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The #BookTok Connection: Examining Cultural and Linguistic Identity Expression in Online Reading Communities

Sarah Elizabeth Jerasa

Department of Education and Human Development, Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634, USA; sjerasa@clemson.edu

Abstract: #BookTok, the TikTok sub-community for readers, has reshaped publishing and digital reading trends where marginalized readers find space to promote diverse books and stories beyond mainstream norms. This paper explores how three international #BookTokers with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds have found community, identity, and activism within this space, highlighting #BookTok's role in fostering inclusive and affirming literary communities amidst rising censorship challenges. This case study used thematic analysis to analyze participant interviews through open and axial coding to explore #BookTok engagement, framed through affinity spaces, transformative potential, and culturally digitalized pedagogies. #BookTok fosters belonging by connecting readers through niche interests, with the algorithm curating content aligned with identities. Participants reported shifts in reading behaviors and identities, with multilingual users expanding language repertoires to access and engage with diverse, identity-affirming texts. Content creation deepened connections, enabling advocacy for equity and justice. #BookTok is experienced as an affirming community where diverse texts and content creation can foster critical connections and promote justice-oriented actions beyond personal enjoyment of reading.

Keywords: TikTok; BookTok; diverse readers; reading motivation; culturally digitalized pedagogies; affinity spaces; digital literacies; reading communities

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1. Introduction

#BookTok, the sub-community of readers and book lovers, has had a remarkable impact on the book publishing industry (Harris, 2021), the marketing of authors (Currenti, 2023), and the dominance of digital reading communities to promote reading behaviors (Asplund et al., 2024; S. Jerasa & Boffone, 2021; S. E. Jerasa, 2023; S. Jerasa et al., 2024; Merga, 2021). With 320 billion views (as of November 2024), this thriving community of content creators, viewers, and readers has built a space that has shifted how readers discuss, promote, or think about books. As a result of this powerhouse space, #BookTok is also responsible for some of the most popular book series, titles, and authors, such as Colleen Hoover or Sarah J. Maas.

The content within #BookTok spans from readers sharing their favorite books, suggesting new genres or tropes, or recreating favorite book scenes. Although popular or trending books and authors have held a steadfast regime within #BookTok, significant discourse exists for diverse readers who stray from the mainstream genres, tropes, or stories. In other words, the community of #BookTok is a space that promotes readers to gain visibility and connect with their peers who share similar interests, values, and identities (S. Jerasa & Boffone, 2021; Maddox & Gill, 2023; Wiederhold, 2022). As such, niche sub-communities

within #BookTok have emerged, including #BlackBookTok, #QueerBookTok, #AsianBookTok, and #LatinxBookTok that reflect similar types or sub-categories of content (Dera, 2024a, 2024b; Maddox & Gill, 2023). While #BookTok can serve as a digital space to promote book awareness and reading behaviors, it can also contribute to algorithmically driven "rabbit holes" or "silos", limiting what users can view and access within the platform (Maddox & Gill, 2023; Krutrök, 2021). Despite this challenge, TikTok users can engage with content around books, genres, and authors not historically recognized or promoted within mainstream publishing. Therefore, these marginalized voices are privileged and given an impactful digital platform for discourse within #BookTok. Marginalized identities *can* find community within digital spaces in a way that promotes, supports, and affirms their specific interests, backgrounds, and experiences. Scholarship in other digital spaces has highlighted representation within a community is pivotal to developing reading identity, specifically for marginalized identities (cultural, linguistic, and sexual orientations) (Vasquez, 2005; Wargo, 2017).

The current landscape of book censorship and the politicization of worldviews has further emphasized the need for not only books or texts to reflect and represent diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds accurately but also for environments or communities to exist to enhance, support, and encourage identity formation of all readers (Every Effort Matters, 2022). The importance of diverse representation within books can be affirmed as metaphorical windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors and benefit marginalized and dominant identities (Bishop, 1990). Historically, educational spaces like K-12 schools have largely promoted White, middle-class, and heteronormative ideologies through curricula and text selections. Thus, third spaces (K. D. Gutierrez, 2008) or out-of-school spaces can serve as a refuge to form communities that adequately reflect such marginalized identities (Hill, 2023; Liang et al., 2024; Skerrett & Bomer, 2011). Situated spaces that privilege marginalized reading identities and voices are needed beyond schools to support those often left out of mainstream media and systems. In light of recent political pushback where book bans and censored literacies in the United States and globally have aimed to silence diverse perspectives, there has become a growing need for a space like #BookTok to serve as a safe space for readers with diverse cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

With such significant attention on this growing digital space, this study aims to capture the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse #BookTok users and how their participation in this space contributes to their reading experience and identities. This examination also contributes to a growing body of scholarship on the importance and significance of digital spaces that promote critical and justice-oriented perspectives. By applying critical framings, this study presents how #BookTok is a digital space *and* a conduit for fostering critical reading communities through dialogic exchanges to support reading and identity formation. This paper highlights the cases of three global #BookTokers with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and how their experiences emphasize ways this space has uniquely supported their reading identities and participation. This study will answer the following research questions: (1) What aspects of the #BookTok community support the diverse perspectives of individuals? (2) How have #BookTok users' reading behaviors or interests shifted due to participation in the space? (3) How do individuals participate in #BookTok to reflect their cultural and linguistic identities?

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Transformative Potential and Culturally Digitalized Pedagogies (CDP), frameworks that align with their focus on exploring how #BookTok can serve as a space for justice-oriented and emancipatory practices among reading and culturally and linguistically diverse TikTok users. These theories aid in examining how marginalized

users engage with TikTok to challenge inequities, build community, and foster civic activism, which includes the active participation to promote social, political, or environmental change within society. By applying these theoretical perspectives, this study considers the ways in which the platform might amplify diverse voices and facilitate meaningful digital participation for marginalized identities.

2.1. Transformative Potential

Transformative potential exists as a theoretical framework that acknowledges the systems of inequity to equip individuals with critical consciousness toward understanding their own identities and ultimately transform spaces for more equity through anti-oppressive interactions (Jemal, 2017). Transformative potential aligns with Freire's (2000) theory of critical consciousness to promote shifts and changes within a perceived oppressive system of normative experiences. Jemal (2017) posit that transformative potential extends the notion of critical consciousness from Freire (2000) and is "defined as levels of consciousness and action that produce the potential for change at one or more socio-ecosystemic levels" (p. 603).

Simply acknowledging or reflecting on inequitable systems is not enough to instigate transformation within a space. According to Jemal (2017), transformative potential is mainly situated within the individual and self-actualization before moving into disrupting larger systems. Jemal (2017) suggests that critical reflection leverages critical action in that "people do not blindly act to change oppressive social conditions without some consciousness that their social conditions are unjust" (p. 609; Watts et al., 2011). Actions toward transformative potential suggest that critical consciousness (Freire, 2000) is not necessarily a tangible end product, policy, or legal victory to disrupt systems of inequity. Rather, critical consciousness offers an individual and "psychological process of empowerment that stems from altering one's perception of self in society" (Jemal, 2017, p. 616; L. M. Gutierrez & Ortega, 1991) and ultimately affirms individual identities towards autonomy and equity.

Within spaces that privilege a mainstream or majority (White heteronormative) perspective, it is not so much discrimination or dismissal of cultures, backgrounds, or identities but rather the absence or lack of representation that silences the experiences or the existence of individuals. Particularly within published texts or trade books offered in schools, curricula, or mainstream media, the transformative potential exists by transforming discriminatory or oppressive spaces "as equitable, just, and liberating" (Anand & Hsu, 2020, p. 125) by pushing forward these often-silenced voices and experiences.

2.2. Culturally Digitalized Pedagogies

Extending the seminal critical work of culturally relevant pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive pedagogies (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2017), culturally digitalized pedagogies (CDP) (McDaniel, 2024) centers the digital practices of culturally diverse youth and how these practices affirm, acknowledge, and support civic activism (Garcia et al., 2020) through engaging in actions that aim to influence public policy, raise awareness about critical issues, or advocate for justice and equity. Central to this work is the understanding that marginalized youth, particularly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), utilize digital spaces to participate in online communities to foster a sense of belonging and engage in justice-oriented and critical conversations. The content for these conversations varies across platforms, topics, and formats, but what is central is how digital cultural wealth and capital are prominent in mobilizing and validating identities and diverse experiences shared by others with similar cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

As McDaniel (2024) notes, CDP prioritizes digital media as a central gathering and community builder for social-oriented activism in the digital work that BIPOC youth

produce. McDaniel (2024) argues that youth are not only participating in digital spaces or social media to engage in entertainment but are prioritizing forms of communication to build community by "educat[ing] others through self-expression; engage in necessary conversations; seek racial justice and take on systemic racism, encouraging others to do the same; celebrate cultural and linguistic diversity; and create counternarratives to include accurate representations of BIPOC" communities (p. 200). As such, this work shifts the intention and purpose of digital content produced within spaces like TikTok towards a more unified and intentional construction. Content within TikTok varies across reading and special interest communities. However, the ways that BIPOC youth, according to McDaniel (2024), intentionally engage in digital discourse inclusive of "issues that impact themselves and their communities" (p. 201). This work aligns strongly with aspects within social practice theory where mediated actions within spaces help define an individual's identity (Cole & Engeström, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). Similarly, Stetsenko (2017) developed the Transformative Action Stance, which aligns with CDP by emphasizing how participation in a digitally mediated space goes beyond mere contribution to actively shaping an individual's learning and self-understanding. Within CDP, McDaniel (2024) highlights the need for a broader engagement with the forms of digital literacy practices that BIPOC youth produce and consume. CDP moves critical examinations of digital youth productions towards reclaiming space and literacies that reflect their sociocultural backgrounds and experiences (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1984). Although CDP supports pedagogy within educational spaces, this theoretical framework is appropriate for this study because it is grounded in the authentic digital spaces where diverse youth and #BookTokers engage, reflecting their situated experiences and community development.

3. Literature Review

In providing an overview of recent scholarship on TikTok and #BookTok, the following sections highlight the intersections of critical affinity spaces, restorying practices, communities of practice, and digital reading communities. This scholarship builds on how individuals from marginalized identities engage in transformative digital practices that amplify voices and foster collaborative meaning-making. By situating #BookTok within this scholarship, this review underscores its potential as a site for culturally digitalized pedagogy and social change.

3.1. Reading Identities Within Communities of Practice and Affinity Spaces

Affinity spaces are the formation of a community often found in digital or online spaces where group members share identities, interests, or goals (Gee, 2004). Gee (2017) operationalizes affinity spaces as being "primarily defined by an affinity for solving certain sorts of problems. As such they always involve the development of certain sorts of skills" (p. 28). Gee's (2004, 2017, 2018) work around affinity spaces have deeply informed other scholars within digital literacies to understand the influence, learning, and forming of identities through these online communities. Gee (2018) describes how classrooms and educators can learn from the exchanges in affinity spaces by mapping the various locations (physical and digital) and ways individuals interact with their interests by grounding examples from video gamers. Gee (2018) suggests extended offline activities (e.g., writing about their games, creating art, talking about gaming) are also a part of affinity spaces and developing identities. Leander and Boldt (2013) argue that literacies take shape beyond a textual product and how individuals form meaning as they engage in activities related to their interests. As Gee (2018) suggests, young people need access to these affinity spaces to explore their interests and deepen their understanding. Within affinity spaces,

Gee (2018) offers that "people are fully engaged in helping each other to learn, act, and produce, regardless of their age, place of origin, formal credentials, or level of expertise" (p. 9). Individuals interact, engage, and extend their understanding of topics, interests, and passions through these spaces.

Beyond establishing a place of community, affinity spaces situate a hierarchical sense of membership where learning practices are exchanged within interest-based skills. Abrams and Lammers (2017) consider how affinity spaces provide a place of community due to the engagements, interactions, and exchanges between individuals. These spaces also provide belongingness for identity formation and align to components of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Lave and Wenger's (1991) communities of practice situate identity and belongingness to a community on the degree to which an individual engages as an expert in the field. Additionally, Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that hierarchies exist between those with and without expertise within communities of practice. Curwood's (2013) study on Hunger Games fan-based online spaces (X/Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, and Facebook) highlights that these affinity spaces, although digital and distant, allow for more collaboration and interaction with others than printed text (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011). Through an ethnography approach, Curwood (2013) analyzed the digital literacy practices and participation within a community, finding that youth gravitated towards affinity spaces to express their identities (Curwood & Cowell, 2011) and develop and maintain essential relationships (boyd, 2008). As such, affinity spaces are just as much community-forming as identity-forming. As Curwood (2013) suggests, literacy practices within affinity spaces move beyond traditional forms of comprehension and critical analysis, including a wide range of digital literacies, collaboration, and composing. Within affinity spaces like those described by Curwood (2013), individuals engage in the space and learn about community values, which develop and enhance their identity formation.

Identity is how we see ourselves and how others view us. While some identities are fixed, such as race, culture, or gender, we can choose other identities based on upbringing, jobs, training, or personal interests (Gee, 2004). According to Gee and Hayes (2011), our identities are based on our discourses, which are embedded with social language and "integrates ways of talking, listening, writing, reading, acting, interacting, believing, valuing, and feeling. . .in the service of enacting socially situated identities and activities" (p. 111). In defining reading identity, school-related discourses often come to mind where particular actions, interactions, and habits indicate that someone *is* or *is not* identified as a reader. Cultural models of the skills, actions, and reactions within a discourse ultimately define our identities. As such, Gee (2000) suggests that these identities and discourses of being a "reader", when they align with school-based discourses, impact the way a student acts, resonates, and understands language and literacy practices privileged by these academic spaces (p. 115). Therefore, the ways individuals view or think about a reading identity are often situated in the academic discourse of school-based reading and literacy practices. Reading identities frame how individuals see themselves and impact how they choose to carry out their identities whether in analog or digital spaces. Hall (2012) posits that students' identities play a significant role in how students choose to think and discuss a text, suggesting that cognitive ability is irrelevant in determining a reader's actions and reading strategies. This study notes that while reading identities can evolve through intentional environmental and social conditions, identities are often grounded in long-term developments and reinforcements from teachers, parents, and peers.

3.2. Restorying for Reading Communities

Extending Rosenblatt's (1994/2019) theory of transactional reading, Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016) offer restorying as a bending of texts using social media. Namely,

restorying is a process for readers to reimagine and "reshape narratives to reflect better a diversity of perspectives and experiences [as] an act of asserting the importance of one's existence in a world that tries to silence subaltern voices" (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016, p. 314). For example, youth might recreate or respond to a text in a social media platform by using multimodalities to alter a characters' racial background, historical placement, or geographic location as a mechanism to bring *their* identities and experiences into the textual interpretation. Young people respond to the texts they are reading and move the ownership and agency of texts into their own hands to shift the time, place, identity, mode, perspective, and metanarrative. For readers from historically marginalized identities (i.e., BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ readers), texts often exclude their backgrounds, narratives, and experiences. Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016) note that young people are engaging in restorying to bend narratives through digital networks and affinity spaces within social media (i.e., Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok), taking up "new opportunities to connect, collaborate, and communicate, relationships between readers, authors, and texts" (p. 316). By reframing or bending the textual narratives, readers place their spin, which also situates notions of community.

Restorying reinforces many components of identity-forming actions (Bakhtin, 1981; Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016), which place the reader at the center of the textual interpretations, particularly within identities often left out, marginalized, or silenced. Additionally, the orientation of digital construction and reimagining exists as both learning and identity development (Engeness & Lund, 2020; Engeness, 2021). Thomas and Stornaiuolo (2016) state that "young people engaged in participatory culture produce individual and collaborative content as part of their everyday lives using a wide variety of multimodal tools to make meanings that are increasingly decentralized, crowdsourced, and situated in a multiplicity of contexts" (p. 318). This extends what Rowsell et al. (2019) describe as adolescents' preferred interactions to interpret digital texts, seeing it less as a literal translation but engaging in remixing or reimagining to interpret deeper meaning.

3.3. Hacker Literacies

Aligning within digital communities of practice are also "hacker literacies" (Santo, 2011), the sociotechnical engagements that are "empowered participatory practices, grounded in critical mindsets, which aim to resist, reconfigure, and/or reformulate the sociotechnical digital spaces and tools that mediate social, cultural, and political participation" (p. 2). In other words, the ways individuals engage in digital practices that shift or alter their original intent or purpose to build, bring together, and empower others. Santo (2011) describes the best example of hacker literacies as hashtags that have morphed specifically on platforms such as X/Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Commonly used to identify or mark a group, keyword, or phrase, hashtags (#) are social identifiers that construct varying forms of meaning (Zappavigna, 2015). An example of this "hack" was in 2007, when Messina (2007) suggested the migration of using hashtags in Twitter (now X) as not just an identifier but as an organizing tool around important issues (Carvin, 2009; Gannes, 2010; Santo, 2011); as Santo (2011) argues, hashtags were never intended to be a social organizer. However, hashtag participation has rewritten how the X/Twitter platform is used for critical participation. In essence, hacker literacies align with how individuals may reframe digital tools to mobilize others, collectively building a community of shared interests and values. Although much of Santo's (2011) work examines hacker literacies through social activism, the malleability of social media platforms and digital technologies as communicative and community formation tools warrants consideration for the content and material for marginalized identities.

3.4. Online Reading Communities

Online book communities are growing in popularity, where readers gather through online or socially mediated digital platforms to post, blog, recommend, or discuss books. Foasberg (2012) discussed how social media spaces, like X/Twitter, provide a socially interactive space for book clubs and reading communities as "many participants posted links to their blogs, but others also used it as an opportunity to encourage each other or make note of the books they had read or other aspects of their lives that affected their reading" (p. 50). Interactions that serve as a form of reader response extend beyond the individual reader and a text. Instead, they progress toward a deeper understanding of community development within these digital spaces through social interactions about their reading.

Online reading communities can offer individuals a more enhanced experience to discuss and deepen literary understandings beyond reading a text independently. Colwell et al. (2018) found that youth participating in online book clubs experienced richer reading experiences compared to independent reading. The online setting allowed for academic discussions with minimal adult interference and encouraged more meaningful connections between participants. The space afforded a sense of autonomy to choose texts and engage in discussions that reflected personal identities and experiences, which led to deeper, more nuanced interactions with both the texts and fellow community members.

3.5. TikTok: The Social Media Platform for Gen Z

TikTok is a short-form video social media app that has overtaken U.S. popular culture. Since 2018, users in the United States have created and interacted with three-second to three-minute-long videos, virtually engaged with followers, and developed digital communities based on interests, identities, and passions. The literacies within this digital platform exemplify how literacy is fostered by a community, constructed through video-based content, and consumed by users. The platform, structured by an algorithm, permits and limits how users, contributors, and the TikTok community view, use, and compose content. Boffone (2021) suggests that the way young people (particularly in Generation Z or those who were born between 1990 and 2010) choose to use and engage with social media spaces is indicative of the way "young people. . .view social media as a critical place to construct identities and form distinct youth subcultures" (p. 10). TikTok is more than just a dance app. It situates itself as a source of social or pop-culture currency for emerging communities and affinity spaces to exist based on interests, passions, and identities.

TikTok's platform as a social media space permits interactions among and between users (Nichols & LeBlanc, 2020), and participation in the TikTok community relies on the algorithm's personalization. Like many other social media platforms, TikTok emphasizes content curated for its users (Ruehlicke, 2020). However, TikTok's platform is distinct in delivering content directly *to* users based on previous activity and learned user behavior (Ruehlicke, 2020). TikTok is unlike other social digital platforms like X/Twitter, Snapchat, or Facebook, where users are the primary agents for seeking, finding, and selecting their community, content, and followers. TikTok's technical platform structure aligns with the techno-skeptical constructs described by Nichols and LeBlanc (2020), who argue that platforms inherently and intentionally bring individuals and interests together, highlighting that "all of these activities are intimately bound up with digital relations that are not always immediately visible to us" (p. 107). In this way, TikTok's algorithm mutually connects and segregates users into concrete categories or communities without user manipulation. Ruehlicke (2020) suggests that TikTok's inclusivity is presented as having spaces for everyone, not that everyone is equally welcome in all spaces. To engage in a particular community or content, users must actively "teach" the platform through their actions,

engagements, and viewing patterns. The platform upholds power as it decidedly pushes content to the screen's forefront by default, asking users to make choices within the provided content. The platform's tools allow users to make targeted choices within the content provided, allowing a user an assumed perception of their literacy engagement, agency, and access.

This digital community is not without critique. TikTok's algorithm often pushes content that promotes White heteronormative ideologies, which perpetuate offline systems of inequity (Boffone, 2022; S. Jerasa & Burriss, 2024; Tanksley, 2024). Other social media spaces have also been criticized for their hidden or subversive algorithms that privilege normative aesthetics, ideologies, or perceptions. In 2020, X/Twitter received criticism for its image-cropping algorithm, which would crop out or focus on the most significant part of an image. As Hearn (2020) describes, this technology's bias chooses to promote white components of images while cropping out Black and Brown faces. Within TikTok, this preference for whiteness is sometimes not as apparent as it is masked within the interconnectedness and hidden algorithmic components. As such, "rabbit holes" or "silos" can function as promoting bias through the algorithms preference for particular trends or user behavior patterns (Maddox & Gill, 2023). Boffone (2022) describes the TikTok bias when he says, "TikTok is built around TikTokkers mimicking the platform's most-followed accounts. That is, the repetition and virality of . . .videos, trends, dances, and aesthetics [that] replicate whiteness" (p. 23). This is not to say that historically marginalized identities, such as Black or Brown individuals, are not using this space. Instead, they *are* recreating these digital spaces to celebrate and elevate their identities and experiences through hashtags and subcommunities. Acknowledging TikTok's hidden or subversive side, historically marginalized identities have used or found community within TikTok. For example, Martinez (2022) studied how Black teenage girls use TikTok to construct spaces of Black joy as a form of resistance against White supremacy and racist systems of oppression. While TikTok's algorithm often amplifies certain voices, the platform can be used by Black, Brown, and LGBTQIA+ youth to actively engage and carve out spaces that serve their own needs and foster critical communities.

3.6. BookTok: The Sub-Community of Readers

#BookTok is a thriving TikTok sub-community that brings readers and book enthusiasts together to share favorite titles, recommend genres or tropes and creatively engage with their literary passions. #BookTok provides a space for meaningful interaction among readers while leveraging TikTok's multimodal tools, including audio, video filters, and music, to create engaging and emotionally resonant content (Merga, 2021; Wiederhold, 2022). #BookTok has garnered significant attention from readers, publishers, and the broader book industry. Its influence is evident in the rise in marketing strategies, such as Barnes & Noble's #BookTok-themed displays and publishers collaborating with content creators for book promotions (Balling & Martens, 2024; Harris, 2021). This growing synergy between social and economic forces demonstrates #BookTok's ability to shape literary trends and consumer behaviors, empowering teens and adults through a shared passion for books (Reddan et al., 2024).

The platform offers a space for users to exercise autonomy and agency, finding books (Dezuanni et al., 2022) through videos that often reflect personal interests rather than adhering to external rules or evaluations (Boffone & Jerasa, 2021). This dynamic shifts how individuals discuss and experience YA literature, making YA texts "memeable, fun, engaging, and socio-culturally relevant" (S. Jerasa & Boffone, 2021, p. 221). Recent scholarship has found that #BookTokers engage in the space not only to discuss books but as Asplund et al. (2024) posit, to "confirm, develop, and challenge their own reading practices" (p. 648)

through social approaches, such as shared annotations or reading in a physical space with others. Additionally, Dezuanni and Schoonens (2024) argue that #BookTok can be positioned as a learning space as a form of peer pedagogies (Dezuanni, 2020) where content creators serve as teachers about "reading identities, critical thinking in book selection, goal-setting in reading, pleasure reading, and importantly, the value of media entertainment in encouraging reading" (p. 9). Dera et al., (2023) explored students' "reading personas (e.g., bookworm, book doubter, or book avoider) to determine their potential #BookTok usage, finding that students with a positive reading attitude and who frequently read, viewed #BookTok with strong appeal; however, those with negative reading attitudes were less likely to use the space.

Overall, recent scholarship has confirmed the potential and power to inform and shape individuals' reading behaviors and identities through digital participation. Since #BookTok frequently elevates marginalized voices and stories often excluded from traditional school curricula, fostering discussions, book clubs, and content around these texts. This inclusivity transforms #BookTok into a literacy space where youth can encounter diverse cultural, queer, and linguistic representation, creating a safe and affirming environment for self-expression and acceptance (S. Jerasa & Boffone, 2021). While Asplund et al. (2024) and Dera et al. (2023) both emphasize the potential impact of #BookTok on readers with varying attitudes and interests, neither study explicitly included the perspectives of individuals from diverse cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, it is important to understand such perspectives in order to determine the significance, application, and nuanced aspects of #BookTok for diverse readers. #Booktok scholarship has noted that the majority of content focuses on mainstream, popular texts or authors that reflect White, heteronormative perspectives (De Melo, 2024). De Melo (2024) found through a comparative analysis of the race, gender, and sexual orientation identities of #BookTok content creators, authors, and texts finding that although diversity exists, the space is, however, dominated by mostly White, female, and heteronormative texts, authors, and content creators. Despite this finding, diverse content still exists that serves as both representational and affirming community space for non-dominant viewpoints. Extending work by Martens et al. (2022) and Kulkarni (2024), #BookTok can be an affirming space for readers of diverse cultures and linguistic practices that are often not recognized in other online or analog spaces. As such, this study addresses a gap in #BookTok scholarship by examining how international creators with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and how the space fosters community, affirms identities, and advocates for equity.

4. Materials and Methodology

This work is part of a larger mixed-methods study on the reading motivations of users associated with #BookTok. This study utilized an online survey instrument to investigate reading motivation and reading perceptions of #BookTokers and recruit study participants for interviews. The scale instrument included questions where participants rated their reading identities today and as youth in elementary school, which provided data on respondents' identity shifts as readers. Given the emerging scholarship on TikTok research, particularly its algorithmic and human–machine interfaces, limited methodologies have been developed. The researcher first engaged in a walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018) for systematic interaction with the platform to saturate the algorithm in order to effectively recruit participants for surveys and interviews. Over four weeks, hashtags like *#BookTok* and *#bookish* were used to curate content that aligned with the interests of the #BookTok community as a training tool for the platform's algorithm. This process provided the research-specific TikTok with semi-randomized, algorithm-driven content, ensuring a deeper understanding of the community's digital patterns and creating opportunities to

recruit participants effectively. Between June and August of 2022, the researcher contacted 1646 TikTok users through direct messaging and email to complete the survey instrument. A total of 525 recorded survey responses were collected; however, 450 were eligible for analysis to determine scale values for reading perceptions and #BookTok-related reading motivation. All survey respondents were invited to opt-in as interviewees; however, only those participants who indicated a reading identity shift from youth to current day were considered eligible. A total of 42 participants met the interview eligibility criteria, and only 20 completed the consent to participate. It was determined that six to eight interviewees would be appropriate for the scope of this study. Six interviewees were selected using demographic data to ensure diverse perspectives across genders, race/ethnicities, languages, and sexual orientations. For the scope of this paper three of those interviewed participants were selected as case studies. The section below details this study's participants and their credentials. The Institutional Review Board approved this study at the author's institution (STUDY00003042).

4.1. Participants

For this paper, selected participants were international #BookTokers who shared experiences of having varied linguistic experiences in schools where their home or primary spoken language was not the dominant language used in their schooling or early elementary education. For this study's analysis, three participants from the six that were interviewed in the larger study were selected as cases as these participants identified as non-White individuals and resided in a country outside of the United States. Participants shared ways their experiences with #BookTok promoted a diverse cultural experience and affirmation for the texts they read. The following section provides an overview of each case in this study.

4.1.1. Armand

Armand is a 22-year-old Middle Eastern male currently living in Germany, where he is a college student. He was an Iranian refugee, and his family left home and moved to Albania when he was in high school. Armand identifies as multilingual, speaking and reading in Farsi, German, and English. Armand is an avid fantasy reader and describes his purpose for #BookTok, which is to mostly connect with others who like to read his favorite types of books. During the interview, his TikTok account had 13.4K followers and 1 million likes with 715 videos. Armand described that access to TikTok was ultimately limited until he began college in Germany since the Iranian government restricted access to the app.

4.1.2. Gibson

Gibson is a 26-year-old Queer Black male currently living in the Netherlands as a college student studying international creative business. He grew up in Curaçao and speaks and reads in multiple languages, including Dutch, English, and Papiamento, which is the native language of Curaçao. Gibson's TikTok account includes 430 videos with 653K likes and 18.4K followers during the interview. Gibson started chronicling his reading using an Instagram account, which quickly migrated to TikTok. Gibson's #BookTok content focuses mostly on book recommendations for texts that include people of color and queer stories.

4.1.3. Robin

Robin is a 26-year-old Filipino Asian female self-proclaimed "dog-ear and spine-breaking reader" who enjoys reading nonfiction books. As a multilingual, Robin speaks and reads Tagalog (an indigenous language of the Philippines) and English but prefers to read texts in English because more books are available. Robin views her participation in #BookTok as part of a larger movement for advocacy and activism against the current political situation in her country and the banning of books (or red-tagging) that are critical

of the country's current government. At the time of her interview, Robin's TikTok account had 370 videos with 305.4 likes and 6348 followers. Her #BookTok content focuses mostly on books she recommends that privilege female and Asian voices.

4.2. Data Collection

The researcher applied a case study (Merriam, 1998) approach and examined the bounded unit of global #BookTokers' participation in the digital platform who experienced a shift in reading behavior from their youth. Due to the focus of this study, only interview data collection and analysis are reported. Data sources included three participant interviews (see Table 1), and interviews were conducted via Zoom in August and September 2022, with video recordings capturing audio, facial expressions, pauses, and other non-verbal communication. Using Carspecken's (1996) interview protocol, data focused on understanding participants' intentions, reactions, and perceived implications of their contributions within TikTok. Discussions explored three key domains: (a) the rationale and intentions behind #BookTok engagement, (b) perceptions of elementary reading experiences and early reader engagement, and (c) reflections on participants' current reading lives. In order to capture how participants constructed #BookTok content and understand their engagement in the space, video elicitation (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015) was applied to triangulate findings and provide visual support for the participants to view, recall, and discuss their experiences.

Table 1. Interview Participants Across Demographics, $n = 3$.

	Racial Identities				Language Use		Gender		Age	Geographic Location
	Hispanic	**Black**	**Asian**	**Biracial**	**English**	**Multilingual**	**Female**	**Male**		
Armand			X			X		X	22	Germany
Gibson		X				X		X	26	Netherlands
Robin			X			X	X		26	Philippines

4.3. Data Analysis

The author applied a thematic analytical approach (Merriam, 1998) where interview transcripts were examined and coded for themes aligned with critical affinity spaces (Abrams & Lammers, 2017; Curwood, 2013; Gee, 2018), transformative potential (Jemal, 2017), and CDP (McDaniel, 2024). The researcher first used the raw transcription data to open code (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to determine how the interview transcript data emerged through an inductive analysis (Miles et al., 2020). Drawing from critical affinity space, CDP, and transformative potential, child or sub-codes were determined through a more inductive approach for understanding the more nuanced components using axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) for themes and connections to the theoretical framework of culturally digitalized pedagogies particularly focusing on aspects of culturally focused digital productions, reflections of personal lives, notions of belongingness toward community formation, and engagement towards activism and allyship (Jemal, 2017; McDaniel, 2024) (see Table 2 for coding scheme). Coded data and child codes were validated by Dr. Dominique McDaniel to confirm findings and alignment to theoretical framing with emphasis on CDP. For analysis validation, the author confirmed participants' statements with their reading motivation survey responses as a form of member check.

Table 2. Data Analysis Coding Scheme.

Parent Code	Child Code	Examples
#BookTok Community	Shared Interests	"My friends or people around me [don't] have the same [book] tastes as me. So there were no person [sic] around me to like talk about. . .books."
	Distinctive Membership	"I started accumulating followers and having conversations with people all around the world about just queer books, and that's . . .how I made a lot of my friends today."
	Authentic/True Reflection	"You feel safer, you can be who you are without having to have everything staged."
	Space for Diverse Backgrounds	"Anything that is MLM (Male Loving Male) is already a plus for me. . .And now, getting to read these books, knowing that they exist is amazing.
Critical Perspectives	Access to Social Currency	"If you want to be in like the inner circle, you need to like read the books that everybody [reads]...otherwise you won't get the jokes, you won't get the videos."
	Understanding Others	"I was completely ignorant to the existence of other ethnicities in general. The [understanding] that me and this [other] person, we were not the same. . .didn't exist."
	Understanding Selves	"These are like the kind of books that I wished I would have known existed when I was growing up and what would have helped me so much with my identity and self-assurance."
	Taking action	"Right after the election was called, everyone was panicking about books being banned."
Shifts in Reading	Reading Identity	"I found reading in high school, but when I was, uh, younger it was my sister who reads. . ..Eventually I became the reader."
	Diverse Representation	"Afterwards I was like, craving more because I didn't know queer literature was an actual genre."
	Language Access	"So I think I had read all the translated fiction that was about fantasy. You have this one shelf with translated texts."
Reader's Response	Dialogic Interactions	"I get comments like, 'Oh, do you have anything for like a new adult sapphic romance?' or something like that, and I just reply to those comments with videos and with either books that I have or books that I know
	Shared Reactions	"When I'm reading slowly it's because I like to like live react, live tweet or just like live text. My friends like, oh my God, you'll never guess what just happened. And then just, um, start a conversation from that.
	Reflecting Identities	"Say if a book has two love interests. . .let's say they are both white, I always try to imagine the other one as a person of color. Yeah, because I just like seeing people of color in these stories.
	Responsibility to Community	"This kind of forces me to like, do research and look for books, because I don't want to leave the [#BookTok] people hanging."

5. Findings

This overview of findings first examines how the #BookTok community is presented according to our participants' experiences and how the community reflected shared interests, authentic representation, and distinctive membership while serving as an inclusive space for diverse backgrounds. The second theme of findings centers on the critical perspectives that were discussed by #BookTokers and how the content provided access to social currency (Moje et al., 2008) and served as a mirror, window, or sliding glass door (Bishop, 1990) to deepen understandings of varied perspectives. The third theme pointed to the shifts #BookTokers experienced as readers due to their participation in the digital

space compared to their reading experiences from their youth. Lastly, findings connected to how participants engaged in #BookTok as a form of reader response and how their content and engagements reflected their reading practice and identity with others.

5.1. #BookTok Community

#BookTok emerged as a distinctive community in participants' descriptions, with some noting how they discovered it or how the algorithm introduced them to the reading community. Armand described being intrigued by TikTok despite having limited access to it in his home country of Iran. Armand would use backdoor tactics such as watching book-related TikTok videos through YouTube shorts, which were not restricted. Once Armand's family relocated to Armenia as refugees and later moved to Germany, he could finally access and download TikTok, where he noticed how the platform's algorithm found book-related content that was very specific to his niche interests of epic fantasy. Armand noted that he quickly was able to lean on the algorithm to find other readers who shared the same interests as him, as he described, "The way the [TikTok] algorithm works is that you find your exact copy [sic]". Similarly, Robin first began using TikTok due to her curiosity about the "new" space. Robin noted that the platform surprised her because she immediately found other accounts that shared her interests, specifically discussing characters and quotes from books. She described that she stumbled upon #BookTok by chance and noticed that her content feed became more tailored to books when she said, "It really clicked in little by little. . .when I was fully in [#BookTok] that's when I realized I was really having fun". For Robin, she said that feeling seen by content that reflected her interests made the experience of using TikTok particularly unique and enjoyable.

The community feeling of #BookTok was mostly described as not just content but the creators, viewers, and fellow readers that really made the space distinctive. For Armand, he described that his analog or in-real-life (IRL) friends or family did not have the same reading interests. He explained that although he loved to read, he did not note anyone to share his ideas or new thinking with. He described this when he said, "the type of books that I read are not what necessarily my friends [read]... and people around me [don't] have the same taste as me. So like there was no person around me to like, talk about this. Like books, fantasy books". To Armand, #BookTok became his virtual reading community. Gibson also felt a sense of community with the users of #BookTok since he first started using TikTok during the COVID-19 shut down, when he felt isolated and alone without friends and family nearby. He quickly discovered a thriving community around books when he said, "I started accumulating followers and having conversations with people all around the world about just queer books, and that's sort of how I got into #BookTok and that's how I made a lot of my friends today". For Gibson and Armand, this interpersonal connection and feeling of social interaction allowed for the #BookTok community to mimic and mirror what they would normally do with friends or family within analog settings.

Participants described the feeling of the #BookTok space as being distinctive compared to other social media spaces, namely that TikTok felt like a more authentic space where they could share aspects of their identities without fear or critique. Armand described his participation with #BookTok noting a sense of security and familiarity as he engaged with content through leaving comments, responding to content creators or viewers, and liking videos. Armand described his approach to creating content in #BookTok as feeling comfortable to show his face to discuss his favorite fantasy books or characters without worrying about having a perfect bookshelf as his backdrop. Robin additionally noted on the distinctive feel of TikTok and described her first interaction with the platform saying, "[it was] the first time I [was] able to show myself in [a] video without makeup on. . .looking like I just woke up. I can't do that in Instagram. That's why TikTok is my preferred social

platform". To Robin there was something special about this platform space that allowed her to feel safe and transparent about the books she loved and found most interesting. This was something she hadn't experienced in previous social media platforms before.

The #BookTok community was often described as the space or access point for reading suggestions or recommendations. Although participants described that popular or mainstream authors and texts were common within #BookTok content, there was an overwhelming sense that diverse authors, stories, or texts were privileged and welcomed within the digital reading community. Robin described how she only knew about certain authors based on popular media but that the #BookTok community helped her find books that reflected her own interests when she said, "the quality of the content . . .it's more catered to what I like. Before [#BookTok] all I know [sic] are the ones I see in TV, like Nicholas Sparks and Dan Brown. And now I can find more [books or authors] that's not really as famous, but will speak more to me". Robin made clear that her reading interests focused on finding and reading texts written by female Asian authors, and the #BookTok community helped her find those texts. Gibson also found that the #BookTok community supported varied interests and diverse books. Gibson described the content creators he followed as being reflective of his specific interests, saying,

> One thing I really like about the people I'm following is that it varies a lot. . . there are some people that I follow specifically that talk about like books and their love of Greek mythology, and others talk about diverse books and specifically talk about books like Black authors [and] Black protagonists. . . There's like a circle of people that I'm just excited to see what [they] post on a daily basis.

For Gibson, the #BookTok community afforded him a space for multiple and intersectional identities to co-exist. In this way, Gibson felt like his curated content helped him to find creators and books that reflected his varied reading interests and supported his identity as a Black, queer male.

5.2. Critical Perspectives

Findings noted that participants' #BookTok engagements supported their ability to take up critical perspectives. This included reading similar texts to be part of a robust and dynamic discourse across the #BookTok community. Commonly understood as social currency (Moje et al., 2008), one must have social knowledge or inside information (e.g., reading a popular or controversial book) to be included in the conversation but also to be able to make sense of it. Participants noted that reading particular texts meant they also understood the commentary or discussion about it. It simultaneously supported their community membership while also allowing them to take a particular stance on a discourse. Armand noted this when he described that being part of the #BookTok community also meant he had to read similar books and authors discussed within #BookTok videos. He described wanting to understand the inside jokes. He wanted to make content that his community members would understand when he said, "if you want to be like in the inner circle, you need to like read the books that everybody [reads]. . . otherwise you won't get the jokes, you won't get the videos". Armand noted that this active participation helped him to build an understanding for the varied perspectives, discussions, trends, and jokes that often were present in #BookTok.

Participants also described their #BookTok participation as a way that deepened their own sense of themselves and their identities. This occurred through the content they viewed or created and the books they selected to read from #BookTok. Robin described her reading behaviors as enjoying all types of books but described that when she read books or authors aligned with her cultural experiences as a Filipino female, her reading experience was significantly more impactful. Robin could feel a difference in how she read a text

with Asian characters. She noted how she could internally understand their experiences, saying, "I think I am moving farther away from books with only white characters and more [books] with the diverse ones. Which is better. . .especially if it's Asians, like I relate to them more, like understand each other more". To Robin, this deeper level of understanding by reading diverse and representational texts allowed her to experience books in a different way. This allowed her to make deeper connections with characters and stories, affirming her identities. Gibson also noted that reading books and authors who reflected his identity as a Black, queer male changed how he saw himself as a reader when he said,

> Because these are like the kinds of books that I wish I had known existed when I was growing up. And it would have helped me so much with my identity and self-esteem because I was very insecure as a child. And now I'm getting to read these books, knowing that they exist is amazing. So whenever I find any recommendations [that include] male representing romance with Black people, it's like, "okay, give it to me".

To Gibson, reading and participating in a space like #BookTok provided access to texts that enhanced his reading and his understanding of his intersecting identities.

Bishop's (1990) metaphor for diverse texts highlights that books can serve as mirrors and windows to understand others' cultures and lived experiences. While two out of the three participants described their reading of diverse texts and participation in #BookTok as affirming their own identities, Armand described that his #BookTok engagement allowed him to see perspectives beyond his own culture. Armand grew up in Iran, where he often did not see cultures outside his Middle Eastern background. He described being unaware of other racial or ethnic backgrounds, saying, "So basically until 13 or 14 [years old] I was completely ignorant to the existence of other ethnicities in general. The [understanding] that me and this [other] person, we were not the same. . .didn't exist". However, Armand noted that by participating in Instagram, X/Twitter, and TikTok, he was exposed to cultures and perspectives different from his own experiences growing up in Iran, which ultimately broadened his worldview.

Understanding critical perspectives also included taking up civic action to address issues of inequity or injustice. Robin described how #BookTok supported her reading and how she mobilized her account to support other readers within her home country of the Philippines. Robin described the political situation in her country as "tense" and "problematic" since the 2022 presidential election of Ferdinand Marcos Jr., son of the country's former dictator. Robin explained how her country's democratic society has experienced significant threats due to fears around book bans and censorship of printed materials that oppose the current political ruler or referenced "subversive, anti-Marcos, anti-Duterte contents" (Santo, 2011). To this, Robin said:

> After the election, we had some very disappointing results, and afterwards I knew I wanted to use my [#BookTok] platform to be [an advocate] for our country. . .Right after the election was called, everyone was panicking about books being banned. [Censorship] is going to happen eventually we were all so sure, so we bought every [book] we could. . .There is already a ban happening on what can be published. I want to do my part in helping the younger generation have these . . .books written by our own.

Robin saw her #BookTok space as an opportunity to promote books written by Filipino authors in her native language, Tagalog, and to preserve her culture's history.

5.3. Shifts in Reading

Participants were selected for this study based on their identified reading shifts compared to their elementary schooling experience using a scale instrument at the time of

recruitment in addition to their cultural and linguistic demographics. A direct cause or correlation was not named in participants' reflections, but some noted changes in their reading behaviors compared to their earlier experiences. Individual accounts described shifts in reader identity, particularly in how they now perceive themselves as readers compared to their elementary school years. For example, Robin described that she wasn't the "bright" one in her family and that her sister was considered the strong reader, saying, "when I was younger it was my sister who read and I always thought it's so sad that [reading] is not for me. Like I wish it was but it wasn't. Eventually I became the reader". Robin noted that she initially did not identify as a reader but later transitioned to see herself as someone who reads. Gibson also alluded to his reading ability as a barrier to his reading due to low self-esteem. He noted that he didn't start reading or see himself as a reader until 2019 when he made a New Year's Resolution to read more books. Gibson selected queer books that really interested him saying, "I found *Simon* Versus *the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (Albertalli, 2015)... and I devoured this book in like 2 ½ days... and mind you I haven't really read or finished a book before this. Afterwards I was like, craving more because I didn't know queer literature was an actual genre". For Gibson, having discovered a genre or book with diverse representation unlocked an urge and desire to read that shifted not only his behavior but how he identified as a reader. He noted that texts available to read in elementary school did not interest him due to a lack of representation. Simply put, Gibson did not see himself in any of the books he could read. Gibson commented on this when he said,

> The books that I saw didn't really represent me. I didn't see myself in any of the characters physically. Sometimes even personality wise, I didn't see myself... Now [Black characters] are in books, in movies, or TV shows. I think the very first time that I even felt... represented in any piece of media was watching Cyborg in *Teen Titans*. I was like, 'Oh my God! A Black superhero, finally!'

The fact that Gibson now has access to types of books and media that are inclusive and reflect his own identities has contributed and affirmed his current-day reading behaviors.

Another pattern that came up were the ways participants described the quantity and format of books that they read. Robin noted that she has significantly increased how many books she reads per month and even keeps track of her books using an online app in addition to her #BookTok content. Robin described this by saying, "Now I read around, uh, nine to ten books in a month or like nine to twelve. Before that I only read like two to three books in a month. Like sometimes none". Robin attributed her high volume reading success to #BookTok saying, "because of #BookTok, the books I find now are better suited for me. I am having a lot more fun with them because they are written for me". Armand also acknowledged that his volume of reading increased due to not just the genre or topic of books but the format, namely audiobooks. Armand described his reading behavior shifted when he started using audiobooks for reading saying,

> I love audiobooks. [Reading has been] really hard for me. It was something that I always noticed even by studying, especially for academic stuff. I can't sit in the same place and just read. I need to always be doing two or three things at the same time. I usually put on an audiobook and put it on 2× or 3× [speed] if it's possible in the app.

Armand noted that this reading format change allowed him to unconsciously focus on a text and story while also doing other activities like video gaming, driving, or artwork. Utilizing the audio features of an audiobook also allowed Armand to get through texts quickly, which would be harder to do if he only read the text alone.

Alternatively, Gibson noted that his reading behavior shifted towards a more slowed and intentional pace where he would read only for pleasure. Gibson noted that his reading purpose shifted how he read a book explaining if it was only for him, he wanted to savor the experience saying, "my reading habit is a little slower. . . it's more for my own enjoyment and honestly I'm not tested or anything. Most of the time when I am reading slowly it's because I like to live react, live tweet, or just like live text". According to Gibson, this slowed approach to reading allowed him the opportunity to engage with others about the books he was reading, making the meaning more impactful to his own thinking.

The three participants noted that the availability of texts in their primary or home language was a barrier to their early reading behaviors. Armand described how his linguistic practices often limited his access to the reading material he loved. Armand's first language is Farsi, and he described that in bookstores, he was often limited in what he could read since most books were published in English and his English language was still developing. Armand said, "Fantasy [the genre] especially is not a big thing in Iran, [so] the amount of translated [books] that I had access to was limited. . . So I think I had read all the translated fiction that was about fantasy. You have this one shelf with translated text". As a result, Armand was motivated to learn English to gain wider access to the books he wanted to read and participate in online conversations. Robin also described a similar experience as she noted that few books are written in her native language of Tagalog, the basis of national language of Filipino, and so she often had to read books in English, saying, "I'm comfortable reading in English. I tried to read Tagalog book once a few months ago but I did not finish it. . . I feel like there's not a lot of books written in Tagalog. . . The language is I think a barrier too to Filipino readers". Not having wide access to books written in accessible languages prevented participants from being able to engage with texts they wanted to read fully.

In addition to linguistic limitations, Gibson highlighted that school settings privileged books that were not written in his home language. Growing up in Curaçao, Gibson's first and home language was Papiamentu, a Creole dialect of Portuguese. His schools used Dutch for all instruction and learning materials, including books. Despite these challenges, Gibson shared that he identifies as multilingual and fluent in multiple languages, including Papiamentu, Dutch, English, and German. As a child, Gibson shared he felt a divide in his linguistic repertoires and avoided texts written in Dutch. He has since shifted and described his reading choices based on content rather than linguistic representation when he said,

> [My parents] would always get Dutch books and I didn't really like them. . .[but] I've noticed that even if a book is in Dutch, [if] it's interesting enough, I will read it. Like I have a few now that are in Dutch that I've read because I just like the premise. It takes me a little while longer, but I like them.

To Gibson, what started as a significant barrier to accessing texts shifted as he gained more autonomy in the books he could read based on his interests, even if the language were more challenging to consume. As Gibson described, the story and characters made the challenging language worth reading.

5.4. Reader's Response

Participants described how their participation in #BookTok took up varied positions where they created content, viewed videos, and followed or commented on accounts. The three participants described #BookTok as their preferred space for discourse to talk with others about books. This was often due to not having in their everyday life available to share books, recommendations, or ideas about genres, authors, or characters. Armand described that although people in his family were readers, no one shared the same specific

interests as him. #BookTok afforded Armand a place to have discourse with others despite not knowing them IRL saying, "So I'm [sharing books] with basically strangers in the internet, like [to] have a community online that have a same interest as me". According to Armand, these shared interests in epic fantasy books allowed him an opportunity to enjoy the genre and encouraged him to read more.

Gibson also described how discourse about books has really supported him as a reader, feeling that he had an audience to share his thoughts about authors, stories, and even subgenres of texts. Although Gibson's videos began with just funny anecdotes, he started to include more book-related content when viewers began responding and engaging with him. This feedback not only reinforced Gibson's decisions on what types of content to create but gave him a sense of how his content impacted others' reading. Gibson shared that a lot of his content were responses to comments and questions about books that addressed Black or queer experiences highlighting a sense of obligation to help others find titles or authors for queer literature when he said, "I get comments like, 'Oh, do you have anything for like a new adult sapphic romance?' . . .and I just reply to those comments with videos and with either books that I have or books that I know". In this way, Gibson saw his participation and reader response as a responsibility to support other readers in the same way he was supported when first joining #BookTok.

Although reading is often described as an individual practice, Gibson and Robin noted they engaged in buddy reading or book club discussions as a result of #BookTok. Robin explained that this form of reading behavior started as a way to encourage others (e.g., friends, family members, fiancé) to read more but also fostered her own reading saying, "now that I have found #BookTok I have also encouraged [my best friend] saying, 'maybe these are the kinds of books you would want' so now we have like a two-person book club". Similarly, Gibson described that he and his #BookTok friends would often read a book together saying,

> I buddy read with two of my friends and what happened was we just read at our speeds and. . . when they caught up to me we just had this exchange back and forth of what we think is going to happen. Like we exchanged theories of what's going to happen to the characters.

For Gibson, this form of shared reading and discussion about books became part of the way he read his books and thought about reading, which translated into his #BookTok content.

6. Discussion

The #BookTok community fosters a sense of belonging through shared interests, diverse perspectives, and broadened worldviews while influencing individuals' reading habits and content-creation practices. Across the three cases, findings highlight the impactful role of language in book access and the transformative changes participants experienced in their reading. These insights have practical implications, demonstrating how representation in texts and opportunities for discussion outside traditional educational contexts can deepen engagement with literature globally. The discussion is organized around the study's three guiding research questions and themes to explore how the #BookTok community supports diverse perspectives, how participants experienced shifts in their reading behaviors, and the ways participants used #BookTok to reflect their cultural and linguistic identities.

6.1. #BookTok Community: Affirming Identities for Sense of Belonging

Participants revealed #BookTok's importance as a secure and inclusive space where users could meaningfully connect with other readers who affirmed their cultural and linguistic identities. According to participants, #BookTok fostered a sense of belonging by connecting readers with similar niche interests, such as epic fantasy or queer literature. Such

assemblages aligned with affinity spaces (Abrams & Lammers, 2017; Gee, 2018) namely in the formation of bounded groups based on shared identities and passions. Although notions about the #BookTok community are not new (Dera, 2024b) there appears to be a deep affective pull that encourages the participation of the space (Kulkarni, 2024), particularly those with positive reading attitudes (Dera et al., 2023). Robin noted how her enjoyment of TikTok shifted once her curated content included books she identified with and wanted to read. For Gibson, it became the other #BookTok community members that fostered his emotional connection. #BookTok's community and interactions within the digital space afforded participants a welcomed sentiment and allowed them to develop identities as readers and individuals (Gee, 2018; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). Within #BookTok, participants also noted the sense of membership within the space, namely, understanding jokes or inside commentary by reading commonly known or popular books. In this way, #BookTok includes a hierarchical membership of those who read and know the same types of books, authors, or tropes to understand the defining characteristics of such sub-communities or identities.

#BookTokers described the platform's algorithm as crucial in curating specific content that aligned with *their* individual preferences. This also enabled users to find and engage socially with other like-minded readers. As such, #BookTok became less about the digital space or the algorithmic curation and more about the individuals who made up the community. This centering of the community made participants feel safe to share their ideas, identities, and opinions (McDaniel, 2024). Despite critical views on the authenticity of TikTok's content and creators' intentions due to economic profits (Florida, 2022) or microcelebrity status (Abidin, 2021), participants felt seen and supported by their fellow #BookTokers. On the surface, this sense of belonging might only look like standard connections or textual discussions on favorite genres, tropes, or books. However, beyond these shallow interactions, participants saw the #BookTok space as intimate, allowing their true selves to exist. Participants noted that this experience with TikTok contrasted their experiences with other social media platforms or IRL spaces. Through affirming conversations, participants shared that #BookTok was *their* community to engage with the critical issues significant to their identities, communities, and lived experiences.

Participants described their #BookTok experiences as opportunities to be seen and heard where their identities were affirmed. This affirmation also served as an intentional carving out of space by utilizing the digital platform for their discourse around particular topics closely associated with marginalized identities (Jemal, 2017) beyond just their common interests in books (Asplund et al., 2024). It is well known the book publishing industry reflects a predominantly White, monolingual author population with books that overwhelmingly revolve around or promote White heteronormative ideologies (So & Wezerek, 2020). Additionally, there have been critiques on how social media algorithms like TikTok maintain a bias towards non-dominant viewpoints and individuals through algorithmic coding (Boffone, 2022; Tanksley, 2024). This is largely due to the algorithm creating echo chambers of content that reflects the larger discussions and behavior patterns. Critics have suggested such "silos" of information and viewpoints as problematic (Maddox & Gill, 2023), where content is continuously reinforced within a closed loop, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives and excluding outside voices from the conversation. However, the findings highlight that participants felt included within #BookTok because they could openly discuss representative texts or topics that reflected their linguistic and cultural practices, lived experiences, and identities. In many ways the algorithm performed its part to find "siloed" content that was inclusive of the types of content users wanted to see. Participants noted that the fact that they saw themselves in the texts that were discussed or, as Armand said, "your exact copy", provided a sense of community that took up a trans-

formative potential stance (Jemal, 2017). Participants acknowledged the overwhelmingly absent or lack of representation in media, including books, TV, and social media. However, the participants noted that their participation in #BookTok affirmed these identities and viewpoints (Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). As such, the #BookTok community proactively empowered their experiences or existence (L. M. Gutierrez & Ortega, 1991; Jemal, 2017) by digitally discussing and affirming their reading practices and interests.

6.2. Shifts in Reading Behaviors

Findings highlight the multiple ways participants experienced shifts in their reading compared to their previous experiences as youth. Measures for this study did not conclude correlation or causation patterns for the direct impact of #BookTok participation and changes in reading behaviors. However, some described specific ways their reading habits evolved since engaging with the #BookTok community. The most prominent thematic pattern was access to a wider and more varied selection of texts. While this access is likely influenced by multiple factors—such as age, economic flexibility, and autonomy—several individuals discussed how #BookTok contributed to discovering books that better reflected their cultural and linguistic identities. For example, Gibson and Robin noted that #BookTok helped them recognize the existence and legitimacy of books featuring protagonists aligned with their interests, such as Black queer male or Asian female leads. While #BookTok did not create or validate these genres, they credited the space for facilitating their discovery of such texts. This experience also extended to linguistic access, as all study participants identified as international and multilingual speakers who previously struggled to find books that matched both their interests and language preferences. Reflecting on their current reading experiences, individuals shared that they now have greater access to books that incorporate their preferred languages. Language appeared to be a more significant barrier during their younger years, when their linguistic repertoires were still developing. As adults in their twenties, they described themselves as stronger speakers and readers in their non-native languages, such as English. Consequently, these shifts seemed to stem more from increased proficiency and access to books they enjoy rather than from the format of the texts themselves.

In addition to the access to books, participants noted that their reading identities or viewing themselves as readers shifted significantly. Although it is unclear what role #BookTok played in this shift, participants said they revised their understanding of what it means to be a reader by interacting with others who shared similar reading habits and interests (Asplund et al., 2024). Through #BookTok, participants found other readers who could share their thoughts about texts and felt encouraged that their approaches "counted" as reading. In many ways the role of the platform's algorithm affirmed their choices by assisting to find content that validated the ways they wanted to read. This shift points to affinity spaces where participants were affirmed as readers to develop their reading identities through the digital community (Gee, 2018). Although it is likely that multiple factors also contributed to these shifts in participants' reading identities, findings suggest that #BookTok played a role in facilitating these changes and in how the participants view their reading today.

Participants shared a shift in what or how they read texts and their overall purpose for their reading. Namely, participants wanted to be part of the #BookTok discourse and have a reason to discuss a book with an IRL individual or analog community (Asplund et al., 2024). Armand noted that he sought out TikTok to be a part of the conversation about epic fantasy authors and books. Gibson and Robin said their reading purposes were to share their thoughts through book club discussions or buddy reading. Gibson shared that his slow approach to reading significantly changed because he wanted to read for his pleasure

and share his authentic reactions with others through live reacting. In this way, participants acknowledged that their reading shifted due to wanting to share their reading experience with others. Whether it was an online or offline discussion, participants noted that they were reading to be able to express themselves, build a community (McDaniel, 2024), and contribute to the larger conversation taking place.

6.3. Representation Through #BookTok Participation

Literacy scholar Bishop (1990) coined the metaphor "Books as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" to highlight the importance of diverse representation within books for young readers. Her metaphor still holds for adolescent and adult readers as findings highlight how diverse representation in texts supported participants' racial, linguistic, and cultural identities. Although some individuals initially joined TikTok out of curiosity or to explore the space, their continued engagement with #BookTok ultimately stemmed from finding affirmation of their own cultural and linguistic identities through both consuming and producing bookish content. In alignment with the concept of restorying, study participants engaged in identity-affirming actions through their book reviews, recommendations, and textual interpretations, all of which were informed by their identities, cultural or linguistic backgrounds, and lived experiences (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016). This continued engagement allowed them to carve out a distinct space to validate their experiences and existence (Jemal, 2017) and to create counternarratives that celebrate their cultural or linguistic diversity through texts (McDaniel, 2024).

Although participants noted that #BookTok was an affirming community of like-minded readers, findings also highlight how participation served as civic activism or advocacy towards emancipatory justice. Gibson noted he felt a sincere obligation towards providing accurate and affirming content that promoted Black, queer authors or texts for his followers and fellow #BookTokers to enjoy. To Gibson, he was responsible for supporting his community and advocating for them through his content. Additionally, Robin highlighted how her #BookTok platform became a hub for book access in response to book bans taking place in her country. In this way, Robin intentionally challenged the political oppression and regulatory systems by hacking the original intent of her #BookTok platform and community (Santo, 2011). As such, Robin mobilized awareness to address the political and racist issues that deeply impacted her and her fellow Filipinos (McDaniel, 2024). Although the broader societal impact remains uncertain, participants engaged with #BookTok in nuanced ways to cultivate literacy practices that reclaimed this space, authentically reflecting their sociocultural, linguistic, and ideological identities and experiences (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1984).

7. Implications

This study highlights the theoretical implications of #BookTok as a digital space where marginalized communities reshape traditionally oppressive platforms to serve emancipatory purposes. In contrast to TikTok's algorithm, which typically amplifies content reflecting dominant White, heteronormative ideologies (Boffone, 2022; Tanksley, 2024), these #BookTok users actively reimagined the space to prioritize diversity, inclusion, and liberation. This aligns with the concept of New Literacies, where digital and multimodal approaches to literacy challenge traditional practices (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1984). By intentionally engaging with the platform in ways that amplify identity-affirming content, marginalized users not only reshaped the digital environment but also trained the algorithm to prioritize diverse voices and experiences. As a result, #BookTok functions as a "third space" (K. D. Gutierrez, 2008) where these often

overlooked identities are celebrated, fostering community building and solidarity that extends beyond book discussions to empower participants (Santo, 2011; McDaniel, 2024).

These findings confirm previous scholarship on TikTok and underscores the practical significance of #BookTok as a dynamic digital space for agentive creative expression and community building. While digital activities on platforms like TikTok are often dismissed as trivial or unproductive, findings confirm such digital spaces are powerful sites of meaningful composition where users actively produce, share, and consume content that shapes identities and fosters meaningful connections. Participation in these digital spaces influences emotional and intellectual experiences, such as reading, and helps develop critical ideologies central to identity formation (Engeness, 2021; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). Despite the possibility that TikTok may not remain a permanent fixture in popular culture, it highlights how youth and digital users can harness social media platforms to create and navigate spaces that challenge dominant narratives and disrupt the status quo (Jemal, 2017). In this way, #BookTok offers a meaningful opportunity for digital creation and the cultivation of a critical, transformative community.

The engagement observed on #BookTok points to a broader shift for application within in-school or out-of-school reading practices. Reading is no longer only an individual activity but can be a collective, community-driven experience. By creating and sharing multimodal content, #BookTok facilitates a participatory reading culture where conversations about books extend beyond personal reflections to include collective identity promotion and civic activism aimed towards creating positive change or addressing societal challenges. When #BookTok content emphasizes the experiences of BIPOC, Queer, and marginalized readers, it fosters a supportive, critical reading community that transcends traditional reading practices present in educational settings. In this digital space, reading becomes a social endeavor (Asplund et al., 2024), where meaning is constructed from the text and the discourse and connections formed through shared experiences. This transformation emphasizes a more inclusive understanding of literacy, acknowledging the diverse identities and experiences reflected in the texts people read and the conversations they participate in. #BookTok can allow individuals to redefine themselves as readers, validating their unique identities through their chosen discussions and texts. The collective, affirming nature of these conversations underscores the importance of digital spaces in shaping modern reading practices and fostering critical identities in both online and offline contexts.

8. Limitations and Future Research

Participants in this study reflected multiple linguistic and racial backgrounds with global perspectives. While this diversity highlighted participants' unique experiences, it also resulted in the clustering of various viewpoints. As a limitation, the study was unable to thoroughly examine the nuanced experiences of specific marginalized groups, such as Black, LGBTQIA+, Latinx, or Asian communities. Future research could address this limitation by focusing on the particular linguistic and cultural dynamics within #BookTok sub-communities to understand better how these identities navigate and reshape the space. Additionally, this study was part of a more extensive study that focused on the relationship between #BookTok and reading motivation. As such, future research could include a scale development with culturally digitalized pedagogy (McDaniel, 2024) with affinity space theory (Abrams & Lammers, 2017; Gee, 2018) to capture the interplay between platform engagement and reading habits. The relatively small sample size of the study presents a limitation where generalizability cannot be attained. Future research can include larger samples through surveys to construct more transferable findings. Another notable limitation is the black-box nature of TikTok's AI-driven algorithm, which heavily influences participant selection and content curation. While this study employed methods to control

for algorithmic bias, future research could explore how the algorithm shapes marginalized identities' ability to find and engage with their communities, offering opportunities to unpack its role in fostering or hindering inclusion within #BookTok.

9. Conclusions

#BookTok serves as a potential site for transformative potential within CDP and affinity spaces. This study examined the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse #BookTokers, focusing on how this digital space influenced their community participation and reading behaviors. #BookTok can be understood as a space that shifts the concept of reading from an individual activity towards a more collective and community-driven practice. Participation in #BookTok can be a purposeful act of connecting with others, advocating for diverse representation in literature, and affirming marginalized identities. By leveraging culturally digitalized pedagogies (CDP), #BookTok empowers users to challenge the status quo and promote transformative advocacy for equitable representation in books and reading practices. These practices, shaped by the platform's algorithm, provide personalized content that can foster civic activism, social justice, and empowerment.

This research contributes to the broader understanding of how digital platforms can function as spaces for cultural sustainability, civic engagement, and transformative educational practices, offering insights for educators, researchers, and policymakers aiming to leverage technology for equitable literacy practices.

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