The Virtual Book Club: An Analysis of Popular Romance and Participatory Culture

Cassie Turkstra

MRP Proposal

Supervisor: Dr. Christina Baade

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Content Warning

This research discusses themes of abuse, mental health, and domestic violence. Content regarding these topics is briefly mentioned throughout the discourse analysis of Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us* and the subsequent analysis of TikTok discussion of her book. Please read with care.

Introduction

A young woman enters her bedroom and walks up to her full bookshelf, selecting a fresh romance novel she's wanted to read for some time. She's heard of this book for months on #BookTok, watched all the reviews, and added it to her TBR [to be read] on Goodreads. Her favourite TikTok accounts rated the book very highly, mentioning the friends-to-lovers trope, the spicy content, and the male protagonist who makes for the perfect book boyfriend. Halfway through the book, she reaches the long-awaited plot twist that many fellow readers warned her about. She opens up TikTok on her phone, watching reaction videos to that specific chapter, and she feels immediately validated that other people feel similarly to her.

This imaginative vignette demonstrates a common contemporary reading experience, for which #BookTok plays a central role. TikTok reintroduced me to reading at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I engaged with a like-minded community of young adult readers when isolated at home. Romance reading continues to offer me an escape from external stress, and I often lose myself in the confines of a love plot with a predictable, happily-ever-after ending. Over the past four years, I have watched friends become avid readers and social networking sites become overrun with book reviews and recommendations. Romance reading has dominated the publishing industry for generations, but its popularity manifests in new ways online, interesting young readers globally (Fitzgerald, 2024). This project focuses on how romance readers collaborate online to discuss romance books and engage in participatory culture.

Pamela Regis defines the romance as "a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines" (Regis, 2013, p. 22). Her influential definition also emphasizes the role of women as readers and authors. Since the eighteenth century, romance reading has been popular among female demographics (Regis, 2013). According to Andaleeb

Wajid (2020), "the genre privileges women's desire" (para. 9). It is scrutinized for prioritizing the fantasy of achieving one's goals through a love plot (Regis, 2013). Romance is often denigrated for its association with sentiment and women's bondage; in addition, it is criticized as a depthless literary indulgence that concentrates on love and erotica (Regis, 2013). Meanwhile, authors and publishing houses are denounced for exploiting female sexuality and identity and for commodifying love (Johnson, 2010). Still, romance remains one of the most popular literary genres.

In 2020, when North America entered a lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the cultural practice of romance reading converged with digital forms of literacy during at-home isolation. Readers used social networking sites, such as TikTok, to review books in short, engaging videos and comment on other's posts. Fan reading communities developed the TikTok hashtag #BookTok to discuss popular novels more easily online. Social networking sites provided spaces where young people "[found] like minded individuals, work[ed] through the coming-of-age experience, and cultivate[d] a sense of generational culture" (Boffone & Jerasa, 2021, p. 220). The publishing industry attributed a global increase in book sales after 2020 to this rise of digital discovery and discussions (Boffone & Jerasa, 2021).

One of the most debated novels on #BookTok is Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us*. First published in 2016, *It Ends With Us* became a New York Times bestseller in 2021, and the author attributed this success to literary trends on TikTok (Alter, 2023). Pushing the boundaries of romance writing, her novels contain "an addictive combination of sex, drama and outrageous plot twists" (Alter, 2023). Though Hoover's novels focus on white, heteronormative relationships that have long defined mainstream romance (Jansen, 2020), her plots often depart

from classic romance conventions and include mature themes, such as abuse, death, and mental illness.

It Ends with Us demonstrates how contemporary romance is changing. The discussion of Hoover's book and the romance genre more generally by fans online offers a rich site for analysis. Thus, in this MRP, I will investigate how young adult readers discuss and debate the romance genre on #BookTok, focusing on the following questions:

1. What methods and discursive strategies do young adult readers use to discuss romance novels online?

2. How does #BookTok function as a community for young adult women to critique, debate, and discuss popular novels, such as Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us*?

This study concentrates on Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us* because of its widescale popularity and the vigorous debates surrounding her work. The reception of Hoover's book exemplifies how fans debate and collaborate online to define romance as a genre. Romance reading is an intensely valued practice for young adults, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic. There is recent scholarship on romance, but it gives little attention to the impact of #BookTok on the cultural and community aspects of romance reading. This research aims to understand discursive strategies on #BookTok and how they have changed romance reading culture.

Romance in Perspective: Literature Review and Context

To inform my analysis of romance discussions on #BookTok, I rely on cultural studies scholarship, especially regarding the romance genre and its polarizing conventions and tropes. I also investigate ways to theorize and define online reading cultures and fandoms. In this section, I will discuss the cultural and publishing industry context for my study, and I will then explore

romance as genre, community, and feeling. This context and theorization will ground my analysis of #BookTok romance discourse and my *It Ends With Us* case study.

Shifts in Reading as Practice: Context

Book covers embody the shifting status of romance reading and the relationship between publishers and readers. As the first thing readers notice, book cover designs are essential for branding romance and intriguing prospective readers. Cover art has changed drastically since the mid-twentieth century, evolving with women's sexual freedom and reflecting specific sexual preferences (Fisher, 2022). Over the two decades before #BookTok, cartoon book covers became increasingly common, differing from the classic cover art used by renowned publishers like Harlequin Romance (Fisher, 2022). As cover art shifted, so too did the consumption of novels on e-reading devices, such as the Kindle. Digitized forms of reading and cartoon covers allowed readers to read novels publicly without appearing to be consuming romance novels (Flood, 2011). However, young readers today are increasingly vocal about reading romance novels in public spaces or online forums (Braidwood, 2022). The perceived shame about reading romance or the tendency to read books in private is no longer a defining feature of the genre (Braidwood, 2022).

Today, e-readers are less popular with younger demographics, and young readers have returned to purchasing physical book copies (Asplund, 2023). In a recent article for the CBC, data shows that "17 per cent of Canadian purchases were in e-book format in 2022, while 47 per cent were paperback and 25 per cent hardcover" (Weikle, 2023, para. 29). Older generations use e-readers more commonly, and the increased popularity of fiction genres are advancing sales of print books among younger generations (Weikle, 2023). Owning a physical book is a signifier of online reading culture, where young readers go to discuss the books they have read and select

their next novel. Bookstores have their marketing to address the popularity of romance and fiction online. For example, display tables entitled "Popular on BookTok" or "Spicy BookTok," continue to line the floors of popular bookstores four years after the establishment of #BookTok.

Figure 1. *Trending on #BookTok Indigo Table Display*

Note. Photo taken at the Indigo bookstore in Ancaster, Ontario. Other displays included "Spicy #BookTok." (photo by Cassie Turkstra, 2024)

TikTok was poised to increase in popularity during the pandemic. The algorithmically driven platform allows users to create short video content and engage with others' posts through comments, likes, saves, and views. While scrolling, users are shown content based on their preferences and videos they have liked, curating a feed of videos for their particular interests (Dhakecha et al., 2023). During the pandemic, young adults gravitated towards the platform due to its diverse content that engaged millions of users during lockdown conditions (Littleton, 2021). Moderating content on TikTok became a concern of various legislative bodies, alarmed by the unpredictable nature of the algorithm and the fake news gaining traction on the platform (Littleton, 2021). Nonetheless, TikTok remains extremely popular, with millions of videos

published daily by a mainly young audience worldwide. Niche trends like #BookTok thrive on TikTok due to its popularity and users' ability to create meaningful content.

Digital book club culture, such as #BookTok, is reestablishing reading as a leisure activity for young audiences. In late 2019, when the hashtag #BookTok first emerged, young people used TikTok "to interact on their own initiative without being restricted by dominant reading discourses and/or school reading practices" (Asplund et al., 2023, p. 1). As the online book community flourished during at-home isolation due to the pandemic, belonging and a sense of community became prominent reasons for young people to keep interacting online (Asplund et al., 2023). Readers publish short videos online, reviewing and recommending specific books to other like-minded readers (Martin & Miller, 2022). Other social networking sites, such as Amazon's Goodreads, built social ties among an online reading community and drove profit from information sharing between users (Worrall, 2019). Visiting sites such as TikTok or Goodreads connects readers to a broader community who share the experience of reading a particular book (Martin & Miller, 2022). For example, romance novels inspired discussions and communal learning about sex, interpersonal conflict, abuse, and consent (Helkenberg, 2020). Feeling with and learning from others became a prominent feature of these online spaces, which helped transform the romance genre and reading practices.

The romance genre has often been criticized for having simplistic writing and storylines and for relying on white, heteronormative relationship plots (Asmelash, 2023). There is a growing amount of racial and sexual diversity in popular romances, involving the representation of both characters in popular stories and of authors themselves (Asmelash, 2023). Other shifts in the romance genre involve the exploration of mature themes such as oppression, abuse, racism, trauma, and grief–all of which are more commonplace in popular romance novels today (Jansen,

2020). Though not entirely new, the popularity of mature content complicates the conventional definition of a romance book characterized by happily-ever-afters (Alter, 2023).

 Romance As Genre

 Genre was historically considered a way to categorize content (Stein, 2008). Media scholars today see genre as "ideas or cultural categories" (Stein, 2008, para. 3) constructed by fans and producers when creating or engaging with content. Janice Radway, Pamela Regis, and Catherine Roach are three prominent scholars who examine the romance genre and its readers. Radway (1991) engages with readers directly to analyze popular myths and debates about romance in the twentieth century. Regis (2007) offers a historical defense of romance, advocating that it should have a place within critical scholarship. Roach (2016) is a romance author and scholar who examines romance in popular culture to discover the reasons for its popularity. Each scholar offers an innovative way to discuss romance, explored with the readers and authors who create it.

 In her book *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture,* Janice Radway (1991) discusses her ethnographic approach to romance reading. She is one of the first scholars to consider romance in cultural studies, questioning its marginalization. Radway (1991) critiques stereotypical romantic storylines that illustrate the patriarchally defined role of women but also writes about how women use romance as a cultural practice. Her work examines the escapism offered by romance novels and critiques their plots for setting specific societal expectations about love and relationships for women. Radway (1991) writes about the dichotomy of how romance novels both perpetuate patriarchal ideas and establish feminist ideologies, explaining that "the act of romance reading is used by women as a means of partial protest against the role prescribed for them by the culture, the discourse itself actively insists on the

desirability, naturalness, and benefits of that role" (p. 2008). Her analysis inspired this project by emphasizing the necessity of understanding how literature can act as a means of agency and meaning-making while also, at times, upholding problematic ideologies.

The literary scholar Regis (2007) looks at the decision of readers to pick up a romance novel. In her approach, Regis works to define romance and legitimize the genre within critical scholarship. In *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, she identifies eight criteria as the basis for writing romance fiction. From the meeting to the declaration to the inevitable betrothal, Regis (2007) argues that the formula is generally the same. Whichever way the romantic relationship is built in the text–from enemies to lovers, a slow burn, friends to lovers, a holiday romance, fake engagement, or a forbidden love affair–the romance novel universally relies on the idea that "all will be well by the end" (Roach, 2016, p. 166). Regis (2007) uses the history of romance to defend it, leaning on popular novels to explain its benefits and impact on readers.

Roach (2016), after years of ethnographic research, claimed that romance is empowering and important for women, offering an outlet for pursuing their desires and fantasies. Specific tropes and conventions, such as bodice-rippers and happily ever afters, are used to define romance as a category, but romance reading is more complicated than such imagery implies (Jansen, 2020). Romance reading can be "a communal exploration of reparative impulses, practices, and fantasies" (Roach, 2016, p. 178). Roach responds to Regis's eight criteria of romance by offering nine elements that represent the deep structure of romance novels. From the perspective of a gender and cultural theorist and a romance writer, Roach (2016) speaks to a non-academic audience to explain the ideologies within romance and the reasons for the heavily dominated female demographic. Roach and Regis differ in their approach to conceptualizing

romance, which shows how the genre is a set of ideas regularly defined and redefined by audiences, fans, and scholars.

Readers continue to define and defend romance in new ways online. Reading a romance novel is an active practice for readers, and their personal interpretations of stories co-create meaning from novels and change the subsequent online discussion (Radway, 1991). Investigating online trends such as #BookTok and the case study of the book *It Ends With Us* give insight into how the cultural practice of romance reading is evolving or staying the same. Together, Radway's, Regis's, and Roach's work can offer insights into recent shifts.

Romance As Community

Since the eighteenth century, female readers have used romance to generate a sense of community and belonging (Regis, 2013). Scholars have attempted to understand romance reading in myriad ways, grappling with the plot structure, the depictions of love, and the genre's reception. Whether fostering a sense of belonging, finding escape in a love plot, or enjoying the pleasure of a predictable story, the reasons to read romance are vast. Readers of romance are expanding their discursive methods, converging book club dynamics with social networking sites. Cultural and communications theorists present perspectives on understanding and interpreting the shifts to online reading culture.

Romance readers define #BookTok culture online and collaborate to derive meaning from popular books. Lauren Berlant and their work on intimate publics addresses how women's culture, or romance novels in this case, can be constructed and perpetuated within popular culture. Berlant (2008) examines how non-dominant groups are idealized as sharing common knowledge and experience in representational work. For example, the narratives outlining romance in popular novels shape the conventions of falling in love, being a female protagonist,

and finding a happy ending (Berlant, 2008). Within this context, the intimate public of female-identifying readers in North America is assumed to have a shared experience of being a woman and, in Berlant's (2008) opinion, would, therefore, be persuaded to become "a vague or simpler version of herself, usually in the vicinity of a love plot" (p. 6). In their work, Berlant (2008) attempts to understand mass-mediated women's culture as an intimate public where women feel together without necessarily trying to know each other. Women in this sense, share in the sentimental experience packaged by industry that involves the fantasy of love and escapism (Berlant, 2008).

Berlant's perspective somewhat removes the agency of the reader to construct a genre and obscures intricate facets of fan culture. Without rigid laws of genre or community on sites such as TikTok, it is possible to expand on Berlant's ideas to examine contemporary intimate fan publics surrounding romance reading in a new environment. Developing Berlant's ideals to examine how intimate publics discuss, debate, and critique the literature marketed to them is a potential way to understand these audiences as having agency. If we don't consider the discussions and community ties fostered by these pieces of shared culture, however normative their decisions may be, we risk perpetuating the idea of the unthinking consumer. Methods used by audiences to engage and question representations, thinking critically about the "women's culture" (Berlant, 2008, p. 5), create a new image of the active, critical online fan community.

Raymond Williams defined culture as any place where communication occurs, which is "the social process of symbolic interaction that brings together and relates different actors in the production and use of objects" (Fuchs, 2017, p. 752). Books become cultural objects for TikTok users to review, recommend, and discuss online. Williams understands culture on a broad scale, whereas Berlant's (2008) review of U.S. mass culture focused on establishing specific intimate

publics that develop from communities searching for unique experiences to feel together. To understand how cultural products attract particular communities, Henry Jenkins and his work on participatory culture can be applied.

Fan communities established around specific books or genres exemplify participatory culture. As defined by Henry Jenkins (2006), negotiating cultural artifacts in a designated place where people or fans come together to collaborate on the process of making meaning is an aspect of participatory culture. Fan communities on TikTok that discuss books are examples of "active, critically engaged, and creative" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 1) people. Creating short videos or comments on other's creations supports two-way communication between creators, viewers, and the authors of the original book. TikTok videos act as informal mentorship, through which creators influence fellow readers about specific books. For example, short reviews of novels offer recommendations and ratings for audiences and guide others' reading practices. Participatory culture can blur the line between the producer and the consumer, as seen with young audiences reading novels and creating videos engaging with content creatively (Jenkins, 2006). Unlike Berlant, Jenkins sees fan cultures as sites of communication and collaboration where fans can develop intimate knowledge of one another.

Romance As Feeling

Participatory culture allows people to build social connections and community in any given environment, such as TikTok. In these spaces, intimate publics are created, which "legitimates qualities, way of being, and entire lives that have otherwise been deemed puny or discarded" (Berlant, 2008, p.3), such as the degradation of romance literature. Popular culture generates spaces of belonging in a mediated way and a space to feel together within the intimate public created from that shared engagement (Berlant, 2008). Romance is a genre that pulls

communities into these publics to feel together. Regis (2013), in part, defines romance as including a sentimental plot that separates it from mainstream culture. Readers fall in love, feel for the characters, and sometimes have their hearts broken, all in the process of reading romance. Feeling in a community and reading the same stories is built from these sentimental attachments built into romance.

The concept of sentimentality offers insights into the hostile reception and perception of bestselling romance novels that insist on the lack of depth in the storylines and the denigrating image of erotica. Carl Wilson (2007) addresses why a subculture can enjoy sentimental media, not for its formal functions but for how it makes one feel. Part of the appeal of popular romance is that it functions on a plain constructed from real life but portrays romance in its most idealized form. Escapism can establish substantial emotional functions for the reader and a deep personal connection to the characters and storylines (Wilson, 2007). When these emotional responses are validated and discussed online, the process of feeling together and fostering an intimate public, as defined by Berlant (2008), is the consequence.

Personal stories and emotional reactions are inseparable from the trending hashtag #BookTok (Wiederhold, 2022). Performing membership online consists of engaging in a two-way process of sharing emotions and feeling together. During the COVID-19 pandemic isolation, the desire for these stories and books that manage emotional escapism increased in popularity (Weikle, 2023). Colleen Hoover's book It *Ends With Us* was first published in 2016 and became a bestselling work during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Alter, 2023). Hoover's ability to reflect complicated topics and appeal emotionally to readers are reasons for her success and the selection of *It Ends With Us* as the overarching case study of this project (Weikle, 2023).

Hoover's book and its controversial response help reveal the methods and discursive strategies fans use to discuss romance online.

Discussing romance as genre, community, and feeling offers a multidimensional framework for theorizing about the romance reading community on #BookTok. As a genre, romance is often defined by the tropes and conventions that lead a novel to end with a happily ever after for its characters. Historically, engaging with such texts and emotionally investing in them was seen as an undisciplined way to engage with cultural texts that place reason aside (Knight, 1999). However, performing membership on #BookTok and online reading spaces requires a willingness to share feelings with other fans and evaluate the quality of a book based on the emotions experienced while reading. On #BookTok, credibility and popularity are granted to users sharing an intimate or emotional investment because it is understood online as the method to develop a reasonable opinion of a text. Using TikTok, this project develops from the insights of various scholars to theorize about romance reading in new ways and understand fan culture as a complicated process of participatory culture.

Methodology

By 2023, the #BookTok trend received over 200 billion views from users on TikTok (Ariyanayagam, 2023), benefitting content creators and propelling authors like Colleen Hoover, Emily Henry, Lucy Score, Lauren Asher, and Sarah Adams to fame. I selected TikTok for this study due to its popularity amongst readers, authors, and publishers. I conducted a naturalistic observation on TikTok, completely anonymizing users to maintain social media ethics and privacy, to explore how reading communities today interpret romance and engage in participatory culture. In addition, I performed a discourse analysis of the case study *It Ends With*

Us to understand aspects of the plot that fans respond to on TikTok. Focusing on Hoover's book exemplifies the broader conversations and themes evolving among romance readers online.

Case Study: It Ends With Us

Colleen Hoover is "arguably one of the [#BookTok] community's most successful authors" (Ariyanayagam, 2023, para. 15), mainly from the success of her first viral book, *It Ends With Us*. Colleen Hoover's contentious reputation among TikTok users exemplifies how fans discuss and debate romance. Before conducting naturalistic observation, I performed a discourse analysis of *It Ends With Us*. Colleen Hoover's book contains a mix of romance formulas and graphic content that tests the reader's expectations of a romance novel. Fans can interpret the work of romance writers like Hoover as being empowering–or problematic. In my analysis, I identified noteworthy tropes, erotic scenes, romance, and emotional factors in the novel, which helped inform my interpretations of themes that emerged in dialogues online. I also used these themes to develop my search terms. Looking for how the novel's themes and tropes were taken up in online discussions gives deeper insight into how participants define romance as a genre.

Naturalistic Observation Techniques

Naturalistic observation is a qualitative research method focused on the natural interactions of people in a setting and defining broad characteristics of those interactions (Angrosino, 2016). I first viewed TikTok casually and formed categories that were open to alteration based on the data as it revealed itself throughout the research (Angrosino, 2016). From May 1st to May 31st, 2024, I engaged in naturalistic observation of 110 videos on TikTok to examine the strategies used by #BookTok users to discuss and debate books. The TikTok users who produce the content examined in this investigation are known as content creators, or creators for short. A creator develops short videos that define youth literary culture, shaping the

online conversation (Schellewalk, 2021). I completely anonymized the data to maintain the privacy of TikTok users who create or interact with the platform. To preserve platform and user privacy standards, the data used for this research does not quote, name, or directly explain specific videos. Maintaining anonymity is an essential ethical consideration when dealing with social networking sites (Brodeur & Zeffiro, 2020). Removing risk for individual creators and commenters is fundamental to avoid harm to the TikTok users involved in this sample (Brodeur & Zeffiro, 2020).

I developed my search criteria from preliminary observations that I made as a casual user of TikTok over the last four years. Unfortunately, TikTok's search features didn't allow me to specify a precise time period when selecting videos to include in my study, so my sample was dictated by what the algorithm presented. Nevertheless, by creating a new TikTok account, free from the algorithmic bias of my personal account, I was able to access a fresh set of videos for my analysis. I used search words including "BookTok," "It Ends With Us," "Colleen Hoover," and "Romance Books." Searching the terms "BookTok" and "Romance Books" revealed general patterns of conversations revolving around bestselling books. Searching "It Ends With Us" and "Colleen Hoover" informed my case study, showing how books and genres are debated and discussed.

Figure 2

Categories For Naturalistic Observation Data Entry

Link	Date	Search Word	Views	Likes	Hashtags	Number of Comments	Visuals (physical book, environment, etc)	Identity of speaker	Observation of the Comment Section

Theme #1 Key Words	**Theme #1:** About the book "It Ends With Us" (plot,	Mention of Theme #2 (Yes/No)	**Theme #2:** About community (reading community,	Theme #3 (Yes/No)	**Theme #3:** About romance (Tropes, conventions	Theme #4 Key Words (Negative, positive, neutral)	**Theme #4:** About Author/Writing (Structure,	Overall book reception (negative,	**Theme #5:** Emotional response (Feeling,

	characters, setting, etc)		addressing others, etc.)		, thoughts, etc)		Hoover, Style, etc)	neutral, positive)	reaction, emotions)

Note. Every video collected for this research was documented using each search criterion.

In the data collection table, I recorded information about views, likes, hashtags, and the number of comments recorded for each video, as seen in Figure 2. First, I populated the table with the most popular videos on the search feed that reoccurred with different search words. Then, I used randomized selection to populate the rest of the table. I gathered detailed notes on the comments for each video, which revealed how fans engage with video content across the #BookTok trend. The physical settings are also significant because they gave me insight into the domestic spaces the community associates with reading culture. To describe the environment, I used keywords to track and define the specific room or filming location, the use of props, and other general background details. Every aspect of the #BookTok fan experience is captured in Figure 2, from specific video metrics to the environment and identity of the speaker.

In addition to specific metrics and details about the TikTok videos used in this study, I also noted the overarching themes that emerged in the videos and comment sections. I took notes about how the individual creator of each TikTok video talks about the book *It Ends With Us*, as well as another section to summarize their overall reception of the book. I also noted the creator's reaction to Colleen Hoover as an author and her writing style, using keywords and a generic positive or negative entry. The structure, writing, and response to Hoover as an author are included in the notes section of the table. I also recorded how the creator, or the users in the comments, discussed their perspectives on romance tropes, conventions, and the genre as a whole. Lastly, I documented how creators and commenters used specific terms and strategies to convey their emotional responses.

Challenges of Randomized TikTok Observation

TikTok has limitations that affected the sample used for this project. Algorithms significantly influence literary trends online, curating content to appeal to each user (Dhakecha et al., 2023). Although using a new account minimized the impact of algorithmic influence, it was challenging to quantify the impact of recommendation algorithms on producing the feed used for this work. Further, on TikTok, users cannot search in a specific timeline. Though COVID-19 has shown an increase in online reading culture, there was no way to search for how romance changed within a particular year. After viewing the search page for an extended period of time, TikTok stops offering videos from the archive of content, determining when the search must be refreshed or refined. This limitation means that this study did not capture the diverse discussion of *It Ends With Us* and romance happening in years earlier than 2021.

TikTok Findings And Analysis

To research how primarily young adult readers critique, converse about, and debate popular romance novels on #BookTok, I engaged in naturalistic observation of 110 randomly selected TikTok videos. I tried to select the most popular videos, which meant that I included videos dating from 2021 to the present within my sample. To select the videos, I utilized TikTok's search feed, entering the following search words: "BookTok," "It Ends With Us," "Colleen Hoover," and "Romance Books." Figure 3 shows the representation of videos published in each year based on this randomized selection of content. Due to the randomized search feed and For You Page of TikTok, as well as the lack of a publication year search function, exploring beyond this time frame was not possible.

Figure 3

Publishing Dates of the TikToks Used for Naturalistic Observation

Publishing Dates of TikToks
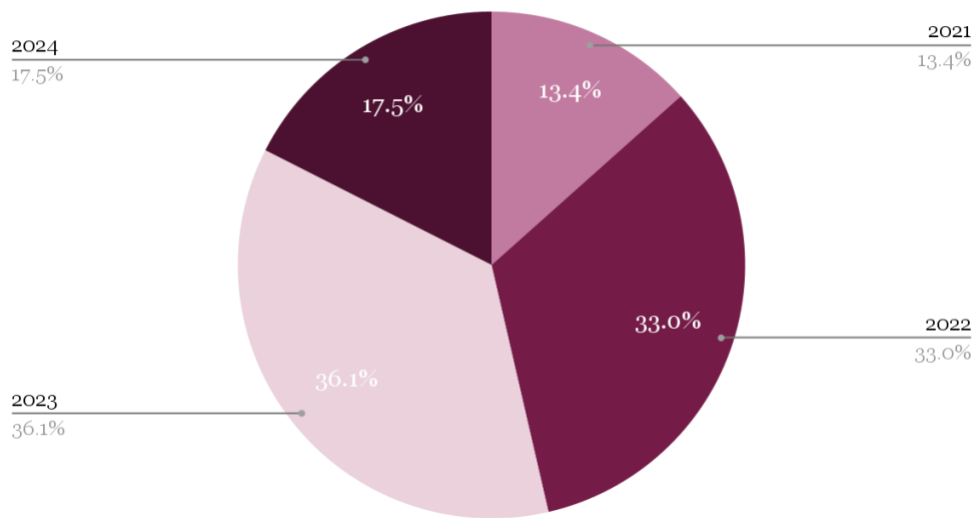
Note. Outline data collected for naturalistic observation based on the video's publish date.

  The observational data I collected demonstrated that #BookTok is diverse in some ways but not in others. The sample showed an overwhelmingly young demographic. However, there was clear racial diversity represented in the sample. Non-white content creators accounted for 33% of the sample, and comments in different languages appeared in several popular videos. The ethnic diversity of creators on the platform is increasing along with the popularity of authors from various backgrounds and novels that offer stories outside of a love story between two straight white characters (Jansen, 2020).

  In addition to racial diversity, male presenting users and content creators on TikTok accounted for 9% of the recorded sample. Romance novels are considered "non-serious fluff for unhappy spinsters and housewives" (Jansen, 2020, p. 4), but the visibility of men reading these novels challenges this characterization. Male presenting users often describe themselves as reading romance at the request of their girlfriends; their presence reflects a trend of men reading erotic chapters and expressing their enjoyment of romance. Romance novels are mainly written

for women and are meant to reflect female desires and fantasies about love and erotica (Roach, 2016). The presence of men reading romance demonstrates that a portion of this population is engaging in stories about female agendas and pleasure.

Environmental Factors

Content creators use similar filming locations and props within their TikTok videos to demonstrate membership in the #BookTok community. Fans share the understanding that romance reading occurs in private spheres of the home, often the bedroom. In these spaces, using a physical book as a prop or filming in front of a full bookshelf adds credibility for the content creator, showing they are an expert in the discussion.

Like a shared vocabulary, there are defined environments where the #BookTok community is engaging online. In my sample, 25% of the videos showcased a large bookshelf behind the creator. Over 85% of creators held a hard copy book of the book they were discussing in their hand. Owning a bookshelf or a physical book is one way to perform membership within this community and claim a place within the conversation. Asplund, Egeland, and Olin-Scheller (2023) show that owning a physical book is one of the most recognized features of reading as a cultural practice. Previous studies on #BookTok and youth reading habits indicate physical books as influential cultural artifacts for young readers (Asplund, 2023). The physical book is used to solidify a place in the online community and to "strengthen their self-image and social status as readers" (Asplund, 2023, p. 11). Additionally, owning a bookshelf is a documented way for TikTok video creators to display their books and expose the type of reader they are for their audience (Asplund, 2023). New books trend weekly on #BookTok, so with the expectation to own a physical copy, maintaining popularity as a content creator requires a significant financial investment. Given that the average cost of a hardcover book in Canada is around $20, and the

average cost of a paper book is around $15, not everyone can afford to be a creator (Anderson, 2024).

Reviews, Recommendations, and Comments

Social connection and a willingness to engage with the content created by fellow community members have helped establish the fan culture surrounding books (Jenkins, 2006). #BookTok users create short videos to review and recommend books in a variety of formats, and community engagement can be seen in user likes, comments, and views. The comments on popular book recommendations often validate the creator's opinion about genre or author. Interestingly, TikTok's For You page and algorithms work to provide content to individual users that reinforces their opinions or shows them something agreeable (Schellewalk, 2021). The platform's customization algorithms inspire many users to leave the comment, "commenting to stay on BookTok," to keep content about books recurring on their For You page.

In the study, one of the most prominent themes is how video creators referenced the #BookTok community and other fans of reading on the platform. Out of the videos analyzed, a creator addresses the viewers 83% of the time. Examples of this acknowledgement include the following: "Listen up, BookTok," "Let's talk about some books," "I just wanted to come on here to tell you," or "For all the spice lovers out there." Participation on the platform means that creators acknowledge viewers of their videos and address the #BookTok community. Comments address the content provided in the video, fostering this two-way form of communication defined in participatory culture. Algorithms and TikTok's For You page influence the popularity of specific videos. Still, ultimately, the fans create and comment on videos to determine spaces of participatory culture online.

Creators and commenters debate whether popular books, such as Colleen Hoover's *It*

Ends With Us, are "worth the hype" or worth purchasing. Reviews often say a book is worth reading if it makes them feel a specific emotion, whether it be heartbreak or love. Carl Wilson's (2007) concept of sentimentality highlights the role that taste can play as a mode of feeling, through which a work is evaluated based on how it makes the reader feel. Romance reading becomes a process of feeling together, with #BookTok reviewers recommending that other fans seek out and experience the same pain, anger, happiness, confusion, or emotion as them. However, not all tastes are shared: Henry Jenkins (1992) explains that within participatory culture, those "who possess the wrong tastes must be distinguished from those whose taste conform more closely to our own expectations" (p. 16). This is evident in the online debates surrounding Colleen Hoover, whose books are often associated with being in bad taste. Comments on videos that review Hoover often critique creators who enjoy her writing, assuming they are at the beginning of their reading journey. Policing taste in participatory culture is evident on TikTok, with a book's quality often being determined by how it makes readers feel.

Uploading videos and receiving comments is a process of two-way communication where fan communities speak back to the industry. TikTok users can create videos that last a few seconds to several minutes to discuss books or film reactions. In this process, fans collaborate and construct genres, agreeing on the tropes and conventions that classify a novel as a romance. Authors can comment and respond to user videos, similar to how fans can respond directly to their favourite writers. Video creators engage in conversations in the comment section of their videos or decide to open their page to whatever audience is attracted to their content. Each interaction helps determine which books become popular. One popular TikTok video can drive a sales spike for a particular book, motivating thousands of young readers to buy it. Fan communities have increased their power to construct genre through their conversations online.

Shared Vocabulary

Raymond Williams (2017) discusses language's importance in developing a sense of community and culture. Novels are cultural texts that allow readers to share an experience and participate in discussions about their experience. The language within the books is significant, but the shared vocabulary used in online spaces is a crucial element in reading as a cultural practice for young adults. Specific words and phrases are integral to defining the #BookTok community and its members. Figure 4 demonstrates this popular language for discussing books online. As the romance genre shifts to reflect more complicated topics and subgenres continue to grow, the language used to describe books also evolves (Weikle, 2023).

Romance books are often categorized by the tropes included in the love plot, which maintain the ideal of a happy ending for the protagonist (Roach, 2016, p. 169). Tropes include the narrative structure of popular romance, such as the first meeting of the protagonist and the love interest and the happily ever after that ends in a marriage (Regis, 2007). Tropes also include specific categories that define the plot based on how the love interests interact, fight, and end up together. For example, a marriage of convenience trope describes a novel in which the main character is forced into a marriage and ends up falling in love with their new partner.

Figure 4

Word Mapping of #BookTok Vocabulary

Note. This word map outlines the common phrases used when discussing novels on #BookTok drawn from the research sample.

Part of the shared vocabulary online involves using tropes to recommend or review novels. For example, content creators often describe romance books as having friends-to-lovers, enemies-to-lovers, found family, fake dating, slow burn, forced proximity, strangers-to-lovers, or other common tropes. Video discussions of Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us* mention found family, slow burn, friends-to-lovers, and lovers-to-enemies to convince viewers to read the novel or express their dislike. Authors like Colleen Hoover are debated within the genre because they push boundaries of expected tropes, conventional happily ever afters, and erotic scenes. Video creators and users commenting on videos define romance based on these potential plots and tropes. In the #BookTok community, using shared vocabulary connects participants and constructs a shared experience of reading.

When reviewing, recommending, or discussing popular novels, fans will use specific words or phrases that are popular on TikTok. For example, words such as chemistry, spice

content, smut, romance, romantasy, romcom, book boyfriends, and love are commonly used. This language is a key part of developing reading culture online and producing romance as a genre. From the observation of TikToks, several other terms were consistent across the data, defining the online conversation. When books are not meeting a reader's expectations, one would say "DNF," or "Do not finish". If a review is appealing to a viewer, or if there is a book a creator hopes to read, one would say "TBR," or "To be read." Popular novels have well-known characters mentioned in TikToks, specifically male love interests. Popular "book boyfriends" are well-liked on the platform and often function as a tool for recommending a novel.

Lastly, it is common for users engaging with the #BookTok trend to know specific chapters and quotes from popular books. For example, in discussions of Hoover', *It Ends With Us*, many comments and reviews warn readers of chapter 14, where the male love interest, Ryle, first assaults the protagonist, Lily. Fans also quote the last line of the novel, highlighting the emotional reaction when they realize its relation to the book's title, marking the end of the cycle of abuse. This language and engagement work to develop a reading culture and curate a sense of belonging for platform users. Over 90% of the 110 videos in this study used the #BookTok shared vocabulary captured in Figure 4. Active #BookTok users consistently use popular language and stay informed about new trends to describe novels.

Erotica and *"Spice"*

With the use of shared vocabulary, #BookTok members use specific metrics to rate romance novels and discuss them. When a book first appears on #BookTok, fans search for reviews from their trusted content creators to see if a book is "worth the hype." One of the primary ways to achieve a high rating online is if the book includes extensive sexual content, known as "spice." In the romance genre, in particular, comments often ask the level of "spice,"

referring to the amount and quality of erotic scenes. Several videos included in this study said that romance reading, including erotic content, is effective escapism and brings the reader significant happiness. Captured in the data is the male-identifying demographic, accounting for 9% of the sample, who were often included in short videos reading erotic chapters with their girlfriends filming their reactions. Popular novels continue to produce heteronormative plots, and increased diversity in romance is still necessary. However, the benefits of romance reading and spicy content cannot be overlooked.

Red pepper emojis can also be used to signify a rating of sexual content when determining the amount of spice in a novel. Five red peppers indicate a high degree of sexual content, and one pepper indicates very mild content. The five-star rating scale, translated through these peppers, is a common practice on #BookTok. Within similar dialogues, creators and questions in the comments discuss a book's "spice" level, referring to the sexual content. Both the red peppers and sexual content, which are referred to as "spice," are popular social constructions of the online reading community. Bookstores have created displays for "spicy" content on #BookTok or "SpicyTok" to address the desire to read erotic scenes. Open discussions between readers and the publishing industry inadvertently remove some taboos around romance reading, validating it as a popular leisure activity.

Research shows that reading about sexual content can be effective sexual education for young audiences to fill the gaps in traditional education (Helkenberg, 2020). Erotic content can inform readers about relationships, consent, and sex. The willingness to read these stories is important to validate romance reading and female pleasure. Roach (2016) writes that reading about sex "is a pathway to knowledge of self and world, with dueling possibilities for insight and self-deception" (p. 192). Romance is known for its sexual content, but sex and fulfilling a desire

for connection is highly important to young adult women (Roach, 2016). Meanwhile, male-identifying users partaking in romance reading challenges the assumption that romance reading is strictly for women. Further research could investigate how men read romance and understand the potential consequences and benefits of their engagement.

Emotional Response

Expressions of emotion and sentimentality pervade the videos and the comment sections of #BookTok. Notably, only 7% of the videos examined for this research included no statement about how the creator felt while reading and their emotions in response to the novel overall. Many videos documented someone reading a specific chapter or scene and documenting their reaction. Readers curl up in their bedrooms, showing tears, surprise, or other emotions at a specific passage. Comments on those videos related to the experience, recommending other books that create similar feelings for readers.

Over 93% of the videos included an explanation or mention of emotion, making it one of the most consequential features of the #BookTok trend and romance reading. Mentioning how a book made someone feel included language about being heartbroken, having their heart ripped out, giggling and kicking their feet, not being able to put it down, being emotionally destroyed, having a heartwarming experience, feeling frustration or shock at an ending, sobbing, being pleasantly surprised, feeling manipulated, or overall becoming emotional in any form. Discussing the emotions drawn from a book is a defining feature of #BookTok, and it relates to sentimentality and the concept of feeling together to foster cultural belonging.

On TikTok, a reader's opinion about a book is developed from their emotional reaction to the text. Other platforms for young adult reading culture, like Goodreads, often rely on a similar connection to emotion. Previous studies have found that most comments on Goodreads include

the reader's emotional reaction or expressions of intimacy with other users (Driscoll & Sedo, 2019). Like Goodreads, #BookTok brings young adults together to enjoy books as cultural artifacts, not necessarily for their formal elements (Wilson, 2007). These communities value romance novels for their ability to provoke specific emotions, causing readers to emote and have sympathetic responses to the plot. They expect to be able to connect with characters and feel emotionally invested in their storylines. Participants recommend and review books based on their emotional responses, demonstrating that sentiment is an essential romance convention.

Deborah Knight discusses how sentimentality and the ability to feel emotions are understood in feminized terms as a fault and an inadequate response to a cultural artifact (Knight, 1999). In modernist art, sentimentality was seen as an aesthetic flaw and emotional responses were considered irrational, unsophisticated, undisciplined, or a risk to reason (Knight, 1999). The idea of good and bad taste is intertwined within the discussion of sentimentality, assuming that audiences cannot decide the quality of a text when their emotions are invested. Scholars who defend emotion and the sentimental process of romance, such as Radway, focus on how fan communities develop around a cultural product. Sharing an emotional experience can allow fans to connect or feel represented within the art based on the aspects to which they personally relate. Feeling together within the online community is a valuable practice of identity, community, and belonging.

Romance remains the most popular published genre partly because of the escapism and positive emotions that readers take away from the novels (Fitzgerald, 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic, when at-home isolation led many young adults to feel secluded and lonely, romance reading offered community and generational culture (Boffone & Jerasa, 2021). Talking about books online provided a public space for open discussions where otherwise denigrated

thoughts about romance could flourish. Spreading a desire to feel together through shared "identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67) produced this primarily female online community. Connecting with fellow readers online and inspiring others to participate in a reading culture based on emotion is one of the central features of #BookTok.

Negotiating Romance

Romance novels are socially constructed, passing through many stages to reach the hands of a prospective reader (Radway, 1991). The romance genre is complex and challenging to define as authors and readers continuously evolve their expectations. Romance novels often have straightforward writing, but, as Janice Radway (1991) highlights, readers decode meaning in novels quickly based on what they relate to. In other words, reading romance is a process of learning that provides a form of escapism for readers through the confines of a love plot (Radway, 1991). In many ways, the romance genre has remained consistent, offering happy endings, classic clichés and formulas for love. Nevertheless, fan culture and the use of romance novels continue to evolve. Female-dominated communities have long used romance as a means of community, belonging, and a place to foster a cultural identity. Examining TikTok reveals how romance is negotiated as a genre and how the discussions around romance develop through community participation.

Figure 5

Mentions of Romance Across All Data

Mentions of Romance
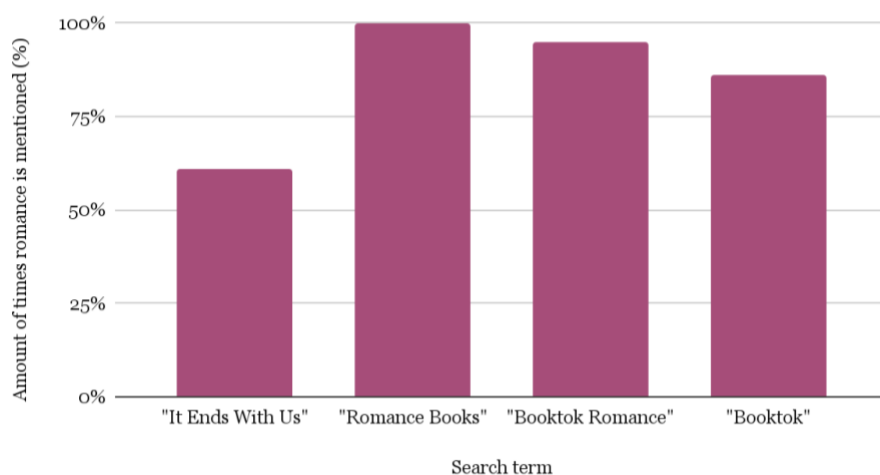
Note. The percentage of times that romance was mentioned when using each individual search word.

Romance and fantasy genres dominate the conversation on #BookTok, as Figure 5 shows. The search word "BookTok" could have resulted in videos about a wide range of genres, but 86% mention the romance genre. Within the discussions on #BookTok, the community treats some books as fitting easily within the genre. For example, searching for Emily Henry and Christina Lauren almost invariably results in videos and comments about romance. In contrast, when searching Colleen Hoover, only a small percentage of videos mention romance or her affiliation with the genre (Weikle, 2023). As I will discuss below, Hoover's place within the romance genre is highly contested.

Janice Radway (1991) explains that romance reading is a complicated social process where white, female-dominated communities collaborate to define romance and its conventions. It is fans' interpretation and desire for specific tropes, erotic scenes, or happily ever after endings that set the expectations for romance. According to Berlant (2008), romance books also set expectations for falling in love and romance in real life. When defining and discussing romance, readers become subject to cultural artifacts that can also affect interpretations of love outside of

novels (Berlant, 2008). Intimate publics composed of fans discussing romance online are partaking in cultural practices that have otherwise been connotated as worthless (Berlant, 2008). The female-dominated communities defining romance through participatory culture are reclaiming popular culture and generating opportunities to influence it.

Discourse Analysis and TikTok Findings: *It Ends With Us*

Colleen Hoover's best-selling novel *It Ends With Us* is a contentious text online, debated for its mature content, romance, and quality of writing. Hoover is a contemporary romance author who challenges readers' expectations "by using some formulas and clichés" (Adeline, 2023, p. 77) but inserts twists and unexpected plot points that differ from classic romance. A discourse analysis is incorporated throughout this section to provide context for fan reviews and debates of the book. When reviewing Hoover's work, readers reference the story's emotional features, romantic tropes, and conventions.

Colleen Hoover credits TikTok with propelling her career (Alter, 2023). On TikTok, Hoover has established a large platform, bypassing mass media gatekeepers to speak with her fans directly (Chin, 2016). She has addressed criticisms of her work in self-deprecating and humorous ways, which has led to fan support and further debates about the quality of her books (Alter, 2023). TikTok readers can speak to Hoover directly by engaging with her videos or creating TikToks to converse about her books. Hoover remains one of the most popular yet polarizing figures on the platform. Individual readers leave hate comments or post videos criticizing her as an author. Others publish positive reviews and credit Hoover's books, and their unexpected plots, as the reason they began reading recreationally. Positive reviews often face backlash because the haters of Hoover's books articulate a need to distinguish themselves from #BookTok users who enjoy her writing.

From the 110 videos I surveyed in this study, 24 users expressed an adverse reaction to the book, 40 creators enjoyed it, and many others were neutral. Numerous creators discussed the quality of Hoover's writing and whether the novel can or should be classified as a romance. Users often describe *It Ends With Us* as a gateway novel that can reignite reading as a leisure activity. The community treats mentions of reading her work as a sign that the creator or commenter has not developed a refined taste and is new to the #BookTok community. Users encourage these beginners to read other spicy books by authors who are more acclaimed on the platform. Policing taste is an aspect of Jenkins's (2006) participatory culture that creates communal standards that community members should expect or desire. Even when they disagree, fans become informed and socially connected by sharing their thoughts (Jenkins, 2006).

Mature Content

One of the primary reasons for Hoover's contentious reception on #BookTok is her inclusion of mature and graphic content in her novels. The book has numerous examples of mature content. Atlas and Lily are two characters raised in abusive households who have vivid memories of domestic violence and assault inflicted on them or their parents (Hoover, 2016). Lily's present-day love interest, Ryle, has a traumatic past involving the death of his brother that causes him to have outbursts of anger and blackouts (Hoover, 2016). But it is the domestic and sexual violence that characterizes Lily and Ryle's relationship that inspires the most controversy.

Creators mention the vivid descriptions of domestic abuse in *It Ends With Us*, giving context and trigger warnings for other readers. When debating whether *It Ends With Us* is a romance book or not, numerous fans assert that the plot romanticizes abuse and domestic violence. The most common critique of Hoover's book is that it commodifies and provides a misunderstood depiction of abuse. The emotional difficulty of love, abuse, and trauma drives the

book's plot. Hoover was inspired to write the story by her own mother's experience, and she wrote the book to understand women experiencing domestic violence more deeply (Hoover, 2016). She encourages readers to consider their biases or assumptions about abusive experiences, and this is met with pushback from fans.

It Ends With Us presents problems for the community's spicy content ranking system. When a creator ranks the book with red pepper emojis or defines it as spicy, other users argue that this is a misleading representation of the story and romanticizes abuse. Hoover's inclusion of domestic violence is initially a surprise plot twist, but it then increases as Ryle disrespects Lily's boundaries. Many fans found the book's representations of sexual violence displeasing and said the inclusion of aggression meant that the novel should be classified as contemporary fiction, not romance. The video creators from the sample also frequently discussed the relationship between Lily, Ryle, and Atlas, saying whose side they were on by the novel's end. Though Ryle is a domestic abuser, many fans felt sympathy toward his character and the trauma he faced. Several readers saw this as problematic and insisted that Hoover's writing provides too much sympathy for the abuser and manipulates readers to question who they side with. Ultimately, no character in *It Ends With Us* has a storyline free from internal struggle or crisis. The plot demonstrates that romance is complicated, and working through trauma is the ideal happily ever after for characters. Hoover challenges romance clichés by weaving abuse and trauma into the plot and surprising readers with unexpected twists in most of her books.

Tropes and Genre

Romance authors who adhere more closely to the tropes and standard formulas of romance are not met with the same criticism as Hoover. For example, Christina Lauren, Abby Jimenez, and Emily Henry generally gain positive reviews and are considered non-negotiable

romance novelists on #BookTok. Emily Henry is known for integrating messages of grief and pain into her love plots and for having characters "battle it out, fall together and break apart, and fight their way back to each other" (Henry, 2023, p. 10). Although Henry produces stories that mention grief and loss, the characters can reach a happily ever after conclusion and achieve their romantic goals. Her stories generally include popular #BookTok tropes and erotic content. Popular authors such as Henry do not include mature themes and graphic violence to the same extent as Colleen Hoover; therefore, they are not contested to the same extent.

Riddled with plot twists and mature content, Hoover's work *It Ends With Us* has several elements that align with romance criteria. For example, referring to Regis's (2007) eight features of romance books, *It Ends With Us* includes a chance meeting between the characters on a rooftop, a barrier keeping them from dating, mutual attraction, declarations of love, and more. However, the book redefines the final betrothal, repeats aspects of the eight-part formula with an unexpected love interest, Atlas, and redefines a happily ever after (Regis, 2007). Many fans online highlight examples of love and romance throughout the plot to argue for Hoover's place within the genre. These include the fact that Lily, the protagonist, regularly discusses romance in her internal monologue and the presence of childhood friends-to-lovers and then strangers-to-lovers tropes in the novel's first half. Ryle and Atlas also demonstrate protective qualities, obsession and sexual desire toward the female protagonist (Hoover, 2016). Hoover's fans respond positively to these conventions in their reviews, using tropes to define the book as a romance novel. However, the intertwining of abuse and trauma with the love plot creates complications for Lily and questions for readers. This complicated depiction of love and abuse makes Hoover's work more contested than other popular romance novels circulating on the platform.

When discussing the plot, 15% of the videos summarize or review the book as a romance novel; others did not mention romance, not seeing it as a defining factor of the plot. The characters' relationships are meaningful to readers, but the mature themes can overshadow the novel's romantic elements. Early popular romances in the mid-twentieth century differ from contemporary romance in how the author defines or writes the happy ending (Jansen, 2020). Finding a lasting love match by the end of the story is not necessarily the happy ending that some authors rely on today. The relationship in *It Ends With Us* involves domestic violence and demonstrates the complications of breaking up (Hoover, 2016). Ryle, the main love interest, has positive qualities, including working as a surgeon and his dedication to helping children. However, he inflicts gaslighting, violence in various environments, and trauma on Lily (Hoover, 2016). Lily's happily ever after ending involves her breaking the cycle of abuse for her infant daughter by divorcing Ryle.

Though Lily's story ends with her happily ever after focused on her daughter's happiness, Colleen Hoover relies on classical romance conventions in the epilogue. Set months after the birth of her child, the epilogue describes Lily running into Atlas, her childhood romance, and the couple kissing and declaring their interest in starting a relationship (Hoover, 2016). The epilogue contradicts this ending by diverting back to traditional happily-ever-after romance conventions where the heroine finds true love by the novel's end.

Colleen Hoover's novel *It Ends With Us* includes many romance tropes, but the discussion on #BookTok does not discuss the book in terms of its slow-burn romance with Atlas or strangers-to-lovers formula with Ryle. Instead, the online discussion concentrates on how the book made readers feel. Whether this reaction is anger about the ending, sadness for the main character, shock at the plot twist, or confusion, the book provokes a sentimental response. Fans

want to have an emotional connection to the book, but when presented with an unconventional happily ever after, there is a sense of disappointment and betrayal.

Romance as a genre, community, and feeling is evolving online through the popularity of the social networking site TikTok. Reviews, recommendations, and comments on popular books underscore two-way communication and participatory culture amongst young adult readers. The shared vocabulary and popular environments become a means of defining the culture through language and shared contexts (Williams, 2017). On #BookTok, romance is negotiated based on the desires of its members and centers around a sentimental response. Books like *It Ends With Us* highlight how readers critically engage, debate each other, and collaborate, using reading as a cultural activity of a generation.

Conclusion

Romance reading has never been a truly isolated practice. Historically, books were sites of discussion and shared experiences for women. Whether in the confines of a book club or through shared knowledge of characters passed between friends, stories are cultural artifacts that continue to shape community experiences. In her autoethnographic project, Roach (2016) found that the community is vital when talking about romance; readers "come together, bonded by their common investment in the genre, in online forums and in-person writing events, in order to share their love of books" (p. 191). The phenomenon of reading as an example of participatory culture is not new, but industry developments have evolved the practice. Novels are critical sites of discovery about culture, but the communal experience of readers and their critical responses demonstrate shifts in literary fan culture.

Over the past decade, social, cultural, and industry factors have effected changes in romance reading as a leisure activity. Industry developments in the design of book covers, e-

readers, and bookstores engaging with online trends all affect reading as a practice. Social networking sites like Goodreads and TikTok facilitate two-way communication between fans and authors or publishers. Goodreads and TikTok are tools to connect with like-minded individuals to discuss literary preferences, and fans can use these sites to form a community of readers (Boffone & Jerasa, 2021). Cultivating generational culture by reading and feeling together offered a new sense of belonging and identity during the isolation of the pandemic (Boffone & Jerasa, 2021), and reading culture increased in popularity during this time (Wiederhold, 2022). Reading became a way for young adults to introduce leisure activities in their private space while engaging with peers online and sharing a communal experience.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, romance reading was one of the most popular genres for young readers. Although romance reading is criticized for commodifying female sexuality and containing unimportant plots, younger generation readers worked to legitimize it as a valuable practice (Johnson, 2010). Diverse subgenres of romance appealed to readers during the pandemic and continue to be used as escapism for readers. Across the romance umbrella, readers support the growing racial and gender diversity of authors and characters in popular stories (Weikle, 2023). Romance novels also began to reflect more complicated topics and mature themes within the storylines, allowing young readers to pull from a broader range of texts (Weikle, 2023). As romance changes as a genre and the practice of reading continues to evolve, online fan discussion is continuously developing.

The literary trend #BookTok offers a place for fans to critique, debate, and discuss popular novels. Sharing specific vocabulary in videos and comments is a discursive strategy creators use to review and recommend specific novels. The physical environment used in TikTok videos also defines the conversation and how to perform membership. From the physical book to

the intimate location of the bedroom, the videos posted online convey to readers that private practice has turned communal. The community is notable in that it consists of men and women worldwide. The phenomenon of romance reading is expanding into a young, racially- and gender-diverse demographic. Roach (2016) explains the importance of highlighting female desire in societies that generally uphold patriarchal ideals. Continuing to increase the popularity of stories written by women, primarily for women, influences underlying gender power dynamics and should be the focus of future research.

Genre is interpreted in new ways based on shared ideas that translate across popular videos. For example, romance is defined by the tropes, sexual content, and emotional response or reaction. Colleen Hoover's novel *It Ends With Us* shows how books that play with romance conventions, as defined by the online community, are highly debated and polarizing. Hoover's work is contested within the romance field for its mature themes and controversial plots that interpret romance formulas in new ways. Fans online do not mindlessly receive the content in a novel without demonstrating a critically engaged response full of emotion, conviction, and reason.

This project has demonstrated that reading culture online consists of a critically engaged community that actively constructs romance as a genre. Romance is a legitimate leisure activity and public practice for members of #BookTok, where discussing popular novels continues cultural exchanges that build the community. Future research should seek methods to surface trends over a broader range of videos and locate archived content to understand how trends have evolved on #BookTok on a broader scale. Research has been previously conducted on Goodreads and TikTok, but a more detailed look into the experience of young adults on these sites will demonstrate the cultural trends of a generation. Opening up this community of readers and fans,

though on a somewhat unstable platform to research, is an innovative way to explore how reading as a participatory culture is evolving.

Henry Jenkins (1992) sees fan collaboration as necessary for developing community and a sense of belonging. Young adult readers on TikTok blur the line between producer and consumer, creating and commenting on videos to discuss books (Jenkins, 1992). Engaging one's emotions is a discursive strategy on TikTok that leads to friendship and community between readers. In these active, critically engaging discussions, reading the book "is the beginning, not the end, of the process of media consumption" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 284). Determining the conventions of specific genres and legitimizing specific types of reading changes the industry and reading as a cultural practice. The phenomenon of #BookTok is one example of an online community built from sharing an emotional experience, showing the importance of feeling together to develop belonging and define culture.

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