Identities and Online Communities: #booktok

Jessica Fitzgerald

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Darci Thoune, Department of English

ABSTRACT

In this project, I focused on online communities and the power that they have in shaping identities. My main focus was #booktok which is the book-centric space on the social media app TikTok. By performing a textual analysis on 291 comments across 30 #booktok videos, I came to the conclusion that as an online community, #booktok has created a character of "The Reader" by valuing relatability and outreach more than the shared interest of the community: books. I analyzed these findings using an understanding of social media goals and an understanding of how online communities function.

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has seen the growth and development of the internet and its evolution into a social space. Today, social media is a daily part of life and we see ourselves as pieces of an enlarged social web through apps like Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and more. We often don't associate the earlier days of the internet with social connection, but literature published as early as 2004 details online communities in a similar way that we perceive them today. An online community is "...based on shared experience, interest, or conviction, and voluntary interaction among members in the service of member welfare and social welfare" (Bidgoli). The term 'shared interest' could refer to many things, but the one that I focused my research on is the shared interest of books and reading. On Tiktok, a subgenre for readers called #booktok emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic when people were stuck in their bedrooms and homes and forced to turn to reading for entertainment (Stewert). As of May 2023 the tag has around 135.7 billion views when the tag only had 6 billion views in March of 2021. The #booktok space is made up of publishers, writers, and readers of all ages, but is concentrated heavily with young people.

#booktok is not the first nor is it the only book centric space on social media. Before the boom of #booktok, platforms like Instagram (Bookstagram) and YouTube (BookTube) were popular spaces for book and reading related discourse, and *The Internet Encyclopedia* includes "Creative Communities" that house people who collaborate to create things like literary works (Bidgoli). Although #booktok is not the first book centric space, the effect that it is having on readers is astronomical. According to Dr. Bronwyn Reddan, 38% of Australian teenagers were using TikTok in 2020, and those teenagers were spending 23.4 hours on TikTok per month. This is 14.8 more hours than Australian teens were spending on Instagram and 6.3 hours more than they were spending on Youtube which are the other two platforms that were known to bring book culture forward. The amount of time that young people are spending on TikTok is manifesting through trend literacy and community building in the app. Creators on #booktok take advantage of TikTok's features to participate in the trends that the community favors (Reddan).

The effects of high #booktok engagement are not only seen on TikTok, but instead are seen in bookstores and by publishers. Both physical and preexisting book spaces have made room for #booktok's influence. For example, both Goodreads and Barnes & Noble have shelves set aside for popular #booktok titles. Data has shown a significant increase in sales for popular #booktok genres in 2021 in Australia. For example, romance title sales were up 16%, and science fiction/fantasy sales were up 6% (Reddan). It's common that the titles that #booktok boosts are not new releases. Colleen Hoover is one of #booktok's favorite authors. Her book *It Ends With Us* sold enough copies to be called the book of the summer in 2021, yet the book was released in August of 2016 (Stewert). This is not an isolated event- similar things have happened with books like Adam Silvera's *They Both Die at the End* and Taylor Jenkins Reid's *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. Both books solidified their spots on #booktok tables in bookstores in 2021, but they were both published back in 2016 (Reddan). While this seems to be just relevant to YA titles, it's becoming clear that #booktok's influence is spreading to adult literature as well with titles like Alex Michaelides' *The Silent Patient* topping Barnes & Noble selling charts (McIlroy).

The literature seems to point towards an extreme change in the publishing industry caused by the rise of digital book spaces like #booktok. Publishers are focusing on hiring book influencers that are able to work with the different platforms and create content that is likely to be engaged with in spaces like #booktok. According to Steve

Sieck, this increased attention that publishers are giving to digital spaces is coinciding with the bigger picture questions of privacy. With Google announcing that they are planning to phase out the use of third-party cookies that track data and make it easier to make targeted ads, publishers are having to look at the content being consumed instead of the person consuming it (Sieck). With spaces like #booktok available to publishers, it's easy for them to see what is being consumed and how it's being consumed. The trends that circulate in spaces like #booktok are often simple and easy to replicate due to the nature of TikTok: short videos with trendy songs or meme sounds.

With the continued growth and relevancy of #booktok, I wanted to delve into the space and research the effect that this community is having on its users.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- **What power do online communities have in shaping identities?**
    - How has #booktok contributed to the identity of "The Reader"?
    - How does #booktok function as an online community for readers?

METHOD

In my research, I focused heavily on qualitative review of my findings. I think that quantitative data was helpful for establishing my context, but my main goal was to see how the community of people work together to define the space, so I wanted to focus on the people involved instead of looking at numbers of sales or engagement.

Textual Analysis

A major piece of my research took place in the #booktok space. I started by creating a brand new TikTok account that is not tied to my personal data or algorithm from my personal account. I then used the new account to break into the #booktok space and found what is popular (free from the influence of what I have curated my own #booktok feed to look like) and then moved into the comment sections of these videos. On each individual video, I blindly scrolled through comments and randomly selected three pages worth. I then went into these comments and coded them for patterns that show the identities and relationships that are manifesting in the space. I have included a sample of this method which can be found in Appendix A. In the sample, I found a #booktok video by going to the #booktok tag on the app. The video that I selected was uploaded on August 09, 2022, and it had 882.1k views as of December 05, 2022. The video is approximately six seconds long, taken at 2x speed, and placed over a sped up version of a trending Taylor Swift song. The creator is seen ripping open a package of books that she had ordered. The text reads: "Buying books bc I saw a quote on tiktok and don't even know what they're about >>" and the caption reads: "Spent £66 so they better be good". Hashtags under the video are: #foryou #fyp #booktok #books #deliverus #theedensseries #theedens #juniperhill #juniperhillbooks #indigoridge #indigoridgebook #garnetflats #garnetflatsbydevneyperry #devneyperry #pamgodwin. After looking at these details, I went to the comment section and randomly selected my comments. Because I wanted to look at identities and communities on #booktok, I created codes that reflected this.

It is important to note that TikTok has a 150 character limit when it comes to comments. This means that the comments are not a space for lengthy discourse on #booktok. Instead, TikTok offers "duet" and "stitch" features where users may create and attach their own video in direct response to the original. I did not look at any duets or stitches because I wanted to limit my research to what the comment section has to offer in terms of the short, immediate thoughts that #booktok users had in response to a video. In the comments that I randomly selected; I saw a lot of patterns develop in the realm of the relatability of the original TikTok. I saw a lot of engagement proof in the number of comments liked by the creator, comments that had replies, and comments that had other accounts tagged in them.

For the overall scope of my research, I collected 30 TikToks with a total of 291 coded comments. The following graph outlines the breakdown of the final coding scheme:

Outreach (220)	Relatability (219)	Book Focused (189)	Negativity (41)	Platform Focused (16)
Has replies (136)	Excitement (93)	-	-	-
Liked by creator (77)	Personal anecdotes (89)	-	-	-
Tagged friend (7)	Examples (33)	-	-	-
-	Validation (4)	-	-	-

RESULTS

- Outreach
    - For outreach, I coded moments where traditional social media features were employed in the comment section. As there are many features available to TikTok users, I broke this code down into three subsections.
        - First, if a comment has replies. One important find in this piece of my research was that my data shows that there were 136 instances where a comment had a reply that indicates some sort of conversation in this space. This demonstrates interaction between members of the #booktok online community and goes back to the 2004 definition of online community: an online space of shared interests (Bidgoli). The TikTok video itself is a fixed object that the creator has tailored for publication, but the comment section is a raw space where members of the community are frequently coming together to share thoughts and opinions.
        - The second piece of the outreach code is if the comment was liked by the creator. This was easy to identify due to the fact that TikTok has a feature where comments that were liked by the creator receive a badge that is displayed in the comment section. While the comments are where the conversation is fostered, the original video and its creator are the face of the moment. The comments are traditionally typed and users can hide behind their comment using an unidentifiable username and profile picture. A 2018 study looked at Twitter and how users fostered parasocial relationships with creators on the platform. I used this study in the understanding of my own findings to understand the importance that something as trivial as a "liked by creator" badge may have on a comment. According to the study, people who feel ostracized and who crave a sense of belonging are more likely to feed into a parasocial relationship online (Iannone). In the case of #booktok, a comment being clearly liked by a creator could lead to the commenter feeling connected to the creator and it could encourage them to keep commenting on their future content to maintain that sense of relationship and belonging.
        - The third piece of the outreach code is if the commenter had tagged a friend. While this wasn't a large piece with only 7 noted instances, I still found it important to include. By tagging an account in a #booktok comment section, you may be hinting towards the general algorithm that this is the content that you will not only engage with, but that you will share with others. In an article about the TikTok algorithm, the New York Times stated that TikTok's goal is user retention (Smith). By a user spending the time to head to the comment section and tag a friend, the algorithm will know to push similar videos onto their For You Pages to keep them scrolling and the cycle continues now that another account has been tagged and therefore drawn to watch the same video.
- Relatability
        - Excitement: These moments in my sample of comments were the most common but were often the simplest. Given the 150 character limit mentioned earlier and the nature of TikTok as a modern social media platform, these types of comments were often extremely short and kept up with social media lingo. For example, comments like "me",

"100%", and even just "!!!" were enough to imply that the commenter felt represented in the TikTok (Appendix B)
        - Personal anecdotes: This code was almost clumped together with excitement, but in the end I separated it due to the different physical nature of these comments. The personal anecdotes still had to adhere to the character limit but were a bit longer than the excitement comments. These comments also shared a bit more of the commenter's personality as they attempted to make their experiences known in the online community.
        - Examples: These comments were subtly trying to relay the relatability of the original TikTok. Instead of directly identifying themselves with the video like the excitement comments, they would leave hypothetical situations or quotes from books that speak to what the original video was commenting on. Regardless of the lack of individuality in the comments themselves, these comments still showed that the commenter understood and identified with the TikTok.
        - Validation: This code was the least common throughout my research with only 4 coded instances. These comments were a mix of the excitement and examples comments- they were subtly showing relatability with the inclusion of the self. An example of a validation comment is: "omg i'm so glad i'm not the only one" (Appendix C). These comments still include the commenter in the picture with self-identifying language and personal opinions, but they boast a sense of distance between the commenter and the community by sharing that they thought they were the only one to think or act a certain way. Even though there is still this sense of distance, I included it in the relatability code because in the end, the commenter is disclosing that they think or behave in the way that is demonstrated in the video.
    - For the analysis of these four codes, I referenced the 2018 Twitter study mentioned above. These types of comments were about inserting oneself into the moment in the online community to feel like they belong and are represented and therefore represent the construction of an online identity and relationship with the #booktok community. The study concluded that maintaining parasocial relationships may be a good way to satisfy a lack of social needs (Iannone). #booktok boosted in popularity during a global pandemic where social interaction was extremely limited, and the frequency in the relatability comments in my research suggests that a yearning for social inclusion is still prevalent on the platform.
- Book Focused
    - For the book focused code I marked each time that a comment mentioned the name of a book or author. I did not differentiate here between if the comment was negative or positive in nature because #booktok is a space for book recommendations as well as book reviews in both the comments and the original video. While #booktok has its authors and titles that it adores, it also has those which it detests. Given that #booktok is a book centric space, the abundance of these types of comments was not a surprise to me. It is in these types of comments where commenters dipped into the parasocial relationship and recommended books to the creator, where they dropped titles that they saw in the original video that they like or don't like, and where they asked why their favorite author/title wasn't included in the original video. These types of comments are likely the expected backbone of #booktok, and as a researcher I was surprised to see that they weren't the top category. My analysis of this trend can be found in the discussion section of this paper.
- Negativity
    - The 41 comments that I coded for negativity were comments that disagreed with whatever the creator included in the original TikTok. Comments here ranged from saying a book shouldn't be included in a video, saying that they don't do the behavior or think in the way that the creator seems to assume "readers" do, or voicing that they think that a popular #booktok title is undeserving of "the hype". These comments weren't in the majority, but they still fit into the #booktok community because even though they disagree with the creator, they do so by being an active member of the community and sharing opinions on a shared interest.
- Platform Focused
    - With 16 coded instances, the platform focused comments were the smallest portion of my research. These comments were the ones that focused on the composition of the TikTok itself instead of engaging with the book centric topic. Often, these comments brought up the sound that the creator used or commented on the clip transitions that the author pulled off. Similarly to the

relatability comments, these comments fit in with the idea of building a relationship between the commenter and the creator by acknowledging the time and effort that the creator put into the product.

DISCUSSION

The intention behind my research was to answer the following question and sub questions:

- **What power do online communities have in shaping identities?**
    - How has #booktok contributed to the identity of "The Reader"?
    - How does #booktok function as an online community for readers?

After completing my research, I can conclude that online communities like #booktok shape identities by leaving room for discourse and interaction between members of the community. This may be obvious for text-based platforms like Twitter, but for video-based platforms like TikTok, the comment section isn't the main function and it needs to be actively clicked into to even be read. All over my research, members of the #booktok community are seen interacting with each other by replying to comments or tagging friends. Even if the members aren't actively using these features of TikTok, they are still participating by voicing their opinions, thoughts, anecdotes, and even their disagreements.

In regard to my first sub question, through this discourse and community building on #booktok, creators and commenters alike seem to have created a character of "The Reader" who isn't simply someone who reads. Drawing from my research, the most common type of comments was regarding relatability and outreach. Both of these codes outnumbered the code that is related to the genre of the online community: books. With this data and the background on #booktok and online communities provided in my literature review, I have concluded that "The Reader" is someone relatable and charismatic while talking about or holding a book. One of the TikToks that I included in my research was posted December 31 of 2022. The video has 5.1 million views and 1051 comments as of May 8 of 2023. In this video, the creator shares a comparison between the books they have on their shelf and the books that they actually read in 2022. These numbers were not even as the creator shares that they never read some of the books that they bought that year. One commenter said, "buying books and reading them are two completely different hobbies" and another says, "first person to ever read most of the books they bought" (Appendix D). What these commenters are referencing is "The Reader" and how they often have extravagant bookshelves with tens if not hundreds of titles that they have never actually read.

For my second sub question, I paid attention to the technical features of TikTok as a platform itself. Because of the nature of TikTok as a social media platform, it can be expected that outreach and relatability are high up on the list. TikTok boosts content that will have high retention rates and therefore needs to be pleasant and digestible to the audience (Smith). The nature of the platform makes it so that content needs to be fast paced to fit the trends and quick scroll interface of the For You Page. #booktok users are seeing a video, identifying with it, commenting on it, and then moving on to the next video to repeat the process all in a minute or less. This builds a web and strengthens their algorithmic tie to the #booktok community and further exposes them to "The Reader". As seen in the comments that I gathered, users are relating to "The Reader" character that creators are fronting which only perpetuates the identity and makes it acceptable and even desirable to the members of the online community.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of the semester, I collected 291 comments on popular #booktok videos with the hope to learn more about online communities like #booktok and how they shape identities. In the research, I found that the #booktok online communities shape identities by valuing the relatability and outreach of content. The majority of the comments that I coded focused on these two factors more than they focused on the special interest of the community. This has formed a character of "The Reader" on #booktok and as the platform grows, that character and its traits evolve and spread. While I am happy with the results of my project, I think that there were some limitations. First were technical limitations that prevented me from taking this project to a larger scale. The entirety of this project took place in my iPhone's camera roll and if the scope of the project was any larger it would have gotten out of hand. I would have liked to look for a larger sample to see how these patterns and trends measure up. A second limitation was the lack of input from #booktok users. If I were to follow up on this project in the future, I would love to survey or interview #booktok users to gather more qualitative data on the inner relationships and networking of #booktok.

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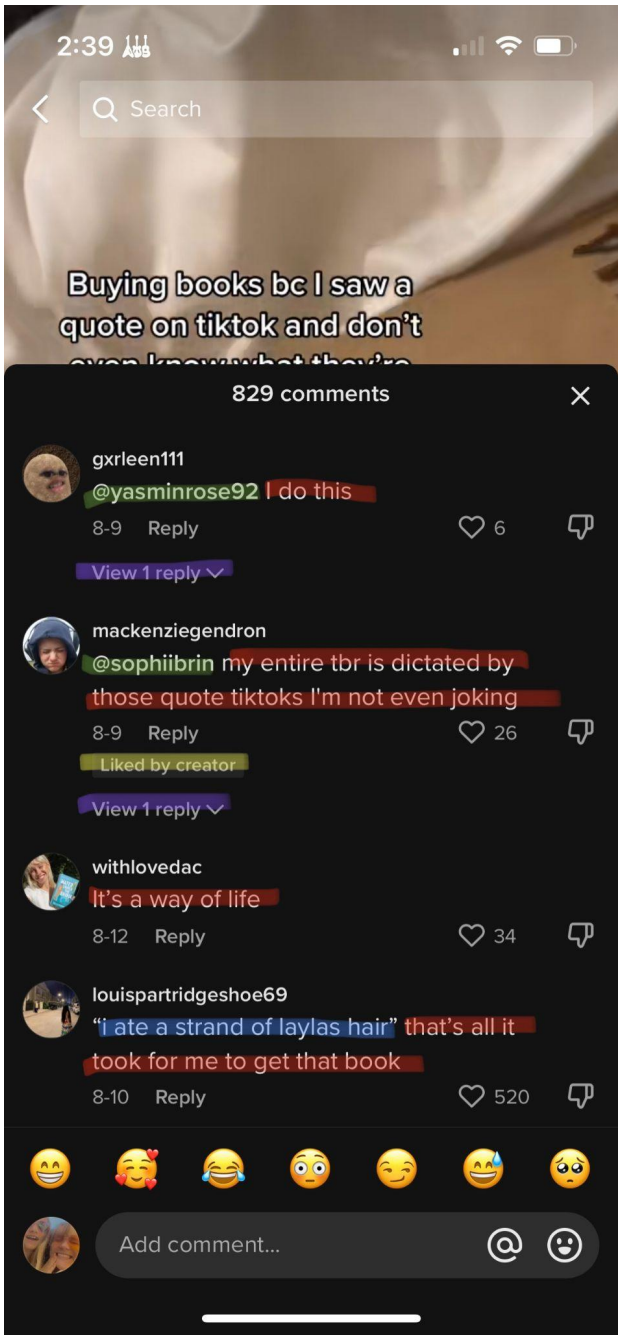
APPENDIX A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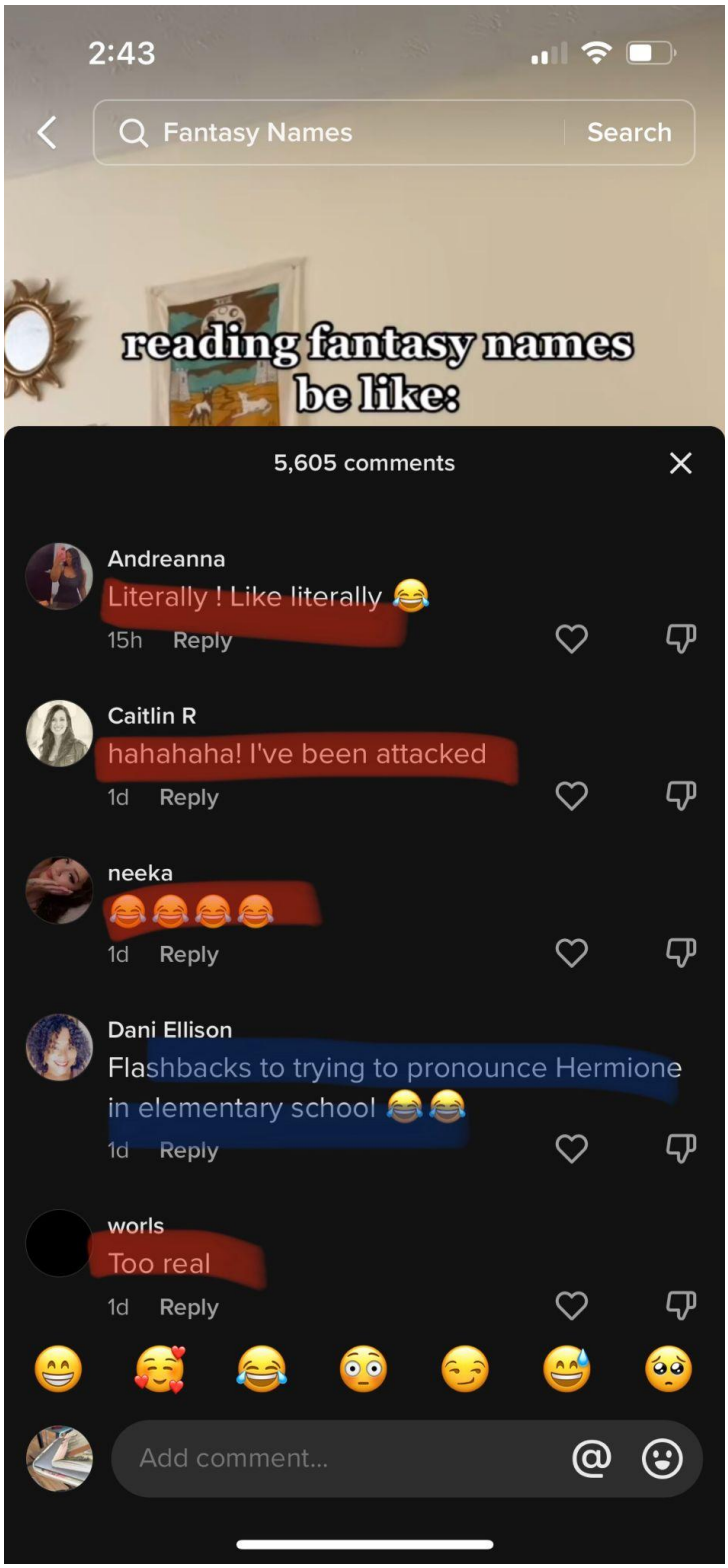
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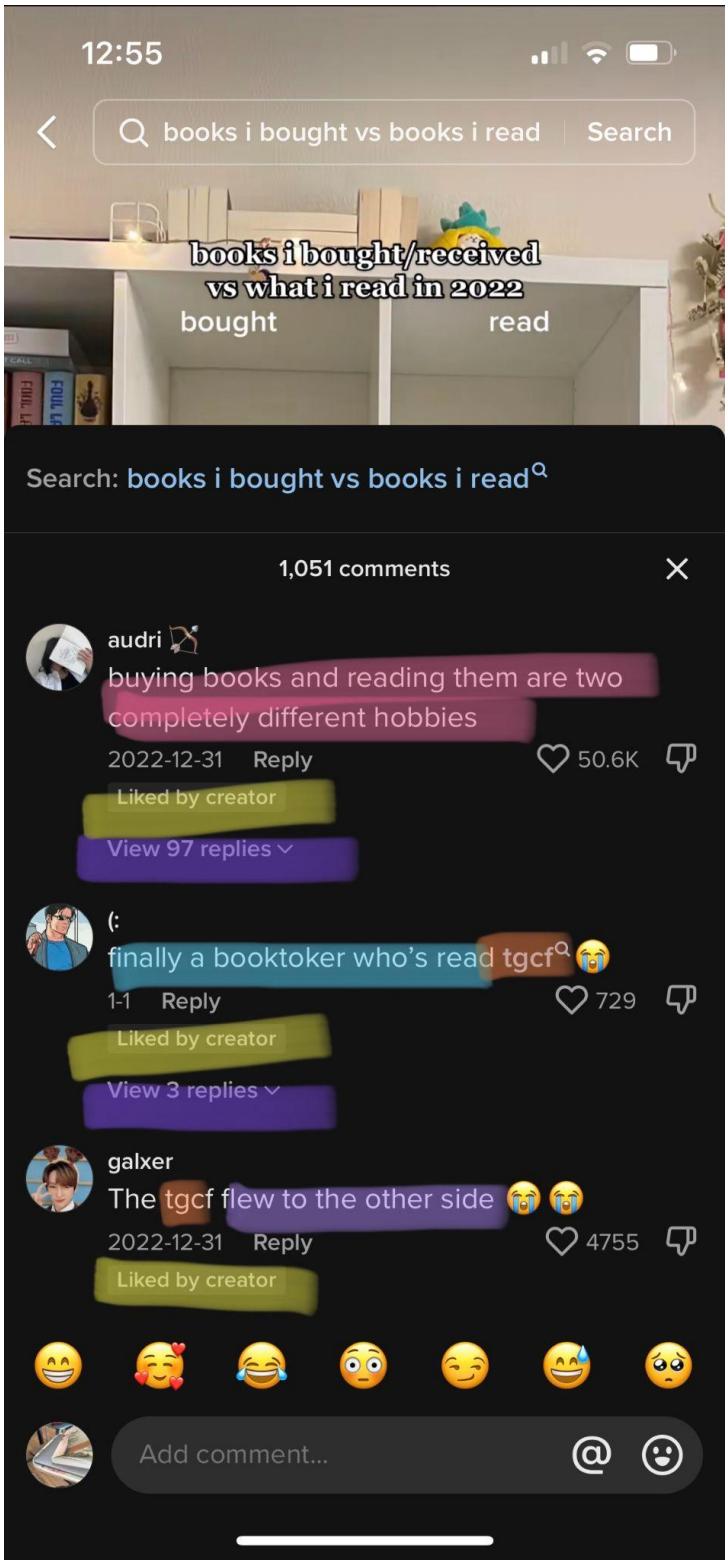
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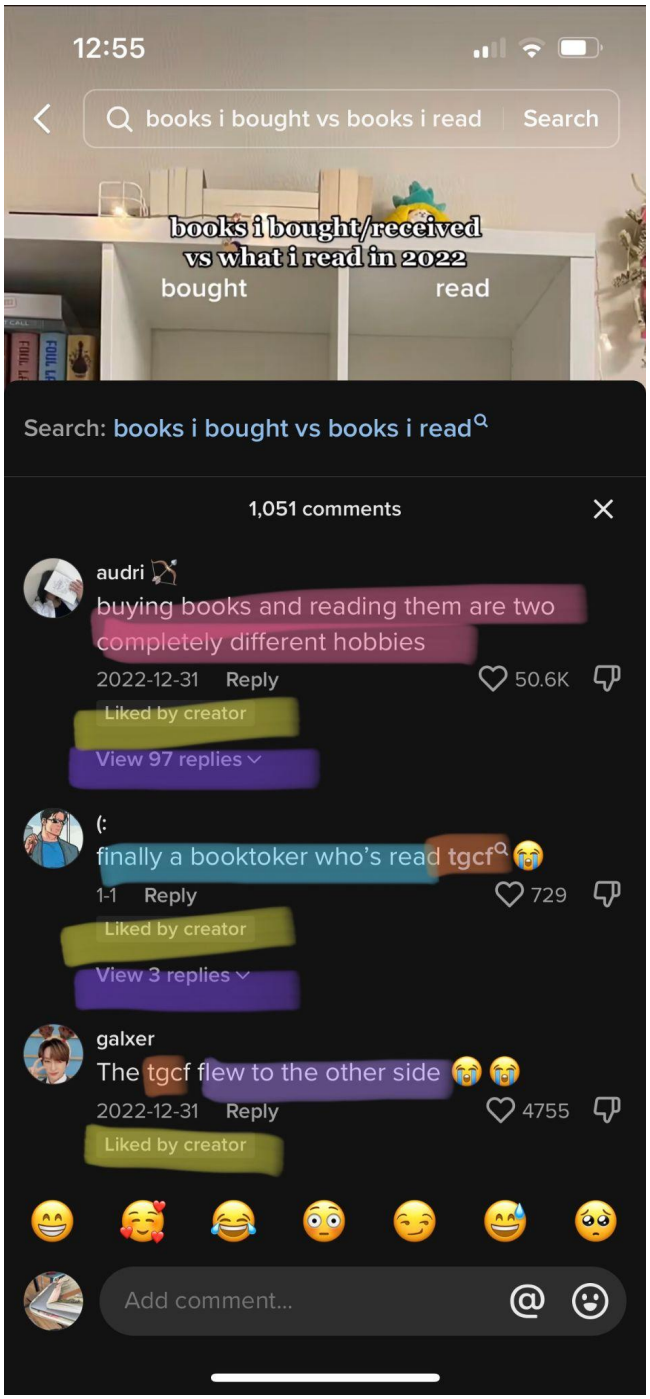
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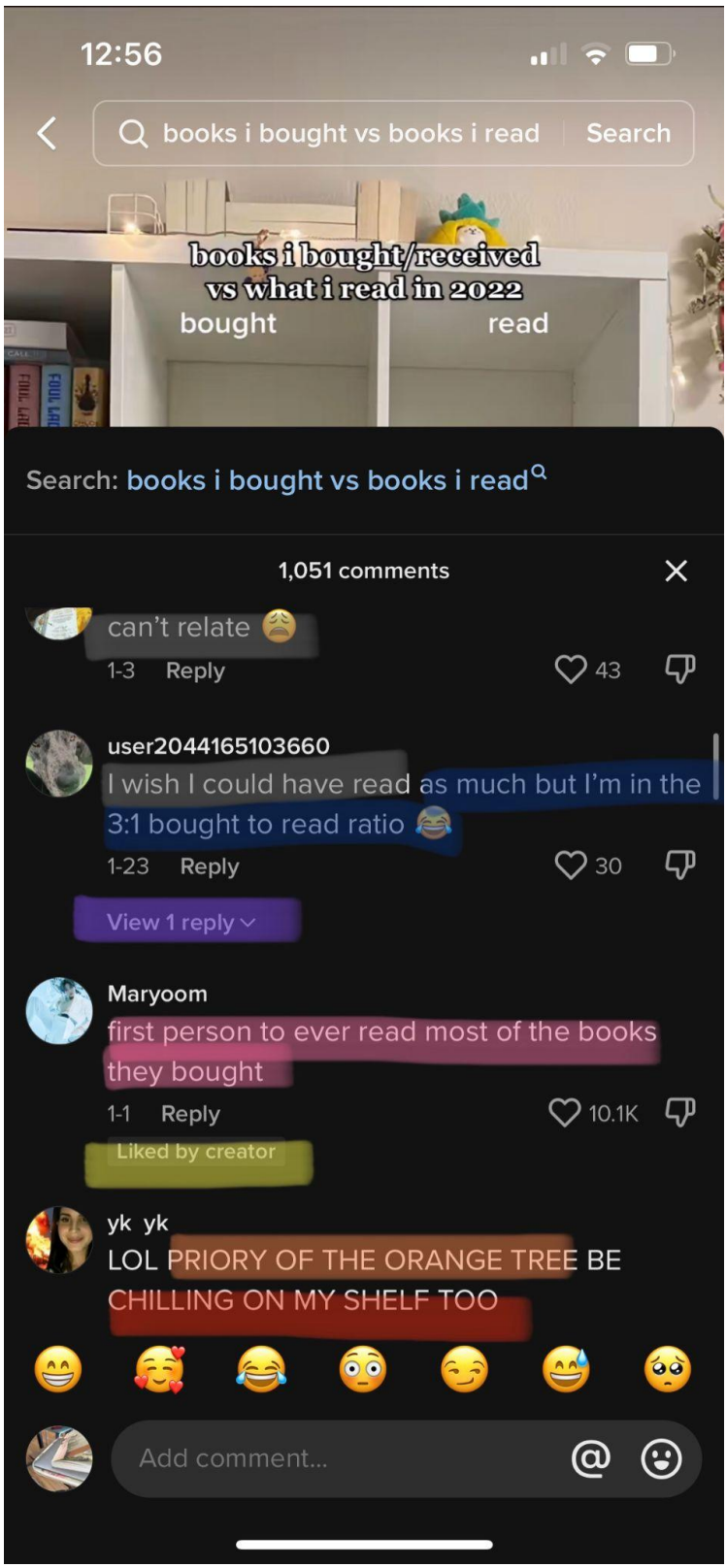
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