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Sharing is caring: young people’s narratives about BookTok and volitional reading

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores young people’s narratives about BookTok and volitional reading. The data consist of narrative interviews with eight students (all girls) from two different classes in year 1 and year 2 of a preparatory programme for higher education, that is, students aged 17–18 years old. Using the framework of Wenger’s notion of communities of practice and Bamberg’s theory of narrative positioning, the findings indicate that the volitional reading practices described by the participants are strongly characterised by social, physical, and emotional dimensions that are generated and made possible by the book as an artefact. The findings also show that young people use the digital media platform TikTok and its subcommunity BookTok as a resource in constructing their own volitional reading practices and as a means to strengthen their reader identities. In view of their use of BookTok, this article contributes insights into young people’s volitional reading practices and the construction of reader identities outside of school. The results also contribute to the ongoing discussion about how to support and motivate young people to read literature.

Introduction

The current new media landscape, where reading occurs in all possible formats and on different platforms, affects how we perceive reading. Moreover, it has created virtual places such as Tumblr, Twitter, Bookstagram, and BookTube where reading, as well as discussions about literary texts and reading activities, can take place. A more recent example displaying reading cultures and reading practices is the social media platform TikTok, where the hashtag BookTok has become an important and widely spread forum for young people interested in books and reading. The hashtag BookTok emerged in late 2019 and has been described as a digital book club for young people created by young people, enabling them to interact on their own initiative without being restricted by dominant reading discourses and/or school reading practices. BookTok can be described as a community of literary video-bloggers or vloggers (Scolari et al. 2021) where videos reflect the playful, unrehearsed aesthetic of TikTok. Because BookTok as a phenomenon is quite new, there are only a few studies published so far that mostly describe the BookTok phenomenon itself. For example,
in light of young people’s declining results in terms of reading comprehension and reading habits, Jerasa and Boffone (2021) highlight the potential pedagogical opportunities that BookTok offers to help teachers reduce the gap between reading practices in and out of school, and Merga (2021) discusses how BookTok can inform library advisory services, encouraging them to build young reader-friendly spaces. Another example is Martens et al. (2022), who explore how young adults positioning themselves as BookTokers (people who publish videos of books and/or reading activities on the app TikTok) present their reader identities and how they use the affordances on BookTok to connect with other BookTokers. However, there is a lack of empirical research capturing young adults’ experiences of BookTok as spectators (often referred to as ‘lurkers’).

The activities taking place on BookTok are closely linked to what is sometimes called ‘reading for pleasure’, where reading is volitional and ‘free voluntary’ (Krashen 2004) or ‘recreational’ (Ross et al. 2006). Even though BookTok might be used by teachers and students in literature classes, the phenomenon itself did not originate in educational institutions. Moreover, the concept of reading for pleasure could be problematic when used in education. Previous studies have shown that young people in Sweden, where the present study is situated, clearly distinguish between school reading and volitional reading, where they look for reading experiences connected to emotions and empathetic reading practices (Asplund and Olin-Scheller 2021; Nordberg 2017, 2021). Just as in fan communities, digital platforms can easily offer arenas for creating spaces where interpretive communities interested in leisure reading can develop and spread to a large group of readers (Olin-Scheller and Wikström 2010). Here, engaging in this reading and interpretive community is not necessarily based entirely on what we connect with ‘pleasure’ and ‘pleasant reading’; the glue uniting the readers could, besides joy, also be experiences and feelings such as sadness, anger, and discomfort (Felski 2020). These communities are a part of the contemporary media environment where book culture and internet culture actually converge, offering opportunities for the participants to use fiction in interaction with other readers in their ongoing identity formation (Haglund 2021).

Volitional reading has been associated with greater reading ability and academic success (Brozo 2019; OECD 2019b; Sullivan and Brown 2015). Because children’s and young people’s interest in volitional reading has decreased, there has been increased attention in many countries to ‘the concepts of reader engagement and reading for pleasure in both policy and practice’ (Cremin and Moss 2018, p. 59). In a Swedish context, national and international studies indicate that students’ positive attitudes towards and engagement in reading have steadily decreased over the years (Läsdelegationen [The Reading Delegation] 2018; Mullis et al. 2012; OECD 2013, 2019a, 2021). In response to these surveys, several efforts to promote and stimulate young people’s reading, with the aim of making them read more and better, have been launched in Swedish schools (Carlbäum et al. 2019; Nordberg 2017). Despite this, students’ reading interest has continued to decline, and when the results from PIRLS 2021 confirming this development were launched in Sweden in spring 2023, the debate about reading instruction in school and children’s and young people’s (and their parents’) reading habits has intensified in the media among policymakers, researchers, educators, and literacy organisations. Recently, the Minister of Education in Sweden stated that there is a serious ‘reading crisis’ in Sweden and called for a revival of the physical book in the classrooms, criticising digitalisation for jeopardising students’ reading ability (Clemens 2023).
Against this background, we direct our interest to young readers in Sweden and their volitional reading practices as they engage with, through, and around the digital media platform TikTok, and specifically the BookTok subcommunity. Drawing on narrative interviews with upper secondary students in Sweden, the present paper explores the significance of BookTok in the lives of young readers and what BookTok means for their reader identity formations. Concerning their use of BookTok, the current article aims to contribute insights into young people’s volitional reading practices and the construction of reader identities outside of school in the present changing media landscape.

**Participatory culture and communities of practice**

To describe the drivers behind young people’s engagement in activities linked to different media, Jenkins coined the term *participatory culture* in 1992. Since then, the importance of participating and being a participant in producing texts in various media has dramatically increased. Currently, young people in Sweden, as well as in other countries, spend a great deal of time using social media such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok (Statens Medieråd [Swedish Media Council] 2021), where they communicate and interact, as well as produce and publish texts, images, films, and so forth. The forms of expression that are included in participatory culture are extensive and constantly changing. Jenkins’ definition of the term is broad but based on a few key principles. According to Jenkins, participatory culture has low barriers and strong support for creating and sharing creations with others. It has some form of informal mentorship, where the knowledge of the most experienced contributors is passed on to more novice participants. An important aspect is that the participants feel a social connection with each other and care about what other people think about what they have created.

Participatory cultures are sometimes viewed as informal learning environments. Gee (2005) calls these environments ‘affinity spaces’ that offer powerful opportunities for learning because they are built on shared aspirations that bridge differences in, for example, age and gender. Participants can also be involved in different ways depending on ability and interest, and each participant is constantly motivated to know more or to improve their ability in a certain context, allowing each participant to feel like an expert while taking advantage of the expertise of others. This type of context is sometimes described as a community of practice. Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2015) define a community of practice as ‘groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly’ (p. 1). Wenger and Wenger-Trayner believe that, for a group to be considered a community of practice, it must meet three criteria: First, there should be a *domain*, where members do not necessarily need to know each other, but they must share an interest and passion for that particular domain. Second, there should be a *practice*, where it is not enough to share an interest, but members must also develop specific skills, routines, and tools that they then actively use in their practice. Finally, there must be a *community*, where the members carry out activities that allow them to learn things from each other. In the present article, we draw on these criteria of domain, practice, and community regarding participatory culture and communities of practice to explore adolescents’ volitional reading practices outside school.
Materials and methods

The data in this article consist of interviews with eight female students from two different classes in year 1 (5 students) and year 2 (3 students) of a preparatory programme for higher education, that is, students aged 17–18 years old. This upper secondary school is situated in a small town in central Sweden, and each class consists of about 30 students. The programme is a traditionally female-dominated programme, with approximately two-thirds female students attending on average in Sweden (Svenskt näringsliv [Swedish Enterprise] 2021), and there was an even greater gender imbalance in the two classes included in the study.

To get in contact with adolescents who had an interest in BookTok, we contacted an experienced teacher who taught literacy in upper secondary school. The teacher confirmed an emerging practice among students related to the phenomenon of BookTok and said that the school library had created a special department for BookTok books. Through this teacher, we were introduced to students in two classes who were informed about our study. The school, the classes, and the students who participated were all chosen by convenience sampling selection and we had no background information, such as socio-economic situation or previous reading experiences, about the young people who participated. Hence, all data were constructed through young people’s narratives about BookTok and themselves as readers.

Following the ethical guidelines and rules for social science research issued by the Swedish Research Council (2017), the students were informed about the objectives, aims, and implementation of the study. Because the students were older than 15, parental consent was not required, but the students were encouraged to inform their guardians. Some weeks after the presentation of the information, interviews were conducted with the eight female students, who were all active users of BookTok and had given their written consent to participate in the study and to be interviewed. In connection with the interviews, they were briefed again about the project and informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time without explanation. We also gave assurance that what they told us would not be shared with the teachers. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

The majority of students in the two classes were girls. Although gender is not the main focus of the present article, it is relevant to note that the main demographic of BookTok creators, viewers, and authors is young women (Wall 2023), which is also in line with studies that highlight that girls read more and have a more positive attitude towards reading than boys (Brozo 2019; Logan and Johnston 2009; OECD 2016; Schleicher 2019). Even so, a limitation of the present study needs to be mentioned explicitly: there was a small sample and not representative because the purpose was not to generalise these findings to a larger population. Our study is about avid readers engaging in digital technology for reading, the informants are all female as a result of the convenience sampling, and the findings of the study cannot be applied to students in general.

The interviews were carried out in school facilities chosen by the teacher to ensure that we could interview the students without interruption. We interviewed the students individually in the form of conversations based on a general guide, although the questions asked during the interviews also related to what the participants told us. In this way, the interviews developed and were shaped by the students’ accounts in relation to overriding and central
areas. These areas included in the interview guide mainly focused on the students’ descriptions and experiences of the BookTok phenomenon (e.g. Can you tell me about BookTok and what it is? How do you use BookTok? What do you do with what you have read through BookTok? What happens afterwards? Do you talk about it with someone? Do you write about it?), while some questions concerned their reading experiences generally and over time (e.g. How would you describe your relationship to reading? Could you tell me about any reading memories from your childhood? Can you tell me about reading in school?).

As interviewers, we participated in developing the content of the accounts through summaries of what had been said, and we also tried to pinpoint significant aspects of BookTok and reading in the conversations together with the participants. One strategy was to encourage the participants to give concrete examples of what they were talking about. This type of interview method is similar to what Morgan (2004) calls divided attention in conversation. The interviews were recorded by Dictaphone and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

We analysed the participants’ narratives about and experiences of BookTok from a narrative approach, viewing narratives as socially situated actions through which people construct meaning, understanding, and identity (Giaxoglou and Georgakopoulou 2021; Mishler 1999). We were interested in how the participants constructed and performed their identities in the interview situations, how they displayed impressions of themselves, of who they are and who they want to be, and how they made claims about themselves and others and the surrounding world (Andrews 2007). Hence, we were not only paying attention to the story as told by the participants, but also to the dialogic relation that was established between interviewer and participant and to the broader context beyond the immediate interview situation (Kohler Riessman 2008). The primary focus of our analysis, in other words, was how the participants constructed themselves as readers, how they performed their reader identities in the interview situation, and how they positioned themselves as readers in relation to others. Further—and based on the assumption that identities are intimately entwined with narratives that are culturally available to that person (Andrews 2007)—the local context, as well as the broader context, such as dominant discourses and values of what constitutes reading and texts that circulate in a particular culture at a specific time, were taken into consideration.

When examining the reader identities that emerged in the narratives during interviews, we were inspired by Bamberg’s positioning analysis (1997, 2004), in which a starting point is his interest in the identity-constructing practices that people employ in and through their storytelling. According to Bamberg (1997, 2004, 2011), the process of positioning takes place at three analytical levels. The first level deals with how the characters in the story are positioned in relation to each other. The second level is about how storytellers position themselves in relation to the interviewer and/or to an imagined audience. The third level has been elaborated further upon by Bamberg (Bamberg 2004, 2011; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008) and concerns how the narrator positions a sense of identity in relation to dominant discourses and in that way ‘establishes himself as a particular kind of person’ (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008, p. 391).
Results

The participants described themselves as readers having read various amounts during different periods of their lives. A common factor was that someone read books to them in childhood and that they shared a great interest in reading, which has increased and, in one case, been reborn through their engagement in BookTok. When they described how they came into contact with BookTok, it usually involved encountering videos and vlogs on books and reading in their TikTok flows. They perceived this as a ‘trend’ that has been growing stronger and suddenly ‘exploded’, which also gradually increased their interest in BookTok. In their accounts, BookTok emerged as an image of a digital forum, a ‘fun platform’, as one participant said, where people from all over the world who are interested in reading could exchange experiences of reading and books in various ways. Several of the participants, like Astrid below, used ‘community’ when describing BookTok (italics in the quotations indicate that the participants are expressing themselves in English):

I would describe it as... well ... yes, a type of group, sort of, I don’t know, a community in English, on TikTok... with people who take an interest in reading books... like to share their views for instance of books or of, well, the context of the books, you know, and want others to be interested. And do—partly, I suppose they do it for fun—and many have different motives for engaging in social media—yes, but also to make others interested in wanting to read more. (Astrid)

Encountering BookTok meant an opportunity for the participants to adopt different roles. Most of the participants emerged as consumers. They monitored BookTok primarily by watching the videos posted and sometimes adding a comment but did not produce and upload any videos. On the other hand, BookTok seemed to provide various kinds of impulses, which we will discuss further below, but first, we will deal with the community aspect of BookTok as it emerged in the participants’ accounts.

Belonging to a community of readers

There are several reasons why young people in general use BookTok, but the sense of belonging to a community was prominent in our material. Like Astrid, Tora also used the term ‘community’ to describe belonging to a group, even though she was ignorant about who the others ‘really’ were because ‘people are a little anonymous in the community’, but it was still ‘fun’ to be part of it. Being a reader and identifying as a reader were important to our participants, and through using BookTok, they found a platform for making new contacts with people sharing their interest in reading, for strengthening their self-image, and for forming and reforming their identities as readers. Here, we can see concrete manifestations of the emergence of a ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins 1992), in which the sense of social belonging with other readers is a primary driving force in using BookTok among the young generation. Several of the participants mentioned that they surrounded themselves with friends and classmates who talked about the books they had encountered in the videos on BookTok and then read. In this way, BookTok emerged as a local community of practice (Wenger 1998) in which the participants met in person, sharing their experiences of BookTok and their readings. Signe, for example, said that
she had a feeling that reading had become more ‘trendy’ than it was before and that her friends’ conversations about BookTok experiences and reading could trigger her reading interest further:

Yes, you know, if I hear my friends talking about a BookTok book and they have read it and say what they think about it, then I feel like reading it, too. Then, it is also inspiring for us to talk more about books now than before BookTok because we have read the same books. (Signe)

Here, Signe also mentioned another dimension central to young people’s reading: the importance of reading the ‘same books’ that others have read or finding out other people’s reactions to a book that she has read. For Tora, it was ‘most enjoyable’ to read BookTokers’ comments if she had read the book the BookToker was talking about in the video:

But I mean if I scroll BookTok and people talk about books, then it’s more fun if I have read it too to see if … I have been given some books I love and others I hate, and then, I find out why you hate that book, sort of. But it’s fun. (Tora)

As Martens et al. (2022) suggest, ‘BookTok provides a nonjudgemental space in which young people can have freedom to read and engage with books they love – or love to hate’ (p. 715), and this was also something that Tora highlighted above.

In addition, Stina emphasised the importance of talking about and comparing a book with others. According to Stina, it can be challenging to find a person close by who has read the same book, but BookTok offered an opportunity:

But I think BookTok really is a great thing because of the situation of having read a book and having no one close by who has read it, too. ‘Okay, but there are millions here in the comment section who have and who you can talk to, you know’. I think this is part of its greatness. (Stina)

As described in the interviews and clarified by Stina above, BookTok offered the participants the opportunity to keep a conversation going on texts discussed in the comment section of the virtual forum with other readers outside their own local community, and this encouraged participation. In this way, BookTok emerged as a virtual, global community of practice that also compensated for the lack of friends in the local community with whom they could exchange reading experiences. Hence, in this virtual forum, the young people in our study emerged as users who cocreated and maintained a participatory culture (Jenkins 1992) through which they were not only allowed to enjoy a sense of meaning and context, but also to engage in conversations with other readers, outside their (local) circle of friends, and feel that their own comments were significant. A common BookTok phenomenon mentioned by several participants was their appreciation of videos in which BookTokers talked about their reading experiences and described the feelings evoked in the reading:

But … you know, many videos I have watched before have been, like… maybe they’ll show—Well if this person has read the book … which they have, that is, if they give a tip about it, maybe it… that is, perhaps display a specific part of the book, a page or so which has affected the person a lot and shows that a person connects feelings to the book and that it becomes a big thing. (Astrid)

Several of the participants mentioned the emotional aspects of reading and that they both liked and were inspired by others’ reading reactions. According to Martens et al. (2022),
BookTokers’ dissemination and recommendations of a book on BookTok are mainly based on emotions rather than on content, and it was evident in our data that the participants as BookTok users were searching for reading experiences that connected to emotions and empathetic reading practices in their volitional reading.

Yet another way to take part in other readers’ reading practices was to check various reading vlogs, where it was possible to follow another reader’s reading practice over time through their video journals. Stina explained that she was motivated to follow BookTokers’ reading vlogs, describing the phenomenon as follows:

But people often create reading vlogs when they are reading and this is very motivational because, ‘Oh, that looks nice, I want to do a vlog, too’. So I do this a lot, but it’s also inspirational. […] Yes, and stays with me through the day, like, ‘Go on, hang with me while I’m doing this’ and then, you do it, even if it’s only about reading. It’s like this, ‘Hang with me when I read today’. (Stina)

Here, Stina clearly positioned herself as a consumer by actively choosing to follow a reading vlog while demonstrating social affinity with the vlogger and stating that she cared what the vlogger had created and posted, which is a central feature of the participatory culture that Jenkins (1992) describes. The quote also highlights that the creator of the reading vlog actively invited followers for the whole day, and as Dezuanni et al. (2022) show, BookTokers can use different strategies when inviting followers to interact socially and materially with books and reading. These strategies also included the activities undertaken by BookTokers to reduce the social distance between themselves and the audience that they were addressing on the social media platform, which is a form of ‘relational labour’ (Baym 2018). However, Stina’s use of BookTok also served a function for herself; that is, she found it inspiring to watch other readers’ reading vlogs because these motivated her to read. Watching someone reading ‘looks nice’ and like something she would like to do herself. Therefore, being a consumer in using BookTok can serve several functions at the same time. By watching and commenting on others’ reading vlogs, users can contribute to creating and recreating BookTok as a participatory culture (Jenkins 1992) while confirming BookTokers in their endeavours to be recognisable to others as a ‘book person’ or a ‘book reader’ (e.g., Dezuanni et al. 2022). As readers, we can also be inspired to read more and strengthen our identities as reading human beings. Further, what the participants were describing when they were talking about their use of BookTok was also a global community of practice in which they could connect and relate to readers other than friends and classmates within their local community.

**Sharing thoughts and feelings about the same reading**

The social dimensions of reading that the participants highlighted as significant and as reasons for using BookTok had a direct impact on their own reading practices. In addition to learning about others’ reading experiences and reactions to books read on BookTok and/or talking to friends and other readers about their reading experiences, some described how they shared such experiences with friends and classmates (after school) by reading each other’s books. In this way, the participants used BookTok as a common point of reference in live conversations. As such, experiences from BookTok as a virtual, digital community were then physically enacted in different ways with friends and classmates in their local community. A phenomenon in the BookTok world that some of them had seen and picked
up on was ‘annotation’, which for instance involves underlining while reading or commenting on Post-it notes or in the margin while reading. Stina described herself as an engaged reader, and through her accounts, she emerged as a reader with considerable experience of BookTok and annotating, experiences that she shared with some of her classmates:

We often swap books. Me and a few other people in my class have an arrangement that we have all read the same copy of a book, and we can do something called *annotate* in the book. This means adding comments, for example. […] You sort of *highlight* something, and you can stick a Post-it note or bookmark in some way for what you want to return to, and then, we proceed writing in this way that one starts, and then, the others write their comments, and hand them to someone. Then, you can respond to comments or write your own. […] Many times, it’s like, well, if I start, I start with an empty book, and then, I write what I want to in it and what I’m thinking about. It might be a simple ‘Ha-ha’ after something I thought was funny, like. Then, I’ve finished with it, given it to a friend, and she might write in it or something and return it to me. When I get it back, I might choose to skim through it and check what others have reacted to, sort of. It’s a bit like that. (Stina)

Tora had used BookTok for several years and had also spent time annotating. Like Stina, Tora seemed to be a dedicated reader, and she often mentioned that reading was more enjoyable when she could share her reading experience with others through annotating:

Yes, but it has a lot to do with the fact that I, partly my—it was my friend again who got me into this because she likes to underline herself, and then, she likes to lend it to people so they too can make notes. And then, when you read, it’s like you are reading together almost, if someone else has read it before and made notes. Moreover, it’s like interacting with the book; you can write like this if someone has done something stupid, for example: ‘Hey, that’s not fair’. Or you can sort of react if something is cute and write ‘Aw’ kind of. So when someone else reads it, it’s great to go back and check it out. (Tora)

In this account, the feeling of ‘reading together almost’ is highlighted as an effect of reading friends’ notes in the books that Tora is reading and also that ‘it’s like interacting with the book’ when she writes comments and reactions to characters’ actions. Likewise, friends’ comments on her own comments added a new dimension to the reading. Tora elaborated on this point:

Well, it’s, yes, but instead of just sitting there reading, you can still get into a book, but there’s more when you interact with the characters yourself, kind of. Because, now, when I read a book, as when I borrowed from a friend, then it’s like this: okay, there are those two characters, and then she is there, who is sort of there sometimes […] it’s fun. Especially when—sometimes we like ‘to introvert together’, as we call it—then she can sit with a book, I can sit with a book. And I have a book that she’s read, and I can just say to her when she’s sitting there, ‘Yes, you’ve written this’, sort of. (Tora)

This type of interactive reading gave Tora more than ‘just’ reading a book in the ‘usual’ way. It was still possible for her to ‘get into a book’, but the point was that ‘there’s more when you interact with the characters’, and she also felt that her friend who had commented on the text ‘is sort of there sometimes’. Reading together was also an activity in which Tora could experience the concrete presence of her friend through her comments in a book, and this was taken one step further towards a reading practice involving ‘to introvert together’, meaning a situation of being together as each were reading their own book, which one of them had read previously and commented on. In real time, the person reading the
commented book can stop reading and comment on a comment there and then. In a sense, it is possible to see this activity as a transformation process through which Tora and Stina, in this case, redesign (Janks 2010, 2013) the reading of fiction as a solitary activity into a social and fellowshipping reading practice in which present and previous readings of the same text can meet, and through which touchpoints for talking about readings and reading experiences in real time are created.

The social fellowshipping reading practice that the young participants talked about and created with their friends and other BookTok users also meets the criteria that Wenger (1998) suggests define a community of practice. First, there is a clear domain through BookTok in which young people share an interest and passion. There is also an explicit and identified community in the participants’ accounts of BookTok, displaying how they are inspired and motivated to develop and deepen their reading practices by watching and commenting on videos and exchanging reading experiences with friends and classmates. In practice, this means that the participants not only read more and more frequently, but also, as in the case of Tora and Stina, developed their own routines and tools for using actively and consciously when reading. The examples above also illuminate that there is more than one community of practice present when the participants talk about BookTok; BookTok as a virtual, global community in which the participants mostly emerge as ‘lurkers’ who contribute through written comments at best, on the one hand, and in which they form mutual relationships as actors within their local/physical community, on the other hand. Moreover, the narratives of Tora and Stina reveal how these two communities contextualise each other. The results suggest that the individual participants’ local practices (such as reading together, swapping annotated books with friends, etc.) are directly inspired by the practices observed on BookTok.

The physical book—presenting oneself as a reader

It is clear that the physical book had a special value among the participants, both as an aesthetic object and as an identity marker. Several interviewees said that they wanted to buy books instead of borrowing them from a library but could not afford it. Books were a ‘luxury’ and something they hoped to receive as presents and also saved money to buy. As Martens et al. (2022) found in their study, BookTokers’ readerly identity was closely related to their book consumption, and for some, a great deal of time, money, and attention was spent on buying and collecting books, as was the case in our study:

Preferably, I read books in print, so many are on my want-to-buy list … books are expensive. […] I like to buy them for myself because I want to keep them. (Freja)

Several participants emphasised the importance of holding the book, skimming through it again, recalling the feeling of reading it as a memory, but also to display it to oneself and others:

I used to borrow books, but now I buy them instead […] I came into my own money and … realised that … books become such a big part of one’s life that I want to keep them to be able to know that, when I have finished reading them, they are still there in my bookshelf. (Ingrid)

Owning books seemed to create an identity for the participants as readers. Similarly to the BookTokers that Dezuanni et al. (2022) refer to, the young participants in our study
underlined the importance of the book as an object, and described how the book as a physical artefact was used to strengthen their self-image and social status as readers. They also frequently mentioned the bookshelf, which is the place where books can be displayed and seen and present a picture of who people are and want to be. They wanted to be unique, and the bookshelf was a potentially important tool in their identity creation where showing not only ‘the right books’ but also preferably many books was important:

It's clear, of course, that there are certain books you don't want to exhibit perhaps [...]. I've kept books I read in primary school and when friends come round [...] I might not want them to be seen then. But... of course, it also means something that I become inspired when I see... young girls and boys on TikTok... who have a big, whole book collection at home and can actually name each title... and their interest is so great that all they do after school is to read... I want to be such a person. [...] It's great reading because it's also good for you. [...] it's interesting to see that they have... so many books at home that there's no room on the bookshelf so there's a heap on the floor; that's the person I want to be. (Astrid)

Dezuanni et al. (2022) call the bookshelves displayed by BookTokers as ‘shelfies’, describing them as both performative and labour intensive. Owning a book as a physical object can have different values for young people. Many mentioned emotional values related to the power of the book to evoke various emotions, often linked to aesthetic experiences, and the bookshelf is a central place for this. Books and bookshelves have become resources in young people’s constructions of specific reader identities, similar to the way Astrid described them above. Furnishing a home with bookshelves and heaps of books signals a certain intellect, and displaying books shows that a person actively uses and reads books.

A specific BookToker, @BookBookOwl, and her shelves are mentioned by Dezuanni et al. (2022); @BookBookOwl emphasised the aesthetic dimension of how her books were arranged to show her signature rainbow colour theme. This theme recurred repeatedly in the interviews which clearly showed that our participants were attracted to the idea that arranging bookshelves in various ways can present personality traits through books.

There are parts of BookTok that only aim to inspire how to arrange your bookshelves [...] I can imagine that if I check my parents’ bookshelves, for instance, they might simply have put them there. [...] But I think that my generation, this thing with TikTok, etc., it should be a little posher and a bit more aesthetically pleasing sort of. [...] There are many variations. People talk about aesthetics. And then some people like it very colourful; they just have a lot of colourful books. The sorting of them is very important also [...] often there is a system. Some do it according to genre, while many others do it according to colour. Then it's called a rainbow shelf when they place all red covers on one shelf and all yellow on another, and all blue, so it looks like a rainbow. [...] It happens even that they make bookshelf tours sometimes, if you have seen house tours or apartment tours of someone's home, this is what you can do with bookshelves also, kind of 'Here is a tour of my rainbow shelf'. (Stina)

In this extract, examples of terminology and ways of expressing oneself in English (italics in the quotations) instead of Swedish clearly link to BookTok language use (e.g. Dezuanni et al. 2022). In addition, it seemed as though the young participants in our study preferred to read books in English, as Greta, for instance, testified to:

No, but since I read in English, and mostly in English. But this is also a thing with BookTok that you should read in the original language so that it shouldn't be translated and have a different feeling. And so it is, most authors are Americans kind of, so that is how it's been in English. (Greta)
According to Greta, it was ‘a thing’ to read in the original language, and because many books on BookTok are written in English, young people in Sweden read in a language other than their mother tongue. The BookTok community is a language-marked participatory culture (Jenkins 1992), where young Swedish readers invest in reading and buying books written in English and using English concepts when they talk about the BookTok community.

From the participants’ accounts, it is clear that they can keep a book to reread it, but also that there were other reasons for keeping books, such as showing who they are or want to be, or demonstrating an intellectual side to others. A book is in this way a way of ascribing social and cultural status, signalling education and knowledge, as Tora expressed it:

And then, it’s just, well, it makes me feel smart, too, when I’m reading. There is something special to be on the bus: reading. Everybody else is busy with their mobile phones—I sit with a book … (Tora)

The tactility of books has a decisive importance for the way in which the participants seemed to choose to handle books. The fact that many readers of fiction point to haptic and tactile aspects as significant to the reading experience and that reading is both an intellectual and a sensorimotor process is highlighted by Martens et al. (2022). The feel of a book is linked to its shape and design, which are important aspects of the function that young people attribute to the book.

Generally, the participants described using books in various ways and that they wanted to be able to choose how to use their books. Stina, for example, described how she used different types of bookmarks to fill an aesthetic function:

You choose some colours and other things that suit the book; that’s what I do. So that these bookmarks—if the book has a blue cover or something, then you might want blue Post-it notes or something or you write with a blue pen. And then there are coloured pens, or ink […] I’m very creative in this way, and that’s why I liked what I said before about bookshelves and everything that they should be seen and not just put there; they should look nice, too. It’s the same thing. I simply don’t want to make a mess in the books. I might colour a nice drawing here and there and write things in a nice way. (Stina)

Discussion

Being a reader and presenting oneself as a reader to others seemed very important to the young people we interviewed, and it is clear that BookTok serves a function in their efforts to construct reader identities in several respects. Through Bamberg’s analytical framework, BookTok emerges as a digital literary community united by a genuine interest in reading and a wish among members to position themselves and identify as book readers. The young people in the present study were attracted to BookTok not only for book tips and inspiration for volitional reading or to take part in other readers’ emotional reactions to books, but also to engage in and interact with user-generated content in the form of videos and other texts. In this digital community, there are no explicit pointers regarding good or bad books or correct or incorrect reading, which they may encounter in more institutional reading communities. Instead, different readings, different books, and different ways of reading are allowed to meet and mingle.

We note that the BookTok community is characterised by what Jenkins (1992) describes as a participatory culture and that it constitutes a community of practice (Wenger 1998) because the young people themselves experience it as inspiring and educational, thus
enhancing their self-image as readers, which testifies to the presence of a peer pedagogy culture (Dezuanni 2020) within the community. Several participants described how they were inspired in their reading practices by other readers. Tora, for instance, described how she and her friend ‘introverted together’ when reading and talking about their annotations. In other words, for this group, reading is not necessarily a solitary activity. On the contrary, reading physical books together in the same room is possible. Thus, young people's volitional reading, as well as the practices framing it, emerge in a very concrete and explicit way as a social act. In several respects, this concrete social act interacts with the BookTok community as the young people are inspired by and redesign (Janks 2010) reading practices encountered on BookTok.

The communities of practice that young people belong to change over time, and the young people in our study clearly belonged to different communities at the same time as an integrated part of their everyday life: at home, in school, on digital platforms, and related to their interests. Communities of practice can also be more or less available to young people, and BookTok as a community of practice seems to be easy to access. Although the young people in our study were members of the same digital community of practice, this type of belonging also opens up for membership in local communities. Identity processes and a sense of belonging are interconnected, and when these young people cross borders of different communities of practice, it creates new possibilities for them to develop reading practices and strengthen reader identities. Young people's identities in a community of practice are tied directly to their competence in community practices. In part, their reader identities have been created by participating in what Wenger (1998) calls brokering processes of connecting with others ‘who can introduce elements of one practice into another’ (p. 105).

Furthermore, it is not only an interest in reading that has united the participants in our study, but also their love of the physical book. Previous research has focused on the cultural sociology of reading and the materiality of books (Asplund 2021; Thumala Olave 2020). A cultural sociology of reading is not only concerned with reading preferences, but also with finding out what people do with the books they have chosen to read and what meaning books have in their lives. The young people in the present study found it important to hold a physical book in their hands, feel it, and browse it when they are reading. The reading act emerged as a very physical act, and one in which the book itself is central to this reading practice. The participants’ love of books and the reading practice that has been developed through BookTok, among other things, resulted in a desire to own books. However, books cost money, and they were well aware of this, which means that the book, in addition to emotional and aesthetic values, has been ascribed economic value.

In previous research, physical books have been conceptualised as, for example, iconic in different ways through the readers' immersion into them as aesthetic objects (Alexander 2008; Thumala Olave 2020). Physical books have also been described as happy objects, highlighting the practices of interacting with books on both physical and emotional levels (Asplund 2021). In broad terms, reading can be seen as a process of both subjectification, when the readers make the content, characters, and the emotional experiences their own by incorporating them into their personal biographies and sense of self, and objectification, when the readers comply with the formal and physical properties of the book (Thumala Olave 2018).

The practices of interacting with books on a physical level that these young people exemplify are extended and prolonged by them when they orchestrate activities in relation
to reading, such as when they underline and make notes in the books or on Post-it notes attached to pages in a book. This enables friends to include comments and reflections when reading the same book. There are also obvious aesthetic elements in the way underlining and comments are made in colour and on coloured Post-it notes harmonising with the book cover and layout. These can be seen as physical acts strengthening the emotional dimension of the reading, which many highlighted as significant for their relation to reading and in BookTok posts. Reading is turned into a social practice, uniting tactile and physical aspects with aesthetic and emotional ones. However, in contrast to the BookTokers that Dezuanni et al. (2022) describe, who expose themselves and their books and bookshelves on videos uploaded to BookTok and whose actions emphasise ‘the importance of the book as an object rather than the process of reading’ (p. 369), the physical book has been made by the participants in our study into a much more important and necessary part of the process of reading and, by extension, for the construction of their reader identities.

Conclusion

In our study, the volitional (pleasurable) reading practices described by young readers are strongly characterised by the social, physical, and emotional dimensions for which the book as a physical artefact is crucial. Hence, the present study has brought new insights into the expanding sociality of reading. However, it is also evident that the young people in our study used the digital media platform TikTok and its subcommunity BookTok as a resource to confirm, develop, and challenge their own reading practices and as a means to strengthen their images of themselves as readers of literature. Hence, digitalisation, the contemporary media landscape, and the physical book mutually contextualise each other, providing resources to motivate and support the young people in our study as readers and to empower them to move forward.

A community of practice has been described by Wenger (1998) as a group of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavour for which they share a common passion. If teachers and students together design new communities of practice (local and virtual), it could open up possibilities for both deeper learning and innovation related to reading. Helpful steps towards creating such new communities of practice in reading instruction at school, involving diverse student groups with a variety of backgrounds and interests, could be to 1) articulate a clear shared-learning need, for example, reading fiction, 2) identify students with both similar and different interests, needs, and visions, and 3) bring these identified student groups together in person or virtually. In this way, reader-friendly communities could emerge, and a shared vision and set of norms for their communities of practice could be collectively created.

Because individuals and groups of students have different needs, engaged educators and school librarians can use the findings in our study to explore how they can help reluctant or less frequent readers and young people who are not members of the BookTok community to engage in reading. Finally, when interacting with young people about books and reading, appropriate language must be used (Merga 2021). Thus, the result of the study implicate that using engage young peoples’ reader experiences and emotional responses evoked by books and readings could be beneficial as pedagogical resources – also in order to engage less avid readers in increased volitional reading.
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