTok

With this new rise and emergence of book lovers on TikTok, many bookstores have turned towards BookTok as a means of reaching and connecting to book lovers. There are many different ways that these bookstores have been able to make use of TikTok including promoting books, generating brand awareness, and simply making enjoyable videos about books they love. This use has taken a shift from how BookTok originally started, with users creating user-generated content, but it has not taken anything away from the charm of BookTok and it has not made it feel like these bookstores are simply on TikTok to sell books.

The Covid-19 Pandemic was a hard time for many independent bookstores as they struggled to overcome the challenges they faced (O'Brien, 2022). However, many independent bookstores were able to develop creative ways to protect themselves, one of which involved engaging with BookTok (O'Brien, 2022). As it grew in popularity, bookstores and publishers started to notice it more and realized it was a thriving community of readers. They wanted to get more involved in this community to regain that connection with readers to help their business. It was not until late 2020 and early 2021 that the publishing industry started to note just how much of an impact BookTok had on sales (Wiederhold, 2022). In one case, Simon and Schuster did not notice a bump in sales for the popular novel *It Ends with Us* by Colleen Hoover until late 2020, and then during the summer of 2021, the sales skyrocketed (Stewart, 2021). Book sales for independent bookstores were up 75% in the first quarter of 2021 when compared to the first quarter of 2020 (O'Brien, 2022). The sales were also 60% higher than pre-pandemic sales in

2019 (O'Brien, 2022). Despite the hardships of the pandemic, bookstores were able to find strength in BookTok to help them push through. With the Pandemic ending, BookTok has continued to grow beyond what anyone could have imagined and has flourished into a diverse and influential marketing phenomenon (Dalrymple, 2022).

Book publishers and bookstores have created accounts on TikTok to increase engagement with book lovers, monitor trends so they can act in accordance, and market and promote books. On these accounts, the publishers have created a variety of videos, such as Penguin Teen's TikTok posting a video and telling the audience "secret" information about books that will be coming out in the fall of 2022 (Penguin Teen, 2021) and Hot Key Books responding to the increase of popularity for *We Were Liars* by giving the audience a warning to stop reading the book because "people across the internet are sobbing their hearts out" after reading it (Hot Key Books, 2021). TikTok is used to promote and encourage users to buy and read certain books that the publisher or bookstore sells, but it also gives those who run the account creative liberty to make fun videos. The lively and friendly environment of TikTok allows for genuine interactions between readers and businesses that could not have started without the readers. In turn, it also allows for interactions between the microculture the fans created and the publishing industry. Book lovers have immensely impacted the industry and have caused bookstores and publishers to become more consumer-focused by incorporating BookTok into their marketing and business strategies (Dalrymple, 2022).

Looking at a few TikTok accounts of small bookstores, many of them did not join until 2021, as they were not aware of BookTok until bestseller lists in 2021 started to show atypical books and sales for backlists rose (Wiederhold, 2022). One bookstore, who happened to be struggling to keep *It Ends with Us* on their shelves because it was so popular, first heard about it

because someone told them they found the book on TikTok and they wanted to check it out (O'Brien, 2022). They then decided to look more into it and decided to use TikTok, especially the algorithm, to find “which titles are currently most popular in each genre and [curate their] shelves accordingly” (O'Brien, 2022).

Cupboard Maker Books is one example of many independent bookstores who joined BookTok. Their first video was published in March of 2021 introducing the bookstore to viewers by showing a video tour of the bookstore with music in the background (Cupboardmakerbookstore, 2021). At the time, the sound they were using was trending and the hashtags they used in the caption included #bookstore, #indiebookstore, #books, #bookworm, #booktok, and #book. This first video shows how bookstores have started to become part of the community of book lovers on TikTok. Currently, they have over 110k followers and over 2.4 million likes for all their videos.

BookTok has allowed for brand awareness for many of these small bookstores and a key tactic to use on BookTok is to make it their own by curating their account to be different. On the TikTok accounts for these bookstores, they need to show what makes them unique so they can stand out and gain more views and attraction through that (Gibbs, 2022). Cupboard Maker Books has grown on TikTok and has found a way to diversify from competitors by highlighting all the cats that live there. Their more recent videos show cats in the bookstore as well as all the content they create about books. Bookstores can better connect with book lovers by making a name for themselves and showing them their uniqueness. While larger bookstores like Barnes and Noble have joined TikTok, their use of TikTok is different from independent bookstores. Independent bookstores have used TikTok to promote their stores and offer customers a firsthand account of the shop, which larger chains would not need since they are all very similar (Rivera, 2021).

Bookstores can utilize BookTok for exposure from locals but also tourists who may have not otherwise heard of it (Rivera, 2021). It is easier for people to “stumble upon the store’s account” because of TikTok’s algorithm, which helps businesses’ brand awareness (Rivera, 2021).

By creating TikTok accounts, bookstores have created a two-way connection with book lovers. Not only are bookstores able to communicate with book lovers, but book lovers are also able to communicate with them. They can interact with TikToks by liking and commenting, can follow the brand’s account, and more. @kaylawiththebookproblem is a TikTok content creator and influencer with over 39.5k followers. On top of creating content about books she enjoys and authors she has met, she also has posted a few TikToks about local bookstores she has visited. One example is about her trip to a new romance bookstore called Meet Cute in San Diego, California. In the video, she voiceovers her trip and shows her excitement about visiting the store and what books she bought while she was there (kayla ❤️ #Booktok, 2022). The video has Meet Cute, the bookstore, tagged in the caption so her followers can now interact with the bookstore and learn more about it. A still from the TikTok is seen in Figure 6.



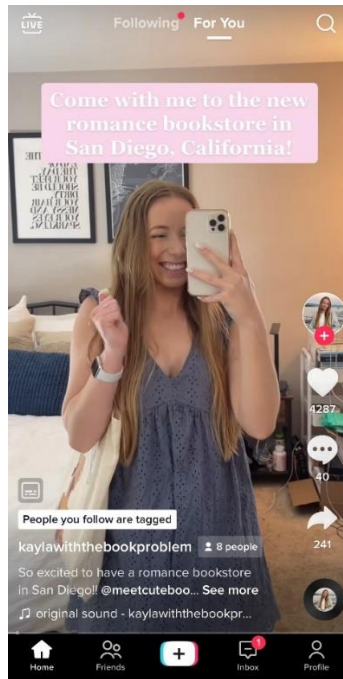
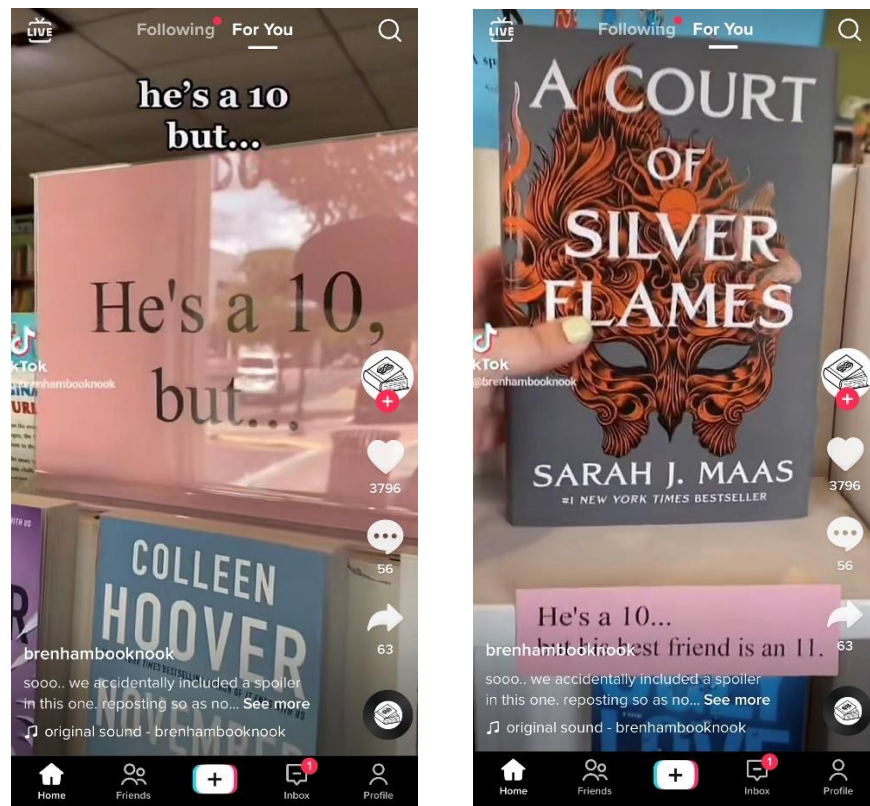



Figure 6 (kayla ❤️ #Booktok, 2022)

The Book Nook is an independent bookstore in Brenham, Texas that has been on BookTok since 2021, many of their TikToks are fun videos about the bookstore and books that utilize recent trends, sounds, and hashtags. One TikTok example from their account features books from the store that followed a current trend at the time. This video is about ranking and rating characters who “are a 10 but...” and would describe something about them that might lower their ranking. In the bookstore, they had a display shelf titled “He’s a ten but...” and gave short information about the characters in the books and their “but...” reason for each respective book. Some of the different books that they highlighted include *A Court of Silver Flames* by Sarah J Maas and this book was described as “he’s a 10...but his best friend is an 11” and *the Love Hypothesis* by Ali Hazelwood and that book description was “he’s a 10...but he doesn’t like pumpkin spice” (BrenhamBookNook, 2022). This video used a sound from a song that was popular at the time and only a few hashtags including #spoilers, #soSorry, #BookTok, and

#HesaTen. As seen, many small bookstores have created displays based on BookTok and have studied different trends to see what ones are popular so the TikToks they create can gain views. Figures 7 and 8 show stills from the TikTok showing the description of the bookshelf that is following the trend and an example of one of the book descriptions.



Figures 7 and 8 (BrenhamBookNook, 2022)

Another great example is from Schuler Books, an independent bookstore, and the video shows different employees finding recommendations for different genres including horror, children, young adult, and manga but the catch was they had to do it quickly, hence the name “speed recommending” (Schuler Books , 2021). It not only shows the different books the store has but also gives an inside look at the employees and how much they enjoy doing what they do. The sound was upbeat music and they used #booktok, #bookstore, #fyp, and #indiestore

for their different hashtags in the caption. Recommendations are a popular theme for TikToks for bookstores and this takes a creative and fun spin on a simple TikTok video idea. Figure 9 shows a still from the TikTok.



Figure 9 (Schuler Books 📖, 2021)

Hashtags and sounds that are trending are two tactics that are useful to increase exposure on TikToks and have been used by different independent bookstores. In the examples given, many of them utilize these tactics and also use a lot of the same core hashtags (#BookTok, #book, #fyp) that are popular and will help them get more views. Bookstores can generate more loyal customers as well as increase sales by creating accounts on BookTok and interacting with the community there (Rivera, 2021).

At one independent bookstore, who was willing to be interviewed for this thesis about their use of TikTok, the employee who runs their TikTok account first heard about BookTok in 2019. At the time of the interview, they had been working at the bookstore for around two and a half years as a bookseller. The owner of the bookstore reached out to them around a year ago to

see if they had an interest in revamping the TikTok account the bookstore had previously created that was not very active. The interviewee gladly accepted and has since taken on the mantle of TikTok manager. On top of running the TikTok account, they shelve books, help customers, and fill special orders. The owner saw “other bookstores using it on reels” and was motivated to use it to promote their products. The independent bookstore provides books for all ages and is a very community-based bookstore that offers fun events and is “friendly and welcoming.” Their goal with TikTok was to “make it more active” by “[interacting] with the comments and hashtags” to “make it a better place to promote their products.” Their first TikTok was published in mid-2020 and was an introductory video to the bookstore. It highlighted some aesthetic clips of books and the store itself. The video was accompanied by a soft pop song and the hashtags included were #books, #indiebookstore, #bookstore, #read, and #fyp. Since then, they have worked to create fun TikToks and increase engagement.

During the TikTok manager’s downtime, they work on researching trends and TikTok ideas on BookTok to create a TikTok video “every week or every two weeks.” They have a lot of events at the bookstore that they use TikTok to promote as well as create fun videos and promotional videos for books themselves. A typical video is created after researching “trends that overlap with BookTok trends and ones that other people have used in relation to books.” They have found that TikToks that show their faces and the people who work there have done well compared to others. The different hashtags they use include ones that are currently trending, are related to the sound, and are related to the store like #indiebooks. They “always like the comments and most of the time try to respond.” Engagement is important, as is connecting with the community, which is not only important for the bookstore but also for BookTok.

The microculture of BookTok has grown into a vast community that has a strong influence on the publishing industry. Bookstores have created displays for these popular books and have worked to ensure they have copies of the books in their stores as well. TikTok has become a pivotal social media platform for bookstores to generate sales and awareness. The community is creative and fun, which makes it easy for everyone to become a part of it. “I like BookTok, it’s a warm and welcoming environment on TikTok” is how the TikTok manager who was interviewed chose to describe BookTok when asked what they think of BookTok.

## V. Conclusion

TikTok has become an influential platform to communicate on, especially for microcultures. It has paved the way for changes in society and for microcultures to rise. BookTok is a useful example to see how microcultures have led to changes and trends within their industry. What started as book lovers creating content about their books grew into increases in profits and sales, especially in areas that the publishing industry could not have predicted. Such cases are the rise in sales of backlisted novels like *We Were Liars* and *It Ends with Us*. Now, bookstores, authors, and publishing houses have started to incorporate this into their marketing plans to seize the opportunity at hand. Independent bookstores have especially found the use of it to engage with the community and promote their books. On TikTok, these independent bookstores can widen their reach so more and more people can hear about them and support them. More often than not, they use fun and engaging videos to achieve these goals.

TikTok is an excellent way for independent bookstores to engage with book lovers. Content marketing, influencer marketing, and word of mouth marketing are all useful methods to use on social media platforms and, therefore, on TikTok, but not everyone has made a shift to using TikTok. TikTok’s unique platform and genuine environment are just a few of the reasons

for its success. It is a fun and engaging platform to increase reach across consumers to successfully market towards them, thus allowing businesses to have a more consumer-based focus. TikTok has allowed businesses to gain better knowledge of the different microcultures that exist within their respective industries. These firms can use their time and resources to analyze them to better focus their strategic plans to increase profit.

Microcultures have a profound impact on society and BookTok has revamped the publishing industry. The Bookseller, a British magazine that reports news on the publishing industry, announced BookTok as the FutureBook Person of 2022 (Jones, 2022). The people who are a part of the BookTok microculture are considered to be the FutureBook Person. They recognized BookTok for this award because of their “innovation and advocacy [that] has most impacted the book market” (Jones, 2022). The book community and the microculture of book lovers have grown immensely as a result of BookTok and the publishing industry has recognized that impact. It is only fitting for BookTok to receive this recognition as a result of all it has done for the industry.

Each generation of readers finds a new and distinct passion for reading that stems from their time, culture, technologies, and more (Jones, 2022). The world has shifted into a digital age, so, reading must as well. TikTok is this generation’s spark for the passion of reading and popularizing it. Wrapping up, it will be interesting to see where BookTok goes in the upcoming years. The world of social media is fast-moving, and the next big thing could still be just around the corner. Still, it is important to recognize the impact that TikTok has had on the microculture of readers and the publishing world. Marketing to readers has changed from what it used to be with TikTok taking over. Storytelling will always be something that is a part of human society, the means of sharing those stories have changed and continue to change. What once was groups

of people gathered around a campfire sharing stories has changed into people watching TikTok on their phones. Despite all the changes that society goes through, storytelling and books will always be a part of it, and BookTok is just a new chapter in this evolution.

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