



***“Reading isn’t lonely at all”***  
**An analysis of BookTube’s community features and cultures**

**BA Thesis**

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# 1 Introduction

Reading is a hobby that might be seen as a solitary experience by most people. For Ariel Bissett, a 26-year-old Canadian BookTuber (someone who makes YouTube videos about books), the opposite is true. In a video titled ‘*has reading become competitive???*’, she talks about how online book communities such as BookTube make reading a communal experience and so “*suddenly reading isn’t lonely at all*” (Bissett, 2017, [5:36]). In essence, reading is a solitary hobby where you only need yourself and the book (in whatever form). However, the internet has facilitated an expansion of said hobby to include socialising over shared interests with other booklovers. Bissett says that she started her YouTube channel because she wanted a space to talk about books with like-minded individuals instead of having to explain the whole plot of a book to her mother before they could talk about it. This environment offers Bissett the perfect opportunity to share her love for books where thousands of people can see it. Many people do not have the opportunity to talk about books with people they know offline for multiple reasons (not the same interests, not that many close friends, etc.) and so for them BookTube is the perfect escape.

Bissett also talks about the positive and negative sides to BookTube. The main positive aspect is the ability to talk about your favourite books with like-minded people anytime and anywhere. This communal sharing seems to be the most common reason for joining the community. Competitiveness is a negative aspect of the community. It pressures BookTubers to read as many books as possible to fit the image of reading presented in the community. In this thesis, these two aspects will be covered in depth. To this end, this research will analyse BookTube and its community features and cultures. This will be done by answering two research questions:

1. What are the features of BookTube as a community?
2. What are the positive and negative characteristics of the culture(s) present in the BookTube community?

First, relevant literature will be presented in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 will detail my method and will go in-depth on the use of digital ethnography in this research. After that, Chapters 4 through 6 will dive deep into the features of BookTube as a community and the kinds of culture characterising it. This includes the topics of community, fan culture, participatory

culture and influencer culture, and the pressures BookTubers face. In the discussion and conclusion (Chapter 7), the answers to the two research questions will be presented alongside a discussion of any possible limitations and suggestions for future research.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 BookTube

BookTube is the name used for a segmented part of the bigger YouTube community that consists of creators whose content is focused on books. This community consists of those creating and posting the videos as well as those who view and comment on those videos (Lo, 2020). However, when one talks about ‘BookTube’ they more often than not will refer only to those actively contributing to the community by creating videos. For clarity’s sake, when I refer to BookTube I mean the whole book community on YouTube, including both the creators and the viewers. When I refer to BookTubers, I specifically address those members that create original content and post it on YouTube.

Within BookTube, it is common to create certain types of reoccurring videos. A list of the nine most common types of BookTube content was established by Ehret, Boegel and Manuel-Nekouei, but is relatively outdated (2018, p.153); see Figure 1. New types of common BookTube videos that could be added are Unhauls (opposite of a book haul, as described in Figure 1), Reading Vlogs (BookTuber vlogs their daily life and talks about their current read in more detail), and Read with Me videos (a BookTuber will sit down and read so that their followers can ‘read together’ with them).

BookTube is still seen by many as a small community, but it has grown significantly since its start around 2010. YouTube has stated that BookTube had received over 200 million views in total (as of 2018) and that compared to the year before (2017) engagement had gone up 40 percent (de León, 2018). However, the few papers (Ehret et al., 2013; Sorensen & Mara, 2014; Perkins, 2017) written on the topic of BookTube are mostly older pieces which report outdated information which is why this thesis will focus on the current situation of BookTube, to describe its characteristics at present.

| Type                | Characteristic(s)                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Book review         | General review of a specific book                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Book haul           | Show books (usually five or more) recently purchased, borrowed from the library, or acquired through publisher sponsorship and events                                                                                     |
| To be read (TBR)    | List (and often a display of physical copies of) of books that the BookTuber plans to read soon                                                                                                                           |
| Monthly wrap-up     | Summary of books read during the previous month, often with a minireview of each book                                                                                                                                     |
| Bookshelf tour      | Tour of a personal book collection, often describing how the person's bookshelves are organized (e.g., genre, color, author)                                                                                              |
| Tag                 | A BookTuber responds to questions or completes challenges on a specific theme circulating across BookTube and then tags other BookTubers to do the same. Examples of tags are "Unpopular Opinions" and "BookTube Newbie." |
| Discussion/response | Discussion of specific themes across books or genres and/or response to discussion videos made by other BookTubers                                                                                                        |
| Collaboration       | BookTubers film videos with other BookTubers, often completing tags together or playing book-related games.                                                                                                               |
| BookTube issue      | Discussion of prevalent issues within the BookTube community (e.g., controversy surrounding sponsorship)                                                                                                                  |

Figure 1 Common BookTube Videos. Reprinted from "The role of affect in adolescents' online literacies: Participatory pressures in BookTube culture" by C. Ehret, J. Boegel, & R. Manuel-Nekouei, 2018, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 62(2), p.153.

## 2.2 Community

Considering the focus of this thesis, establishing why a group of people can be seen as a community is an important step in this research. Online communities are not identical to offline communities and as such different theories need to be considered. The affordances of the internet and YouTube specifically allow people to connect with each other anywhere and anytime which is impossible offline due to geographical locations and time zones. Access to the community is always available which has consequences for the features of an online community. Considering the fact that online communities differ from offline ones, there is no single theory that would be useful in explaining online communities which is why in this thesis, I have combined three existing theories to account for BookTube's characteristics and to create a more detailed view on online communities in general.

The three theories on communities employed here, by Anderson (2006), McMillan & Chavis (1986), and Herring (2004), all look at communities from a different perspective: by looking at nations as communities (Anderson), by looking at the sense of community members get (McMillan & Chavis), and by looking at specifically virtual communities (Herring). These original theories will be discussed, after which the combined theory on online communities and the division into the three categories of features will be developed and discussed in-depth

in relation to BookTube in the chapter focusing on BookTube as a community (see chapter 4).

The first theory is Anderson's theory of imagined communities. Originally, this was a theory addressing nationalism and the state. Anderson defines a nation as "*an imagined political community*" (Anderson, 2006, p.6). He calls this community 'imagined' because "*the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion*" (Anderson, 2006, p.6). Even though this theory was developed before social media existed as we know it now, this theory still adequately describes the kind of community formed online. This is stated by Gruz, Wellman, & Takhteyev who have applied this theory to Twitter because "*users could never know everyone on Twitter, but they are certainly aware of other users' presence, especially in their "neighbourhood" of sources*" (Gruz, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011, p.1298). There are three elements that are key to imagined communities: common language, temporality, and 'high centres' (Gruz et al., 2011; Anderson, 2006, p.36). The common language allows a nation to communicate and to have a shared background for understanding. Temporality relates to the shared consciousness that people have by experiencing two events happening at the same time in different places (Lo, 2000). High centres are the foundations around and under which the nation is organised such as monarchs or governments.

The second theory is about the sense of community that members have, which can be analysed through four key elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Even though this theory was developed far before the first social media platform even existed, it remains an interesting theory to this day because it views communities in a different light. That is, instead of focusing on why a group of people can be deemed a community, this theory looks at the way that the members themselves experience a *sense* of community.

The final theory is from Herring (2004) who has compiled six sets of criteria to characterise community, specifically online, based on previous literature on virtual community. These six sets are:

- 1) active, self-sustaining participation; a core of regular participants
- 2) shared history, purpose, culture, norms and values

- 3) solidarity, support, reciprocity
- 4) criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution
- 5) self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups
- 6) emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals (Herring, 2004, p.352)

She explains that these six belong to three different categories: sociability (set 1 and 4), support (set 3 and 6) and identity (set 2 and 5). Unlike the previous two theories, Herring's definition of community has been tailormade for online communities.

The relevant characteristics used in the three theories to describe the characteristics of communities can be combined into three main features of *boundaries and group identification, norms and values*, and *hierarchy*. The division into these three specific categories is based on finding the comparable and different elements of the three theories. After, I grouped similar elements together to define a new category. The meaning of the three features and further information will be explicated in chapter 4.

## 2.3 Participatory culture and fan culture

Next to the communal aspects of BookTube, the features of the different cultures present are also a specific focus in this thesis. Therefore, I will explain the phenomena of participatory, fan, and influencer culture since these are prevalent cultural phenomena that manifest themselves in online communities (the last one will be discussed in section 2.4). That is the case for BookTube too, which is why it is relevant to describe them here.

The term participatory culture is defined as a “*culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content*” (Jenkins, 2006a, p.290). Jenkins (2009) defines a participatory culture as having five characteristics:

- 1. Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement,
- 2. strong support for creating and sharing creations with others,
- 3. some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices,
- 4. members who believe that their contributions matter, and
- 5. members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, they care what other people think about what they have created). (pp. 5-6)

In a participatory culture, it is important that all members know that they are free to contribute if they want to and that what they contribute will be appreciated and valued (Jenkins, 2009). This means that not everyone will contribute, but it is typical for participatory culture that individuals will be provided with “*strong incentives for creative expression and active participation*” (Jenkins, 2009, p.6).

Participatory culture and fan culture are deeply intertwined because when someone is a fan of something, they feel the need to participate in the culture surrounding that something. However, it is important to first discuss fan culture separately from participatory culture, because it has consequences for online communities in its individual form as well. According to Duffet, a fan is a “*self-identified enthusiast, devotee or follower of a particular media genre, text, person or activity*” (Duffet, 2013, p.473). Fan community, often referred to as a fandom, is defined as “*a socially organized group of fans who share one hero, text or genre and then network with each other*” (Duffet, 2013, p.473). Fans are thus people who are enthusiastic about a certain thing and when fans come together to share that enthusiasm, they can be called a fan community (or fandom). Another important concept is fan culture, a “*community of fans that discuss, critique, and create around a particular source work, be it a film, a series of books, a television show, or a comic book*” (Brenner, 2013, p.33). When discussing the term fan culture throughout the rest of this thesis, I will rely on this definition because it describes the core of BookTube in the most complete way.

As said before, extricating fan culture from participatory culture is hard because the manifestations of these two cultures are so similar. Fan culture can be seen as the cause and participatory culture as the effect. When one becomes a fan of something, there is a high chance that one will start participating in that related culture. One of the central characteristics of fandom is the ability to transform spectatorial culture into participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006b). Jenkins specifies that you are not a fan when you are a regular viewer of a specific program; there needs to be an added layer of interest and participation such as sharing your love for the program with friends or by becoming a part of a community of other fans who like the same content (Jenkins, 2006b). Fandom can become a participatory culture when the experience of media consumption is transformed into the production of new texts, a new culture and a new community (Jenkins, 1992). These two kinds of cultures are heavily present on BookTube because the nature of the community is being a fan of books

and participating online to share that excitement and fascination (further explanation can be found in chapter 5).

## 2.4 Micro-celebrity and the parasocial relationship

Micro-celebrity and parasocial relationships are two easily visible manifestations of online influencer culture. As such, influencer culture is a prevalent online culture phenomenon that can also be seen on BookTube, next to participatory and fan culture. The term microcelebrity is defined as “*the commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same*” (Senft, 2013, p.346). Everyone can be a microcelebrity. because the term implies that all individuals have an audience (as soon as they have a social media account) that they can cultivate through communication and interaction (Marwick & boyd, 2011). However, it is also often used to refer to non-traditional celebrities who rise to fame through social media (Nouri, 2018). The identity of a microcelebrity is based upon the recognition, admiration, association, and aspiration of their audience (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). This is all possible thanks to the ‘attention economy’ which is based on the idea that value can be assigned to something’s (or someone’s) capacity to “*attract ‘eyeballs’*” in this current media-saturated and information-rich society (Marwick, 2015, p.138). Marwick discusses microcelebrity on Instagram and states that users often like people and things that they find aspirational, which is a term used in marketing for something that people desire to have for themselves but usually cannot have (Marwick, 2015). The content posted on so-called luxury Instagram accounts function as examples of what (young) people dream of having, but which they cannot obtain (yet) (Marwick, 2015). In short, social media offers regular people the opportunity to become famous and encourages them to become microcelebrities (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019).

An important aspect of microcelebrity is the parasocial relationship between the celebrity and the follower/viewer/fan. A parasocial relationship is an intimate, mediated relationship between celebrities and their audiences which results in the audience developing a sense of intimacy, perceived friendship and identification with the celebrity (Chung & Cho, 2017). Social media has a self-disclosing nature which means that social media users reveal hidden personal ideas and feelings with others which results in an enhanced feeling of perceived intimacy and bonding that makes parasocial relationships stronger (Chung & Cho, 2017). On

BookTube, the content creators are microcelebrities whose parasocial relationship with the audience influences the community (see chapter 6).

### 3 Method

The aim of this research is to examine the features of BookTube as a community and to identify the positive and negative characteristics of the cultures prevalent on BookTube. The approach best suited to this is digital ethnography using direct observation as the method. This is because in order to be able to analyse BookTube's features, it is necessary to observe BookTube *as is*. This is not possible when using for example surveys or interviews as a method because the data will then be focused on the members' perspective on BookTube rather than their actual activities. The ethnographic concept of 'hanging out' is extremely important in this research, because it has allowed me to be immersed within the community to gather data in such a way that I can understand the actions of those within the community from within their own frame of reference (Browne & McBride, 2015). Murthy describes ethnography as telling social stories, which is what I aim to do by analysing BookTube (Murthy, 2008). I want to present the story of BookTube and its members to others in order to inform them about the phenomena characterising that community.

Digital ethnography is the online version based on the older approach of ethnography. Digital ethnography is research into "*the ways in which people use language, interact with each other, employ discourses and construct communities, collectives, knowledge and identities, through and influenced by digital technologies*" (Varis & Hou, 2020, p.230). The use of the word 'digital' refers to the fact that the communication is facilitated and shaped by digital technologies (Varis & Hou, 2020). It is important to note that this definition of digital ethnography does not focus solely on the online excluding the offline; rather the decision as to whether to include the combination of the online and offline is based on the nature of the specific research. For this particular research, the focus will be on the online aspects of BookTube, but it is important to note that the offline influences the online. This is the case simply because the content on BookTube is created by people with their physical device rooted in their offline location. The effect of BookTube on the offline life of those in the community, or the effect of their offline lives on their BookTube activities, is an interesting topic to research as well but is outside the scope of this particular thesis.

An important aspect to this research is the fact that I myself have been part of the BookTube community as an avid viewer for several years. This makes me deeply familiar with the community and as such I can be seen as somewhat of an expert. This makes the clear

distinction between participant and non-participant ethnography difficult. While I have not interfered with BookTube in terms of, for instance, speaking to other members or setting out surveys, as a viewer I still participate by being a part of the subscriber and viewer count.

It is important to note that I did not restrict myself from the beginning to a set number of BookTubers or videos to analyse. This means that I have watched over 200 videos for this research (in the past I have watched an undeterminable number of videos out of my own interest) out of which I have selected representative examples to present in the analysis. The idea behind using representative examples is that in order to be able to explain the actions of members of BookTube, they can be used to show patterns identifiable in all videos of a similar kind. Instead of, for instance, presenting analyses of multiple book haul videos, I can present one example that fits the general pattern of book hauls, or to discuss deviations from the pattern by picking an example that is *not* representative, to illustrate phenomena and behaviours that stand out because they are exceptional in the community.

These representative examples have been identified based on my findings of me ‘hanging out’ on BookTube. In order to choose the examples, I have done extensive research by observing BookTube in various ways. This was informed by the focus of my research (communal aspects and the three cultures) and my theoretical framework which allowed me to look for certain phenomena more specifically. Concretely, I would watch various videos that contained a specific phenomenon in order to get a good sense of the similarities and differences between videos. In order to analyse the concept of book hauls for example, I have watched book haul videos in two different ways: videos from my subscriptions and videos found through the search function of YouTube. I have not restricted the research to only one of these methods simply because I wanted to get as broad a selection of materials as possible. By using videos from my subscriptions, I could easily analyse differences and similarities in terms of content, thumbnails (the image users see when browsing YouTube), and titles (something which is harder to do by using the search function alone simply because the number of results is too large).

As I have been viewing BookTube content for years, and through my subscriptions to particular BookTubers may have had exposure to only specific types of BookTube content, this had to be considered. As such, it was important to me to use the search function in order to emulate the experience of entering the BookTube world for the first time where you are

met with a broad variety of different videos and different creators. This also allowed me to see whether content accessed through searches confirm or reject my findings based on the kind of content I have accessed through my own subscriptions. When selecting a specific video to analyse, I would pay attention to multiple factors: (1) the presentation of said video in terms of the thumbnail and title, (2) watching the actual video and taking note of the content and the presentation of said content (use of language but also use of background and props) and (3) analysing the description box and comments to see what viewers (and fellow BookTubers) said about the video. Taking this approach allowed me to gather many different findings and select a representative example that contained all (or most) of the commonalities found in similar content.

For a digital ethnographic research such as this one, it is important to think about ethics and privacy. Due to the public nature of BookTube, it is not necessary to anonymise the data that I have collected. These BookTubers and their viewers are aware that posting publicly online means that anyone with an internet connection is able to access their online behaviour. They essentially post online to be seen and to get publicity. As such, there is no issue analysing these videos for the purpose of this research. In addition, the content of the videos is not of a sensitive nature (e.g., political statements) and so I cannot accidentally bring these public individuals into a compromised situation.

## 4 Analysis: Community

As discussed in section 2.2, the three different theories on community by Anderson, McMillan & Chavis, and Herring can be combined into a new theory on digital communities that has three different features: boundaries and group identification, norms and values, and hierarchy.

*Boundaries and group identification* cover those characteristics that show how the members present themselves as being part of a separate community to those outside of it. This includes the community's boundaries, the members' sense of belonging and identification, the integration and fulfilment of needs, the active and self-sustaining participation of members, and the self-awareness of the group as a distinct entity (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Herring, 2004).

*Norms and values* become visible in how the members interact with others within the community and what the conventions within the community are. This includes the common symbol system, the shared history, and the uniformity and conformity of the community. (Anderson, 2006; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Herring, 2004).

*Hierarchy* refers to the set of characteristics that show how relationships between various member groups function and how critique is expressed. This includes the emergence of roles, hierarchy, and governance but also criticism and conflict (resolution) (Anderson, 2006; Herring, 2004).

### 4.1 Boundaries and group identification

By forming boundaries and identifying themselves as a separate entity, the BookTube community is presenting a certain image to those outside their community. The characteristics of this category are *boundaries, sense of belonging and identification, active self-sustaining participation, and success of the community*.

Boundaries ensure that members feel safe to express themselves emotionally within the community and that intimacy between members can develop (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The BookTube community does not have any strict boundaries limiting who can become a member. But within the community, there are different levels of membership (see Figure 2). Anyone can get a taste of the community by simply watching one or two videos, but that does not make them a part of BookTube immediately. These 'accidental' or casual viewers are at the entrance of the community and if they wish to do so, can move on to the second category

of passive viewers. The difference between the casual viewers and the passive viewers is that casual viewers lack certain necessary knowledge such as the jargon, knowledge of popular books in the community, and knowledge of popular BookTubers (more on this shared culture in section 4.2). The category of passive members contains those who watch BookTube and subscribe to BookTubers but do not participate in any other way. In contrast, the active viewers are those who watch BookTube regularly, and subscribe to BookTubers *and* they comment, like, and participate in live shows by BookTubers and BookTubers' book clubs. The difference between the passive and the active viewer is that the passive one only benefits from the community while the active viewer also gives back to the community. The core members of the community are the BookTubers themselves. These are the members that actively create video content to post on YouTube for other members (the viewers of any category or fellow BookTubers) to enjoy.

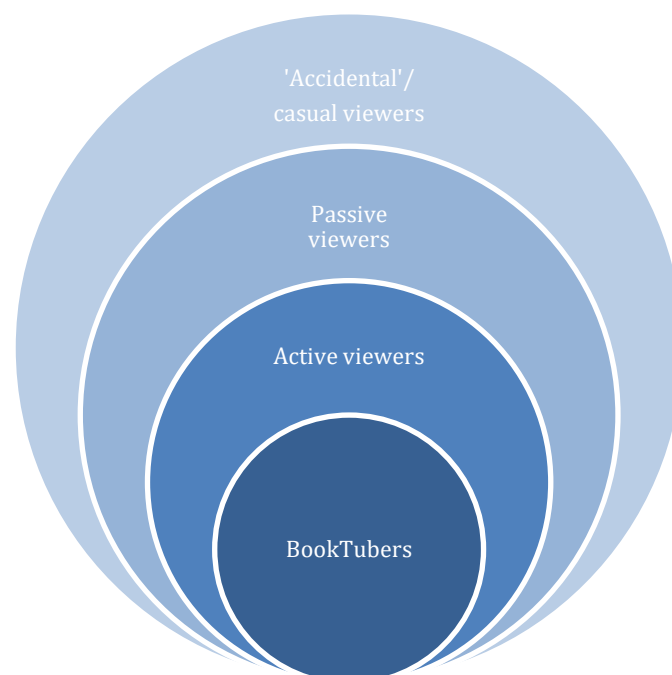


Figure 2 Venn diagram depicting the various roles within BookTube ranging from accidental viewers to the actual producers of content (the "BookTubers").

The sense of belonging and identification “*involves the feeling, belief, and expectation that one fits in the group and has a place there, a feeling of acceptance by the group, and a willingness to sacrifice for the group*” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.10). Since feelings of members cannot be understood in an ethnographic analysis such as this one, measuring the sense of belonging and identification of BookTubers can only be done by examining whether BookTubers call themselves a part of the BookTube community, or call themselves a

‘BookTuber’. Most BookTubers see themselves as being ‘only’ BookTubers and they will often feel pressure to make content about books only. BookTuber Stories For Coffee talks about these pressures and she often talks about what “we” do on BookTube (Stories For Coffee, 2021). BooksandLala has said in a video talking about BookTube throughout the years “*I no longer need to comment on what BookTube was doing because now in 2015 I am part of BookTube*” (BooksandLala, 2020a, [7:34]). The phrasing used by these two creators clearly shows that they identify with the community and that they feel a sense of belonging.

Active self-sustaining participation is necessary for BookTube to continue to exist but also to signal to outsiders that they are a community that does not need input from outsiders. BookTube as a community offers a way for participants to be social about books with other like-minded individuals. BookTubers can be seen as a core of regular participants, because they are the ones who create the content on which the whole community is based. They have to post regularly as the flow of content will be stilted otherwise, which might result in less viewer interest and interaction. If viewers behave irregularly, this is less of an issue since there will always be other people to watch and interact with the content (to a certain extent; if everyone would stop viewing, BookTubers have no one to create content for). The community is active because there are seemingly endless videos uploaded each week. BookTubers try to upload regularly and most have an upload ‘schedule’. YouTubers in general try to post videos multiple times a week and will often let their subscribers know of their upload schedule which essentially just refers to the days (sometimes even the exact time) that viewers can expect new content from them. The community is self-sustaining because there is no outside influence that has to tell the members to participate.

The final characteristic is the success of the community. Here I will use the subscriber count as a measure of success. As stated by Sorensen and Mara (2014), it was common for BookTube channels to not exceed 1000 to 1500 subscribers and only some accounts were monetized. Many BookTubers now have regular sponsorships and while there are still small BookTube channels, there are many examples of ‘new BookTubers’ having far more than 1500 subscribers. An example of this is fictionalfates who started in June 2020 and has over 50,000 subscribers (as of March 2021). Perkins describes three BookTube ‘celebrities’ who, according to her, have played a big part in connecting social communities with the private act of reading (Perkins, 2017). They are PolandBananasBooks (almost 325,000 subscribers in 2017), Katytastic (220,000 subscribers in 2017), and JesseTheReader (180,000 subscribers in

2017). These BookTube ‘celebrities’ are still big in 2021 with 413,000, 249,000 and 402,000 subscribers respectively (as of March 2021). For JesseTheReader this amounts to a 22% average annual growth rate. The huge growth in subscribers and the quick rise of new BookTubers shows the success of the community.

## 4.2 Norms and values

The norms and values of the BookTube community refer to the (unspoken) rules between the members of the community, and their shared culture. These can be identified by analysing the uniformity and conformity of the community, their shared symbol system, and history and criticism within the community.

Within a community, there is a certain pressure for conformity and uniformity that comes from the need for consensual validation (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The consensual validation construct assumes that people have an inherent need to know that things are experienced in a similar way by others (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). There are two clear aspects of BookTube that show its uniformity and conformity: the type of videos produced by BookTubers, and thumbnails.

As discussed in the theoretical framework, there are certain common types of BookTube videos as defined by Ehret et al. (2018). In recent times, new BookTube staples have originated, such as reading vlogs. When analysing the screenshot consisting of 24 thumbnails, taken of my personal subscriptions, (content by non-BookTubers has been excluded), 10 out of 24 videos are reading vlogs, 3 are recommendations videos, 5 are discussion/challenge videos, 3 are book hauls, and 3 are other videos (see Figure 3). This means that in total 21 out of 24 videos could be classified as one of the BookTube staple categories with the exception of three videos (live show, readathon announcement, and an unrelated video) from which two still fit within the BookTube community but are less frequently made videos.

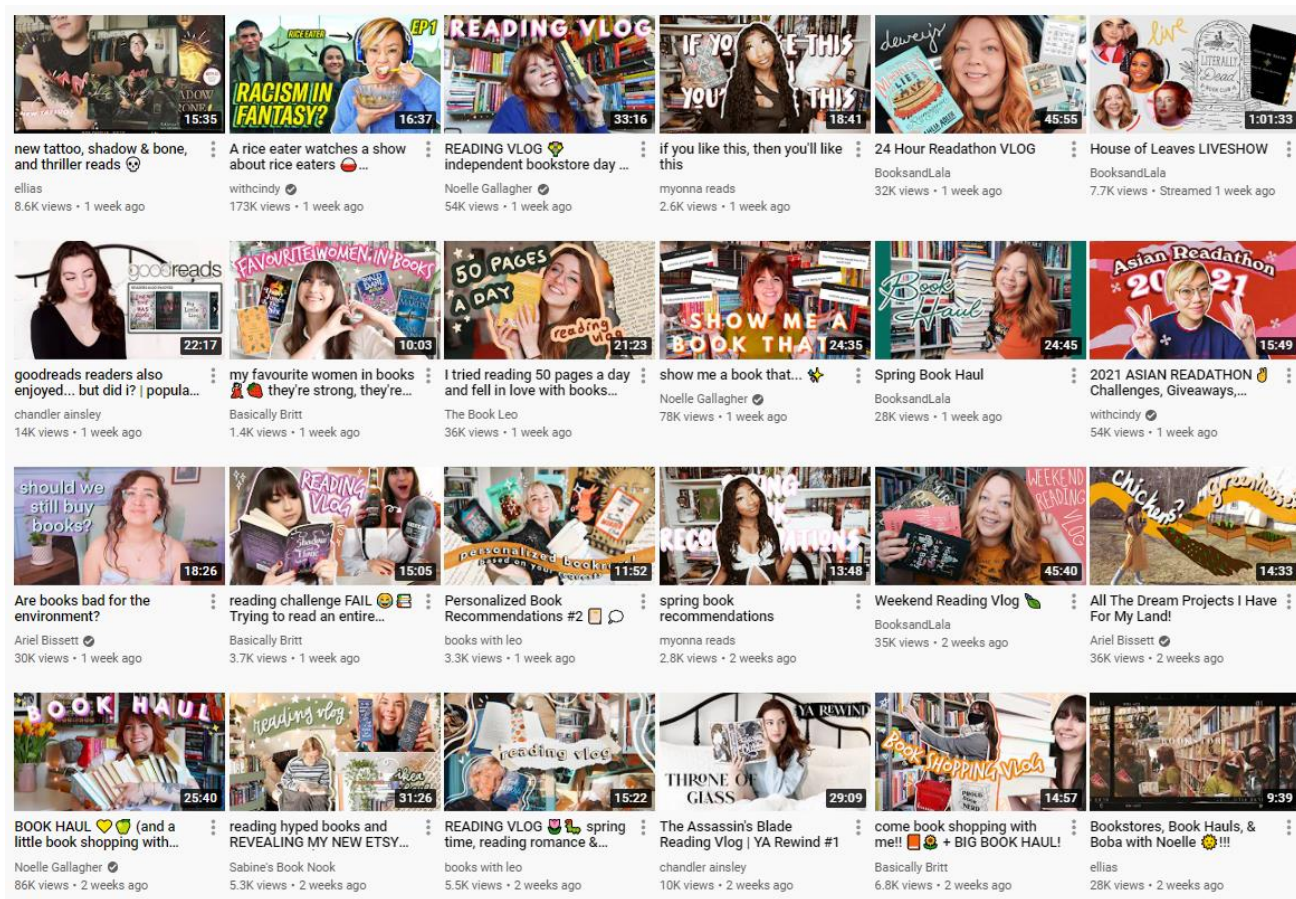


Figure 3 Screenshot featuring my personal subscriptions (BookTubers only) showing thumbnails of various videos (taken April 2021).

Thumbnails (and titles) are the first image that a viewer sees of a video and as such are the first impression on a viewer. This means that it is important to give the viewer an idea of what they can expect the video to be about in the title and thumbnail. 19 out of 24 thumbnails in Figure 3 contain books in some form (can be a stack, a single book, or a bookshelf). The remaining five thumbnails are for videos that are not directly about books (one from Bisset which is unrelated hyped to BookTube and two from withcindy which are indirectly about books) which means that there are only two thumbnails which are directly about books that do not contain books in the thumbnail. This shows how unlikely it is for BookTubers to create content without featuring books in their thumbnails. Next to that, the title of a video is also an important factor with BookTubers explicitly stating what the video content is. This is not always the case but most examples in the screenshot show the use of keywords such as 'vlog' and 'haul' (note that some video titles are unfortunately cut off due to YouTube's subscription box format). An interesting observation is that the use of clickbait titles is not a standard practice within the community, unlike many other YouTube communities. Clickbait

is the act of tricking viewers into clicking on their videos by using eye-catching thumbnails, headlines that intrigue or shock the viewers, or using false information (Zannetou, S., Chatzis, S., Papadamou, K., & Sirivianos, M., 2018). This has become standard practice online (not just on YouTube) due to the attention economy because using clickbait is a successful way of gaining attention. BookTube has its own clickbait in a way: BookTubers including the huge number of books in their title or thumbnail. However, this is not the same as other clickbait because it is not misleading, since they do include that number of books in their book haul (more on this in section 6). Instead, the standard practice is to make the title actually informative by including keywords and sometimes describing the actual content of, for example, a vlog. This is a way in which BookTube is clearly different from many other communities on YouTube.

A common symbol system is important for members to have, mostly to maintain group boundaries (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The most obvious symbol for BookTube is books, since that is the basis for this whole community. But other things such as language, certain rites of passage (uploading your first video, gaining a certain number of subscribers, having your first sponsorship), and creating certain content (the BookTube ‘staple videos’) are also shared symbols. The jargon used on BookTube is an interesting example because it is very specific. This jargon is not completely unique to the BookTube community, some are also used in other online bookish communities.<sup>1</sup> Examples of such jargon are ARCs, TBR videos, wrap-up videos, and book hauls.<sup>2</sup> There is also more book-related jargon that is mostly used during book hauls such as deckled edges, dust jackets, and embossing.<sup>3</sup> These terms are second nature to BookTubers and their viewers, but to any outsider these terms might be completely foreign. Most new members will pick up the jargon by watching videos, but there

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the word bookish is also an example of jargon in online book communities. The definition of the word bookish that will be used throughout this thesis is that it means “of or relating to books” or “fond of books and reading” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> ARC stands for Advanced Reader Copy which are copies of books given to reviewers before the release of the book, usually to generate hype around that title. TBR videos are To Be Read videos in which a BookTuber will discuss the books that they plan to read in a certain timeframe (usually within a month, so for instance an April TBR). A wrap-up video is one in which the BookTuber talks about the books that they have read and usually will give a small review at the end of the month (usually a follow-up to the TBR video, so for instance an April wrap-up). Book hauls are videos in which BookTubers will ‘haul’ books which means books that they have recently bought. This format is similar to other haul style videos on YouTube.

<sup>3</sup> Deckled edges are a certain style of edge where the pages of a book have not been cut but instead have been left rough. Dust jackets are the removable outer cover of a hardcover book which sometimes can have fan art on the reverse side when a book is a special edition. Embossing is when there is a raised part on the cover of the book, usually the letters of the title or one specific element of the cover.

are also explanation videos that will guide you through the most important terms (Napier, 2019b; BooksandLala, 2017).

The shared history of BookTube can be understood through a combination of the concept of temporality by Anderson (2006) and the concept of shared history by Herring (2004). Temporality refers to the idea that people can be linked by two events happening at the same time in different places which gives them a shared “*consciousness of a shared temporal dimension in which they co-exist*” (Lo, 2000). Anderson (2006) links temporality to a nation experiencing two events at the same time in different places but this could also be applied to the bond formed between BookTube members who have read the same book. They have experienced the event of reading a certain story which will then link them with everyone in the community who has read that same book. A nation as a community as described by Anderson and the BookTube community are not entirely comparable in this sense because Anderson’s theory specifies two events happening at the same time which is not exactly what is happening on BookTube. However, the idea of a shared consciousness of a shared temporal dimension in which BookTube’s members co-exist is certainly present. The shared consciousness can be seen as the shared experience of the book with the shared temporal dimension being that all members have had to take a certain amount of time to read (or listen) to that book which creates a dimension in which they can co-exist and can discuss the book (namely on BookTube). This means that the shared history of BookTube is the shared act of reading and/or having an interest in the same books which manifests through shared activities on BookTube. This results in members mostly having a shared frame of reference because most of them have read the Harry Potter series, for example. The videos can function as an archive which makes it easy to trace back the shared history and to see which books are widely discussed and read on BookTube. An example of a video detailing the history of BookTube is BooksandLala’s video in which she discusses (her) BookTube history and which books were popular when (BooksandLala, 2020a).

Criticism is an important way for members of the community to show that someone has broken the norms and values of the community. Since BookTubers are public figures, they are the ones most susceptible to critique within the community (more information can be found in section 4.3 and chapter 6). Critique of books and authors is also a common occurrence on BookTube, but since authors themselves are not a part of the BookTube culture, this will not be discussed further. An example of BookTubers criticising fellow

BookTubers are the “Book CommuniTea” videos by Jess Owens. In her videos she talks about recent gossip (“spilling the tea” is an idiom for talking about gossip) surrounding fellow BookTubers, authors, books, and anything else that interests the ‘online book community’. The kind of behaviour being identified as problematic in her videos, but also in criticism by others, can range from critiquing being racist/discriminatory to being ingenuine. Another often discussed point of critique is that BookTube is too focused on consumerism (more in section 6.1). Book hauls are seen as a source of this issue because the whole content of that type of video surrounds buying books. BookTubers are often accused of glorifying book buying, making other people feel pressured to conform to the standard that they are presenting (consumerism is one of the main pressures BookTubers face). For example, Jess Owens has dedicated a video to BookTuber Sasha Alsberg who allegedly has forged authors’ signatures and has sold ARCs (which is not allowed) (Owens, 2020). This can be seen as Alsberg breaking a norm and Owens criticising her publicly for her behaviour.

#### 4.3 Hierarchy

Hierarchy refers to the way in which the different members of the BookTube community are divided into groups, and how these groups criticise each other. As discussed in the boundaries section (4.1), there are different layers of membership which results in a hierarchy. The BookTubers themselves can be seen as ‘high centres’. This is an idea by Anderson (2006) that a society (or community) was organised around ‘high centres’. He conceptualises these high centres as being monarchs who rule by some form of divine privilege. In translating this to the digital world, we can think of high centres as individuals who are followed by many others, such as celebrities (Anderson, 2006; Gruzdt et al., 2011). If I apply this to the BookTube community, I can define all BookTubers (i.e., the members of the community that produce content) as the high centres. They are the core members that keep the community going and they are often looked up to by those on ‘lower’ membership levels. The hierarchy within the BookTube community can also be applied to only the BookTubers layer. Within the group of BookTubers, there are different levels of hierarchy based on their audience size. Those with the most subscribers can be seen as the top of the hierarchy and the ‘highest centres’. Due to their status, BookTubers are also the ones most susceptible to critique within the community. This can either be done by their viewers (via comments, private messages, or Twitter) or by fellow BookTubers (in the same way as viewers or in their own videos). Anyone within the community is in theory allowed to critique others, but those lower in the

hierarchy (passive viewers) are less likely to reach a big enough audience for anyone to pay attention to them. If a big BookTuber were to critique a fellow big BookTuber, this would get more attention and might lead to the critiqued BookTuber 'being cancelled' which would mean losing credibility and followers, possibly resulting in having to stop creating content.

## 5 Analysis: Cultures

The BookTube community has various characteristics of certain (online) cultures which influence the way the members act. There are three cultures prevalent on BookTube, two of which can be classified as having positive effects and one as having negative effects, as identified by BookTube members themselves. For members of BookTube, the community offers them something positive that they would not have had otherwise and yet there are some aspects that can create friction and pressures within the community itself. In this chapter, the two ‘positive’ cultures, participatory culture and fan culture, will be analysed. The kinds of cultural phenomena which have negative influences on BookTube members will be discussed in the pressures chapter (see chapter 6). Participatory and fan culture overlap in some ways, since someone who is a fan will often want to participate in cultural activities related to their fandom. In short, participatory and fan culture are the reason that most members become a part of the community, because they are looking for a place that has like-minded people with whom they can share their love and passion for books.

### 5.1 Participatory culture

A participatory culture can be defined by five characteristics: (1) relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, (2) strong support for creating and sharing creations, (3) some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices, (4) members believing their contributions matter, and (5) feeling some degree of social connection with one another (Jenkins, 2009). Chau analyses these five characteristics specifically in the context of YouTube and defines how YouTube functions as a participatory culture for youth (Chau, 2010). The focus of his research differs from my research, since he researches how YouTube can function as a participatory culture for youth, but his observations are still worthwhile to apply to BookTube. His general statements about why YouTube is a participatory culture can be ‘translated’ from applying to youth communities only, to be applicable to BookTube.

The first characteristic of *relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement*, applies to YouTube in general because it has low entry requirements (in essence, you need a device to access YouTube and to upload videos *and* you need something to film with) and “*its participatory trajectory is gradual*” (Chau, 2010, p.67). What Chau means by that last part is that becoming active and participating on YouTube can happen slowly. First, one can

start off watching the videos as an unregistered user, then one can make an account to be able to subscribe, like, and comment, and then possibly one can take it even further and start creating content themselves. This is a gradual process and one often does not reach the stage of becoming a YouTuber. This works the same for BookTube and in essence these stages are the different layers of membership someone would go through.

The second characteristic of *strong support for creating and sharing one's projects* is explained by Chau as being present on YouTube because as a platform YouTube enables easy content sharing which highlights their users' sense of belonging and identification with the community (Chau, 2010). Based on my observations, this second characteristic is present within BookTube through BookTubers showing public support for their colleagues' endeavours. For example, BookTuber Noelle Gallagher released a necklace in collaboration with a jewellery brand and her fellow BookTubers then talked about and wore that specific necklace. fictionalfates talked about the necklace in one of his videos, describing it as “*simply stunning*” and says that he is proud of her for this project (fictionalfates, 2021a). This is not necessarily a project related to YouTube or BookTube itself, but it is an opportunity that Gallagher probably would not have had if it were not for her BookTube channel, and it does say something about the support members offer each other. This support is an interesting trend which goes against the pressure of competitiveness.

*Informal mentorship*, the third characteristic, is the way in which wannabe YouTubers can learn new skills by watching videos specifically created to help new YouTubers. Chau (2010) explains that these videos help create opportunities for youth to take on different responsibilities. BookTubers create ‘how to’ videos that are catered specifically to the BookTube community, such as ‘*BOOKBANG: beginner booktuber tips*’, ‘*How To Build A Good BookTube Channel*’, and ‘*things i wish i knew before starting booktube* 🗨’ (chandler ainsley, 2018; Murphy Napier, 2019a; chasingpages, 2020).

The fourth characteristic relates to the idea that in a participatory culture, there should be a belief that contributions matter. Chau explains that at any level of participation, users contribute greatly to the community. For example, the YouTube database takes each view into account and based on that, videos with a high view count will be displayed on the home page (Chau, 2010). Viewers can give feedback through comments and videos which builds a

connection with their community and the specific YouTuber. “*Fans use this feedback system to encourage and support the content creators, and content creators in turn are more likely to produce additional content for viewers to enjoy*” (Chau, 2010, p.71). This can often be seen in the comments where BookTubers will reply to viewers and thank them for watching their videos and for their continued support. An example is a comment by a viewer who said, “*I am excited for the videos from you this summer* 🌻❤️❤️❤️” under a video by fictionalfates who replied with “*thank you* 😊😊” (fictionalfates, 2021b).<sup>4</sup> By commenting something and showing their excitement for future videos from fictionalfates, this viewer has given him the belief that his contributions matter to them.

The fifth and final characteristic is the *sense of social connection* which Chau explains with the example of collaborative channels containing videos by multiple creators who all make videos for the same channel, giving them a sense of social connection. This is not as easily translatable to BookTube, because it is not a common practice there. However, this does not mean that there is no sense of social connection on BookTube. It just presents itself differently. One can wonder what is meant by the term ‘social connection’ and when we look at Jenkins, he clarifies that a participatory culture should have members “*who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, they care what other people think about what they have created)*” (Jenkins, 2009, p.6). This certainly goes for BookTubers who will ask their viewers to comment down below about the books that they have discussed in that particular video, or who will reply to comments to thank them for watching their video. An example of this is Noelle Gallagher’s 100K Q&A video in which she celebrates reaching 100,000 subscribers (Gallagher, 2020). At the beginning of the video, she thanks her subscribers and talks about how this milestone is a dream come true and how grateful she is to those who have subscribed, commented, or liked. She puts a lot of emphasis on how grateful she is, which shows how important this milestone – essentially showing the number of people that like the content she makes – is for her. Through this act, she shows that she cares what other people think of her creations.

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<sup>4</sup> The emoji used by fictionalfates is called the pleading face emoji and is meant to resemble the idea of puppy-dog eyes, but in this context, the emoji is more likely to refer to the feeling of being thankful for such a sweet message and possibly feeling emotional over it.

## 5.2 Fan culture

Brenner's definition of fan culture states that it is a "*community of fans that discuss, critique, and create around a particular source work, be it a film, a series of books, a television show, or a comic book*" (Brenner, 2013). When defining fan culture along Brenner's definition, there can be no uncertainty in saying that BookTube has fan culture embedded in its community, as being a fan of an activity (reading books), fan of a text (a specific book or book series), and even being a fan of a person (specific authors or characters) is at the heart of the BookTube community. An extra layer of fan culture that can be applied to BookTube is that the BookTubers themselves also have fans. The fan culture present in a community such as BookTube can be seen as a pyramid structure (see Figure 4) with authors or certain books or characters at the top, the BookTubers themselves in the middle, and the readers (who watch BookTube specifically) at the bottom. Of course, there are also readers who do not engage with BookTube, but these are not a part of this particular pyramid. This idea of a 'fan pyramid' is a simplified view of reality, because some categories may overlap (e.g., BookTubers that are also authors) but it does allow for a more visual representation of the idea of fan culture on BookTube.

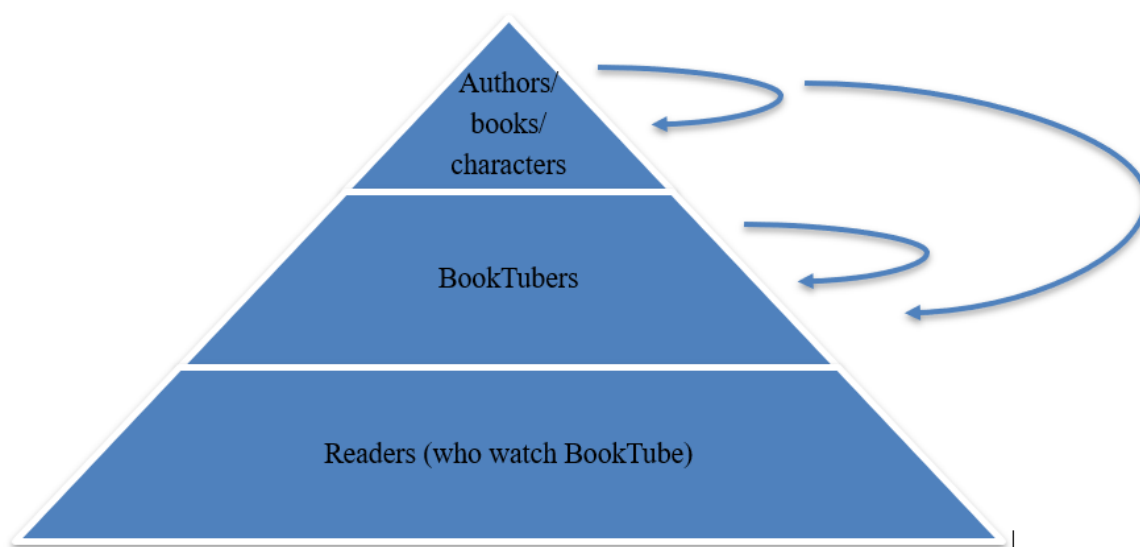


Figure 4 Pyramid showing the hierarchy of being a fan with the arrows depicting the addition of being fans of lower or similarly placed groups.

In addition to the pyramid, there are BookTubers who are fans of fellow BookTubers and authors who are fans of fellow authors. This is represented by the three arrows that signify that there are authors who are fans of fellow authors, BookTubers being fans of fellow BookTubers *and* authors being fans of BookTubers. An example of a YouTuber being a fan of a BookTuber is Carrie Hope Fletcher, who is known mostly for her videos relating to musical theatre but who has started uploading BookTube content such as a reading vlog, various tag videos<sup>5</sup> and a wrap-up. In her first ever reading vlog, she talks about reading a certain book because a fellow BookTuber recommended it to her. This BookTuber is Noelle Gallagher, who Carrie has messaged about something she saw in one of her videos, after which she explicitly specifies that “*we’re like not friends, I’m just being a huge fangirl*” (Fletcher, 2021). Another BookTuber, BooksandLala, discusses certain pressures that BookTubers feel and she validates her own opinion because “*as a BookTube fan*” she sees BookTubers struggle with those pressures (BooksandLala, 2020b). It is interesting that in this situation, BooksandLala positions herself as a BookTube fan and not a BookTuber.

BookTubers can be seen as being in a more privileged fan position than other readers, simply because they are awarded different opportunities than non-BookTubers. Examples are receiving ARCs or free books from publishers and forming a close bond with authors. Tomasena (2019) explains this from the publishers’ point of view. BookTubers can be key players in promoting and marketing certain titles, specifically young adult books. This exchange can result in free books, access to exclusive events with authors, and “*the possibility to widen their social capital to become part of the industry*” (Tomasena, 2019). This exchange or “collaboration” as Tomasena has defined it, usually results in cheap promotion of new titles for publishers.

BookTubers regularly mention having received books from publishers or that they are doing a collaboration with publishers on a book. When this is the case, BookTubers will have to explicitly state in their videos that they have been sponsored due to YouTube’s ad policies which result in a small box being shown at the start of the video to all viewers with the text “*includes paid promotion*” (Google Support, n.d.). It is important to note that there is a difference between a sponsorship (receiving financial compensation) and gifted items (items

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<sup>5</sup> In tag videos, BookTubers respond to a certain set of questions or complete a set of challenges after which they ‘tag’ someone else to do the same thing. An example is the ‘unpopular opinions’ tag in which BookTubers have to talk about their opinions that are different from most others.

received, solicited or unsolicited, from companies, such as books) but in both cases the creator needs to clearly state that they have been sponsored or gifted these items. In an Instagram post by BookTuber Stories For Coffee (or ‘storiesforcoffee’ on Instagram), she clearly adds in her caption that she has received these books for free from publishers (see Figure 5a).

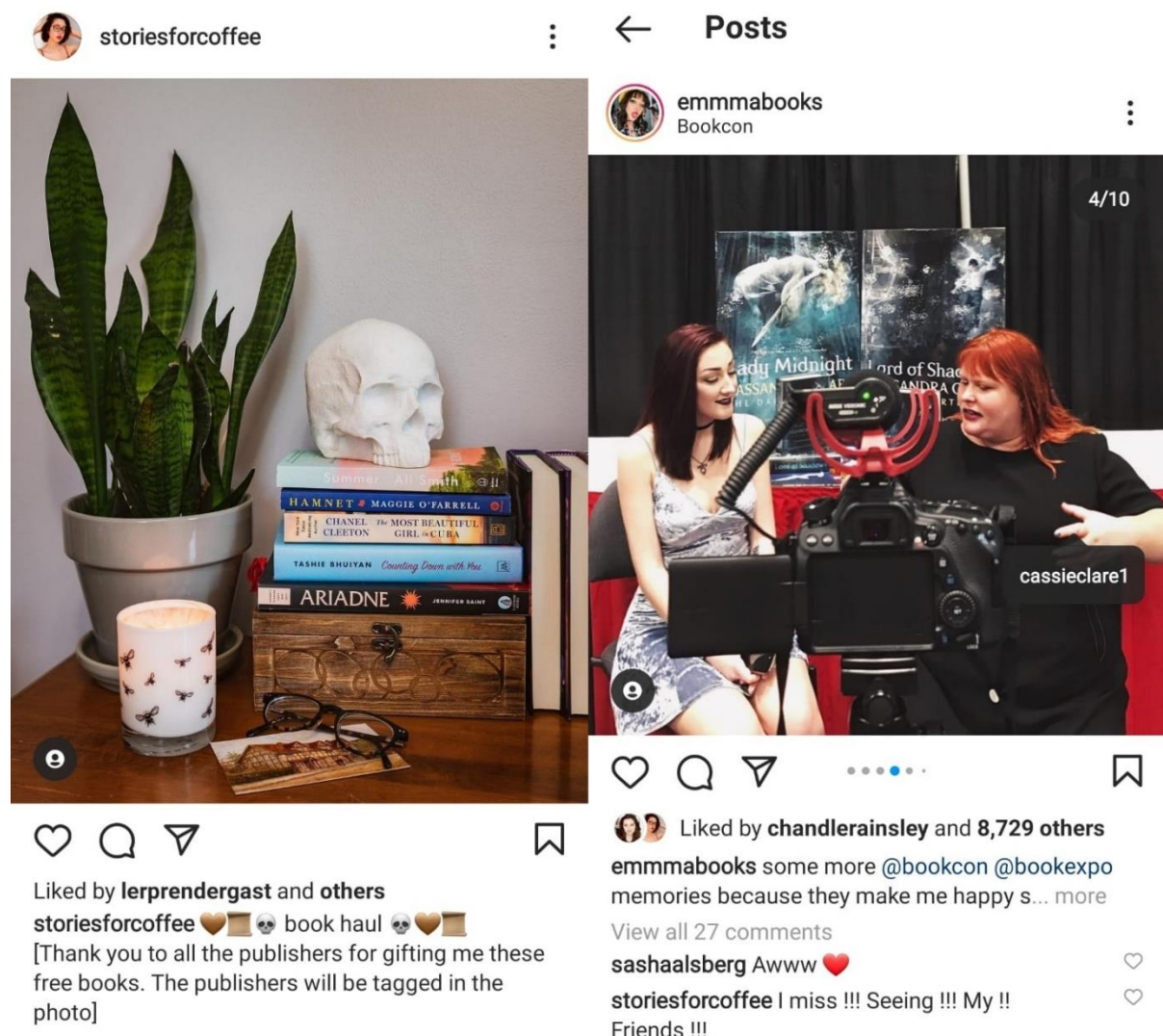


Figure 5 Instagram post left (figure 5a): BookTubers often post photos on Instagram that relate to their BookTuber identity. In this case, Stories For Coffee has posted a picture of a recent book haul. She adds a disclaimer saying that these books were all gifted for free by publishers.

Instagram post right (figure 5b): Emmmabooks is an example of a BookTuber that has a close bond with authors. She knows author Cassandra Clare (‘cassieclare1’) well and has been given the opportunity to interview her and receive ARCs of her books.

There are also BookTubers that do not accept free books from publishers anymore because they used to receive too many and they did not know what to do with them. BookTubers may feel pressured to talk about and read every book that they receive for free, but the number of books received can get out of hand. This is described by a BookTuber interviewed by Tomasena, who felt a responsibility to review all the books he had received and who had to decide to cut down on the number of free books he was sent (Tomasena, 2019).

There are some BookTubers that are known for having a close bond with certain authors. Emmmabooks is known for being a big fan of the Shadowhunters books, which has resulted in her interviewing the author Cassandra Clare multiple times and making various videos with her (see Figure 5b). Another example is BookTuber Ariel Bissett, who also makes a bookish podcast called Books Unbound together with her friend and former BookTuber Raeleen Lemay. Ariel has often talked about her enthusiasm for the graphic novel *Sheets*, written and illustrated by Brenna Thummler. Ariel was allowed to read early proof pages of the sequel *Delicates* (an earlier version than an ARC) because the author knew that she was a huge fan. Thummler has also been a guest on the podcast to talk about her newest book. In an Instagram post Thummler states that: *“I have been a devoted listener of this podcast ever since its inception, and implore you to listen if you want fantastic new book recommendations each week”* (Thummler, 2021). This quote shows that Thummler herself is a fan of the podcast and, by extension, can be seen as a fan of Ariel and Raeleen themselves. This adds another layer to the pyramid (Figure 4).

BookTubers can also be seen as a different calibre of fans because they have the opportunity to turn being a fan into a full-time job. As Hills explains, there is a category of fans that can be defined as ‘fantrepreneurs’, which is a category of fan *“who makes money from the small-scale (and possibly grey market) commercial exploitation of their fan knowledge”* (Hills, 2017, pp.865-866). The context is slightly different in that Hills uses the term fantrepreneurship to refer to small businesses who make products related to certain fandoms. Based on my observations, this term can be broadened to include BookTubers (and by extension Bookstagrammers on Instagram, and Booktokkers on TikTok) who might earn money by portraying themselves as a fan of books online. BookTubers who can make YouTube their full-time job are not common but there are various examples of people who do it as a part-time job or just for fun. An example of a full-time BookTuber is Britt Alsemgeest from the channel *Basically Britt*. Part of the reason why she was able to quit her parttime job

is because she can make her living from her BookTube channel in combination with her online shop (Alsemgeest, 2021).

Many YouTubers sell merchandise, ranging from clothing to home decoration. This merchandise can be clearly branded, with logos, names, or faces, but there is also merchandise that is not recognisable as such. BookTubers are less likely to sell merchandise than other YouTubers. Unlike lifestyle YouTubers, among whom selling merchandise is prevalent, BookTubers' content is focused on books and less on their own image. Their personality will still affect their viewers but the enjoyment of the videos is not 'only' based on who they are as a person and what they do in daily life. They portray themselves as fellow fans. This does not mean that BookTubers do not sell any kind of merchandise. There are various BookTubers who sell bookish items or pieces that feature their artwork, as Basically Britt, The Book Leo, books with leo, and Sabine's Book Nook do. These four creators also have an Etsy shop<sup>6</sup> or their own website where they sell bookish items and stationery such as bookmarks, (bookish) stickers, or notepads. These four creators, and many other BookTubers who sell such products, could be called fantrenepreneurs, in the sense that they are entrepreneurs who sell products that fans of reading and books would want to buy.

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<sup>6</sup> Etsy is an eCommerce website where individuals can open 'shops' through which they can sell items. These shops mainly specialize in handmade or vintage items.

## 6 Analysis: Pressures

Influencer culture is one culture which has negative manifestations on BookTube since it causes pressures which are often addressed by members. Influencer culture has this consequence because BookTubers can be classified as microcelebrities, or influencers, due to the fact that they have an audience on YouTube, which they can cultivate through communication and interaction (Marwick & boyd, 2011).<sup>7</sup> Most BookTubers' identities are based upon recognition, admiration, association, and aspiration of their audience (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). I specify most BookTubers, because amongst BookTubers there are different hierarchal levels (mostly based on their audience size). As such a BookTuber with only 500 subscribers versus one with 150.000 subscribers will have a different status of microcelebrity. Audiences recognize BookTubers as an authority on literature and admire them for their knowledge on authors and books. Viewers would like to be associated with these microcelebrities and might feel that they are associated due to the nature of their parasocial relationship. With traditional celebrities, there is a low chance of ever having the celebrity notice you. This makes the parasocial relationship on BookTube (and YouTube in general) interesting since it is relatively easy to get in contact with BookTubers because of the ability to write comments or reach out to them via Instagram or Twitter. Seeing other viewers get a response in the comments or during a live show strengthens the parasocial relationship and shows that BookTubers care about their viewers, making fans believe they might get a response as well (Rasmussen, 2018). Aspiration is an important feature of being a microcelebrity and is potentially the source of all pressures faced by those in the community (Djafarova & Trofimenko, 2019). Viewers aspire to be like their favourite BookTubers in regard to how many books they own, what their bookshelves look like, and how much they read.

BookTubers have placed themselves in the public eye by becoming a microcelebrity on YouTube. This position is described by BookTuber Ariel Bissett as a 'public reader' because everything she reads is documented online (Bissett, 2016). In the specific video where she makes that characterisation, she often uses the word "pressure" to describe what she feels as a public reader. Since this is a term originated by someone within the community (and other

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<sup>7</sup> The word 'BookTubers' used in this chapter again references only those in the community that actively create content and upload that to YouTube.

members often use the word to refer to their own struggles), it is an apt term to describe the negative consequences of being a BookTuber.

Another term to describe a “pressure” within the community is “BookTube vanity” which is used to explain the consumerist culture on BookTube (withcindy, 2018). TheMeggieJohnson (the BookTuber who coined the term) explains that, when she started out on BookTube, she “*mostly cared about the vanity of things*” (TheMeggieJohnson, 2018, [5:26]). She used to compare herself to “*the biggest channels*” who owned mostly hardcover books and as such she started believing that she needed to match that. Based on my research, I propose to extend the term BookTube vanity to cover not only the need to have hardcover books, but to include anything that contributes to the way BookTubers present their book collection. This includes, but is not limited to, the way their bookshelves look (and the number of bookshelves they own), limited editions and the number of books hauled. Even though neither of the above terms are widely used, they still have merit in describing BookTube culture, because they have been created by people who are active within the community themselves to describe said community. Combined, these two terms show the negative characteristics of the community or the pressures that the members of the community face. The root of the pressures is that BookTubers (and their audiences) feel the need to conform to a certain standard. Bissett describes this as follows: “*I feel these expectations of having to conform to what a ‘reader’ is*”. (Bissett, 2016, [1:53]). She calls this standard the idea of a ‘mythic reader’, someone who is always reading and who buys lots of books. However, she clearly says that not everyone can match themselves to the standard of reading and buying a certain number of books a month (Bissett, 2016). The mythic reader standard is upheld by two specific pressures: consumerism and competitiveness among BookTubers. BookTubers also face other, smaller pressures, such as the idea that they need to make content about books only and not about any other topics that interest them. However, these are minor pressures compared to the main ones and will not be discussed at length, because BookTubers discuss these pressures less, which suggests that they are not as widely felt as consumerism and competitiveness.

## 6.1 BookTube consumerism

Access to books is the main barrier to joining reading communities such as BookTube where consumerism is so ingrained in the culture (mynameismarines, 2020). The term consumerism in the BookTube community refers to a specific act on BookTube which can be defined as buying (any and all) books. As discussed before, one of the BookTube staples is a book haul whose core subject matter is buying books, and, by extension, BookTube consumerism. Book hauls follow a strict ‘format’ that most BookTubers follow. The similarities can be seen when analysing the thumbnails and titles of book hauls. From the small sample below (Figure 6), we can see two clear trends: (1) showing the hauled books in the thumbnail of the video and (2) talking about the size of the haul in the title. Both of these trends prove the same point that the size of the book haul is the most relevant aspect of buying books. They are showing off big stacks of books in the picture and will often put the number of books in the title (e.g., 25+, 40+ and 70 books).

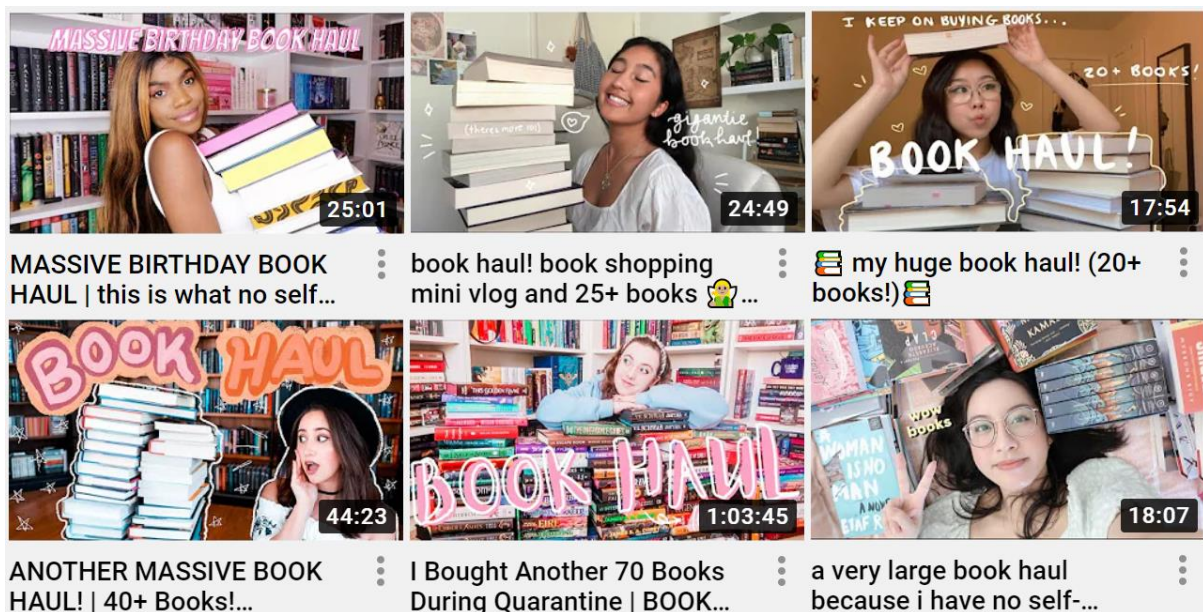


Figure 6 Thumbnails of six different book hauls depicting the similarities in the book haul genre.

Another interesting aspect in relation to consumerism is that BookTubers often make references to the fact that they have “no self-control” or that they “keep on buying books” (as can be seen in the titles and thumbnails above in Figure 6). The discourse used makes it seem as if buying these books was accidental or something they did not plan on doing. The language that they use is similar to discourse related to addiction. By framing themselves as having no self-control they can excuse their consumerist behaviour. Classic addiction symptoms are possibly at play here such as excessive consumption, loss of control, inner

conflict, relapse, positive emotions when consuming, and disregard for negative consequences (Benford & Gough, 2006). BookTubers will show their happiness with having bought all these books but at the same will refer to themselves as having no self-control, showing their disappointment of their loss of control which resulted in excessive consumption. Sometimes BookTubers will take drastic measures to stop this habit and will go on a ‘book buying ban’: this is a period of time in which they do not allow themselves to buy any books, usually after feeling inner conflict over their spending habits. However, they often relapse by, for example, buying a new release that they could not miss out on. They experience positive emotions when buying books, at least for a short time, which is why they are willing to ignore the negative consequences of their actions. An extreme example is the BookTuber TheMeggieJohnson who would almost exclusively eat cup noodles so that she could afford all the books she wanted to buy (TheMeggieJohnson, 2018). The ubiquitous use of this discourse reinforces the idea that this level of consumerism is normal. However, being able to buy this many books is a privileged position for these BookTubers to be in for two reasons: (1) they have the economic means to buy this many books and (2) they have the access to these books.

Most people do not have the economic means to spend this much on books meaning that this aspect of BookTube’s culture creates an economic barrier. withcindy only owns four books (as stated in the title of her video on BookTube consumerism) and she gets all her other books from the library. She does not see the added benefits of buying books when you can often access books for free. Feeling the need to buy books to fit in with (other) BookTubers is a *“pressure [that] creates this weird economic barrier to a hobby that literally should not have that kind of barrier”* (withcindy, 2018, [7:37]). This matches the sentiment expressed by some BookTubers that buying books and reading books are two separate hobbies (chandler ainsley, 2021).

Another barrier is faced by readers who are not from the US and the UK, because this usually means that books are either more expensive (because they have to be translated or imported) or because they do not have access to them. In a tweet @gildedwolvs asked *“what kind of privilege you can’t [sic] enjoy as a reader who lives outside the us/uk?”* which got responses from various parts of the world (gildedwolvs, 2020). Recurring problems are that books are more expensive, they are not available in local bookstores but only online via big chains such as Amazon, and libraries rarely have English books (especially not recent releases). One of

the often cited ‘solutions’ to not being able to afford books is to go to the library (as withcindy suggests), but this is only a solution for those in English-speaking countries (and then not even all of those). The reason why libraries in other countries do not provide the same solution, is because libraries are not always freely accessible, only academic books are available in English, the books are not available in their original language (English books are usually translated), or there are only older releases.

The ‘reality’ presented by BookTubers in their book hauls is one that is hugely different from the one experienced by most readers because of their privileged position in relation to their economic means and their geographical location. By portraying this type of consumerist behaviour as normal or accidental, the members of the community are contributing to the idea that having a big collection of books is necessary to be a member of the community (mynameismarines, 2020).

## 6.2 BookTube competitiveness

When BookTubers talk about the pressures they feel, one often mentioned pressure is feeling the need to read as many books as possible, which can be called BookTube competitiveness. BookTuber Bissett discusses the question whether online book communities have accidentally made reading competitive (Bissett, 2017). She says that reading is a solitary experience, but when you partake in an online book community (perhaps as a public reader), it becomes a shared and communal experience (Bissett, 2017). Her hypothesis in the video where she addresses the issue of competitiveness is that *“by the nature of being a part of a community that revolves around an object, in this case books, you start to compare and contrast your interaction with the object with other people’s interaction of the object”* (Bissett, 2017, [6:09]).

There is a pressure in the BookTube community to read as many books as possible. BookTubers feel pressured to read books to make sure that they have enough and relevant material for their videos. Reading (enough) books is a requirement for being able to make BookTube videos because otherwise you do not have anything to make content about (Elizabeth G Reads, 2020). This is related to a smaller pressure to make only BookTube content and not feeling able to branch out. If this were not the case, not reading ‘enough’ books would not be as big an issue as BookTubers are currently making it out to be.

BookTube is a community that talks about the books they have read which makes it extremely easy to focus on the number of books. This is especially the case with the BookTube format of TBR's and wrap-ups in which BookTubers will almost always state that they have read x number of books this month or they intend to read x number of books. This is a circular process: because people talk about numbers, people focus on numbers which makes them talk about numbers. Because of this mentality, reading has become goal-oriented instead of process-oriented (Bissett, 2017). It is less about the journey of reading and the content of the book, and more about being able to include it in your wrap-up or to mark it as 'read' on Goodreads.



Figure 7 The yearly Goodreads reading challenge 'badge' that users see on their homepage. This details the number of books read out of the set goal (33/50 books read) and whether the user is ahead, on track, or behind schedule (16 books ahead of schedule) in their reading. When a user clicks on 'View challenge', a more detailed set of information is revealed, next to information on how their friends' reading challenges are going.

The digital platform Goodreads contributes to this numbers-mentality with its gamified aspects. Goodreads is not directly related to the BookTube community but it is safe to assume that many of those active in the community have a Goodreads account, because the core interests of both platforms are books and many BookTubers mention Goodreads as a social media platform that viewers can follow them on in their video descriptions.

Goodreads has its own yearly reading challenge in which users can set a goal for how many books they want to read in a year. Throughout the year, users will see a badge of the reading challenge on their homepage (see Figure 7). This badge is a prominent reminder of how users are doing with their challenge and an example of gamification on the platform. Gamification can be defined as “*the use of game design elements in non-game contexts*” (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled & Nacke, 2011, p.9). Such game design elements can be game interface design patterns, game design patterns and mechanics, game design principles and heuristics, game

models, and game design methods (Deterding et al., 2011). The Goodreads reading challenge is an example of the use of the game design elements of badges, leader boards, and time constraint (Deterding et al., 2011). The badge is the image on the home screen that users see daily, there is a kind of leader board where users can see how well their friends are doing in the challenge, and the time constraint is the fact that it is a yearly challenge so you have to achieve your goal before the end of the year.

The focus of this challenge is the number of books read (quantitative) and not the enjoyment, quality or knowledge gained (qualitative). This means that the challenge is a contrived way of making sure that users read ‘enough’, as it depends on your opinion of what is most valuable: reading as many books as possible or enjoying the books you are reading. Users feel the pressure to achieve their goal which means that towards the end of the year, BookTubers start uploading videos about trying to catch up on their Goodreads challenge. In order to complete the challenge, BookTubers will start reading short books or graphic novels (malintriestoread, 2020), focus solely on reading for a certain amount of time (Coco Day, 2021), or even ‘locking’ themselves into a hotel room (Tiana Tea, 2020). The language used when discussing their Goodreads challenge is indicative of their view on competitiveness. Coco Day says that she has “*been slacking on my reading*” because she has been watching tv more than reading (Coco Day, 2020, [0:34]) and malintriestoread talks about being unsure “*whether I’m allowed to count it or not*”, because she is wondering whether certain books count as ‘proper’ reads (malintriestoread, 2020, [1:10]). These two comments show that BookTubers feel guilty when they are spending their time not reading *and* that they worry about whether their reading counts towards the challenge. This manifests itself in certain BookTubers being afraid to stop reading a book midway (in BookTube terminology this is called dnf; did not finish), reread books, or reading short novels or graphic novels, because it might be seen as ‘cheating’ (Bissett, 2017).

## 7 Discussion and Conclusion

The two research questions stated for this research have been answered by doing an ethnographic analysis. The first question is *what are the features of BookTube as a community?* Based on the theories of community by Anderson (2006), McMillan and Chavis (1986), and Herring (2004), my theoretical framework provides a new frame of reference for identifying features of online communities and as such can be used to define the features of BookTube. The three theories separately do not cover the full scope of an *online* community which has some fundamental differences from an offline community. For example, boundaries online and offline are wholly different, because in the offline world physical proximity is necessary (or another way to directly communicate without being facilitated by digital technologies), while online it is easier to come into contact with a certain community. When thinking of an offline book club, there are a lot of features that are different or are not applicable while they are applicable to an online book community such as BookTube. This is the case with boundaries offline being hugely different from online, because now time and place can be a constraint while having certain knowledge before joining the community (e.g., knowing certain jargon and having knowledge of certain types of videos) is less important offline, because you can easily gain missing information from people in the offline book club. By taking the relevant aspects of all three theories, a more definitive online community theory can be created. It contains the characteristics that are most relevant to an online community and that are the most prevalent online. The three features of an online community according to the new theory are boundaries and group identification, norms and values, and hierarchy. This theory is more useful, because it is curated specifically for online communities, which is something lacking in current community literature. Being able to relate these three aspects to BookTube shows its applicability to online communities which was not the case with the three separate theories.

In regard to boundaries and group identification, the members identify the community as a separate entity from other YouTube communities and identify themselves as being BookTubers or being part of BookTube. To separate itself, the community has certain boundaries that signal its autonomy to outsiders. Although they are vague and easy to cross due to the nature of the Internet. Offline boundaries such as time and place no longer play a role when you can simply watch videos on YouTube whenever and wherever you want. However, there are still boundaries, because in order to fully understand and enjoy the

community, you need to have certain knowledge of the shared history and symbol system. This is not something that a casual viewer (someone who is at the periphery of the community) will fully grasp straightaway and as such this functions as a boundary.

The shared history and symbol system are examples of the norms and values within the community which allow the members to have a shared understanding of their community. The members identify themselves as being BookTube members in part because they adhere to and believe in the norms and values of the community. However, these rules of behaviour are rarely explicitly stated, but are followed by most within the community because they share an understanding of them (which outsiders do not share and as such this is another boundary). Those who do not adhere to the rules can expect critique from fellow members on their actions. Criticism is more likely to occur when you are more visible within the community and as such BookTubers (seeing as they form the acme of the community) receive the most critique from others in the community. This can be done by fellow BookTubers or viewers, but the critique might be more visible if given by the former. This is the case because high profile members are followed by more people who can see the critique in comparison to one 'ordinary' viewer that does not have a huge following. The hierarchy that divides the community into passive viewers, active viewers, and BookTubers (those who create content) affects the boundaries and criticism within the community, because of the divide in visibility and privilege. BookTubers have a bigger following, meaning more visibility and a more privileged fan position. This means that there is a boundary to becoming a BookTuber and that the privilege of being visible online has criticism as a consequence. In short, the answer to this research question shows how my new theory presents different features of an online community which are clearly present in the BookTube community.

The second research question is *what are the positive and negative characteristics of the culture(s) present in the BookTube community?* The positive and negative characteristics can be attributed to three different cultures present on BookTube, with participatory and fan culture representing the positive aspects and influencer culture representing the negative aspects or pressures. While the division between positive and negative cultures may seem clear-cut, in reality these cultures all influence each other and as such they all have their positives and negatives. However, the general consequence of each can be classified as positive or negative based on the comments by members of the community. These three cultures all have an effect on BookTube, but it is important to note that they are not only

applicable to this community. They might also indicate a trend for other online communities such as the gamer or beauty community. The focus of this research was BookTube, but it is a possible idea for future research to see how these cultures apply to other online communities (on YouTube).

Participatory and fan culture represent the positive characteristics because they are the reason why most members become a part of BookTube. Participatory culture is a culture prevalent on BookTube because participation is at the heart of the actions by BookTubers. By creating content and posting it online, they are participating in the virtual book world. Without their actions, BookTube would not exist, but without the actions of viewers, Booktubers themselves would not exist. They balance each other by giving content on the one side and appreciating and interacting with said content on the other side. Participating is something one is interested in when one also gets something in return. What everyone within the community gets in return no matter their position or actions, is a place to discuss their passion for books. As such, all members are fans of books (and authors and characters and BookTubers). The pyramid of fandom within BookTube presented in section 5.2 shows us how no matter in which layer you are positioned, you will always remain a fan. BookTube facilitates an easy space in which they can discuss, critique and create whatever they are a fan of. However, BookTubers themselves have a more privileged fan position than their viewers because they get more opportunities to meet authors (and befriend them) and to receive free books and bookish goodies.

BookTubers face two types of pressure: competitiveness and consumerism. Both pressures are essentially the effect of them being microcelebrities or public readers who have to face BookTube vanity. Since everything that they do in their reading life is seemingly public for anyone who can watch YouTube, they have certain pressures, because there are specific expectations from within the community. The reality of being a BookTuber is only known by BookTubers since the reading life that they show online can be hugely different from what happens offline. For instance, they might only want to show a certain side of their tastes (e.g., only showing that you read classics while you also read books that do not fit into that image).

Consumerism describes the BookTubers' need to buy as many books as possible and competitiveness describes their need to read as many books as possible. A deep dive into book hauls reveals behaviour and a discourse that seems close to addiction. BookTubers talk

about their lack of self-control, but also promote that kind of behaviour to their viewers and possibly instil the expectation that they need to do the same thing. This need to be like other BookTubers and buy that number of books is the idea of BookTube vanity and is a trap that new BookTubers often fall into. Many BookTubers say later in their career that they regret that phase and yet it seems a norm to go through it. While experienced BookTubers might tell newer BookTubers not to fall into the trap, seemingly almost all of them do it and, it might garner recognition for them which is important as a new YouTuber. The competitiveness of BookTube culture is visible in videos such as TBRs, wrap-ups and, beyond YouTube, on the social media platform Goodreads. These aspects of the community focus mostly on the numbers of books read and not on the quality or enjoyment of the books. This results in BookTubers trying to find loopholes in order to be able to match other BookTubers' reading speed, such as only reading short books or graphic novels. It is interesting to note that competitiveness only appears to be present on BookTube in this context, since BookTubers often show deep support for their colleagues online (e.g., supporting others' big sponsorships).

In answering these two research questions, I have endeavoured to observe the BookTube community in detail. However, certain aspects were outside the scope of this particular research. It would have been interesting to get direct input from members of the community on these different aspects. Ideas for future research are deeper analysis of the use of addiction discourse on BookTube and BookTube as a gendered community (with specific genres of reading ascribed to male and female readers). In addition, activism and cancel culture are two phenomena that are becoming more commonplace on BookTube with the rise of 'spilling tea' videos in which gossip in the community is discussed. This is related to activism because the gossip is often about a BookTuber (or author or book) being racist, sexist or otherwise discriminatory, which results in BookTubers protesting this kind of behaviour which could result in the person or object in question being cancelled. This is an interesting idea for future research since as of now there does not seem to be agreement within the community about the shape and form of activism and cancel culture, since there are currently no widely accepted norms and values on these two issues.

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