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BookTok: The Cultural Phenomenon Introducing a Stagnated Industry to a New Generation

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University Honors Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Honors College

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1. Introduction

TikTok, a social media platform in which users can post short videos, hosted 1.719 billion users in 2022 and is projected to amass 2.249 billion users by 2027; thus, its impact on culture has been profound (Ceci, “Number of TikTok users worldwide”). While TikTok is home to a plethora of content stretching across an array of genres, certain niche communities have arisen, giving users places to discuss smaller, specific aspects of culture. One of the most prevalent subsections to emerge is “BookTok,” an arena of TikTok in which users promote and discuss books. BookTok has been immensely popular among TikTok viewers—by December 2023, it accumulated 200 million views (Ariyanayagam). Since TikTok’s users skew younger, with nearly 70% of users in the United States being 18 years old, BookTok has mostly reached a younger audience, making reading trendy among a new generation (Ceci, “Distribution of TikTok users in the United States”).¹ The BookTok community has reclaimed terms like “book nerd” once used to deride teens who enjoyed reading, boasting that users are “book nerds” and “book worms” in their TikTok video hashtags (the use of an octothorpe, #, to link a video to a certain subject) (Merga 4). Since BookTok has swayed popular culture so significantly and quickly, research is needed to determine how it is impacting reading habits, book marketing habits, and the literary canon.

2. Background

I. General Book Publishing History

Throughout history, book marketing tactics have shifted, adapting to an ever-changing audience. In the 1980s, direct mail, a model in which companies would send potential customers advertisements and sell books through the mailing system, dominated the book industry (Goff

¹ The percentage of TikTok users that are 18 years old decreases when looking at TikTok users across the world (not just in the United States) (Ceci, “Distribution of TikTok users worldwide”).

259). Direct mail, previously one of the most common ways to gain readers, made hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue through its physical book distribution model; however, the introduction of eBooks changed the market (Goff 259-260). Direct mail quickly went from a flourishing industry to a lost art, constantly on the brink of bankruptcy, as eBooks reduced the demand for physical book distribution (Goff 260). Now, the book industry has shifted once again, as the introduction of BookTok has allowed once-unknown authors to transform into best-selling novelists with the click of a button.

This phenomenon has opened the literature realm to a new generation of authors and readers, transforming the genres of books that are gaining popularity. The books favored on BookTok are typically written by new, female authors, and many are in “escapist” genres like romance, rom-com, fantasy, and young adult (Stewart 1). These novels are a far departure from the books in the traditional literary canon, challenging conventional ideals regarding what types of literature could be considered canonical. Social media is altering the reading landscape by changing the types of books that are popular, which could impact literacy rates and the accessibility of the literary canon. As it presently exists, the canon does not represent the diversity of the literary realm. Since BookTok often highlights diverse authors and books, its influence could allow new voices to enter the canon, diversifying it. This would allow the canon to more accurately represent the breadth of voices that have always been present in literature, even if they have not always been amplified or given a platform.

II. The Emergence of BookTok

TikTok, the video-sharing social media platform that hosts BookTok, launched in 2016. TikTok gained success rapidly—by 2021, just five years after its release, the platform accrued one billion active monthly users (Ceci, “Distribution of TikTok Users in the United States”).

Despite its quick rise in popularity, TikTok's recent launch date has limited scholarly research on the topic. The BookTok community was formed even more recently (research suggests that BookTok was formed in 2020, although its exact start date is unknown due to the wide range of videos on the site), further limiting research on the subject (Ledda).

TikTok users tend to be younger, as 36.7% of the world's TikTok users were between the ages of 18 and 24 in January 2024 (Ceci, "Distribution of TikTok users worldwide").

Additionally, 69.3% of TikTok's users were between the ages of 18 and 34 in January of 2024, meaning nearly all of TikTok's users fall under the age of 34 (Ceci, "Distribution of TikTok users worldwide").

3. Evolving Reading Habits

I. Introduction

The emergence of BookTok fostered widespread, global discussions regarding reading, as people around the world were able to post videos about books and receive instant feedback through likes and comments. Researchers estimate that BookTok had over 200 million views in December of 2023, and 48% of TikTok users report reading significantly more after they started watching BookTok videos (Ariyanayagam; "TikTok Users Report Reading 50% More").

Additionally, research suggests that people are buying more books as a result of BookTok; BookTok helped sell over 20 million books in 2021 (Harris). In fact, since BookTok's rise in popularity, the total revenue of the book publishing industry has increased significantly each year. In 2020, the book publishing industry saw a \$440 million increase from 2019's revenue, marking a major gain that coincides with the year in which BookTok emerged (Watson). Since 2020, the book publishing industry's revenue has increased steadily, growing by \$370 million in 2021 and \$320 million in 2022 (Watson). The concept of "book haul" videos (videos in which

BookTok users purchase large quantities of books and then show viewers the books they purchased) is popular on BookTok, which could be contributing to this drastic increase in revenue. We watched 50 BookTok videos in an attempt to determine how much “haul” videos dominate the platform. Out of the 50 videos, 8% of them were book hauls, but almost all of them were videos that recommended between ten and thirty books to viewers.² These haul and recommendation videos are commodifying books, making it popular to purchase (but not necessarily read) them.

Despite the book publishing industry’s significant increase in revenue, recent studies suggest that Americans are reading less books now than they have in previous years. The number of books Americans are reading has declined steadily since 2016 (Jones). In 2016, Americans read an average of 15.6 books per year, while Americans only read an average of 12.6 books in 2021, marking a three book decrease in only five years (Jones). This raises two interesting questions: do people trust BookTok’s recommendations enough to purchase books because they saw an author or book promoted on the platform? Are BookTok users who purchase books due to the platform’s recommendations actually reading the books they purchase?

II. Methodology

We distributed a survey approved by the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga’s (UTC) Institutional Review Board (IRB) to 380 people that viewed themselves as “avid readers” (meaning they felt as though they read more than the average population).³ We publicized this survey with social media posts, flyers posted around UTC’s campus, email communications, and UTC newsletters. Participants volunteered to take the self-administered web survey between

² On a different occasion, we saw nine book haul videos in the span of five minutes. This indicates that the BookTok algorithm varies significantly among users and the time at which someone is on the platform, so some users might see more or less haul videos.

³ IRB Protocol Number: 23-106

October 6, 2023, and January 31, 2024. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 75, but our largest age group was between the ages of 18 and 21, with 18.94% of participants falling into that range (see table 1).

Table 1

Age Profile of Participants in Online Study, 2023-2024 ^a

Age	% Respondents (N = 380)
18-21	18.94
22-25	13.68
26-30	11.57
31-40	12.63
41-50	16.58
51-60	13.68
61-70	2.63
71+	1.05
Refused	9.21

a. Note: The percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding.

III. Results

Our survey respondents seemed to trust book recommendations from social media, as 72.89% of respondents said they are likely to purchase a book after seeing it on social media (see table 2). 19.47% reported being “very likely” to purchase a book after seeing it on social media, and less than 10% of respondents were “not at all likely” to purchase a book after seeing it on social media (see table 2). This indicates that social media is influencing readers’ book purchases, as our participants seek out books they see on social media when they are purchasing books.

We asked survey respondents to type in the name of any books they recently saw mentioned on social media. Only 38.43% of our survey respondents were able to recall any

specific titles of books, and only 32.37% of respondents said they recently purchased the book they listed (see tables 3 and 4). Interestingly, 5.26% of respondents could not recall any books they saw promoted on social media, but they were able to identify at least one author that they read about on social media (see table 3). Colleen Hoover, a young adult and romance novelist that has garnered both acclaim and criticism on BookTok, was the most popular answer among these respondents.

This indicates that, while people trust social media’s book recommendations, they are not able to recall the titles of books they saw on social media long-term. Many people seem to be purchasing books they see on social media, and the book industry’s revenue reflects this.⁴

Table 2

Readers’ Likelihood of Purchasing a Book After Seeing It Mentioned on Social Media, 2023-2024 ^a

How likely are you to purchase a book that you saw on social media?	% Respondents (N = 380)
1 (Not at all likely)	8.95
2	16.05
3	30.26
4	23.16
5 (Very likely)	19.47
Refused	2.11

a. Note: The percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding.

Table 3

Ability of Readers to Recall Specific Book Titles They Saw on Social Media, 2023-2024 ^a

⁴ We are using our data to make rough assumptions instead of conducting a statistical analysis. Since this research area is relatively new, there is not a lot of data to which we can compare our results. Statistical analysis will become a viable option when more research surrounding BookTok and its influence on readers emerges in the future.

Number of Book Titles Respondents Could Recall	% Respondents (N = 380)
One	22.37
Two	5.53
Three or more	10.53
No specific titles but could recall authors' names	5.26
None	7.11
No response given	49.21

a. Note: The percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding.

Table 4

Frequency of Readers Who Actually Purchased a Book They Saw on Social Media,

2023-2024 ^{a, b}

If you listed a book in the above question, did you purchase/borrow it?	% Respondents (N = 380)
Yes	32.37
No	13.68
Will purchase it soon	10.00
Question does not apply	1.32
No response given	42.63

a. Note: The percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding.

b. Note: The question was provided to all participants, but it only asked the participants that were able to recall a book in an earlier question if they purchased that specific book. It did not ask participants if they purchased any book they saw advertised on social media.

Our research made it apparent that BookTok is influencing readers' purchasing habits, but we also wanted to determine whether it is influencing their reading habits as well. 83.9% of respondents reported reading between zero and three books in a typical month (see table 5).

Only 1.84% of respondents reported reading more than eleven books in any given month;

however, this percentage increased to 19.48% when respondents were asked how many books they typically read during the summer (see tables 5 and 6).

When comparing data collected by the Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel (ATP) in 2018, 2019, and 2021 to data collected by YouGov in 2023, we can see that Americans’ reading habits have shifted over time.⁵ In 2018, 2019, and 2021, larger percentages of people were reading more books than in 2023 (see tables 7 and 8). For example, in 2019 (before BookTok’s emergence in 2020), 28.28% of respondents said they read more than eleven books in a year (see table 8). In 2023, only 16% of respondents reported reading more than 11 books (see table 7). A staggering 46% of Americans read zero books in 2023, so reading rates have decreased significantly (see table 7). This indicates that, while people are buying significantly more books now than they have in the past, they are not reading more books. This could mean that BookTok is prompting people to buy books but not convincing them to actually read the books they purchase. Another possible conclusion is that, even though BookTok is inducing people to read, people are purchasing more books than they are able to read. The overabundance of books on BookTok supports this conclusion, as people are purchasing a copious number of books and highlighting them in “haul videos.” We examined ten BookTok “haul” videos, and users averaged 19.5 books per haul video.⁶ If the average person were to purchase 19 books in one sitting, it would take them over a year to read all of them (if they read zero to one book per month like most respondents in our survey). Many BookTok users do book

⁵ We wanted to incorporate data from outside sources to account for changes in reading habits over time. Our study was conducted in 2023 and 2024, so we were only able to use our results to make assumptions about monthly reading habits in 2023 and 2024. By including data from the ATP studies conducted in 2018, 2019, and 2021, we were able to evaluate how reading habits have changed over time. Additionally, by including data from YouGov, we were able to examine the number of books U.S. citizens read annually instead of just monthly.

⁶ There was an outlier of 50 books in one video; however, most users (six out of ten) purchased between seven and twelve books.

haul videos multiple times a year; thus, it is reasonable to conclude that BookTok is causing people to purchase more books than they are able to read.

Table 5

Respondents' Reading Frequency in a Typical Month, 2023-2024 ^a

How many books respondents read in a typical month (excluding school-assigned textbooks)	% Respondents (N = 380)
0-1	45.53
2-3	37.37
4-5	9.21
6-10	5.26
11+	1.84
Refused	0.79

a. Note: The percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding.

Table 6

Respondents' Reading Frequency During the Summer, 2023-2024 ^a

How many books respondents typically read during the summer	% Respondents (N = 380)
0-1	13.95
2-3	29.21
4-5	17.11
6-10	19.74
11-15	8.95
16-20	3.95
21+	6.58
Refused	0.53

a. Note: The percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding.

Table 7

Americans' Reading Frequency in 2023 ^{a, b}

How many books respondents read in 2023	% Respondents (N = 1,500)
---	---------------------------

0	46
1	5
2-3	12
4-5	10
6-10	9
11-20	9
20+	7
Unsure	1

Source: The Economist and YouGov. "The Economist/YouGov Poll." YouGov, December 2023,

https://d3nk13psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/econtoplines_FBzrwMv.pdf. Accessed

25 March 2024.

a. Note: Respondents' answers include print books, electronic books, and audiobooks.

b. Note: The percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding.

Table 8

Americans' Annual Reading Frequency, 2018, 2019, 2021^{a, b, c}

During the past 12 months, about how many books did you read either all or part of the way through?	% Respondents
2021 (N = 98)	
0-1	28.57
2-3	16.33
4-5	9.18
6-10	15.31
11-20	11.22
More than 20	18.37
Unsure	1.02
Refused	N/A
February 2019 (N = 99)	
0-1	33.33
2-3	16.16
4-5	9.09
6-10	14.14
11-20	13.13
More than 20	15.15
Unsure	1.01
Refused	N/A
January 2018 (N = 101)	

0-1	28.71
2-3	14.85
4-5	11.89
6-10	15.84
11-20	11.88
More than 20	13.86
Unsure	1.98
Refused	0.99

Source: “2021 Core Trends Survey.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (2021)

<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/dataset/2021-core-trends-survey/>.

a. Note: This data was collected and provided by the Pew Research Center’s American Trends Panel. Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The opinions expressed herein, including any implications for policy, are those of the author and not of Pew Research Center.

b. Note: Respondents’ answers include print books, electronic books, and audiobooks.

c. Note: The percentages may not total to 100% due to rounding.

4. Changes to Book Marketing Tactics

As of December 2023, the hashtag “BookTok” had over 200 million views on TikTok, and research shows that BookTok videos can influence readers’ book buying choices; thus, in response, book publishers and sellers are beginning to use it to guide their marketing tactics (Ariyanayagam; Merga 1). Research indicates that older books tend to go viral, authors and TikTok users focus on current trends when marketing books, and booksellers are changing how they promote books within their bookstores.

Prior to BookTok’s emergence, most books released through traditional publishers had an initial burst of sales right after their releases; however, BookTok has changed this phenomenon entirely, as many books that gain popularity on the platform are typically a few years old (Harris, “How TikTok Became”). Madeline Miller’s *The Song of Achilles* benefitted from this sensation,

as it went viral on BookTok nearly ten years after its initial release (Harris, “How TikTok Became”). *The Song of Achilles* sold about 20,000 copies after its release in 2012, but, after gaining popularity on BookTok, the novel sold about 10,000 per week in 2021 (Harris, “How TikTok Became;” Harris, “How Crying on TikTok”). In 2021, “#songofachilles” had over 19 million views on TikTok (Harris, “How Crying on TikTok”).⁷ BookTok users continue to promote *The Song of Achilles*, posting videos as they read the novel, draw fan art, review the book, or get tattoos inspired by the book (see figures 1, 2, and 3).

Figure 1

Still From 2023 TikTok Video of Chris Olsen’s Reaction to Finishing *The Song of Achilles*^a



Source: Chris Olsen [@chris]. “#songofachilles #BookTok.” TikTok, 9 April 2023,

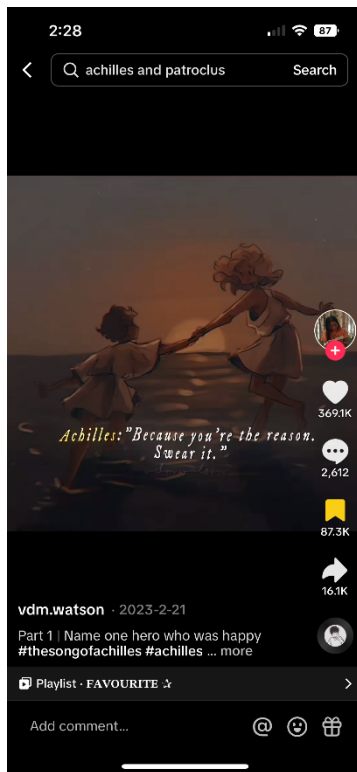
⁷ 2021 is the most recent date at which we can determine how many views a TikTok hashtag has received. TikTok recently released an update that removed the ability to see the view count for hashtags.

https://www.tiktok.com/@chris/video/7220180715118415147?_r=1&_t=8kjTuBBQZ6g.

a. Note: As of March 16, 2024, this TikTok video has over 2.7 million views and 406.7 thousand likes.

Figure 2

Still from 2023 TikTok Video Showing *The Song of Achilles* Fan Art by @vdm.watson ^a



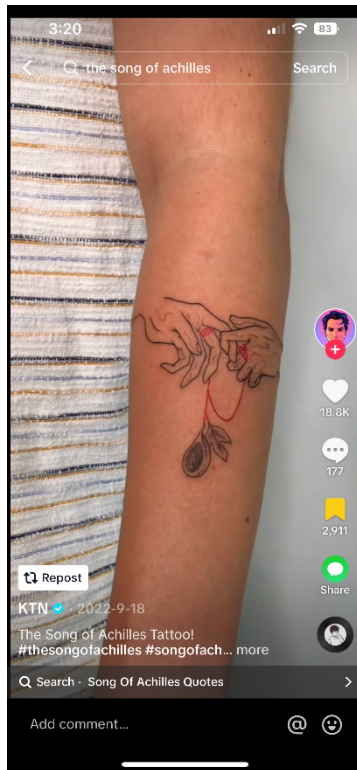
Source: @vdm.watson. “Part 1 | Name one hero who was happy #thesongofachilles #achilles #patroclus.” TikTok, 21 February 2023,

https://www.tiktok.com/@vdm.watson/video/7202800064627100934?_r=1&_t=8kjUTwXe7oc.

a. Note: As of March 16, 2024, this TikTok video has over 2.3 million views and 369.1 thousand likes.

Figure 3

Still from 2022 TikTok Video Showing *The Song of Achilles* Inspired Tattoo ^a



Source: Kevin Norman [@kevintnorman]. “The Song of Achilles Tattoo! #thesongofachilles #songofachilles #booktattoo #bookishtattoo.” TikTok, 18 September 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@kevintnorman/video/7144841997025676590>.

a. Note: As of March 17, 2024, this TikTok video has over 197.3 thousand views and 18.8 thousand likes.

Out of the books that gain popularity on BookTok, most of them either provide respite from the physical world or elicit emotional responses from readers (Stewart 1; Merga 5). The majority of BookTok users seem to favor books in escapist genres like romance or fantasy, but other genres are gaining popularity on the platform (Stewart 1). Now, many BookTok users are beginning to post about books that cause “sadness, engagement, optimism, shock and arousal,”

and works that “lead to transformation of life, self or state of mind” (Merga 5). This recent trend in promoting sad novels could be attributed to young readers’ desire to grow through reading about sorrowful books or an urge to feel a full emotional journey as they read (Merga 5). Scholars attribute *The Song of Achilles*’ spike in popularity to the emergence of emotional reading, as its first burst in sales occurred one day after it was featured in @moongirlreads_’s TikTok video entitled “books that will make you sob” (see figure 4) (Harris, “How Crying on TikTok”). Many authors have started sending BookTok users copies of their books in hopes that a review video like @moongirlreads_’s will make their books go viral; however, while some BookTok users get paid by publishers to post content covering some of their books, sponsored content on BookTok does not perform well (Harris, “How Crying on TikTok;” Grady; Stewart 1).⁸

Figure 4

Still from Viral 2020 TikTok Video that Prompted *The Song of Achilles*’ 2021 Burst in Sales ^a

⁸ A TikTok video’s performance is based on its view count, number of likes, and reception in the comment section.



Source: Selene [@moongirlreads_]. “Reply to @justmemyshelfandi #books #BookTok #fyp #you #reading #sad #bookrecs.” TikTok, 8 August 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@moongirlreads_/video/6858731924865797381.

a. Note: As of March 17, 2024, this TikTok video has over 6.6 million views and 1.1 million likes.

Since BookTok’s popularity has impacted book sales, major booksellers have shifted their marketing tactics. BookTok has significantly altered Barnes & Noble, the largest retail bookseller in the United States, as its brick-and-mortar stores have recently become “gathering places for communities of readers” (“About B&N;” Stewart 2). Shannon DeVito, Barnes & Noble’s director of books, says, “People are coming to our stores, filming content, meeting booksellers” (Stewart 2). This shift in Barnes & Noble’s culture has manifested in changes to physical marketing methods as well; Barnes & Noble has numerous displays dedicated to books

popular on BookTok (see figures 5 and 6). Their displays typically feature buzz words like “BookTok,” “hashtag,” or “trending” (see figure 7). Occasionally, Barnes & Noble will experiment with the word “BookTok” to advertise books, creating displays that read “SpicyTok” or other words combined with “Tok” (see figure 8). Barnes & Noble’s website even has a section dedicated to the “most popular TikTok books,” promoting books from numerous genres and authors (“BookTok”). This marketing shift is not exclusive to Barnes & Noble and other large booksellers; smaller libraries and independently owned bookstores are dedicating full displays to books that are popular on BookTok as well (see figure 9). Additionally, booksellers are promoting books based on BookTok trends, advertising books that will make readers cry or help them escape to fantastical worlds (see figures 10 and 11).

Figure 5

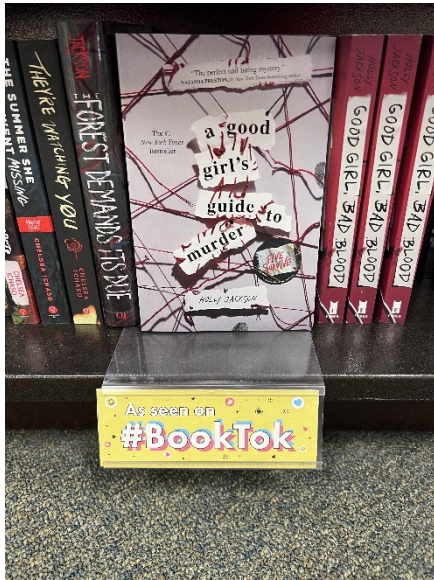
“I Saw It On #BookTok” Display in the Marietta, Georgia, Branch of Barnes & Noble



Source: Daley Culberson. “#BookTok Display.” 17 March 2024, author’s personal collection.

Figure 6

“A Good Girl’s Guide to Murder #BookTok” Display in the Chattanooga, Tennessee, Branch of Barnes & Noble



Source: Daley Culberson. “#BookTok Placard.” 24 February 2024, author’s personal collection.

Figure 7

“#Trending” Display in the Chattanooga, Tennessee, Branch of Barnes & Noble



Source: Daley Culberson. “#Trending Display.” 16 March 2024, author’s personal collection.

Figure 8

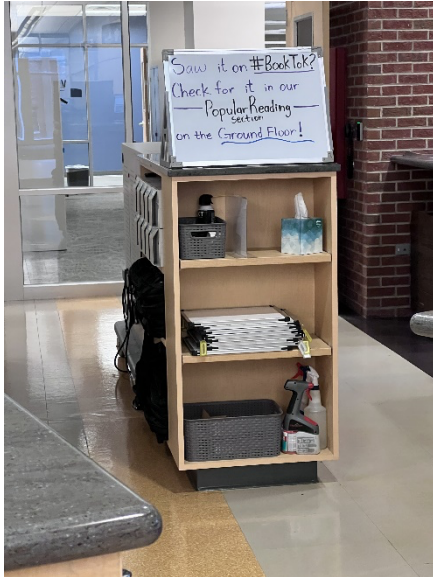
“#SpicyTok” Display in the Marietta, Georgia, Branch of Barnes & Noble



Source: Daley Culberson. “#SpicyTok Display.” 17 March 2024, author’s personal collection.

Figure 9

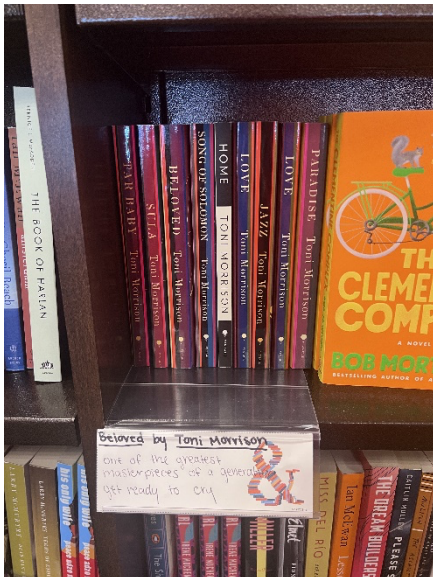
“Saw it on #BookTok” Display in the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga’s Library



Source: Daley Culberson. "UTC BookTok Display." 9 January 2024, author's personal collection.

Figure 10

"Get Ready to Cry" Display for *Beloved* in the Chattanooga, Tennessee, Branch of Barnes & Noble



Source: Daley Culberson. “*Beloved Emotional Read Placard.*” 15 March 2024, author’s personal collection.

Figure 11

Reading as an Escape Display in the Chattanooga, Tennessee, Branch of Barnes & Noble



Source: Daley Culberson. “*Escape Through Reading Display.*” 15 March 2024, author’s personal collection.

Ultimately, BookTok is a reviewers’ platform; thus, the shift in book marketing has been led by readers independent of publishers and authors (Stewart 1). Authors can attempt to manufacture TikTok virality through sending BookTok users books in hopes of receiving a positive review video; however, most authors’ BookTok success has been through chance.

5. Reliability of Social Media as a Marketing Method

TikTok popularity does not come without criticism, and it seems as though many of the authors that have received high levels of acclaim on BookTok receive ample hate as well.

Colleen Hoover is one of the most well-known authors on BookTok. Of the 5.26% of respondents in our survey who were only able to identify an author when asked to list a book they saw on social media (see table 3), 80% of them said Colleen Hoover. Additionally, Hoover sold over 20 million books by 2022 and made up six of the ten best-selling titles in August of 2022 (“Colleen Hoover”).

Despite Hoover’s massive popularity on TikTok and as an author in general, she has been labeled one of the “most controversial” authors on the platform, as TikTok users post videos criticizing both her books and her personal life (Willingham). Criticisms highlight Hoover’s 2016 romance novel *It Ends With Us*, claiming it “romanticizes abuse” (Willingham). Hoover has collaborated with various companies to release merchandise based on the novel, which many TikTok users believe is in poor taste due to the novel’s focus on abusive relationships.⁹ BookTok users also criticize Hoover personally, as she allegedly ignored sexual assault allegations against her son and attempted to discredit the victim raising the allegations (Distractify Staff).¹⁰ BookTok users called for a boycott of Hoover’s books, but, despite her “cancellation” on the platform, she is still widely discussed and stayed on the bestseller list in 2023 (Alter).

Criticism on BookTok does not impact only modern authors; Agatha Christie has been condemned on the platform as well. Recent videos have pointed out the offensive language Christie used in many of her novels, specifically mentioning *And Then There Were None*, Christie’s most popular novel (see figure 12). *And Then There Were None* is the best-selling

⁹ In 2023, Hoover announced a coloring book based on the novel but canceled its release following widespread criticism (Ronald). In February of 2024, Hoover announced a nail polish line that featured nail polish colors that corresponded with her novels. One of the books that received nail polish colors was *It Ends With Us* (Johnston).

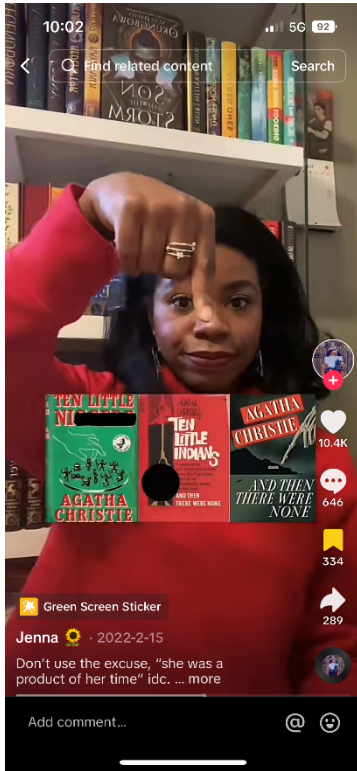
¹⁰ It is important to note that I was unable to find any reliable sources reporting on the sexual assault allegations against Colleen Hoover’s son, Levi Hoover. This information came from an entertainment news website. This is not unusual for sexual assault cases though, as only high-profile cases reach news sources beyond entertainment news. This does not invalidate the sexual assault claims, but it should be acknowledged.

mystery novel of all time, but its original title, published in 1939, included an offensive racial slur (Hall; “And Then There Were None”). The original title for *And Then There Were None* was changed in some publications in 1964; however, after the second title and cover were deemed racially offensive as well, publishers changed the title to *And Then There Were None* and altered the cover image (Hofmann). Many of Christie’s books have been re-edited to remove offensive language (Hall). Despite the widespread criticism of Christie’s works, re-releasing her books without offensive language has allowed Christie’s overall reputation to remain strong among younger readers.¹¹ BookTok users continue to post about her novels, giving them mostly positive reviews (see figure 13). Still, many BookTok users are attempting to spread awareness of the offensive language used throughout Christie’s extensive repertoire.

Figure 12

Still from 2022 TikTok Video Discussing the Racist Language Used on *And Then There Were None*’s Cover; Content Warning: censored racial slurs and noose imagery shown in TikTok video ^a

¹¹ Many younger readers were introduced to *And Then There Were None* after the edits were made; thus, they are unaware of the novel’s offensive history unless they have read prior information or examine the publication details within the novel.



Source: Jenna [@jennaslitpicks]. “Don’t use the excuse, ‘she was a product of her time’ idc.

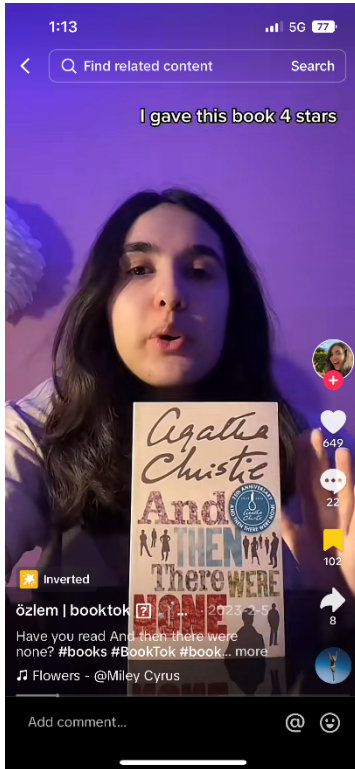
#agathachristie #andthentherewerenone #popularbooks #classicbooks

#themoreyouknow.” TikTok, 15 February 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTLFo5Bhr/>.

a. Note: As of March 18, 2024, this TikTok video has over 49.5 thousand views and 10.4 thousand likes.

Figure 13

Still from 2023 TikTok Review Video of *And Then There Were None* ^a



Source: özlem [@readingbyozlem]. “Have you read And then there were none? #books #BookTok #book #reading #review #fy #fyp #viral #CloseUpAuge.” TikTok, 5 February 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTLFo5QGX/>.

a. Note: As of March 18, 2024, this TikTok video has over 44.2 thousand views and 649 likes.

More research should be conducted to determine whether being “cancelled” or criticized on TikTok actually impacts book sales. While criticism can impact popularity, it is interesting and should be a subject of further research that it is not the case for authors like Hoover and Christie.

6. Literature Examination: Canonical vs. Modern-Day Novels

BookTok has changed the demographics of readers while shifting the types of books they read. Because BookTok is new, it is reasonable to expect that newer texts and authors dominate the discussion. It is easier to think objectively about BookTok’s influence on readers if we

examine the role the community plays in discussions about literature that was already deemed popular or influential in the literary canon.

BookTok's recommendations veer significantly from the traditional, canonical novels that many scholars consider "classics," pushing new authors to the forefront of popularity. In fact, results from our survey indicate that 62.87% of social media users have never received "classic"/canonical literature recommendations from social media. Only 20.60% of respondents reported ever receiving canonical literature recommendations on social media, and some respondents remarked that they only received the recommendations very rarely or only if they specifically sought out posts featuring classic literature.¹²

This phenomenon has opened the literature realm to a new generation of authors and readers, transforming the genres of books that are gaining popularity. The books favored on BookTok are written by new, female authors, and they are typically in "escapist" genres like romance, rom-com, fantasy, and young adult (Stewart 1). These novels are extremely different from the books in the traditional literary canon, which could result in a change within the literary canon's contents. The literary canon is a collection of "highly valued, high-cultural texts that have traditionally acted as arbiters of literary value, determining the discipline of literary studies as well as influencing the critical and cultural reception of literature" (Mukherjee). Even though the literary canon is considered "flexible" and the novels within its designation are up for debate, it is infamously difficult for new authors to enter the canon, as many believe only older novels that have had ample time to gain cultural value should be included (Mukherjee). Additionally, the literary canon is notoriously cisgender, white-male centric and lacks diverse voices, even with ongoing movements to diversify its contents (Al-Shalabi et al. 50-51). The best-selling

¹² The other 16.53% of respondents reported being unable to remember whether they had ever received a canonical literature recommendation on social media.

novels that have emerged due to BookTok's influence have revolutionized the book industry, but they raise an important question: how do the modern books that gain popularity on BookTok differ from canonical, classic literature? Do they have some similarities, or is BookTok creating a new space in the literary canon for different, unique books?

In order to answer these questions, a plethora of literature, including books popular on social media and books traditionally considered canonical, must be examined. This research will focus on mystery novels, as the mystery genre is an under-researched area of literary fiction. When comparing Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*, the highest-selling crime novel in history, to Holly Jackson's *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder*, a best-selling novel that went viral on TikTok, differences between the pieces reveals stark differences in the authors' writing styles, books' compositions, and mysteries' content ("And Then There Were None"; "A Good Girl's Guide to Murder").¹³

The most noticeable difference between Christie's *And Then There Were None* and Jackson's *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* is the use of varying forms. Forms in literature are "elements of a verbal composition," including 'rhythm, meter, structure, diction, and imagery'" (Kramnick and Nersessian 650). Including various forms in books and creative works is increasing in popularity, possibly due to the diminishing attention spans of readers ("Why our attention spans are shrinking"). As people settle into an age of an overabundance of media, they are finding it difficult to concentrate on a singular thing, like a book, for a long period of time

¹³ These novels were selected due to their best-selling status and popularity. Agatha Christie is a well-known author, and her works have prevailed as bestsellers for nearly 100 years. Since her works are prevalent throughout culture, most of them can be broadly considered as canonical literature. When looking at the mystery genre, Agatha Christie is the best-selling novelist of all time, giving her novels a solid place in the mystery literary canon ("About Agatha Christie"). *And Then There Were None* is her best-selling novel, making it the ideal selection for the canonical novel ("And Then There Were None"). *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* went viral on TikTok (it has been featured in thousands of viral TikTok videos), Holly Jackson has over 138,000 followers on TikTok, and the book is a multimillion-copy best-seller. It is, by far, one of the most popular books to be featured on TikTok ("A Good Girl's Guide to Murder"; Jackson, "Videos").

(“Why our attention spans are shrinking”). Incorporating multiple forms into texts can make them seem dynamic to readers, which allows them to refocus on the text. Many authors are beginning to incorporate these tactics into their books, and some authors, like Cara Hunter and Janice Hallett, are experimenting with forgoing prose altogether, telling a story through visual media and nontraditional forms.¹⁴

And Then There Were None includes a short nursery rhyme at its beginning; however, the novel as a whole includes very few forms. The nursery rhyme is significant to the story, as the murders follow the pattern of the rhyme:

*Ten little soldier boys went out to dine;
One choked his little self and then there were Nine.*

*Nine little soldier boys sat up very late;
One overslept himself and then there were Eight.*

*Eight little soldier boys travelling in Devon;
One said he'd stay there and then there were Seven.*

[.....]

*One little soldier boy left all alone;
He went and hanged himself*

And then there were None. (Christie 27-28)

In addition to the nursery rhyme, Christie includes letters within *And Then There Were None*, which can be considered another form. Although the novel features three forms, they are all written alongside and formatted to match the prose, which causes them to blend with one another. This makes the novel static when compared to modern novels that utilize vastly

¹⁴ *Murder in the Family*, Cara Hunter's 2023 bestselling mystery novel, is formatted like a screenplay; no prose is used in the novel. It includes numerous newspaper articles, text messages, and other visual forms, all of which are presented as evidence readers can use to solve the crime. *The Appeal*, Janice Hallett's BookTok famous novel, used a similar tactic, incorporating emails, text messages, and images throughout the book. Neither novel uses any prose in the traditional sense, and both novels give readers active roles in the stories, as readers are tasked with solving the crimes before the stories reveal the perpetrators. Both novels were bestsellers.

different forms. Most of Christie's novels are in this same style, much like other canonical novels from the early 1900s, including *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald or *Of Mice and Men* (1937) by John Steinbeck.

A Good Girl's Guide to Murder is exceedingly different from Christie's text, as it alternates between numerous forms, including informal senior project reports, interview transcripts, maps, text messages, handwritten information, emails, graphic organizers, and traditional prose. *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* also switches between first- and third-person points of view, as the prose portion of the novel is written in third-person, while the senior project reports are written in first-person. The first two pages of *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* introduce the readers to the novel's main character, a high school student attempting to solve a cold murder case for her senior project, through a senior capstone proposal (see figure 14). This immediately informs readers that the novel is going to include multiple mediums, which could interest readers looking for dynamic books that will hold their attention. After the project proposal, Jackson switches to traditional prose for three pages before using another form. Throughout the novel, Jackson alternates between forms so that a new form is included in nearly every other chapter. Within the first three chapters of *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder*, six different forms are featured, including a capstone proposal, prose, capstone project logs (written in first-person), a news outlet report, an interview transcript, fictitious citations, and a social media conversation (see figure 15).

Figure 14

Portion of Senior Capstone Project Proposal in *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder*^a

SUPERVISOR'S COMMENTS:

Pippa, this is an incredibly sensitive topic, as it concerns a terrible crime that happened in our own town. Your project has been accepted only on the condition that no ethical lines are crossed. Please find a more focused angle for your report as you work through your research, and there is to be NO CONTACT made with either of the families involved in this case. This will be considered an ethical violation, and your project will be disqualified.

STUDENT DECLARATION:

I certify that I have read and understood the regulations as set out in the notice to students.

Signature:

PIPPA FITZ-AMORI

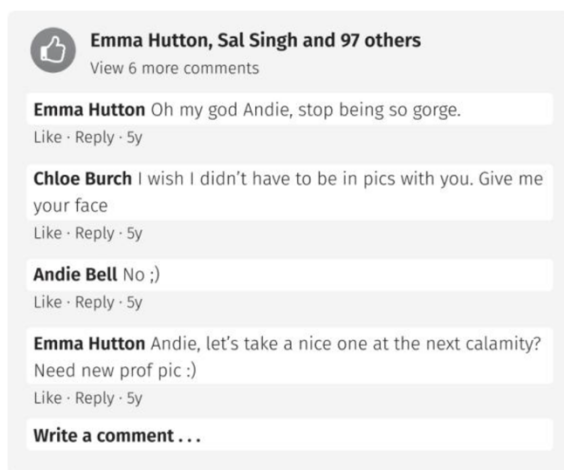
Date: 7/18/19

Source: Holly Jackson. *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder*. Ember, 2021, p. 2.

a. Note: This is not the whole proposal that is featured in *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder*. This is only the final portion of the proposal.

Figure 15

Social Media Post in *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder*



Source: Holly Jackson. *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder*. Ember, 2021, p. 14.

And Then There Were None and *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* also differ significantly in their content, as *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* includes discussions of characters' personal lives while *And Then There Were None* only includes details essential to solving the mystery. In fact, any sense of romance is noticeably absent from almost all of Agatha Christie's novels. Many of Christie's novels feature the same detective—Hercule Poirot—who does not have a love life in the majority of his novel appearances (Evans). He has even been labeled an “asexual hero” and “not canonically straight” by Poirot fans (Evans). Even though *And Then There Were None* does not feature Poirot, much like in Poirot's stories, no romance is discussed.¹⁵

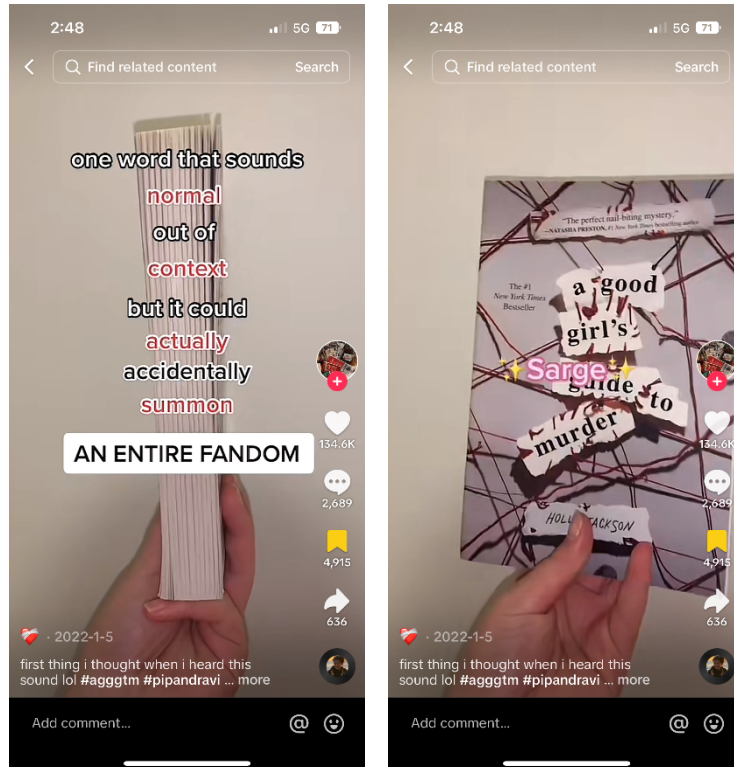
Even though the central feature of *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* is the mystery of a cold murder case, the novel includes a romantic relationship between its protagonists, Pippa Fitz-Amobi and Ravi Singh. Throughout the novel, romantic tension builds between the characters through their interactions and nicknames for one another, resulting in a relationship in the novel's final chapter and the two succeeding novels. While it is not a main element of the story, the novel ends on an upbeat, romantic highlight of the characters' personal lives: “He kissed her, and she glowed with that feeling... ‘Oh,’ he said, turning one last time before the door, ‘and don't tell them the only reason you started this project was because you fancied me. You know, think of a more noble reason’” (Jackson 382). Fans of *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* seem to focus on this element of the plot, as many of the BookTok videos highlighting the novel reference the relationship, specifically Ravi's nickname for Pippa: “Sarge” (see figure 16). *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* has even been featured in BookTok compilations of “romance in books that aren't romances” (see figure 17). Romance is one of the most popular genres on BookTok, and

¹⁵ Interestingly, although there is no romance in the *And Then There Were None* novel, many modern film adaptations of the book have altered the story to include romance and a happier ending (“And Then There Were None (2015)”).

BookTok’s fixation on the relationship between Pippa and Ravi indicates that BookTok users crave romance even in books outside of the romance genre (Stewart 1).

Figure 16

Stills from 2022 “Sarge” TikTok Video ^a



Source: @nerdybookloverbitch. “first thing i thought when i heard this sound lol #agggtm

#pipandravi #foryoupage #foryou #fypage 🍷 #BookTok #books #hollyjackson

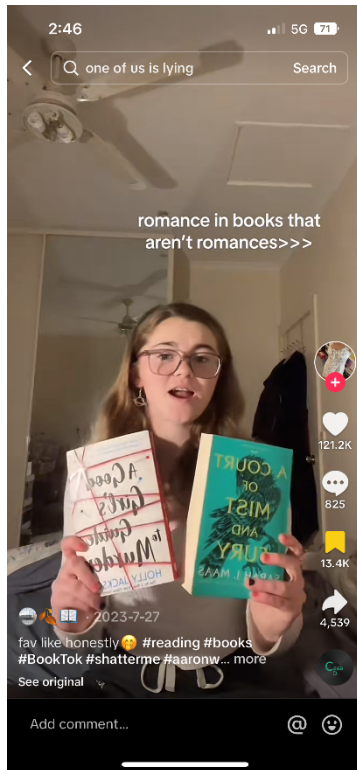
#bookworm #sarge #fyp.” TikTok, 5 January 2022,

<https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTLYeSkJJ/>.

a. Note: As of March 18, 2024, this TikTok video has over 936.9 thousand views and 134.6 thousand likes.

Figure 17

Stills from 2023 Non-Romance Books with Romance TikTok



Source: @obsessedwithbookss._. “fav like honestly 🥰 #reading #books #BookTok #shatterme #aaronwarner #agggtm #ravisinh #thecruelprince #cardangreenbriar #acotr #rhysand #thesongofachilles #oneofusislying #natemacauley #theinheritancegames #fyp #fictionalmen.” TikTok, 27 July 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTLYeYJak/>.

a. Note: As of March 18, 2024, this TikTok video has over 632.9 thousand views and 121.2 thousand likes.

Another stark difference between *And Then There Were None* and *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* is their use of plot twists and formulaic plot points. *And Then There Were None* is intricately plotted; ten murders transpire, and every person of interest eventually becomes a

victim. Most readers are not able to understand how the murders occurred or identify the killer until the revelation of the killer's manuscript/confession in the final pages. Despite this, scholars have created a mathematical formula that can be used to discover the killers' identities in Christie's novels (see figure 18). Additionally, a panel of experts used Christie's best-selling books to create a list of ways readers can identify the killers while reading her novels:

Key Findings:

- The killer will be introduced within the first half of the book
- The killer is likely to be emotionally involved with the victim, most killers are spouses or blood relatives of their victim
- If there are a lot of land vehicles in the story, the killer is most likely female
- If there are a lot of nautical vehicles and aircraft in the story, the killer is most likely male
- If the victim is strangled, the killer is most likely male (or male with a female accomplice)
- If the setting is a country house, the killer is most likely female (75% chance)
- The language used throughout the book to describe a female killer is usually more negative than when describing a male killer
- Female killers are normally discovered due to a domestic item
- Male killers are normally found out through information or logic
- If Poirot is the detective, and the cause of death is stabbing, the killer will be mentioned more frequently at the beginning of the book
- If Miss Marple is the detective, and the motive for the murder is money/affair, the killer will be mentioned more in the later stages of the novel than the beginning. (James)

And Then There Were None fits this formula perfectly: the killer is the first character introduced in the novel, the killer is familiar with all of his victims, the killer is male and the murders occur on an island that only boats can reach, and the killer is revealed through an informational manuscript. This indicates that, even though *And Then There Were None* is difficult for most readers to solve, the novel fits the formula demonstrated in Christie's other books (like *Death on the Nile*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, and *The Murder of Rodger Ackroyd*) perfectly, making her novels formulaic.

Figure 18

Whodunnit Formula for Christie's Novels

Whodunnit formula

$$k(r, \delta, \theta, c) = f\{rk + \delta + \theta\{P, M\}, c(3 \leq 4.5)\}$$

Key

k	Identity of the killer
r	Relationship to the victim
δ	Primary means of transport associated with the novel
θ	Method of murder and the detective characterised in the novel
P	Poirot
M	Marple
c	Chapter of introduction of the killer
f	Female

Source: Taylor Herring

Source: Haroon Siddique. "How to spot whodunnit: academics crack Agatha Christie's code."

The Guardian, 2 August 2015,

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/02/academics-unlock-formula-agatha-christies-mysteries>. Accessed 2 February 2024.

Conversely, *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* subverts formulas, incorporating numerous plot twists that shock readers. At least three plot twists occur within the last 50 pages of the novel, leaving readers unsure of the crime's solution until the final pages. The main plot twist ignores the readers' prior expectations of the crime, as it reveals that the victims were killed by two separate people (Jackson 364-365). Additionally, throughout the book, Pippa maintains a "Persons of Interest" list that catalogs all of her suspects. While the length of the list varies as Pippa adds and removes suspects, it contains around seven suspects throughout the book (Jackson 170, 189, 210, 222-223). Despite the seemingly extensive list, one of the killers never appears on it, and Pippa rarely interacts with her during the novel. Even though the second killer

appears on the list early into the novel, he is cleared as a suspect halfway through the story and is removed from the list. The numerous plot twists throughout *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* engage readers and make it difficult for them to solve the novel.

The difference in the use of formulas in *And Then There Were None* and *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* could be attributed to the amount of competition present at the time of publication. Social media has made other publishing avenues, like self-publishing, available to authors, increasing the number of books being released each year. It is estimated that four million new books are published each year; thus, there is an abundance of new titles available to readers now—these titles were not available when Christie's books were being published (Talbot). Due to the sheer number of options available to readers, authors' books must attract more attention and interest than their competitors' books in order to be purchased. One avenue through which authors can fascinate readers is intricate plot twists. Plot twists and engaging visuals surprise readers and seem to be popular among BookTok users.¹⁶ Jackson could have felt as though she needed to incorporate extra plot twists to attract young readers, whereas this pressure was not present during the period in which Christie wrote *And Then There Were None*.

7. Conclusion

BookTok's impact has been profound, and research shows that it is continually altering the book industry. Our research shows that BookTok users trust the recommendations they receive from other users, which is leading them to purchase several of the books they see on social media. Despite this, Americans do not seem to be reading more books annually, illustrating a potential disconnect between BookTok users' purchasing and reading habits. It is possible that BookTok is prompting users to purchase more books than they are able to read in a

¹⁶ There is a large variety of BookTok videos that recommend books if they have interesting or shocking plot twists.

given year, but more research should be conducted over a longer length of time to determine the applicability of this theory. This poses the idea of performative reading/purchasing, meaning BookTok users could be purchasing an abundance of books to gain notoriety on the platform. This trend is bringing more money to the book publishing industry (authors, book publishers, and book sellers get paid when people purchase their books, not when they read the books); however, it could be temporary. Commodifying books in such a large manner could mean that TikTok users will move to another item when something else begins to trend. This occurred with popular video game *Among Us*; it went from 500,000 monthly users in 2019 to 300 million monthly users in 2020 after going viral on social media (Curry). Despite its extreme popularity, users lost interest, and it lost 250 million monthly users by 2022 (Curry). This same fate could reach BookTok, which would result in a drastic decline in the book publishing industry's revenue. BookTok has already outlasted *Among Us* though, as they gained popularity in the same year; thus, it has the potential to maintain its influence. A large number of factors influence trends on social media, so it is difficult to predict BookTok's exact fate.

BookTok has also influenced the book publishing and marketing industry, allowing older books to gain popularity years after their releases. Book publishers and sellers are shifting their marketing habits to reflect trends on BookTok, most recently highlighting escapism and emotional reading. Additionally, authors like Colleen Hoover who have a lot of followers and mentions on TikTok frequently garner criticism; however, this criticism does not seem to impact their overall popularity, bestseller status, or revenue.

Finally, BookTok could potentially impact the accessibility of the literary canon, as modern novels exhibiting significant differences in content, form, and predictability are significantly more popular on the platform than classic, canonical novels. As these novels gain

popularity and influence culture in future years, they could potentially join the literary canon (since many scholars allow culturally influential novels to join the canon). This could diversify the literature realm, allowing it to finally reflect the heterogeneous range of voices that are present in society.

Since BookTok is a digital social media platform, it is constantly changing. Research regarding the culturally prominent platform should be consistently conducted to determine its implications over time, as it carries the potential to significantly shape readers' purchasing habits, enjoyment, and literacy.

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