

What is BookTok, and how is it influencing what Australian teenagers read?

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May 9, 2022



A teenager is surrounded by books while reading. [Annie Spratt/Unsplash](#)

her reading.

¹ Video-sharing app TikTok has been credited with [making reading](#) “cool again” among teenagers, through the hashtag #BookTok.

² Most BookTok posts are playful short videos, no longer than a minute, that match book images to popular soundtracks.

³ For example, in the ten-second video [“YA whoops”](#), [prolific](#) Australian BookTokker [@londonapples](#), wearing her trademark teddy-bear beanie, appears guiltily surprised when interrupted from

What are TikTok and BookTok?

⁴ TikTok is the fastest growing social media platform [in history](#). It’s most popular among young people.

⁵ In 2020, [38% of Australian teens](#) aged 12 to 17 reported spending time on TikTok. Last year, the hours spent by Australian users [increased by 40%](#) to 23.4 hours per month.

⁶ BookTok is a community of TikTok creators who post videos celebrating their love of books and reading. The hashtag [#BookTok](#) now has more than 46 billion views worldwide.

Who watches and creates BookTok videos?

⁷ Our [Teen Reading survey](#) investigates how Australian teenagers use book-related social media, and who they are.

⁸ Preliminary results reveal that while more than half of Australian teenagers use TikTok (56%), a much smaller number engage with “book talk” on social media, including BookTok (16%).

⁹ This supports [our earlier research](#), which found that regular book talk on social media is the domain of a small yet passionate group of readers. Despite being a small proportion of teenagers, BookTokers are building sizable social media followings, encouraging other teenagers to read and influencing what they read.

¹⁰ [Anecdotal](#) reports by [booksellers](#) credit BookTok with sparking a [resurgence](#) in reading among young people.

¹¹ [Avid](#) BookTokker Mireille Lee ([@alifeofliterature](#)) describes how “I started reading again after six years when I came across BookTok for the first time”.

¹² Until the pandemic, reading rates among teenagers were falling, but the pandemic and the rising popularity of BookTok meant that by 2021, [among UK teenagers](#), a third reported reading more often.

¹³ Many booksellers now feature a #BookTok table, or publish “trending on #booktok” [lists](#) and boxed #booktok [sets](#).

The magic of BookTok, in 5 parts

¹⁴ So, how does BookTok work? We’ve identified five key elements.

1. Playful and creative

¹⁵ First, TikTok is a very playful [medium](#). [Users can embed](#), re-use, [replicate](#) and imitate other posts in creative ways.

¹⁶ A “stitch” post, for example, allows a user to embed another post within their own, to mimic, critique or add humour. In one example, [@penguin_teen](#) uses her [“stitch” post](#) to co-opt another user’s advice on not blaming yourself, playfully blaming author Krystal Sutherland for her sleepless night reading her book.

¹⁷ A “duet” similarly embeds another post, but plays it in parallel to their own. For instance, in one post, [@hellohardbacks](#) [compares](#) [@kaitlin.tracy](#)’s pace in reading Samantha Shannon’s doorstopper *The Priory of the Orange Tree* to her own, in disbelief.

2. Algorithm creates unexpected recommendations

¹⁸ Second, while other platforms recommend content to viewers from the creators they follow, TikTok privileges recommendations based on [its algorithm](#), which draws on posts users have viewed, liked and reposted. This can provide unexpected recommendations tailored to a viewer's individual tastes.

3. Popularity of posts, not creators

¹⁹ Third, TikTok fame is based on the popularity of individual posts, not of creators. Australian BookTokker [@hibas.library](#) generally receives views in the low thousands, but one post on "[Biggest book related pet peeves](#)" reached over 150k. BookTokker [@kelibrary](#)'s account was less than two weeks old when [their book bargain post](#) received 393k views.

4. Connects book lovers

²⁰ Fourth, BookTok creators connect with other book lovers – the platform's key attraction. [@luzlovesbooks](#) explains: "I created my book account because I was longing to find a connection with people about something I am super passionate about."

²¹ This provides a rare opportunity outside school to learn from each other about books, reading and book culture. We explore this sharing as "peer [pedagogy](#)": a process in which young people teach their peers about something that they are passionate about.

5. Emotion is currency

²² Finally, TikTok's [currency](#) is emotion and it is video-heavy, which together make it a much loved, performative medium among young readers.

²³ This is why books like *They Both Die at the End* by Adam Silvera (2017) have experienced a [spike in sales](#) – because they lend themselves to emotional expression and [hyper-visceral](#) performances. It's common for BookTok videos to feature [readers crying](#).

But how is BookTok influencing what young people are reading?

²⁴ Surprisingly, BookTokers have been profiling many books that were published several years ago. Publishers are used to most books having a short shelf life, but BookTok is driving unexpected new demand among young readers for older books.

²⁵ These books include [It Ends With Us](#) by Colleen Hoover, published in 2016, [The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo](#) by Taylor Jenkins Reid (2017), and [They Both Die at the End](#) by Adam Silvera (2017). Dan Ruffino is managing director for Simon & Schuster, distributor of these titles in Australia. He says that in the midst of Covid-19 and paper shortages, "we've had to put in massive orders for reprints of books that were published years ago".

²⁶ BookTok is sometimes criticised for featuring only [a small number of titles](#) by white authors: mostly young adult, romance or fantasy titles. But books trending on BookTok often show teenagers looking for [real-world diversity](#) and complex themes.

²⁷ For example, BookTok sensation [The Song of Achilles](#) by Madeleine Miller is a Greek myth retelling featuring a queer romantic relationship. Another BookTok favourite – Helen Hoang’s own-voices romance [The Kiss Quotient](#) – is about an autistic woman who hires a male escort to teach her how to date. Olivie Blake’s dark academic fantasy novel, [The Atlas Six](#), explores philosophical and moral questions through a **dystopian** lens.

²⁸ As an international community of book lovers, BookTok does not do much to encourage teenagers to read Australian books. However, a few Australian books, such as Canberra author Sally Thorne’s [The Hating Game?](#), do have a [BookTok following](#).

²⁹ Libraries and booksellers are becoming adept at using BookTok as a conversation starter and will recommend Australian books to teenage readers based on titles they liked from the BookTok stable.

³⁰ BookTok’s popularity reflects the **zeitgeist** of the pandemic. It offers a digital space for teenagers to connect with their peers and share **authentic** responses to books in a “**youth friendly**” way.

³¹ By showcasing teenagers who love books and are proud of their reading habits, BookTok inspires other young people to enjoy reading. And it creates trends that influence the types of books they read, sometimes in unexpected ways.

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