

BOOKISH

Bibliomania and the Social Life of Reading



Bookstagram is known for its luxurious aesthetic celebrating the materiality of books ... This bookish aesthetic is developed in posts that feature beautifully styled books and bookish objects as well as posts that celebrate reading as desirable activity.

—Bronwyn Reddan, “[Social reading cultures on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok](#)”

Are you “bookish”? As you’ll have seen if you’ve read Jessica Maddox and Fiona Gill’s article this week about BookTok (and maybe looked more closely at its references), the term has become ubiquitous in the intersecting worlds of Booktube, Bookstagram, and Booktok, as well as social reading sites like [Goodreads](#). I want to spend some time here reflecting on the concept of **bookishness** itself. What does it mean to be, or to become, “bookish” anyway? While the term itself long predates social media, of course, it’s taken on a particular meaning and a particular **resonance** in relation to the representation of books and the practice of reading on social media. In that context, to be “bookish” means quite specifically to participate in what Maddox and Gill refer to as the “digital imagined community” of bibliophiles extending across the social media platforms of YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. So what does being “bookish” actually mean in that specific context? What exactly is “bookishness” in the context of social media?

We could start with the term’s rather odd suffix: *ish*. In popular usage, the term “-ish” suggests an **approximation** to something rather than precise definition. “Let’s meet at six-ish” means that we’ll meet **around** 18:00 hours but not necessarily exactly at that time. But as you know, it’s quite common now in everyday conversation to use the ending “-ish” on its own, detached from a preceding noun, as a kind of shorthand to refer to an approximate state or emotion: “So did you enjoy the movie?” —“Ish”.

To be **bookish**, then, suggests a looser, more casual affiliation with books and compared to that of the professional critic, academic literature scholar, publisher, bookseller, or author. It invokes amateur appreciation rather than scholarly expertise, pleasure rather than literary analysis. Yet because of the high cultural prestige attached to books (what the social

Jessica Maddox and Fiona Gill, “[Assembling ‘Sides’ of TikTok: Examining the Bookish Community, Culture, and Interface through a BookTok Case Study](#)” J. Tomasena, “[Negotiating Collaboration: BookTubers, The Publishing Industry, and YouTube’s Ecosystem](#)”

See also:

Alysia De Melo, “[The Influence of BookTok on Literary Criticisms and Diversity](#)” Michael Dezuanni and A. Schoonens, “[#BookTok’s Peer Pedagogies: Invitations to Learn from Books and Reading on TikTok](#)” D. Valdovinos Kaye, “[JazzTok: Creating Community, and Improvisation on TikTok](#),” *Jazz and Culture* 6 (2) (2022): 92–116.

theorist Pierre Bourdieu calls symbolic capital) that remains attached to books, to identify as “bookish” is still to claim or perform a certain form of social **distinction**. In the social media realm, then, “bookishness” becomes a form of non-specialized (at least in the academic sense of specialization) social identity defined—I would argue—not by disciplinary expertise (textual analysis, historical knowledge) but defined purely and simply by an **affective** relation to its object: what’s often referred to as a **passion** for books and reading. From this standpoint, we can say first of all that “bookishness” is a form of **fandom**, and we know how the popular knowledge of fans involves a very different (I would say affective) relation to its object rather than the **dispassionate** position required of the literary scholar.

What’s equally clear from both of the primary reading assignments for this week is that “bookishness” as a social (media) identity involves not just an affective relation to its object but also a commodified one, that of a **consumer**. It’s no coincidence that the most common video format of Booktubers and Booktok creators is the **recommendation video**, with recommendation here involving not just the question of whether a book is worth your time but also your money. As José Miguel Tomasena explains in his article, Booktubers on YouTube and other social platforms play a crucial role in the circulation and promotion of books and authors, similar to that of music or film critics, in a similar way to how fashion or beauty bloggers become “brand ambassadors”. In addition to their overtly commercial role, though, Booktubers also embody the fantasy of “bookishness” through their conspicuous consumption (a term coined by Thorstein Veblen more than a century ago) through their fetishizing of books as material objects and their highly stylized performances and indeed staging of bibliophilia (literally the love of books). In her brilliant analysis of this phenomenon, Bronwyn Radden refers to this as “a bookish **aesthetic**,” and this aestheticization of books and the practice of reading itself into a self-consciously performed ritual invokes the sociological concept of **lifestyle**, which could be defined as a form of modern social identity in which in capitalism the modern self is articulated exclusively through commodities and consumption.

This brings me to my last point, about **aesthetics**—a concept that we will be focusing on in depth in the last week of the course. For now, let me conclude by defining “bookishness” as what in social media parlance today is known as an **aesthetic**. If we consider bookishness in this way, we can see that there are two quite distinct ways of thinking about Booktok. The first is the approach taken by Jessica Maddox and Fiona Gill in their article, where it is contextualized as one of the many “sides” of TikTok (I’ve included a different example of such a “side” below, in Queline Meadows’s superb video essay about Film TikTok; there is also a link in the margin to an article about Jazz TikTok).

The other way of thinking about Booktok, which to me makes more sense than its “internal” relationship to other “sides” of TikTok, is to re-frame it as an aesthetic that is not confined to TikTok but extending across not only other platforms (notably YouTube, Instagram, Twitter) but also independent personal blogs such as the one linked to at the beginning of this page. While the bookish aesthetic takes different forms on each of these different platforms according to their particular affordances (YouTube vs. Insta vs. TikTok), they do have much in common. I think it makes more sense to consider bookishness as an **internet aesthetic** and to consider it comparatively across multiple social media platforms for that reason. This is even though there are numerous articles specifically about Booktok in particular, I thought it was important also to consider the bookish aesthetic not just on TikTok but also on YouTube (the Tomasena article) and Instagram (the Radden article, linked at the beginning of this lecture).

My argument here may seem a bit strange at this point, given that we are so used to thinking about social media vertically, in terms of **platform infrastructures**. Even though different platforms may have the same corporate owner, we still tend to approach social media in this way (see the TikTok Research Network). Methodologically, it makes sense, I suppose,

but the drawback is that it may lead us to miss the bigger picture; the concept of aesthetics enables us to connect the pieces of the larger jigsaw puzzle.

Hopefully the preceding discussion will make more sense when return to the topic of aesthetics in the concluding week of the course. For now, I hope what I've said makes sense and look forward to hearing about your own relationship to Booktok or the bookish aesthetic on other platforms.

There is, of course, a lot more to say about the larger phenomenon of the cult of physical books and reading as a backlash against the domination of digital, virtual, and visual culture. I think it would be simplistic to reduce it simply to nostalgia for analog culture, though, since we must remember that the the bookish aesthetic or subculture is itself a **networked public** (boyd) or **digital imagined community** (Anderson).

I'm embedding and linking some videos and other sources below that connect both to this readings and my own discussion of them here, and encourage you to explore them and share your thoughts about them in your weekly Review post and the discussion channel on Discord.

Key Concepts

- "Side" (of TikTok)
- Platform vernaculars
- Imitation publics
- Imagined communities
- Recommendation video
- "Bookish" aesthetics
- Social/symbolic capital (Bourdieu)

Further Reading

Claire Armistead, "'After lockdown, things exploded' - how TikTok triggered a books revolution" (**The Guardian**, 8 June 2022).

Dorothee Birke, "Social Reading? On the Rise of a 'Bookish' Reading Culture Online," **Poetics Today** 42 (2) (2021): 149–172.

Bronwyn Reddan, "Social reading cultures on BookTube, Bookstagram, and BookTok," **Synergy**, 20 (1) (2022).

Bookcase Credibility

The Rise of Film TikTok (kikikrazed/Queline Meadows)

<https://youtu.be/iqajurNSp1Q>

Researching Booktube as a Booktuber (José Miguel Tomasena)

<https://youtu.be/kzysSOvDvGo>

My Honest Thoughts on Booktok, Over Consumption of Books, Loss of Personal Reading Tastes & more (Ana Wallace Johnson)

(Follow link - video not available for embedding)

Reading for 24 hours straight in a book hotel... Haley Pham

<https://youtu.be/bqaopTTpaP8>
