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Exploring the "BookTok" Effect - How a TikTok community is transforming the publishing industry

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Two decades ago, the early waves of digitalization confronted the book industry with the pressure to offer e-books (Hao & Fan, 2014). E-books offered simpler distribution and delivery. Yet the underlying structure and logic of the book market were little affected. Traditionally, the popularity of books and authors has been heavily influenced by bestseller lists and powerful literary critics (Lee et al., 2023). In recent years, though, social media and especially TikTok, have promoted a drastic transfer of power away from literary critics and bestseller lists towards individual readers and their communities. The social media platform TikTok, gave rise to a new phenomenon called "BookTok", where users create, share, and view book recommendations. With 200 billion views and an estimated impact of 20 million additional books sold, the BookTok community is realizing tangible economic and societal impact (Harris, 2022). However, we know little about how individual and/or collective efforts, can trigger community-driven disruptions. Moreover, the role of TikTok as a video and algorithm heavy platform limits the transferability of existing theories.

Our exploratory study relies on both human and machine pattern recognition to engage in computational theory construction (Miranda et al. 2022). By gaining research access to the TikTok API, we collect and analyze a sample of nearly 150.000 BookTok video descriptions collected for the second half of 2022. By relying on qualitative analysis supported by topic modeling we discovered two counter intuitive cases. Namely, two books that gained significant momentum on TikTok years after they were published or have first appeared on the bestseller lists or had been discussed by literature critics. By combining primary data from watching and coding TikTok videos as well as secondary data, we shed light on the community dynamics driving this impact. Thereby, we contribute not only to the literature on social media but also towards the role of online communities and the underlying algorithm for triggering power shifts and giving rise to community-driven digital transformation.

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