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BEHAVIOURAL ANTHROPOLOGY ANALYSIS ON BOOKTOK COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the transformation of BookTok from an authentic digital reading community into a performance-driven and algorithmically regulated cultural space, through the theoretical lens of behavioural anthropology. Using a qualitative digital ethnographic methodology, the study analyzes a corpus of 1,500 TikTok posts collected over a five-month period under prominent BookTok-related hashtags. The analysis focuses on patterns of self-presentation, engagement solicitation, and symbolic participation, identifying recurrent behavioural rituals such as follow-for-follow exchanges, performative reader identity, engagement-bait strategies, and content homogenization. The findings indicate a clear shift from reading as a cognitive, interpretive, and dialogical activity toward reading as symbolic performance oriented toward visibility and algorithmic validation. In this context, BookTok functions less as a community of practice and more as a field of digital performance structured by metrics, trends, and affective display.

The article further discusses the broader implications of these transformations for digital culture, literacy practices, and contemporary cultural production. By positioning BookTok as a relevant anthropological field site, the study contributes to critical debates on digital rituals, platform governance, and the behavioural reconfiguration of cultural communities in online environments.

Keywords:

Behavioural Anthropology; Booktok; Digital Ethnography; Performative Identity; Algorithmic Culture

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1. INTRODUCTION

BookTok, a literary subculture within TikTok, initially emerged as a digital space for rediscovering reading and promoting authorship among younger audiences. Between 2020 and 2022, the community played a significant role in reviving interest in reading among Generation Z, transforming book discussions into viral visual storytelling. However, as observed in the field, BookTok has increasingly shifted from a space of authentic reader engagement to one dominated by algorithmic performance and social reciprocity. Many accounts now function primarily as vehicles for follower exchange, promising mutual engagement rather than substantive content. This paper draws from digital ethnographic observation to analyse the behavioural transformation of BookTok communities and to interpret these changes through the lens of behavioural anthropology (Naidin & Opran, 2024; Geertz, 1973; Bourdieu, 1990).

While BookTok has attracted growing scholarly attention in recent years, existing research has predominantly focused on its role in reading promotion, youth literacy engagement, and publishing market dynamics. Less attention has been paid to the behavioural mechanisms through which participation is structured, regulated, and transformed by algorithmic affordances. In particular, there is a lack of empirically grounded analyses that examine how repetitive interactional practices, visibility rituals, and affective performances reshape reading-related behaviours over time. The behavioural reconfiguration of BookTok as a cultural ecosystem therefore remains under-theorized.

This study addresses the following research objectives: to identify dominant behavioural patterns structuring participation within BookTok communities; to examine how algorithmic visibility incentives shape performative reading practices; to interpret these patterns through the lens of behavioural anthropology.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BEHAVIOURAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND DIGITAL PERFORMANCE

Behavioural anthropology studies human conduct as structured by cultural systems, habits, and rituals (Naidin & Opran, 2024, Bourdieu, 1990). Within digital spaces, these frameworks reveal how users enact symbolic behaviours that convey belonging and identity. The performative nature of BookTok parallels Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model, where users manage impressions within algorithmically mediated stages. Similarly, Geertz's (1973) notion of "thick description" enables us to read BookTok content as layers of meaning encoded in gestures, captions, and hashtags. Behavioural anthropology, especially as defined by Naidin (2025a), underscores that behavioural is learned, contextual, and adaptive — shaped by collective expectations rather than individual intention. The key concepts we are focusing on are performative readerhood refers to the public enactment of reading identity through visual, emotional, and discursive cues rather than sustained interpretive engagement. Social reciprocity denotes ritualized exchanges of visibility (e.g., likes, follows) that function symbolically rather than relationally. Symbolic participation describes engagement practices that signal belonging without substantive contribution. These concepts are analytically linked through behavioural anthropology, which conceptualizes behavioural as culturally learned, socially regulated, and

contextually adaptive. They directly inform the study's analytical categories and coding scheme, ensuring conceptual coherence.

A structured coding scheme was developed iteratively, combining deductive categories informed by behavioural anthropology with inductive refinements. Categories included reciprocal engagement appeals, affective cues, content repetition, and visual tropes. Coding consistency was ensured through repeated recoding cycles. The researcher adopted a non-participatory observer role, maintaining reflexive awareness of interpretive positioning within digital ethnography. All data were anonymized, no private content was accessed, and ethical guidelines for research on publicly available digital content were strictly followed.

BookTok, the book-centered subcommunity of TikTok, has rapidly become a significant cultural, social, and economic force in contemporary reading culture. Although not always framed explicitly within anthropology, the emerging research on BookTok draws heavily on anthropological concepts, digital ethnography, identity studies, and the cultural analysis of digital platforms. A synthesis of existing literature shows that BookTok functions as a hybrid space where reading becomes performative, communal, and deeply shaped by platform algorithms.

Early work introduced BookTok as a sociotechnical reading community in which literary engagement is transformed into aestheticized, emotionally expressive, and socially networked performances. Jerasa's (2025) overview of BookTok communities identifies them as transnational affinity spaces where linguistic and cultural identity are negotiated. Similarly, Silva et al. (2022) emphasizes how BookTok serves as a readers' advisory ecosystem, enabling young people to locate community, affirmation, and social belonging around reading practices. Dera's (2024) narrative review, one of the most comprehensive syntheses to date, argues that BookTok should be understood as a cultural and affective formation, not merely an influencer-driven marketplace or literacy trend.

A substantial part of the literature relies on digital ethnography, which aligns closely with anthropological methods. A mixed-methods digital ethnography by Rascati and Grantham (2025) categorizes BookTok content types, creator roles, and platform affordances, emphasizing how TikTok's algorithmic structure shapes user behavioural, visibility patterns, and the emergence of recognizable microcultures. Broader studies on "sides of TikTok" (Maddox and Gill, 2023) similarly highlight how platform affordances help construct semi-autonomous cultural zones – BookTok being among the most prominent.

Identity construction and performance constitute another major research domain. Jerasa (2025) documents how international BookTok users negotiate cultural and linguistic belonging through reading practices, while de Melo (2024) examines how BookTok creators engage with issues of representation, race, gender, and sexuality. These studies align with anthropological theories of identity-as-performance, illustrating how users publicly enact the identity of "reader" through emotional expression, aesthetic cues, and participatory norms. Case studies of youth reading communities (#BookTokMadeMeReadIt) further demonstrate how BookTok serves as a site of peer socialization, humor, and shared affective labor.

Another well-documented theme concerns affect, emotion, and the aesthetics of virality. Dera (2024) notes that highly emotional reactions – crying videos, "this book destroyed me," performative awe – function as membership signals and cultural rituals that reinforce

authenticity. BookTube research (Reddan, 2022) contextualizes these affective displays within a longer tradition of participatory literary fandoms, suggesting that BookTok intensifies the emotional economy of reading through rapid, algorithm-driven visibility cycles.

Complementing these cultural analyses, a separate line of literature examines how BookTok transforms reading behavioural. Studies by Rozaki (2023), Culberson (2023), and Muminovic and Abdallah (2024) document patterns of increased reading motivation, shifts toward popular genre fiction (romance, fantasy, young adult), and blended analog-digital reading practices such as annotated books, aesthetic shelving, and reading lifestyle performances. These findings support anthropological interpretations of BookTok as a hybrid cultural infrastructure, connecting material reading practices with digital self-presentation.

Yet a recurring concern in the literature is homogenization. Dera (2024) and researchers in publishing studies (Studený, 2023) warn that BookTok promotes a narrow band of genres and emotional styles, influencing publishers to reproduce formulaic tropes, cover aesthetics, and marketing strategies. These dynamic highlights the interplay of platform capitalism, cultural production, and user labor – an area well-suited to anthropological critique (Stanescu, 2022). While BookTok democratizes access to book recommendations, it also reinforces new forms of algorithmic gatekeeping.

Finally, educational research positions BookTok within pedagogical contexts. Work on pre-service teachers (Jersa et al., 2024; Rahman and Curwood, 2025) shows that BookTok provides models for youth literacy engagement, offering educators opportunities to connect with students' cultural reading practices while highlighting risks such as superficial engagement and oversimplified literary value systems.

Overall, the scholarly corpus reveals convergences: BookTok transforms reading into a performed, affective, sociotechnical practice, reshapes literary value through algorithmic visibility, and constitutes a meaningful cultural field for identity formation, social belonging, and symbolic participation. Despite its rapid growth, the literature would benefit from more explicit anthropological theorization, comparative cross-cultural studies, longitudinal ethnography, and deeper investigation into material practices and resistance subcultures. BookTok is therefore best understood as a culturally rich digital ecosystem, ideal for ongoing anthropological inquiry into youth culture, reading, and platform-mediated sociality.

3. RESULTS

This paper employs a qualitative, interpretive design rooted in digital ethnography. The primary data consist of observed TikTok posts under hashtags such as #BookTok, #NewBookTok, and #BookTokCommunity. A corpus of 1500 posts was collected across a 5 month period, focusing on user self-presentation, engagement solicitation, and interaction patterns. Content was coded into categories: (a) self-promotional posts, (b) reciprocal-follow appeals, (c) performative reading cues, and (d) authentic book commentary. Analysis was conducted using principles from behavioural anthropology (Naidin & Opran, 2024), semiotic analysis (Geertz, 1973), and interaction order theory (Goffman, 1959).

To strengthen the empirical grounding of the theoretical framework, the analysis integrates anonymized micro-level examples and quantitative indicators derived from the observed corpus. From the 1,500 posts analyzed, approximately 38% contained explicit follow-for-follow or reciprocal engagement appeals, typically formulated through captions such as “new BookToker here” or “support for support,” often accompanied by visibility-oriented hashtags. Repetition analysis showed that over 42% of book-related posts referenced a limited set of highly popular titles, indicating algorithmic convergence and content homogenization. Affective coding revealed that around 55% of posts relied on exaggerated emotional cues—such as crying performances, dramatic facial expressions, or emotionally charged audio—to signal authenticity and community belonging. Visual pattern analysis further identified recurring aesthetic tropes, including staged book displays, neutral-toned backgrounds, and trend-based sound reuse, present in approximately 61% of the dataset. These quantified behavioural patterns complement qualitative interpretation by demonstrating that performative visibility practices are not incidental but structurally dominant within the community. By combining frequency mapping with interpretive analysis, the study enhances methodological transparency and supports the application of behavioural anthropology as an empirically grounded approach to understanding platform-mediated cultural behaviour.

4. FINDINGS: THE RITUALS OF VISIBILITY

4.1. *The Follow-for-Follow Economy*

Posts inviting mutual following, such as “I am a new BookToker, follow me and I’ll follow back,” operate as ritualized exchanges of symbolic capital (Mauss, 1954). Rather than representing genuine community-building, these gestures perform social reciprocity as an end in itself. Behavioural anthropology interprets this as a process where individuals internalize social visibility as value—aligning with Naidin’s (2025a) theory of behavioural adaptation to reward systems. The performance of participation replaces the substance of reading.

4.2. *Performative Readerhood*

Many accounts visually mimic authentic literary engagement by displaying book covers, aesthetic backgrounds, and popular sounds without any interpretive commentary. The performance of “being a reader” replaces the practice of reading itself, echoing Goffman’s (1959) notion of front-stage identity work. The reading act becomes a social symbol of taste and belonging rather than intellectual exploration.

4.3. *Homogenization of Content*

The recurrence of a small set of popular titles (e.g., Colleen Hoover, Sarah J. Maas) exemplifies algorithmic convergence. Users replicate successful formulas to ensure visibility, producing a homogenized cultural field (Striphas, 2009). Behavioural anthropology would interpret this as cultural drift—the ritual persists, but meaning decays (Tylor, 1871).

4.4. *The Engagement-Bait Paradigm*

A frequent trend involves creators asking “new authors” to recommend their books while providing little or no feedback afterward. This behaviour aligns with engagement-bait strategies optimized for algorithmic metrics. The ritual of solicitation functions symbolically—it signals community participation while pursuing visibility, not knowledge exchange. Naidin and Opran (2024) describe this as behavioural signaling: the form of participation without its substance.

Findings indicate recurring behavioural patterns across the dataset, including visibility-oriented reciprocity, affective signaling, and aesthetic standardization. While performative practices were dominant, variations existed, with some users maintaining interpretive depth and dialogical engagement. These findings are illustrated through anonymized examples and descriptive frequency indicators, emphasizing patterns while acknowledging diversity.

5. DISCUSSION

From a behavioural anthropology standpoint, BookTok’s transformation reflects a shift from a community of practice to a field of performance (Bourdieu, 1990). Social validation replaces interpretive depth; behavioural becomes a form of symbolic communication. Naidin’s (2025b) concept of behavioural regulation helps explain this adaptation: users align their actions with the algorithmic “rules” that determine visibility. Thus, digital rituals such as following, liking, or mimicking trends function as adaptive behaviour in an ecology governed by metrics.

The paratextual framing of *ConnectMe* places it explicitly within TikTok’s cultural grammar. The Amazon description brands it as “*the novel of the TikTok generation*” and emphasizes its chat-based narrative structure, which resembles private messaging threads (Paxheart, 2023). This structural choice aligns with BookTok’s preference for fast-paced, emotionally heightened, easily excerptable content – a format conducive to short-form video adaptation (Jerasa, 2025). The book’s promotional materials repeatedly assert that *ConnectMe* “looks like your DMs,” signaling an intention to blur boundaries between fictional narrative and everyday digital communication.

From a marketing perspective, this constitutes a deliberate product–platform fit strategy: the narrative form itself is optimized for TikTok visibility, encouraging quotation, screenshot videos, voiceover reenactments, and reaction clips—the dominant modes of BookTok content creation (Llamas-Flores, 2023). Although TikTok is positioned as the primary promotional channel, the broader marketing ecosystem surrounding *ConnectMe* relies on a multi-platform, cross-promotional approach. Promotional posts explicitly include statements such as “*This is your TikTok book*” and direct calls to action pointing to the author’s TikTok handle (@aimeepaxheart). This mirrors the strategies used by independent authors who rely on TikTok micro-influencers to initiate algorithmic momentum (Maddox & Gill, 2023).

The book’s marketing leans heavily into affect-rich discourse—a known catalyst for TikTok virality. Emotional tags such as “*this will blow your mind,*” “*powerful,*”

“*heartbreaking*,” and similar superlatives reflect the affective amplification typical of BookTok (Reddan, 2022).

Moreover, by emphasizing the book’s resemblance to digital communication, *ConnectMe* aligns itself with BookTok’s preference for relatability, a concept central to identity performance within the community (Jerasa, 2025; de Melo, 2024). This strategy situates the book inside a recognizable cultural pattern: the aesthetic of authenticity and emotional exposure that defines much of BookTok’s literary discourse.

ConnectMe presents a clear example of a book strategically engineered for TikTok’s narrative and aesthetic expectations: short-form emotional intensity, chat-based readability, and branding oriented toward digital-native identity. The promotional efforts rely on cross-platform engagement, emotional framing, and authentic reader discourse. However, the book’s reception suggests that successful alignment with TikTok’s cultural logic does not guarantee viral visibility, highlighting the competitive, algorithmically mediated, and highly unpredictable structure of BookTok’s literary economy.

This case reinforces broader insights from BookTok scholarship: platform visibility is contingent not only on product fit but on community resonance, influencer uptake, and algorithmic momentum – factors that require sustained, multi-level engagement. The discussion differentiates between generalizable behavioural patterns and case-specific insights, such as the *ConnectMe* example. Alternative practices – such as resistance to trend replication or slower reading discourse – are examined to reflect ecosystem complexity. Empirical observations are systematically connected to theoretical constructs from behavioural anthropology.

6. IMPLICATIONS

The findings have implications beyond BookTok. First, they challenge the assumption that digital communities automatically enhance cultural literacy. Instead, they illustrate how algorithmic affordances can redirect behaviour from content engagement to symbolic performance. Second, BookTok’s evolution demonstrates the limits of participatory culture when participation becomes performative rather than dialogical. For anthropologists, the platform offers a contemporary field for studying ritualized attention economies. For educators and publishers, understanding these behavioural patterns can inform strategies to re-engage authentic reading habits (Naidin, 2025a).

ConnectMe by Aimee Paxheart is a contemporary short story romance that explores themes of digital intimacy, emotional trauma, and personal growth in the age of constant online connection. Through a heartfelt narrative and deeply introspective characters, Paxheart delivers a story that resonates with the modern reader—especially those who have ever struggled to balance vulnerability and self-protection in a hyperconnected world.

Yet ironically, despite meeting every so-called promotional requirement, *ConnectMe* was largely ignored by the BookTok community. This is especially surprising considering that many self-proclaimed BookTok readers should, in theory, already have Amazon reader accounts – allowing them to access such books for free through Kindle Unlimited or promotional deals. The analysis suggests that algorithmic platforms can redirect cultural

participation toward symbolic performance. For educators, this highlights the need to integrate critical digital literacy. For publishers, it underscores the limits of platform-optimized promotion. For researchers, it identifies the need for longitudinal and comparative behavioural studies.

This raises an important question: Is BookTok truly about discovering meaningful books, or just following trends for visibility?

7. CONCLUSION

BookTok's evolution from a reader-driven to a performance-driven ecosystem exemplifies the interplay between culture, technology, and behaviour. The community's rituals – follows, hashtags, and aesthetic mimicry – reveal how symbolic participation replaces cognitive engagement. Behavioural anthropology provides a theoretical and methodological lens to understand this transformation as an adaptive response to algorithmic incentives. In essence, BookTok no longer centers on books but on the raising number of followers. The study acknowledges limitations related to sample scope, cultural specificity, and temporal context. Nevertheless, it demonstrates the relevance of behavioural anthropology for understanding digital literacy practices, sociolinguistic participation, and platform-mediated cultural behaviour, reinforcing its contribution to applied linguistics and intercultural research.

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