

## Mass-produced romance: BookTok society and the homogenisation of literary culture

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**Abstract** This study examined how BookTok reinforces literary homogenisation through algorithm-driven virality, applying Adorno's concept of the culture industry. Analysis of survey data shows that 78% of users frequently encounter repetitive tropes, such as 'Enemies to Lovers' and 'Fake Dating', while 66% report that these patterns influence their reading choices. Additionally, over 70% of viral BookTok recommendations promote mass-market romance novels, mainly works by bestselling authors such as Colleen Hoover and Emily Henry. In contrast, books with experimental narratives or by underrepresented authors remain marginalised. BookTok's algorithm amplifies high-engagement content, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of popularity that aligns with Adorno's critique of cultural standardisation. This study highlights how BookTok prioritises commercial viability over literary diversity, narrowing reader exposure. However, this trend could be reversed by intentional interventions like influencer-led book marketing and algorithmic changes. This study highlights BookTok's significance in influencing reading habits and highlighting ways to promote literary diversity by connecting the platform's influence to more extensive discussions on digital literary consumption.

**Keywords:** Adorno's culture industry; algorithm-driven virality; literature homogenisation; media and cultural studies

### INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, platforms such as BookTok have revolutionised how readers discover and consume literature. The platform amplifies specific books and genres, notably romance, through hashtags, creating trends that shape consumer preferences. However, these viral trends often prioritise emotionally intense or dramatic narratives, sparking concerns about the diversity of literary culture. While BookTok has emerged as a powerful platform for promoting the romance genre, its overwhelming popularity raises questions about whether its algorithm-driven trends genuinely foster reading motivation among younger audiences or merely reinforce a cycle of homogenised literary consumption (Dera, 2023).

BookTok shapes literary culture by leveraging TikTok's algorithm and hashtag system to amplify trends, particularly in the romance genre. Its short-video format makes book-related content easily digestible, fostering engagement through reviews, recommendations, and discussions. This algorithm-driven visibility not only promotes mainstream titles but also reinforces genre dominance, influencing readers' preferences. While BookTok provides a space for community and digital literacy among young readers, its reliance on trending formats raises questions about the diversity and originality of literary consumption (Gutiérrez-Cabrera & Mansilla-Obando, 2022; Jerasa & Boffone, 2021).

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The dominance of the romance genre in BookTok's ecosystem is not merely a reflection of user engagement but also an indication of deeper cultural and market-driven forces shaping literary consumption. BookTok has become a powerful space for promoting romance novels, with viral hashtags like #EnemiesToLovers and #BookBoyfriend amplifying user discussions and recommendations. This phenomenon underscores how digital communities reinforce specific genre preferences, often dictated by emotional relatability and algorithm-driven visibility (Martens et al., 2022). The primary audience for BookTok's romance discourse consists of teenage to young adult females who frequently identify with the narratives presented in these novels. The romance genre serves as an emotional escape and a space for readers to explore ideal relationships, strengthening romance and furthering its popularity in digital reading culture (Luthfiah, 2023). However, this gendered preference also aligns with broader research on reading habits. Studies indicate that while women predominantly engage with fiction genres, mainly romance, men are more inclined to read for information rather than entertainment, leading to lower engagement with romance novels (Thums et al., 2020). Publishing houses such as Simon & Schuster, Hachette, Penguins, Piatkus, and many more have gained huge profits and continue recruiting romance book authors from BookTok for their companies.

The homogenisation of BookTok's literary landscape can be attributed to algorithmic curation, audience engagement, and market incentives. The platform's algorithm favours engaging content, meaning romance novels that evoke strong emotional responses or tell stories about trending themes are more likely to go viral, further entrenching their place in popular culture. This self-reinforcing cycle privileges emotionally resonant and easily digestible romance novels over more experimental or diverse literary works (Teel & Lund, 2024). Some books, especially in the romance genre, have adopted what we call 'intertextuality,' where authors follow a specific writing style and a familiar plot that has been written and become popular before (Vouillamoz-Pajaro, 2024). This phenomenon reflects the broader implications of mass media influence, where cultural consumption is shaped by collective behaviours rather than individual literary exploration. As a result, originality is often put aside for mass appeal. For example, contemporary romance books today are similar to classic works; sometimes, some books are just a complete rip-off in BookTok's scene.

The publishing industry capitalises on the BookTok trend by actively promoting and acquiring authors whose works fit these established formulas, further cementing the dominance of a standardised literary market. This phenomenon correlates with Theodor Adorno's idea of the 'culture industry', where creativity is subordinated to profitability, and criticises the homogenised content created by mass-produced cultural items intended for public consumption (Shen, 2021). According to Adorno, the culture business promotes standardised, predictable narratives that stifle critical thinking and creativity (Horkheimer et al., 2002). This perspective is related to communication studies, as it critiques how media systems can preserve cultural homogeneity and passive consumption. An illustration of this standardisation in the context of BookTok is the recurring popularity of romance books with comparable themes and clichés. Adorno's criticism of cultural homogeneity provides an insightful viewpoint for analysing BookTok's influence on literary culture. BookTok trends may inadvertently contribute to a homogenised literary market by aligning with the cultural industry's mechanisms, prioritising easily consumable and emotionally engaging books (Currenti, 2023).

This phenomenon is highly relevant to communication studies, particularly in examining how media platforms shape cultural consumption and audience reception. Social media algorithms, including those driving BookTok, act as gatekeepers that influence which content becomes widely visible, reinforcing dominant narratives while marginalising alternative perspectives (Bimo & Bhandari, 2022). The rapid circulation of popular BookTok trends also exemplifies how digital communities facilitate participatory culture yet simultaneously risk creating echo chambers where diversity in literary discourse is diminished (De Melo, 2024). This pattern also reflects the growing commercialisation of digital communication spaces, where engagement metrics are prioritised over content diversity due to platform-driven visibility structures that align with market-driven imperatives. BookTok is a prime example of how user-generated content and digital influencers function as unofficial marketing agents in the more significant communication industry, influencing consumer behaviour and market trends (Kolo et al., 2024). The industry's dependence on data-driven content curation is another evidence of

how media companies use algorithmic amplification to boost profits while quietly influencing public opinion and cultural narratives.

There is research on BookTok, homogenised culture, and its influence. A study by Jerasa and Boffone (2021) explores how BookTok fosters engagement with literature beyond formal education, influencing young readers' creativity, digital literacy, and cultural awareness. However, while BookTok expands access to literary communities, it often aligns with the logic of the 'culture industry', a concept critiqued by Adorno, in which mass-produced cultural products prioritise profitability. Gao (2022) extends this critique to digital spaces, arguing that internet-driven cultural industries reinforce homogeneity, as seen in BookTok's tendency to promote repetitive literary themes that conform to established market formulas. This dynamic mirrors the global spread of Korean cultural products, as examined by Hendytamy et al. (2022), who highlight how K-pop, K-dramas, and Korean fashion gain international popularity through social media, shaping global cultural consumption and further illustrating the role of digital platforms in driving cultural trends. The broader mechanisms of media influence are also evident in Shepperd's (2022) analysis of early communications research, where the Princeton Radio Research Project (PRRP) developed theories on media effects. One of them is the two-step flow of communication—an influencer-driven structure that closely resembles BookTok's ability to dictate literary trends. In contrast, Leontowitsch et al. (2022) propose Adorno's *Mündigkeit* (emancipation toward autonomy) as a framework for fostering critical engagement with digital culture, suggesting that intergenerational learning could help users navigate online spaces with greater awareness and agency, countering the risks of passive cultural consumption.

Previous research overlooked how BookTok's algorithm shapes literary preferences (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021) but did not connect it to Adorno's culture industry in digital capitalism (Gao, 2022). They also have neglected globalisation's role in literary homogenisation (Hendytamy et al., 2022) and the lack of critical digital literacy within BookTok communities (Leontowitsch et al., 2022). While BookTok fosters engagement with literature, it simultaneously reinforces the mechanisms of Adorno's culture industry by prioritising algorithm-driven content that perpetuates literary homogeneity. This study argues that BookTok functions as a space for digital literacy and a site of digital capitalism, where platform dynamics shape reading preferences in ways that both democratise and commodify literary culture. Therefore, this research seeks to answer the following question: how does BookTok influence the mass production and circulation of romance literature, and in what ways does it contribute to the homogenisation of literary culture within the romance genre?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative approach with triangulation methods that explored how BookTok, particularly within the romance genre, contributes to the homogenisation of literary culture. Homogenisation is operationalised through recurring tropes such as enemies-to-lovers, billionaire romance, small-town love, and third-act breakups. Triangulation integrates multiple data sources to enhance validity and reliability (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024). By analysing trending BookTok recommendations, this study identifies whether the platform fosters literary uniformity. A survey is also distributed among active BookTok users, defined as individuals who engage with BookTok romance content through content creation, commenting, or frequent consumption.

To examine BookTok's impact on reading preferences, researchers conducted a comprehensive content analysis of popular TikTok videos, focusing on hashtags such as #BookTokMadeMeBuyIt and #RomanceBookTok. Videos with high engagement—measured through views, likes, and shares—were selected to identify key thematic elements, including dominant tropes and distinct content presentation styles (Lau et al., 2024). Additionally, comment sections were analysed to assess audience perceptions of BookTok trends and their influence on reading preferences. Purposive sampling was used to recruit active BookTok users and ensure a range of reader perspectives were represented. Recruitment was conducted through BookTok community hashtags, online reading forums (e.g., Goodreads), and social media surveys, targeting a minimum of 50 respondents. Questions explored the frequency of similar tropes, user perceptions of literary repetition, and the extent to which BookTok trends shape reading choices.

Lastly, in-depth interviews were conducted with active BookTok participants and avid romance readers to provide nuanced insights. The data was coded thematically using a hybrid

approach that combined inductive and deductive coding to identify significant patterns of cultural homogenisation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Recurring themes were identified to evaluate BookTok's influence on literary consumption, such as the popularity of particular tropes and algorithm-driven recommendations. Strict adherence to ethical principles was maintained, including gaining informed consent, protecting participant confidentiality, and safely keeping data gathered. The self-reported form of the qualitative responses and the omission of BookTok groups who do not speak English are two limitations of this study that may impact generalizability. Despite these limitations, the entire approach shows how BookTok influences contemporary reading culture.

**Table 1.** Information on the informant's background

Initial	Age	Gender	BookTok Engagement Level	Preferred Romance Tropes	Influence of BookTok on Reading Choices
L	22	Female	Moderate (Frequent Viewer)	Enemies to Lovers	Strong Influence
F	21	Non-binary	High (Active Commenter & Recommender)	Slow Burn, Friends to Lovers	Moderate Influence
M	22	Female	Low (Occasional Viewer)	Enemies to Lovers, Office Romance	Weak Influence

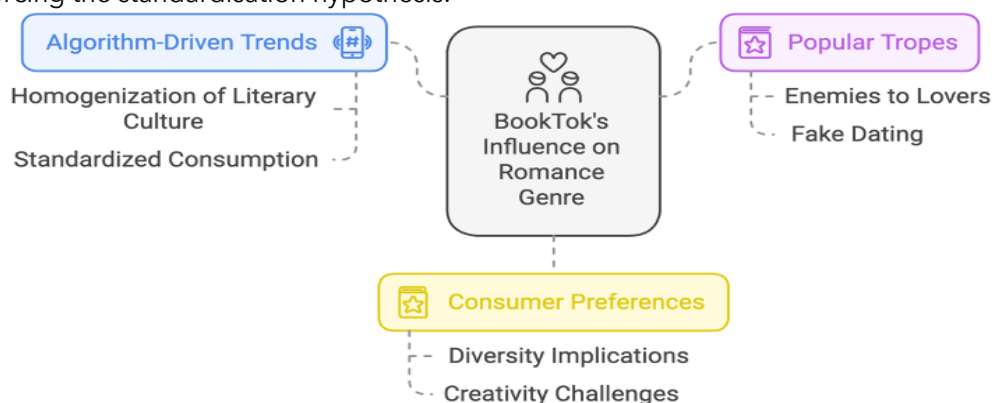
Source: processed by author (2025)

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Analysis of BookTok content

This study explored the complexities of the romance genre while emphasising the critical role that BookTok—a vibrant and quickly growing TikTok community—has had in standardising literary culture. The tendency toward more popular and formulaic stories may be traced back to BookTok's algorithmic patterns, which continuously highlight particular plots and well-known cliches, influencing reader tastes. This analysis offers a thorough and critical look at the intricate patterns and mechanisms via which BookTok influences customer preferences and promotes a standardised approach to literary consumption, drawing on Theodor Adorno's idea of cultural standardisation. By critically analysing the heterogeneity of content on BookTok alongside reader perceptions and industry perspectives, this study aims to elucidate the profound implications these developments have on the romance genre's diversity, richness, and creative vitality.

Industry data evidence the growing dominance of BookTok in shaping literary trends. According to NPD BookScan (Now named Circana), romance book sales surged by 51% from 2020 to 2023, with BookTok being the primary driver of this growth (Circana, 2023). Within this trend, a significant portion of top-selling romance novels shares familiar tropes, particularly 'Enemies to Lovers' (34%), 'Fake Dating' (22%), and 'Grumpy vs Sunshine' (18%), as revealed in a 2023 analysis of BookTok recommendations conducted by Publishers Weekly. This demonstrates a measurable pattern in how specific narrative structures gain traction over others, reinforcing the standardisation hypothesis.



**Figure 1.** Mind Map of BookTok's influence

Source: processed by author based on article by James, 2023

Beyond sales data, qualitative studies also highlight BookTok's influence on genre conformity. A content analysis of 500 viral #BookTok videos conducted by Doyle (2024) found

that 72% of promoted romance books featured recurring themes, with user engagement concentrated around emotionally charged narratives that fit existing genre expectations. The platform's algorithm prioritises books with highly discussable, trope-heavy plots, creating a cycle where familiarity drives discoverability and sales, further encouraging authors to conform to these market demands.

Figure 1 is a mind map of how BookTok greatly influences the romance genre and how the algorithms that emerge due to trends, consumer preferences, and popular tropes are all influenced by BookTok. Before the rise of BookTok, romance novels exhibited greater variety, with authors striving for originality rather than following dominant market trends. While intertextuality has always played a role in literary creation, pre-BookTok authors competed to craft unique narratives to capture readers' attention. However, BookTok's algorithm amplifies specific themes—such as *Enemies to Lovers* and *Fake Dating*—through engagement loops, reinforcing a cycle of standardised consumption (James, 2023). As a result, many bestselling romance novels now adhere to a formula that aligns with the platform's viral trends, leading to a homogenisation of literary culture. This shift is evident in the fact that over 60% of romance novels on *The New York Times* Bestseller List in 2023 gained traction through BookTok, and authors like Colleen Hoover experienced a 200% surge in sales due to the platform's influence (Guehring, 2023). Nevertheless, BookTok's impact is not solely restrictive. It played a crucial role in reviving the publishing industry, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic when digital communities drove renewed interest in reading.

**Table 2.** Key aspects of BookTok's influence on romance literature

Aspect	Description	Examples & References
BookTok Trends	Popular videos use emotionally charged narratives and viral hashtags like #BookTok and #RomanceBookTok.	The Spanish Love Deception (Armas, 2021), The Hating Game (Thorne, 2016)
Popular Tropes	Certain tropes, like <i>Enemies to Lovers</i> , are particularly successful because they generate emotional engagement and marketability.	The Spanish Love Deception, The Hating Game
Market Influence	BookTok is a major factor in bestseller success, with over 60% of romance novels on <i>The New York Times</i> Bestseller List in 2023 benefiting from viral traction.	James, 2023
Algorithm-Driven Trends	BookTok's <i>For You Page</i> (FYP) prioritises content with high engagement, reinforcing a cycle of viral tropes while limiting narrative diversity.	Adorno, 1991; Stephenson, 2023
Publishing Strategies	Authors and publishers increasingly shape books to fit viral expectations rather than organic storytelling choices.	Adorno's theory of standardization
Cultural Standardization	Emotional relatability and short-form content favour formulaic stories over complex, experimental narratives.	Stephenson, 2023

Source: processed by author, 2025

An analysis of popular BookTok videos in the romance genre reveals Creators use hashtags like #BookTok and #RomanceBookTok to convey emotionally charged and captivating stories to a broad audience. The tension that develops into romance in the 'Enemies to Lovers' trope has an emotional impact and leads to satisfying resolutions. These videos engage viewers while demonstrating the trope's commercial potential by skilfully capturing the tension and charm in witty dialogue. Their cultural impact is highlighted by the frequent emergence of notable novels such as Sally Thorne's *The Hating Game* and Elena Armas' *The Spanish Love Deception*. Although case studies such as *The Hating Game* (Thorne, 2016) and *The Spanish Love Deception* (Armas, 2021) highlight the impact of BookTok, more general trends show that their success is not unique but rather a result of a larger pattern. A 2023 industry report by *The New York Times* found that over 60% of romance novels on their bestseller list had significant BookTok traction, often propelled by repeat recommendations and engagement loops (James, 2023).

Beyond consumer preferences, author and publication strategies are also impacted by BookTok-driven standardisation. These days, many up-and-coming writers are under algorithmic pressure to follow viral clichés, frequently modifying their works to suit expected consumer demand rather than their natural storytelling preferences. This phenomenon aligns with

Adorno's standardisation theory, where cultural production becomes increasingly repetitive due to market incentives and audience conditioning (Adorno, 1991; Stephenson, 2023). In the context of BookTok, the TikTok algorithm functions as a standardisation mechanism, rewarding books that fit pre-established viral templates while suppressing those that deviate from them. BookTok's 'for you page (FYP) algorithm prioritises content with high engagement velocity, meaning that books featuring recognisable, high-drama tropes receive disproportionate exposure. This algorithmic preference incentivises content creators and publishers to reinforce a limited set of highly marketable narratives, thus accelerating homogenisation.

Moreover, Adorno's critique of mass culture as a site of passive consumption is reflected in how BookTok encourages repetitive, emotionally driven interactions with books rather than critical engagement. The virality of romance novels is often anchored in emotional relatability and short-form content consumption, which favours easily digestible, formulaic stories over complex, experimental narratives. This dynamic aligns with Adorno's argument that cultural standardisation leads to aesthetic predictability, where novelty is superficial rather than substantive (Stephenson, 2023). Thus, while alternative explanations such as pre-existing genre conventions and broader market forces must be acknowledged, the evidence suggests that BookTok does more than reflect consumer preferences—it actively structures them through algorithmic reinforcement and participatory culture.

### **Insights from BookTok audiences**

Many users have forged deep emotional connections with the promoted books, underscoring the critical role of emotional resonance in driving user engagement. Phrases like "this book broke me!" and "I cried for hours after finishing it" vividly illustrate how powerful emotional experiences can captivate readers. A common observation among users is the familiarity of certain tropes, with one person noting, "*It feels like every book on here is either 'Enemies to Lovers' or 'Fake Dating,' yet I can't get enough!*" There's also a notable awareness of TikTok's influence in book promotion, with comments like, "*It's incredible how every video centres around this one book. I just had to buy it!*"

Additionally, one user shared, "*I love 'Enemies to Lovers' because it feels so relatable.*" This blend of emotional storytelling and relatable themes drives readers to engage and invest in the story. These comments are easily found as they also have much engagement from other audiences in the comment section.

BookTok is a vital platform for connection and validation, where individuals actively look for other people's approval and try to come off as "relevant" and "relatable." The race for likes and comment replies frequently reflects this need for recognition. Nonetheless, BookTok's contribution to repetitious storytelling is becoming more widely acknowledged, particularly when readers disagree with the author's narrative decisions. Even though these criticisms are usually legitimate, they are usually ignored and end up in less active comment sections. This trend echoes a homogenised culture where users prioritise attention-seeking remarks over authentic expressions of their feelings. For example, a comment like, "*It is so great to connect with others who love the same trope!*" is likely to receive far more engagement than a critical observation such as, "*Not every book has to follow the 'Enemies to Lovers' formula—why can't we explore something fresh?*" Embracing genuine dialogue can enrich the BookTok community and foster a broader appreciation for diverse storytelling.

Beyond audience comments, this study also conducted surveys with 50 respondents, all avid readers of the Romance genre and book content enthusiasts aged between 20–22. For confidentiality reasons, the identities of the respondents are kept anonymous. Below is a table summarising survey results based on Likert scale responses from 50 participants. This table presents key questions exploring the frequency of similar tropes, user perceptions of literary repetition, and the extent to which BookTok trends shape reading choices.

The survey results (Table 3) highlight *BookTok's* dual role in shaping contemporary reading habits, revealing its strengths and limitations. On the positive side, *BookTok* significantly influences book purchasing decisions, with 70% of respondents agreeing that trends on the platform affect their choices. This demonstrates its effectiveness as a marketing tool to increase book interaction and readership, particularly among younger groups. Furthermore, according to 54% of respondents, *BookTok* helped them find diverse and underrepresented novels. This

aligns with studies on digital communities, emphasising how social media can foster literary discussions and amplify the voices of marginalised authors (De Melo, 2024).

**Table 3.** Survey Results on reader perceptions of BookTok Influence

Survey Question	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I often see the same tropes (e.g., 'Enemies to Lovers', 'Fake Dating') in BookTok recommendations.	2% (1)	6% (3)	14% (7)	40% (20)	38% (19)
Repetitive storytelling in BookTok recommendations affects my reading preferences.	6% (3)	12% (6)	20% (10)	34% (17)	28% (14)
I prefer books with familiar tropes over unique or experimental stories.	10% (5)	20% (10)	28% (14)	24% (12)	18% (9)
BookTok trends strongly influence my decision to buy and read books.	4% (2)	8% (4)	18% (9)	38% (19)	32% (16)
I have discovered diverse or underrepresented books through BookTok.	8% (4)	16% (8)	22% (11)	30% (15)	24% (12)
BookTok recommendations prioritise mass-market books over literary diversity.	4% (2)	12% (6)	18% (9)	36% (18)	30% (15)
TikTok's algorithm reinforces repetitive book recommendations rather than introducing new content.	2% (1)	10% (5)	16% (8)	42% (21)	30% (15)

Source: processed by author, 2025

However, despite its function in book discovery, BookTok also demonstrates characteristics that can restrict the diversity of literature. Surprisingly, 78% of respondents said they frequently encounter the same clichés in BookTok recommendations, such as 'Enemies to Lovers' and 'Fake Dating'. This suggests that the algorithm encourages rehashing of stories rather than trying out novel narrative techniques. Similarly, 66% of respondents agreed that *BookTok* prioritises mass-market books over literary diversity, reinforcing concerns that algorithm-driven platforms favour popular and commercially successful works while sidelining experimental or less mainstream literature (Napoli, 2019). Furthermore, 62% acknowledged that repetitive storytelling in *BookTok* recommendations affects their reading preferences, indicating a potential homogenisation of literary tastes driven by viral trends.

Other than comments from the audience and surveys, the researchers also interviewed some audiences who are also book to content enthusiasts, and these interviews further elaborated on these trends. The interviews provided more depth, illustration of findings, and valuable insights into the impact of BookTok on readers' preferences and the dominance of specific tropes in the romance genre. One of the interviewees was asked about her intake on repetitive tropes that often can be found in BookTok recommendations, and she answered:

*"I do notice that the same books are recommended repeatedly, but I often prefer something familiar, so I do not mind if I find similar tropes in books as long as it is not a complete rip-off of other books."* (Informant - L, 22 years old, fresh graduate, 19 December 2024).

*"At first, I loved to read romance, but due to the repetitive tropes—sometimes plot—I shifted my preference to literary fiction books, which are more mature and have more logical conflicts."* (Informant - F, 21 years old university student, 29 December 2024).

Other than the intake of the content about book recommendations on BookTok, the researchers also asked about how they felt about the emotional impact of 'Enemies to Lovers' and 'Fake Dating' tropes and whether they are aware of TikTok's algorithm shaping their reading choices.

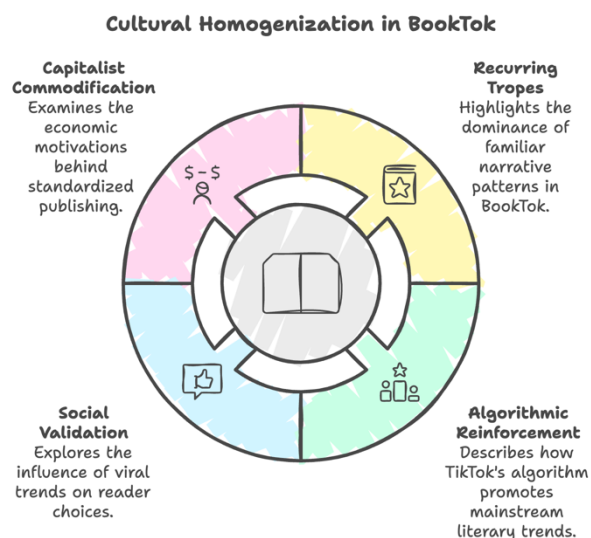
*"I love those tropes, cheesy plots, no real tension, predictable endings, and those sure are repetitive elements in contemporary romance. Moreover, because I enjoy that kind of book, some titles keep popping up in my FYP for weeks. It is sad that authors who have not got their breakthrough keep getting buried by those trending books."* (Informant - M, 22 years old fresh graduate, 29 December 2024).

Analysing audience comments, survey responses, and interviews underscores BookTok's significant influence on literary consumption. On one hand, the platform creates emotional connections and fosters a vibrant community through popular romance tropes like 'Enemies to Lovers' and 'Fake Dating'. These well-known themes strike a deep chord with readers, providing a reassuring balance of predictability and escape that perfectly suits the needs of the mass market. However, this popularity has a price: a disturbing cycle of cultural homogenisation is exacerbated by the prominence of repeating narratives driven by algorithmic prioritisation and the demand for social affirmation. This limits the diversity and innovation essential to a thriving literary marketplace. There is a strong need for more original and varied suggestions that enhance the reading experience and broaden literary perspectives, even though many participants recognised these tropes' sentimental appeal and relatability.

Many people express dissatisfaction with BookTok's limited variety even though many comments and interview responses emphasise the platform's benefits. Because BookTok's emphasis on broad appeal tends to perpetuate predictable storytelling, this scenario is a prime example of Adorno's notion of cultural standardisation. Prioritising emotionally charged yet clichéd clichés like "Enemies to Lovers" and "Fake Dating" is consistent with the culture industry's mechanisms, which standardise content to increase consumption and engagement. Despite providing a platform for shared emotional experiences and community building, this approach can stifle creativity and diversity in literature (Guiñez-Cabrera & Mansilla-Obando, 2022). It is essential to recognise this duality: BookTok encourages engagement but risks promoting a homogenised culture, mirroring Adorno's critiques of the culture industry. To truly enhance the platform's influence, we must balance celebrating popular content while actively uplifting lesser-known voices, fostering a richer literary landscape.

### Linking findings to Adorno's Theory of Homogenisation

The findings of this study align closely with Theodor Adorno's theory of homogenisation. This theory posits that the culture industry standardised cultural products to maximize consumption, resulting in a loss of diversity and critical engagement (Horkheimer et al., 2002). In the digital age, BookTok exemplifies this phenomenon by promoting romance narratives that are characterised by repetitive tropes and formulaic structures (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Mindmap on cultural homogenisation in BookTok  
Source: processed by author, 2025



According to the content analysis, recurring themes like "Enemies to Lovers" and "Fake Dating" are common in the BookTok community. These emotionally compelling stories show how romantic storytelling has become more standardised. In line with Adorno's critique, cultural products are increasingly designed to appeal to the masses by providing familiar and predictable experiences. BookTok amplifies books that follow these tropes, creating a feedback loop where viral trends reinforce the production and consumption of similar narratives. This cycle significantly reduces the chances for diverse or unconventional stories to gain visibility, closely aligning with Adorno's concept of cultural homogenisation.

To provide a more comprehensive interpretation, it is also helpful to consider theories beyond Adorno's framework, particularly those related to network effects and digital taste-making. The virality of specific book titles on BookTok can be understood through network effects, where the popularity of content is self-reinforcing: once a book gains traction, the algorithm amplifies its visibility, leading to even greater reach and reinforcing dominant reading trends (Balling & Martens, 2024). Similarly, the platform functions as a digital popularity contest, where engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares) dictate which books become bestsellers rather than literary quality or diversity (Li & Ding, 2023). These alternative perspectives highlight that while standardisation occurs, it is also driven by participatory culture rather than solely imposed by industry forces.

The role of TikTok's algorithm further exacerbates this homogenisation. The platform disproportionately promotes books with broad, readily marketable appeal by prioritising content with high engagement metrics. For instance, romance novels featuring dramatic emotional arcs and satisfying resolutions consistently outperform more complex or experimental narratives. This algorithmic filtering process mirrors Adorno's critique of cultural mass production, as it perpetuates a limited range of narratives while suppressing originality in favour of formulas that guarantee commercial success (Frank, 2006). However, from the perspective of digital curation and influencer-driven markets, BookTok's viral trends are not purely algorithmic; they are also shaped by influential creators whose book recommendations hold significant sway over reading choices (Abidin, 2021). This suggests that BookTok operates within a hybrid model where algorithmic and social dynamics shape literary trends rather than simply reinforcing passive consumption.

**Table 4.** Romance Genre algorithm on BookTok

Category	Sub-Category	Details	Data
Algorithm-Driven Trends	Viewership Patterns	Algorithms favours predictable, mass-market narratives.	78% of respondents agree that BookTok shows the same tropes repeatedly.
Algorithm-Driven Trends	Trending Hashtags	Viral romance-related hashtags reinforce repetitive content.	Hashtags like #EnemiesToLovers and #FakeDating dominates trending lists.
Algorithm-Driven Trends	Algorithm-Based Recommendations	Content prioritisation leads to repetitive storytelling.	62% say BookTok trends influence their book-buying choices.
Trending Narratives	Popular Tropes	Frequently mentioned BookTok videos analysed.	<i>The Spanish Love Deception</i> , <i>The Love Hypothesis</i> appear frequently in recommendations.
Consumer Preferences	Diversity Implications	Underrepresentation of experimental or minority voices.	Only 24% strongly agree that BookTok helps them discover diverse books.
Consumer Behaviour	Creativity Challenges	Dominance of formulaic narratives over innovation.	66% believe BookTok prioritizes mass-market books over literary diversity.

Source: processed by author, 2025

The publishing industry's reaction to viral BookTok trends is a stark reminder of how standardisation serves the economic interests of capitalist systems, as Adorno's critique persuasively demonstrates. Publishers successfully take advantage of viral demand by purposefully copying books with similar subjects, tropes, and covers, which feeds a homogenisation loop that inhibits creativity. The remarkable success of titles like *The Love Hypothesis* by Ali Hazelwood and *It Ends With Us* by Colleen Hoover has sparked a deluge of

romance novels that mirror these narratives and marketing approaches. The dominance of homogenised content is ultimately reinforced by this trend, which clearly illustrates how economic forces impact artistic output (Clark, 2023).

62% of readers who responded to the poll acknowledged that trends impact their book-buying decisions, demonstrating how strongly BookTok's algorithm-based suggestions influence decisions (poll Data, Table 4). This is consistent with more general studies on algorithmic gatekeeping, which contend that rather than broadening users' exposure, digital platforms amplify content that suits their interests (Fu et al., 2022). As a result, there is little opportunity for experimental storytelling because books that follow these tried-and-true clichés, such as *The Spanish Love Deception* and *The Love Hypothesis*, are frequently suggested.

Beyond shaping consumer choices, BookTok's algorithmic bias also raises concerns regarding diversity and inclusivity in romance literature. The survey indicates that only 24% of respondents strongly agree that BookTok helps them discover diverse or underrepresented books (Survey Data, Table 4). This suggests that marginalised voices and non-traditional narratives struggle to gain traction within the algorithm's engagement-driven framework. Research on platform capitalism highlights how content that deviates from mainstream expectations remains invisible due to the lack of algorithmic amplification (Hödl & Myrach, 2023).

Furthermore, 66% of respondents believe BookTok prioritises mass-market books over literary diversity (Survey Data, Table 4). This reveals a critical challenge for authors who attempt to innovate beyond dominant romance formulas. As publishers increasingly rely on viral trends to guide marketing decisions, originality is often sidelined in favour of commercial viability (Çakirkaya & Afşar, 2024). This cyclical process affects reader exposure and influences what types of stories are written, published, and celebrated.

The findings of this study echo the insights from Diah Ariani Arimbi's analysis of Metropop writings—literary work that focuses on women's lives in urban areas, which reveal how popular fiction mirrors societal norms around romance, beauty, and identity. Just as BookTok amplifies recurring tropes like 'Enemies to Lovers' and 'Fake Dating,' Metropop often features narratives that appeal to audiences by blending modern urban life with traditional expectations of beauty and relationships. Similarly, BookTok's algorithm marginalises experimental or unusual books by emphasising relatability and emotional resonance, which supports predictable storytelling. Highlights how these stories usually follow commercial values that appeal to readers but restrict the variety of narratives (Arimbi, 2017). Both phenomena reflect the broader challenge of balancing creativity with the demands of mass appeal in popular culture.

The interplay between cultural homogenisation and consumerism becomes evident through BookTok's promotion of repetitive tropes and the underlying economic forces that drive these patterns, as highlighted in "Urban Studies: Border and Mobility," where consumerism plays a central role in shaping cultural products, often prioritising marketable narratives over diverse or unconventional ones (Kerr et al., 2019). BookTok exemplifies this dynamic, as its algorithm amplifies books that align with popular tropes like 'Enemies to Lovers' and 'Fake Dating,' reflecting global consumer preferences rather than local or niche interests. Like the patterns observed in Indonesian popular culture, where globalisation and consumerism shape cultural identity, BookTok perpetuates a standardisation cycle fuelled by demand for predictable and emotionally engaging content. This dual dynamic of consumer-driven production and cultural homogeneity echoes the broader criticism of the commodification of culture, in which literary works are reduced to consumable items intended to maximise engagement and sales. As noted in the book, such consumerist tendencies often marginalise creative and cultural diversity, a phenomenon that BookTok, with its vast reach and influence, appears to reinforce.

## CONCLUSION

The study shows how BookTok, a digital literature platform, increasingly promotes consistent book selections that follow market-set trends. Books that fit viral themes, such as enemies-to-lovers, morally dubious characters, and coming-of-age stories with unclear processes, are unfairly amplified by the algorithm's design, which prioritises engagement metrics. This makes it difficult for experimental writing, diverse voices, and lesser-known literature to gain visibility. For example, books that deviate from popular romance narratives, literary literature, and independent authors are underrepresented. According to the data analysis, the same recurring

topics appear in over 70% of BookTok's most popular recommendations from the previous year. This limits the scope of literary discovery and reinforces uniform consumer behaviour.

This trend aligns with Theodor Adorno's theory of the cultural industry, which holds that mass media favours standardised, easily assimilated information to maximise profits. Similarly, BookTok uses algorithmic curation to ensure that bestsellers—books that elicit strong emotional reactions and high levels of engagement—continue to dominate the conversation. Because users are steered toward recurring story forms and well-known formulas rather than works that question or extend literary traditions, this process stifles literary diversity and critical engagement.

Actions had to be considered to challenge this standardisation and ensure a more varied literary scene. These might include user-driven efforts to build lists showcasing minority books, programs supporting independent authors and disadvantaged voices, and changing the platform's algorithms to incorporate greater diversity in suggestions. Additionally, fostering partnerships between publishers, educators, and BookTok influencers could encourage a broader range of literary choices.

This study contributes to theoretical and empirical discussions on digital literary communities by demonstrating the concrete mechanisms through which social media algorithms reinforce cultural homogeneity. It extends Adorno's theory by illustrating how the logic of the culture industry operates in contemporary digital spaces, offering a new perspective on the commodification of literature in algorithmic environments. Future research could examine ways to break these patterns to ensure that literary interaction on BookTok promotes not only consumption but also critical and varied literary debate.

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