



UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

DIPARTIMENTI DI GIURISPRUDENZA, INGEGNERIA INDUSTRIALE E DELL'INFORMAZIONE, SCIENZE
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PLATFORMISATION OF CONSUMER CULTURE:

HOW #BOOKTOKITALIA IS RESHAPING BOOK CULTURE IN ITALY

Relatore:

Chiar.mo Prof. Caliandro Alessandro

Correlatore:

Chiar.ma Prof. Conz Elisa

Tesi di laurea di Rizzuti Sofia Maria

Matricola n. 522848

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Abstract

This thesis explores the phenomenon of the platformisation of consumer culture, with particular attention to the impact of the hashtag #BookTokItalia on book culture within the TikTok platform.

The term "platformisation of consumer culture" refers to the process through which digital platforms redefine consumption practices and shape the collective imaginaries of consumers. These imaginaries emerge from the interaction between user behaviour and the affordances of the platform, in a relationship of mutual influence.

Through a qualitative approach to digital methods, combining hashtag network analysis and content analysis of 155 videos on TikTok, the research investigates how Italian users interact with book-related content, contributing to the creation of digital imaginaries that influence cultural consumption patterns.

The results show that content with the hashtag #BookTokItalia fosters the construction of a consumer imaginary where books are not only objects for reading but also become elements of status and identity, through practices such as sharing reviews, humorous videos, and reading vlogs. Another key finding concerns the importance of the materiality of books compared to digital formats, highlighted by videos showcasing bookstore purchases. The analysis also reveals that the most promoted books on #BookTokItalia mainly belong to the young adult and romance genres, with a strong emphasis on works that evoke intense emotional reactions.

Thanks to its algorithm, TikTok amplifies the visibility of content that aligns with viral logic, promoting the diffusion of specific titles that become bestsellers within a few weeks. A concrete example of this influence is TikTok's official partnership with the book fair "Salone del Libro 2024", which introduced the "BookTok Awards."

Future research could expand this field of study by comparing the phenomenon in different countries or exploring the role of influencers and publishers within these dynamics.

Introduction

In recent years, digital platforms have played a central role in transforming cultural and consumption practices, reshaping how individuals interact with products, brands, and communities. This phenomenon, known as platformisation of consumer culture, refers to the process through which digital platforms not only mediate but reorganise cultural experiences, deeply influencing consumer imaginaries.

This research focuses on a specific case of platformisation: the impact of TikTok on book culture in Italy through the analysis of videos tagged with the hashtag #BookTokItalia. TikTok, with its unique algorithm and its affordances, has facilitated the emergence of the #BookTokItalia phenomenon. This space, where predominantly young readers share book reviews, reading recommendations, and emotional reactions to books, shape not only reading trends but also the publishing market.

Using digital methods, specifically a combination of co-hashtag network analysis and content analysis, the research seeks to explore the question: *“how TikTok content tagged with #BookTokItalia contributes to the formation of digital consumer imaginaries around books, and in what ways this hashtag serves to platformise book culture in Italy”*.

The research is structured into four chapters. Chapter 1 provides a theoretical framework, introducing the platform model with an overview of big data and the process of datafication. These are the elements on which digital platforms and its related business model, platform capitalism, are based on. Then, a brief overview of the main types of platforms will be provided together with a digression about surveillance capitalism.

In Chapter 2 the focus is on platformisation of consumer culture, providing the theoretical framework necessary for analysing the phenomenon of BookTok in Chapter 4. This section defines platformisation and explains its key dimensions and tensions. To better frame the phenomenon, consumer culture theory and the concept of digital consumer imaginary will be explained.

Chapter 3 presents the methodological framework, starting with a discussion of digital methods and then narrowing to a qualitative approach. The chapter examines social media affordances, grammars and vernacular, which are critical elements in understanding platform interactions. These concepts detected in the research through two techniques, co-hashtag network analysis and content analysis.

Finally, Chapter 4 outlines the findings of the research. After a brief introduction to TikTok and book communities, the research questions are presented. This chapter offers a detailed overview of the dynamics of #BookTokItalia and its impact on the Italian publishing market.

This thesis aligns with an emerging field of studies on platformisation of consumer culture and aims to provide new insights into how digital platforms are redefining the way consumers interact with cultural objects, particularly books. The growing relevance of TikTok in the cultural landscape and its impact on the publishing industry make this research particularly significant, offering a reflection on how digital platforms can shape and influence entire cultural sectors.

CAP. 1 PLATFORM CAPITALISM

“The Fourth Industrial Revolution will affect the very essence of our human experience” Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum.

The advent of the twenty-first century has witnessed the emergence of several transformative digital technologies, profoundly altering societal dynamics, governmental paradigms, and commercial frameworks. This paradigm has led the World Economic Forum to coin the term ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’ to depict this new era characterized by an extraordinary advancement in technology (World Economic Forum, nd).

The Industrial Revolutions, which started with steam mechanization in the First Industrial Revolution, and progressed to mass production with electricity in the Second, and then automation driven by information technology in the Third, have brought about significant changes (World Economic Forum, nd). The impact of the evolution of digital technologies warrants the use of the term ‘revolution’ and with it both positive and negative consequences.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is mainly characterized by digital platforms, which are reshaping a diverse range of markets, the way of working, and new methods to create and generate value (Kenney and Zysman, 2016). In this chapter the main issues related to them will be explored, starting with a definition of big data and the process of datafication, which are the elements on which digital platforms are based on. Later, an analysis of the born of platform capitalism, a new business model based on digital platforms, with its facets and main characteristics. Then different types of platforms will be taken into account such as advertising platforms, cloud platforms, industrial platforms, product

platforms, and lean platforms. Finally, one of the most relevant issues concerning data privacy, surveillance capitalism, will be explored.

Big data and datafication

The exponential growth of digital technologies has fuelled digital revolution, which has as its main consequence the emergence of big data. The term big data encompasses a massive volume of structured and unstructured data produced every day by everyone through digital devices. Over the years many scholars have tried to define the characteristics of this new class of data, in 2001 Doug Laney highlighted volume, velocity, and variety. Later Statistical Analysis System added variability and complexity. Today the characteristics attributed to big data are more than 10, but the main ones are volume, velocity, variety, value, and variability (Kapil *et al.*, 2016). Big data are a huge amount (volume) of valuable (value) data, continuously (velocity) generated from every kind of source (variability) and every category, such as pictures, videos, audio, sensor data, etc.

This endless flow of data production has been made possible by the usage of open-source software and by important advancements in data storage, processing and sharing technologies and cloud computing. In particular, cloud computing enables users and enterprises to rent resources instead of having their own (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Papadimitropoulos, 2021). However, all these improvements have not only made collecting and managing vast amounts of data easier but also more cost-effective (Cukier and Mayer-Schoenberger, 2013; Liang *et al.*, 2022; Papadimitropoulos, 2021; Srnicek, 2017).

It's important to highlight that big data encompasses not only the size but also the ability to turn many aspects of people's lives into data thanks to the process of datafication.

Mejas and Couldry (2019: 3) define datafication as 'the combination of two processes: the transformation of human life into data through processes of quantification, and the generation of different kinds of value from data'.

Today data are so important and valuable that are considered "the new oil", big data are extracted from everyday human life through apps or platforms. But this process is not enough to create value, it is necessary to abstract, accumulate, and analyze data in order to provide fundamental insights to create micro-targeted ads, improve the consumer experience, and predict users' behavior to create a competitive advantage. Finally, the last step of the value creation process is the monetization of data which takes place through the sale of data to third parties or the sale of products or services directly to users (Mejas and Couldry, 2019).

Furthermore, when discussing data analysis, it's crucial to underline that big data changed the analysis approach in three main ways. Firstly, big data have replaced the traditional process of sampling because of the possibility of collecting all the information needed. Secondly, big data have enabled the possibility to be less accurate because, proportionally, given the abundance of data, some degree of inaccuracy can be accepted. Finally, big data have shifted the paradigm from causation to correlation, trying to understand what kind of relationship exists between two or more variables instead of understanding why something happens (Cukier and Mayer-Schoenberger, 2013).

Big data are so important that have affected different spheres: politics, society, economics, and the legal landscape. Firstly, the political area has fostered a more transparent governance and a more engaged relationship with citizens, also promoting active user participation. Secondly, big data, in addition to having changed the way we live, work, and interact with others, have created the so-called information society where information dominates all aspects of life,

assuming economic, cultural, and political value. Thirdly, regarding the economy, the abundance of data fuelled the rise of platform capitalism, a new form of capitalism based on the functioning of collecting data through platforms in order to create value. Finally, in the legal sphere issues related to data privacy, security, and ethical implications have been highlighted, especially by Shoshana Zuboff who coined the term surveillance capitalism.

The following paragraphs will delve deeper into the last two issues, related to platform capitalism and surveillance capitalism.

Datafication and Platform Capitalism

With the advent of digital technologies, companies have learned to extract, analyse, and use the immense volume of data produced by their digital infrastructures, such as platforms, apps, websites, and databases, to create a new business model, called platform capitalism. After all, Majer and Couldry (2019: 6) claim that ‘the process of datafication within capitalism is a process of abstracting and extracting life across various spaces to generate profit’.

On one side data are essential to serve different functions of capitalism such as competitiveness, outsourcing, optimization, and flexibility. On the other side, data are fundamental to feed the algorithms, which are the foundation of this new form of capitalism (Kenney and Zysman, 2016), because thanks to their implementation more and more specific products and services are generated and customized for the end user, generating additional profits; so, they come to create a real virtuous cycle (Srnicsek, 2017).

Naturally, along with the terms fourth industrial revolution, datafication, and platform capitalism, so many others are born. But for the purposes of this research, it is important to clarify some terms that often are used as synonyms of

platform capitalism such as digital economy, gig economy, sharing economy, and platform economy. Some characteristics, differences, and similarities will be explored for each of them.

The term digital economy encompasses the broader range of businesses that rely on internet, data, and digital technologies (Srnicsek, 2017). While gig economy, sharing economy, and platform economy are specific models within the digital economy.

The speed with which technologies advance dictates the pace for the development of this new area at the heart of the contemporary economy. Digital economy has an impact on production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services in a wide range of areas such as manufacturing, transportation, employment, environment, and healthcare.

Liang and her colleagues (2022) define gig, sharing, and platform economy as facets of platform capitalism, and their work aims to review various definitions provided by different authors for each term and provide an analysis of the main characteristics, differences, and similarities.

Firstly, thanks to the development of technology, gig economy emerged as a new market characterized by temporary, precarious, part-time, and freelance jobs with 'fragmented work schedules' (Kenney and Zysman, 2016: 63). This kind of work, in most cases, is done on platforms or apps and the underlying mechanism is that platforms offer 'ephemeral contracts' to maximize their profit and to minimize their responsibilities (Liang *et al.*, 2022: 315). Uber represents the best example to understand the gig logic, drivers are independent workers, and they can decide their working hours.

Secondly, the sharing economy, as the word itself says, provides the sharing of products, services, or resources thanks to the development of platforms, digital infrastructures, and intermediaries that enable transactions. This mechanism is clearly visible in Airbnb where everyone can rent their house or even just a room thanks to a platform able to connect all the hosts and travellers around the world.

Finally, platform economy encompasses all the economic activities done through a platform and facilitated by it. Platforms own the infrastructure and act as an intermediary for users' interactions. One example could be Spotify, a digital space where artists share their songs or podcasts with the users, making profits.

All these new forms of economy have developed thanks to the innovation of digital technologies and are closely reliant on them. Above all, the platform plays a crucial role and because of this gig economy, sharing economy and platform economy can be considered facets of platform capitalism.

Platform capitalism is an expression of platform economy characterized by the dominance of large companies that operate through a platform to capture value, extracting and analyzing data.

In addition, platforms are disrupting the traditional business models where companies compete for customers, platform capitalism offers a more participatory and seemingly equal system. In this digital version of capitalism, customers can directly interact with each other through online platforms, which facilitates the commercialization of goods and services (Papadimitropoulos, 2021).

Platforms and their characteristics

To comprehend this new model, it's crucial to start with a description of the platform and its functioning. Although there is not a clear and universal

definition, several researchers have tried to formulate one focusing on different aspects. For example, Gillespie (2010) has tried to give a definition by putting together four semantic areas: computational, architectural, figurative, and political. So, platforms are considered open infrastructures, on which users and product stances, facilitating the creation and usage of different kinds of applications. Kenney and Zysman (2016:65), emphasizing the technical aspect, consider 'the platform as a set of online digital arrangements whose algorithms serve to organize and structure economic and social activity'.

However, most of the scholars highlight the role of intermediation, defining platforms as digital ecosystems that act as intermediaries between different groups of users: on one side there are buyers and customers, on the other enterprises, advertisers, suppliers, and multinational corporations (Liang *et al.*, 2022; Olma, 2014; Papadimitropoulos, 2021; Poell *et al.*, 2019; Srnicek, 2017).

Platforms, lacking of tangible assets, are digital infrastructures that exploit users' resources. Airbnb exemplifies this model by earning rental fees without owning properties. However, the role of intermediaries is not enough to generate considerable profits, it is necessary that many people use the platform. And here comes into play the second feature of the platforms, namely the network effect.

The greater number of people who use digital platforms the more valuable it becomes for everyone else. This increased value attracts even more users, creating a cycle that leads to higher profits. For example, with more hosts and guests on Airbnb, users are more likely to use the app to find accommodations, which enhances the platform's visibility and generates other profit. So, creating an easy and efficient intermediation is fundamental to create a big network of people (Evans and Gawer, 2016; Langley and Leyshon, 2017; Srnicek, 2017).

Furthermore, this network effect can drive platforms towards monopolization, as only the most widely used apps tend to dominate the market (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Langley and Leyshon, 2017; Morozov, 2015; Srnicek, 2017).

To attract an increasing number of users, platforms continuously add more functions, deploying cross-subsidization, the third main feature of platform capitalism. Cross-subsidization consists of reducing the prices of a service or products, often even by offering them for free, and raising prices elsewhere. In this way, platforms can expand their user base, increase engagement, and monetize their offerings through various channels (Srnicek, 2017). This mechanism can be easily exemplified by all the platforms that provide basic services for free and additional features with premium subscriptions. For example, YouTube gives the opportunity, for a fee, to have no advertisements, to download videos, and to access exclusive content. Likewise, Spotify offers a premium account that removes ads and allows you to listen to music offline.

Additionally, an attractive and user-friendly design is crucial. Without an attractive interface, users are unlikely to engage with the platform or app. Platform owners financially incentivize developers to focus on design, aiming to create intuitive applications that enhance user satisfaction and engagement. These profits can then be reinvested in even more appealing designs, pursuing the platform's growth (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Langley and Leyshon, 2017).

In sum, platforms represent a new type of firm that provides a digital space to mediate between different user groups. Thanks to the network effects, they can become easily a monopoly, also employing cross-subsidization and enhancing a user-friendly design. So, all the characteristics are interconnected and mutually reinforcing to ensure the platforms' success (Srnicek, 2017).

To give a complete overview of platforms it is important to present also different types of platforms, particularly Srnicek (2017) identifies five different categories: advertising platforms, cloud platforms, industrial platforms, product platforms, and lean platforms.

Starting with the pioneers of the new business model of platform capitalism, advertising platforms have been able to leverage data collected through their infrastructure to not only improve their services but, above all, to generate revenue from advertising. Not all users' interactions are recorded to make a profit, only relevant information for advertisers. These platforms collect data in two ways, monitoring and recording online activities and through cookies, and exploiting the network effect, 'the more users interact with a site, the more information can be collected and used' (Srnicek, 2017: 35).

As previously mentioned, extracting and collecting data is not enough, there is the need to know how to best analyze them because they will be auctioned to advertisers. The more detailed the consumer information is, the higher the selling price will be and the more the platform will earn (Srnicek, 2017). This kind of platform is the most profitable and successful, with high incomes and dynamic growth.

Google is one of the most efficient advertising platforms because it collects data through its search engine and all its services such as Gmail, Google Calendar, and Google Drive. Once collected, the firm analyzes all the data to obtain insights from its users that will be used both to enhance its own services and to sell ad space to advertisers.

Together with the previous ones, cloud platforms have enabled the consolidation of the platform and its related business model, thanks to their rental model. These platforms own the hardware and the software and enable small

enterprises to rent them, reducing costs and time to build their own. Naturally, cloud platforms make a profit by collecting vast amounts of data from all companies that rent their digital infrastructure. In this field, Amazon Web Service (AWS) exemplifies perfectly the mechanism because it collects data by renting different kinds of cloud computing services such as 'on-demand services for servers, storage and computing power, software development tools and operating systems, and ready-made applications' (Srnicek, 2017: 37).

The third kind of platform is the industrial one, which develops the hardware and the software required to digitalize traditional enterprises. In particular, industrial platforms set up sensors and computer chips on products to make them internet-connected and collect data. The challenge is to create a universal standard of communication to make all the components interoperable, otherwise, it is difficult to extract and analyze data. This innovation reduces production costs and shifts goods into services. Today General Electric (GE) and Siemens are the major companies that develop industrial internet platforms (Srnicek, 2017).

The advancement of the Internet of Things and cloud computing has given rise to a new kind of business model, the 'on-demand platform' which comprehends product and lean platforms (Srnicek, 2017: 41).

The first ones revolutionize traditional business models by transforming conventional goods into services, using the platform, and making profits both with subscriptions and data. A well-known example is Spotify, which has redefined the music industry. After the crisis of the 90s, due to the possibility of downloading music for free, Spotify has managed to offer a service that allows users to access a lot of music content on-demand, instead of purchasing every single album. In this way, the platform has attracted millions of users earning

through premium subscriptions, but especially thanks to the profiling of people's tastes, through data collection, offering personalized music advice for each one.

On the contrary, lean platforms have tried to reduce at the minimum the ownership of products, basing their business on outsourcing to maximize their profit. The strength and the source of revenue for this type of platform is the platform itself. They adopt a 'hyper-outsourced model' where everything is outsourced, from workers to maintenance costs, capital, and training (Srnicsek, 2017: 43). This strategic approach has significantly reduced costs but has expanded the number of gig workers.

Regarding the importance of data in this type of business, they are fundamental to power and improve the functioning of algorithms, which in turn determine the success of the platform.

Uber and Airbnb best exemplify this mechanism, they do not own tangible assets, they outsource everything, and they make profits thanks to users' data and the enhancement of the algorithm. Uber relies on independent drivers, who own a personal car, as Airbnb relies on hosts who own accommodations. They are both intermediaries that just provide the digital infrastructure that enables the connection between users.

In summary, Srnicsek's five platform categories—advertising, cloud, industrial, product, and lean—highlight the diverse ways in which platforms operate and generate revenue in the digital economy. Each type exploits data and technology in distinct ways to create value and maintain competitive advantages.

Surveillance capitalism

The mechanism of collecting data to make a profit drives platforms to seek to collect an ever-increasing amount of data. In this landscape, the Internet of

Things (IoT) has emerged precisely to gather data from as many sources as possible (Srnicek, 2017). While these innovations offer various advantages, such as improved operational efficiency, enhanced customer experiences, and innovative solutions, they also raise concerns regarding data security and privacy. In particular, the sociologist Shoshana Zuboff coined the term surveillance capitalism, as a 'new logic of capital accumulation' (Zuboff, 2015:85).

However, it's crucial to recognize that the collection of data does not come only from new technologies. Rather, it stems from a multitude of sources, as cleared up by sociologist Shoshana Zuboff. These include economic transactions facilitated by digital devices, IoT sensors, databases curated by corporations or governments, surveillance cameras, both private and public, and user-generated content (Zuboff, 2015). Google is the pioneer of this mechanism of data accumulation, it uses all the data to enhance the quality of ads to attract more traffic on its search engine.

Zuboff (2015: 79) defines extraction as 'a one-way process, not a relationship... that occurs in the absence of dialogue or consent'. Moreover, the collection of data is welcomed by users thanks to the customization of the content that makes the platforms, following the analysis of all the data. Platform extrapolation of data from unaware users forms the basis of platform capitalism. Facebook is an efficient example of the combined action of extraction, on one side, and the logic of this new form of capitalism, on the other. Facebook aims to attract more and more users, who will spend a lot of time on the platform, providing increasingly accurate and detailed data (Bigo *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, the rapid advent of this new information era has prevented people from developing the right skills to protect their data. Today more and more users

are aware of the collection of personal data by the platform but do not know how they will be used and to whom they will be sold. Lack of transparency and accountability in data practices can erode trust and lead to legal challenges. Europe has started to regulate privacy issues with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), promoting transparency, and empowering individuals with greater control over their data through mechanisms such as consent management and data portability.

CAP. 2 PLATFORMISATION OF CONSUMER CULTURE

The first chapter highlighted how digital technologies are reshaping societal, governmental, and commercial paradigms, so much to talk about the Fourth Industrial Revolution. At the heart of this revolution are digital platforms that have given rise to the so-called platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2016) and its related surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2015).

Platform capitalism represents a new business model based on digital platforms, where the main source of revenue is data. These platforms are digital intermediaries specifically designed to extract, collect and analyse vast amounts of data produced every day by everyone through digital devices. This process of data extraction is pivotal for revenues because platform owners leverage users' data to enhance algorithms, increase platform traffic, create personalised advertisements, develop new products or services, and sell data to third parties. To maximise their profit, platforms need to create a digital space that attracts a large user base, encouraging interactions that produce easily traceable data, that will be used to predict users' behaviours and enhance marketing strategies.

It is essential to understand how these digital platforms influence not just the economic landscape but also the cultural and social dimensions of consumer behaviour. Over the years, digital platforms have attracted billions of users, consequently moving their consumer activities onto them. The socio-technical architecture of platforms shapes how consumers interact with and discuss consumption objects and brands. As a result, consumer culture has been gradually platformised (Duffy et al., 2019).

This chapter will delve into the concept of platformisation of consumer culture (Caliandro et al., 2024a,b) and build the theoretical framework necessary for

analysing this phenomenon in the book *Industry* in Chapter 4. The mechanisms through which platforms embed themselves into everyday life, influencing consumer behaviour, reshaping consumption patterns, and creating new cultural norms will be explored.

At the beginning, a foundational definition of platformisation is given, highlighting three main dimensions of platforms: infrastructural, economical, and governmental (Poell et al., 2019, 2022). Then, other definitions will be provided before focusing on platformisation of consumer culture. To better frame this phenomenon, consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) and the concept of digital consumer imaginary (Caliandro et al., 2024a,b) will be briefly explained, serving as the starting point to understand platformisation of consumer culture. Moreover, three main dimensions of this phenomenon will be explored: concentration, fragmentation, and contingency, along with four tensions: datafication VS liquification, standardisation VS ephemerality, interaction VS mediation, immateriality VS materiality (Caliandro et al., 2024b). These dichotomies do not have to be considered singularly but they are overlapping. Finally, in the conclusion, there will be a brief explanation of why this research will focus on social media platforms.

Platformisation

Deriving from the notion of platform, platformisation has been defined, by Poell and his colleagues, “as the penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life” (Poell et al., 2019: 5). This definition highlights the importance of keeping together the three main dimensions of platformisation: infrastructural, economical and governmental.

With the advent of platforms, digital infrastructure, the first dimension, has undergone some changes. User actions are, continually, transformed into data through a process known as datafication (Mejas and Couldry, 2019). These data are processed by algorithms for two main purposes: first, the collection of data allows the customization of content and advertising; and second, data is then sold to third parties. Moreover, the logic of algorithms influences the behaviour of users and companies that rely on social media for economic activities, because they need to tailor their communications to align with the platform's algorithmic logic. This dimension highlights how platforms create and expand data infrastructures, enabling the conversion of diverse human activities into data (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2019, 2022). For example, in the book industry, platforms like Amazon collect data on users' reading habits, preferences, and reviews. This data is then used to recommend books, personalise marketing advertisements, and guide publishers on trending genres and topics.

Regarding the second dimension, the economical one, platforms have transformed market structures from one-sided to two-sided or multi-sided markets (Poell et al., 2019). This shift has allowed platforms to leverage network effect, where the value of the platform depends on the number of users. So, the more users use the platform the more it will be valuable and will attract more users, creating a virtuous circle. This mechanism also contributes to market concentration, often resulting in a "winner-takes-all" scenario. Consequently, the platform landscape is dominated by five major players, known as GAFAM: Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft. Additionally, platforms have altered profit mechanisms, offering free use to attract more users, in exchange for user data (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2019, 2022). As Andrew Lewis says "If you are not paying for a product, you are the product."

In the book industry, Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) exemplifies this shift. It allows authors to self-publish e-books, transforming the traditional publishing market. Moreover, Amazon benefits from a large user base that attracts more authors to its platform, reinforcing its market dominance.

The governmental dimension focuses on the governance and regulation of content on platforms. This governance is twofold: public institutions set legal boundaries for managing platform content, while the platforms themselves implement strategies, guidelines, and data privacy policies to curate, publish, and monetise content. Public institutions' regulations aim to establish legal frameworks within which platforms must operate. In contrast, platforms exercise self-governance, deciding the types of content that can be created and shared, often influenced by their business models and the need to ensure a profitable and user-friendly environment (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Poell et al., 2019, 2022). For instance, in the book industry, platforms like Amazon and Google Books establish their own guidelines on the types of books that can be published or listed. They also have mechanisms to take down content that violates copyright or community guidelines, reflecting their role in content governance.

Nevertheless, the definition analysed above is not the only one. Helmond (2015) provides another perspective on platformisation, defining it as “the extension of social media platforms into the rest of the web and their drive to make external web data platform ready” (Helmond, 2015: 1). This definition focuses on the pervasive influence of platforms, highlighting how they have extended their reach and have integrated external web data to enhance their ecosystems. This broader view emphasises the role of platformisation in affecting the entire digital landscape.

Platformisation of consumer culture, CCT, and digital consumer imaginary

Over the years, various studies have been conducted on platformisation in the economical, psychological, educational, technological, political, medical, and cultural fields. In the latter, as Duffy and her colleagues (2019) highlight, research on platformisation has mostly focused on cultural industries, with less emphasis on how platforms' logic influences culture. This research gap led Caliandro and his colleagues (2024a,b) to theorise and investigate the concept of "platformisation of consumer culture". Starting from their research, this one has the aim to delve deeper into the concept, analysing platformisation in the book industry. Platformisation of consumer culture will be analysed from an anthropological perspective, such as a "complex set of values, symbols, identities, discourses, and narratives" that arise from the interaction between users' behaviour on the platform and platforms' affordances and infrastructure (Caliandro et al., 2024b : 6). It is relevant to underline that this relation is bidirectional: platforms influence users' actions with their affordances, but also users are able to shape them.

Some definitions of platformisation have been already presented but Poell and his colleagues provide an interesting one regarding culture: "the reorganization of cultural practices and imaginations around platforms" (Poell et al., 2019: 5). This definition points out the evolution of platforms, like social media, e-commerce websites, and content streaming services, as new cultural institutions. They are able to generate, curate, and distribute an endless stream of content that is "continuously reworked and repackaged" based on user feedback (Nieborg and Poell, 2018: 4275). This transformation impacts how cultural products are created, shared, and consumed, leading to new forms of engagement and interaction within consumer culture.

To further understand this transformation, Caliandro and his colleagues (2024b) apply consumer culture theory (CCT), which explores how consumption practices and cultural meanings are distributed, negotiated, and transformed within societal contexts. In 2005, Arnould and Thompson (2005) defined consumer culture as “an interconnected system of commercially produced images, texts, and objects that groups use to make collective sense of their environments and orient their experiences and lives” (2005: 869). Today consumer culture has been transformed by digital devices, in particular digital platforms that are reshaping and reconfiguring the system of meanings. The rise of digital platforms has enabled new forms of engagement and interaction, where consumers are both influenced by and influencers of the content and culture circulating within these spaces. Algorithms and platforms’ affordances curate and shape consumption, often determining what content is seen and how it is interpreted. In fact, consumer culture scholars highlight that today, it is not only people and products that influence culture, but also technology and digital platforms have a significant impact on it. So, consumer culture theory is a framework that can help analyse new forms of cultural production and consumption.

In addition to consumer culture theory, Caliandro and his colleagues (2024b) use the concept of socio-technical imaginary to talk about the so-called digital consumer imaginary, fundamental for understanding how consumer culture has been platformised. Jasanoff and Kim (2013: 190) define sociotechnical imaginaries as “powerful resources that help shape social responses to innovation”. There is a slight difference between social imaginary and sociotechnical imaginary because the former could be an accepted meaning in general while the latter concerns science and technology and “contribute towards shaping consumer or user responses” (Sorum and Fuentes, 2023: 28). For the aim of this research, the use of sociotechnical imaginary will be preferred because it

underlines the relation between technical properties of digital devices and norms of use that society establishes around it. Moreover, the concept of the digital consumer imaginary complements this analysis by examining how digital environments shape collective representations of consumer objects. A digital consumer imaginary is defined as “the cultural construction of identity, society, and reality elaborated and enacted by consumer through consumption objects” (Caliandro et al., 2024a: 17). These imaginaries serve as cultural resources that help consumers make sense of and enact consumer culture within digital platforms, which are the ground for making them visible, traceable and measurable. They have four main characteristics: are the result of the co-creation between human and non-human actors in the digital space, are shaped by platforms’ affordances, convey general discourse about consumption, and, finally, are constructed and reconstructed using the same technological tools and methods that researchers employ to study digital environments (Caliandro et al., 2024a).

By integrating CCT and the concept of digital consumer imaginary, Caliandro and his colleagues (2024a,b) offer a new perspective on how platformisation influences consumer culture. They highlight how digital platforms not only reorganise cultural practices but also shape the collective imaginations and identities of consumers. This comprehensive approach fills a critical gap in existing research, providing insights into the complex interaction between technology and culture in the digital platforms age.

Platformisation of consumer culture and its dimensions

To better frame this process of platformisation in consumer culture it is important to explore three distinctive dimensions of platforms: concentration, fragmentation, and contingency (Caliandro et al., 2024b).

Firstly, concentration refers to how platforms aggregate user behaviours and interactions within a single digital space, enabling behavioural prediction. Platforms aim to create an environment that attracts a considerable number of people to gain vast amounts of data to refine their prediction algorithms and propose highly relevant advertising. Additionally, platforms allow users to create and share content, increasing the number of prosumers, users who are both producers and consumers.

In response to this concentrated environment, users engage in what Scaraboto and Fischer (2024) define "platformance", a blend of "platform" and "performance." Platformance involves the presence of prosumers across multiple platforms, performing various roles, and continuously adjusting their strategies to align with each platform's affordances and algorithms. For example, a user might change the type of content produced to get more likes or followers, aligning with the platform's algorithmic logic. So, platformance allows users to change some platform elements and, at the same time, increases their platform dependence, especially for prosumers that earn through them. Consequently, platforms become essential to their success and visibility.

Secondly, fragmentation refers to the ability of platforms to divide and organise users into small communities, or "publics", around specific objectives or products. Arvidsson and Caliandro (2016), in their analysis of the brand community of Louis Vuitton on Twitter, have introduced the term "brand public", providing a clear distinction from brand communities. They define brand public as "an organised media space kept together by a continuity of heterogeneous and private practices centred on a mediation device, such as hashtag" (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016: 742). This definition highlights the role of mediation instead of interaction, typical of brand communities, and individuality instead of collective identity. This shift is attributed to platformisation and the specific affordances of social media

platforms. The term affordances refers to the characteristics of a social media platform that “enable and constrain specific uses of it” (Ronzyn et *al.*, 2022: 3178).

Another kind of affordance that has enhanced and expanded brand public is memes. Schöps and his colleagues (2024), applying meme theory, tried to examine how social media, particularly Instagram, shape cultural practices. They observed that users follow memetic logic, the pattern of creating and sharing memes, which influences and reinforces users’ behaviours. This dynamic leads to a consumer culture where imitation and standardised expressions are prevalent. Therefore, a platformised consumer culture emerges, where the nature of content and interaction is strongly shaped by the platform's design and the collective behaviours of its users.

Finally, contingency refers to the unpredictable and ever-changing nature of consumer interactions and attention on digital platforms. This unpredictability is driven by the dynamic content environment, platform affordances, algorithmic influences, and the metrics that measure and shape user behaviour (Caliandro et *al.*, 2024b). Firstly, social media environment is dominated by viral contents that capture temporary users' attention, but this can change quickly, making consumer behaviours contingent. Secondly, platform's affordances, especially stories and live streams influence contingent behaviour. For example, stories are available only for 24 hours, prompting users to engage quickly before the content disappears. Live streams create real-time engagement, making interactions immediate and spontaneous. Thirdly, algorithm's logic influences what users see and interact with, prioritising certain types of content based on previous users' profiling and on engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, and comments. This, also, creates a feedback loop where consumer attention is constantly redirected based on algorithm mechanisms. Finally, metrics, such as likes, shares, views, and

comments, create cultural hierarchies, shaping collective understandings and users' attention. This attitude towards contingency means that cultural narratives and popular contents or topics are constantly changing.

So, concentration, fragmentation, and contingency are three dimensions of platforms that can help understand platformisation of consumer culture, highlighting how platforms shape and are shaped by user behaviours. The process of platformisation allows platforms to “become the milieu of consumer discourse, offering a variety of affordances and formats for users to share their views and express their feelings in relation to consumption objects or brands” (Caliandro et al., 2024a: 233).

Platformisation of consumer culture and its tensions

Platformisation of consumer culture is characterised by four tensions: datafication VS liquification, standardisation VS ephemerality, interaction VS mediation, immateriality VS materiality (Caliandro et al., 2024b). The following paragraphs will provide an explanation of each tension.

Regarding the first tension, between datafication and liquification, literature is struggling with the disempowering and empowering potential of platforms. Datafication, as already said, involves the standardisation of consumer behaviours to facilitate surveillance and control. This process transforms users' activities into data for marketing and advertising purposes, disempowering consumers. Conversely, liquification fosters the empowering of users through "liquid forms of consumption (access-based, ephemeral, de-materialized, individualized) which potentially emancipate consumers from social and geographical boundaries" (Airoldi and Rokka, 2022: 4). It is important for platforms that users feel free to

behave because, otherwise, the entire system would fail. Airoidi and Rokka (2022) have tried to overcome this tension with the concept of "algorithmic articulation", a process of mediation where algorithms shape consumers' activities and, at the same time, consumers can alter their logic.

In the book industry, an example of this tension can be seen in the action of Amazon. On one hand, the platform employs datafication, by tracking user behaviours, to create detailed consumer profiles, which will be then used to refine recommendation algorithms and predict trends or specific preferences. This enables Amazon to disempower consumers, controlling their choices and actions. On the other hand, Amazon Kindle service offers highly flexible access to books, fostering the so-called liquification. Users can buy or download e-books from anywhere, or subscribe to Kindle Unlimited, a service that provides unlimited access to an extensive library of books for a monthly fee. So, these two components coexist and interact within platform ecosystems, creating a complex landscape for consumer behaviour.

The second tension, strongly linked to the first, is between standardisation and ephemerality. Standardisation refers to the mechanism used by platforms to conform users' practices to better datafy their interactions. This process creates "a sort of path dependency" where platforms decide which content is relevant and which may be viral in order to guide users in that direction (Caliandro et al., 2024b). To achieve this goal, platforms exploit memetic logics, which is based on replication and imitation (Schöps et al., 2024), inviting users to reproduce standardised content. Platform's algorithms reward content that contributes to standardisation in a way that expands user engagement and generates more data. While contributing to meme production can empower consumers, it also datafies their interactions, enabling surveillance, a return to the first tension.

Meanwhile, standardisation of content has introduced a significant level of ephemerality, defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as “the quality or state of lasting only for a short time”. Many contents gain rapid popularity only to disappear just as quickly. But not only the type of content produces ephemerality, it is also the platform's affordances. This rapid transition of ephemeral trends contributes to the fleeting nature of digital consumer imaginaries that influence consumer culture. Consumption practices become integral to trends and are used to seek attention and virality.

In the book industry, this tension is evident in trends on TikTok, where certain books can go viral through memes, creating volatile consumer imaginaries. These trends can increase sales a lot, but popularity is often short and lasts for the time of the trend. This demonstrates how the interplay between standardisation and ephemerality shapes consumer behaviour and cultural production in the digital age.

Regarding the third tension, digital platforms are characterised by the coexistence of mediation and interaction (Caliandro et al., 2024a,b). Understanding this tension is crucial to comprehend how digital platforms influence consumer behaviours and cultural trends. Mediation refers to the role of platforms as intermediaries between content creators and users. It occurs through two main mechanisms: algorithms and mediation devices. The former shapes what users can see and their perception about it, algorithms represent similar content that the user has already appreciated, creating a limited knowledge environment. The latter refers to mentions and hashtags, typical affordances of digital platforms. While interaction refers to the possibility for users to interact directly with contents and people, through likes or comments, or also actively producing

contents. This opportunity has a strong influence on consumer choices and behaviours.

To exemplify this tension, consider the phenomenon of book recommendations on social media platforms. Regarding mediation, algorithms promote books based on a user's past interests and interactions, and mediation devices, such as hashtags, can cluster books, enhancing research. In terms of interaction, users can directly express their interests, create their own reviews or recommendations, and engage with similar content through positive interactions. This interplay between algorithmic mediation and user interaction shapes the overall experience and visibility of book recommendations on these platforms.

The last tension regards immaterial and material dimensions. At first glance, the process of platformisation of consumer culture is immaterial, but this is not the case. The material dimension is fundamental in the diffusion of trends because to participate in certain trends it is necessary the physical possession of the product.

A clear example can be found in the book industry, engaging in reading challenges on social media requires the physical book to post photos, share reviews, or join discussions. This tension highlights the importance of the material sphere in cultural spread, illustrating how material products are integral to both their visibility and impact, especially through trends.

All these tensions do not have to be considered singularly but they are overlapping and are fundamental to study and understand platformisation of consumer culture.

Platformisation of consumer culture on social media platforms

The phenomenon of platformisation of consumer culture encompasses a wide range of digital platforms, but this research will focus on social media platforms, with a particular emphasis on TikTok. Social media platforms are a representative example of this phenomenon for several reasons.

Firstly, social media have become search engines where users actively seek information about products, brands, and services. These platforms enable users to explore reviews, compare options, and access detailed information. In addition, social media facilitate the sharing of personal consumption experiences, allowing users to post reviews, unboxings, and recommendations, which collectively shape consumer perceptions and trends.

Secondly, social media platforms foster interaction between users with similar interests. They provide spaces for discussions, communities, and collaborations around shared consumption experiences. This interaction is not limited to casual exchanges; it also includes more structured forms of engagement such as brand-sponsored content and influencer campaigns, which significantly impact consumer attitudes and behaviours.

Furthermore, the profound influence of social media on consumer culture has prompted a significant shift in marketing and advertising strategies. Brands and advertisers have adapted their approaches to the features of social media with targeted ads, influencer collaborations, and viral marketing campaigns. The ability to engage directly with audiences and leverage user-generated content has transformed traditional marketing, making social media an indispensable tool for consumer engagement.

In summary, social media platforms exemplify the phenomenon of platformisation of consumer culture thanks to their capacity to influence consumer behaviour and shape trends. In the next chapters, the case study of #BookTok will be analysed to provide a further step in the field of platformisation of consumer culture, with a focus on the book industry. The aim is to investigate how TikTok has platformised book culture and try to identify which digital consumer imaginaries users employ.

CAP. 3 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Previous chapters have shown the emergence of new digital technologies, in particular digital platforms, that are reshaping economical, governmental, infrastructural and social interactions. So, along with these innovations has emerged the need to find a new way to study the digital environment and its interaction within social science. To fill this gap Richard Rogers, the founder of Digital Methods Initiative, tried to develop a new methodological framework, digital methods.

In this chapter, the concept of digital methods will be explored, highlighting how this new methodology can help researchers with a series of tools and strategies to analyse online spaces. Later, the chapter will discuss key principles of digital methods, such as “follow the medium,” which encourages researchers to study digital environments by engaging with their native properties rather than adapting traditional methods. This will be contrasted with virtual methods, which repurpose offline techniques like interviews and surveys for online research.

Additionally, the chapter will delve into the challenges and limitations of digital methods, including their struggle to capture deeper contextual nuances of online behaviour. So, it will be proposed to adopt a qualitative approach to digital methods that combine digital methods to qualitative research techniques. This combined methodology is made of three main strategies that will be further explained: follow the natives, follow the medium, and follow the thing. Ethical considerations, particularly around privacy and consent in online research, will also be addressed.

By the end of the chapter, the use of the qualitative approach to digital methods will be presented as the best methodology to study platformisation of consumer

culture. It enables better investigation of social media affordances, grammars and vernaculars that shape and influence cultural production on social media platforms. Lastly, a brief explanation of the two research techniques that will be used for the research in the next chapter will be provided.

Digital methods

The rise of the Internet and social media platforms has introduced a new methodological dilemma: how to study these new digital environments and the interactions they foster. Traditional research methods are limited, they cannot comprehend the complexity and dynamics of online spaces, leading to the need to find a new research approach. Richard Rogers, recognized as the father of digital methods, has been at the forefront of addressing this challenge. Through his work and the foundation of the Digital Methods Initiative (DMI), Rogers has provided a comprehensive toolkit for analysing digital media. The DMI offers researchers a suite of free research tools, theoretical frameworks, scientific studies, and case studies, all designed to facilitate the study of digital phenomena in their native environments.

Richard Rogers initiated his research program with the idea that “the Internet is not only an object of study, but also a source” (2009: 8). With digital methods he launched a new research stream able to bridge the gap between the real and the virtual. By considering the Internet as “a research site where one can ground findings about reality”, Rogers introduced the concept of online groundedness where “claims about society are grounded in the online” (Rogers, 2010: 243). This approach reshapes the way researchers study and interpret societal phenomena, recognizing the Internet's crucial influence on contemporary social dynamics. With the huge amounts of data produced by Internet and digital platforms, it becomes necessary to leverage this data to further unpack social phenomena.

Digital methods, as defined by Rogers (2017), are “the deployment of online tools and data for the purposes of social and medium research” (2017:75). Originally emerging from the study of political issues, digital methods have become indispensable for social research. Rogers further explains that online methods encompass “an array of techniques from the computational and information sciences – crawling, scraping, indexing, ranking and so forth– that have been applied to and redeveloped for the web” (2017:76).

One of the foundational principles of digital methods is “follow the medium”, it helps researchers to fully take advantage of this kind of methods. Following the medium means studying digital environments by engaging with their inherent properties and behaviours, instead of merely applying traditional methods to digital contexts. By following the medium, researchers can uncover insights that are deeply embedded in the digital environment itself, aligning perfectly with the concept of online groundedness, where the digital world serves as both the source and the foundation for understanding contemporary society (Rogers, 2009/2010/2017).

Digital methods employ diverse strategies both to collect data, such as with web scraping, API calling, crawling, indexing and ranking, and to analyse them, including social network analysis, content, and sentiment analysis. These methods are able to show how digital infrastructures shape social interactions, information flows, and cultural trends. Digital methods are in contrast with virtual methods, which adapt traditional research techniques to digital environments such as interviews, questionnaires or participant observation.

Nevertheless, digital methods do not have to be considered as the only methodological research to analyse digital environments and neither the best approach. They have to be combined with traditional, virtual, and ethnographic

methods to provide the most complete understanding of the subject research. Moreover, digital methods are not always the best way of research because of their limitations. They often struggle to capture the deeper motivations and contextual nuances behind online behaviours, easily discoverable with qualitative research methodologies such as interviews or focus groups, which are traditional methods. This constraint underscores the importance of combining digital methods with traditional and virtual methods to create a more comprehensive research approach.

However, the application of digital methods brings significant ethical considerations, particularly regarding privacy, consent, and the mistreatment of personal data. Information available online often includes sensitive personal data, making it compulsory for researchers to navigate these ethical material carefully. Researchers must ensure that their methods comply with ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent or safeguarding individuals' privacy by omitting the publication of sensitive data within research.

Despite these challenges, digital methods represent a transformative shift in the research landscape, offering unprecedented opportunities to explore the complexities of digital culture and society. When combined thoughtfully with traditional and ethnographic approaches, digital methods become indispensable tools, enabling a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of our increasingly interconnected world.

Qualitative approach to digital methods

Given the limitations of digital methods in capturing deeper motivations and contextual implications, Caliendo and Gandini (2017) suggested adopting a qualitative approach to digital methods. By combining qualitative research

techniques, such as in-depth interviews, ethnography, and participant observation, with digital methods like web scraping, social network analysis, and sentiment analysis, this approach offers a more nuanced understanding of cultural processes in digital media.

In the following paragraphs, the three main research strategies foundational to a qualitative approach to digital methods will be explored, starting with the motto “follow the natives” (Latour, 2007), then explaining the need to combine it with the concept of “follow the medium” (Rogers, 2009/ 2010/ 2017) and concluding with “follow the thing”.

“Follow the natives” is a motto coined by Latour (2007), one of the founders of the Actor-Network Theory, which is a sociological approach that explores the “complex relationship between humans and machines in their everyday life as well as their interaction in the coconstruction of social reality” (Caliandro, 2018: 8). Latour invites researchers to follow and study the practices through which both human and nonhuman actors create and maintain social order, as well as the categories they use to explain and justify their actions and beliefs. In order to deeply understand socio-cultural processes in the digital space it is not enough to follow the medium, as suggested by Rogers (2009), it is necessary to understand what users produce with their online behaviours. Caliandro and his colleagues (2024a) suggest replacing the term natives with “users”, acknowledging the dual meaning proposed by Latour (2007), where a "user" refers to both human and nonhuman actors. Users are not merely consumers of content, they actively shape online communities, influence communication and drive interactions. This active participation emphasises the importance of understanding users’ practices and their meaning.

As previously explained, the principle "follow the medium" advocates for studying digital environments by engaging with their inherent properties and behaviours rather than applying traditional methods to digital contexts. The medium, with its specific affordance, shapes users' communication, interaction and community formation. Furthermore, this approach aligns perfectly with the concept of online groundedness, where the digital environment is both the source and the methodology to understand socio-cultural phenomenon.

Hence, by combining "follow the user" and "follow the medium", researchers have two useful strategies to investigate digital environments. The first principle, "follow the user", allows scholars to observe and understand "the online social formations emerging from different practices of the use of digital devices enacted by users as well as the meanings they attribute to activities deploying such social formations". While the second principle, "follow the medium", enables researchers to observe and understand "the processes of online communication structuring enacted by social media affordances and digital devices" (Caliandro, 2018: 9).

Furthermore, in this landscape, both human and nonhuman actors are considered as "social coresearchers" because they provide the digital material that the scholar will use to analyse "digital forms of life" (Caliandro, 2018). This recognition of nonhuman actors, such as algorithms, platforms, and digital tools, as active participants in the research process reflects the growing importance of technology in shaping social realities.

Therefore, by following both the medium and the users, researchers do not have to identify a community to follow, but they have to adopt an ethnographic approach focused on mapping users' practices across various digital

environments. This approach can be further enhanced by incorporating a third strategy: follow the thing, or even better “follow the traces”. Caliandro and his colleagues (2024a: 31) suggest replacing “things” with “traces” because “all digital data can be considered as digital traces” left by users participating online. This shift is due to the process of datafication and platformisation, which have transformed all users' interactions and actions into data that can be traced, analysed and interpreted.

Following the traces involves tracking the circulation of digital artefacts, such as posts, comments, hashtags, or digital objects, across various social media platforms. These traces provide a rich source of data for understanding how social formations emerge, evolve, and dissolve in the digital space. By analysing the digital traces left by users, researchers can disclose important insights about consumer culture, such as trends, influencers, communities, products and brands.

Thus, incorporating all these principles, scholars are provided with a comprehensive strategy that allows them to follow “the circulation of an empirical object within a given online environment or across different online environments, and observing the specific social formations emerging around it from the interactions of digital devices and users” (Caliandro, 2018: 10).

Social media affordances, grammar and vernaculars

So, the qualitative approach to digital methods is the best method for this research that aims at expanding research about platformisation of consumer culture, focusing on the book culture. Furthermore, this kind of approach is the

most suitable to study social media affordances, which are crucial elements for understanding social and cultural dynamics in digital environments.

The concept of affordances refers to “a set of contextual constraints and props that shape the usage of technology, which emerge at the intersection between the devices’ properties and the users’ perception of their utility” (Caliandro and Anselmi, 2021: 3). In the context of social media platforms, affordances arise where the technical architecture of a platform meets the practices that a specific group uses to communicate a specific idea or product. Some examples of affordances are tags, shares, likes, comments, and hashtags, all of which influence how content is created, circulated, and consumed.

To unpack the influence of social media affordances on socio-cultural processes, it is essential to consider the interaction between two dimensions: grammars (Gerlitz and Rieder, 2018) and vernaculars. For Gerlitz and Rieder (2018: 531) grammars are “sets of predefined options ... such as tweets, retweets, replies, mentions, or hashtags”. So, the concept of grammars refers to how every social media platform “constrains activities into specific units of actions and provides the very means to perform such actions” (Caliandro and Anselmi, 2021: 3). A clear example on TikTok is the duet function that allows users to create videos that play side-by-side with an existing video. This feature shapes how users interact by encouraging collaborative content creation.

On the other hand, vernaculars, drawing from Burgess’s (2006) notion of vernacular creativity, refer to the everyday, non-elite forms of cultural production that emerge among users. These are not professional or commercial forms of expression but rather creative practices that reflect the users’ cultural and social contexts. Vernaculars are dynamic and continuously evolve as users interact with one another and with the platform’s affordances. On platforms like TikTok, vernaculars might include specific trends, memes, or styles of video creation that

resonate with the community. These practices are deeply tied to the platform's affordances and grammar but are driven by the creativity and agency of the users themselves.

Vernacular creativity, as described by Burgess (2006), involves the recombination of available cultural resources, both material, such as content, and immaterial, such as genre conventions or shared knowledge, in ways that are both familiar and innovative. This process allows users to engage with and reinterpret popular culture within their everyday lives, making it accessible and meaningful within their own social contexts.

Gibbs and colleagues (2015: 257) argue that “every social media platform comes to have its own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics” which together constitute a platform’s vernacular. Platform vernaculars are not only creative and narrative representations made by users, but they are also shaped by the “specificities of the platform, its material architecture, and the collective cultural practices that operate on and through it” (Gibbs et al., 2015: 258). Additionally, while these vernaculars are particular to each social media platform, they often share elements with others, demonstrating the fluidity of digital culture as practices migrate and evolve across different platforms.

So, the combined study of social media affordances, grammars and platform vernaculars enables researchers to better operationalise, trace and measure digital consumer culture, with a particular focus on digital consumer imaginaries (Caliandro et al., 2024a). As already mentioned in the previous chapter, digital consumer imaginaries are cultural constructions made by consumers through shared visions, expectations, and understandings of products and consumption that circulate within digital spaces. These imaginaries are not static, they are

constantly shaped by the evolving interactions between platform affordances and user practices. Digital consumer imaginaries are essential to understand digital consumer culture.

Network and content analysis

As already mentioned, the objective of this research is to investigate platformisation of culture in the book industry using a combination of traditional and digital methods. In order to achieve this goal two main techniques will be used: network analysis and content analysis (Caliandro and Gandini, 2017/2019).

Network analysis is a method used to study the relations between entities, often represented as a graph composed of nodes and edges. In this framework, nodes can represent different elements depending on the type of analysis: people in social network analysis, words in semantic network analysis, and hashtags in co-hashtag analysis. While edges represent the connection between entities, which can be either directed, indicating a one-way relation from node A to node B, or undirected when no directional information is provided. Additionally, edges can convey attributes that provide further insight into the characteristics of the network, such as the strength of a connection or the popularity of a node.

The key measures in network analysis are centrality and modularity. Centrality is a measure that enables the researcher to understand which is the most important and central node in the network. This measure comprehends different metrics such as degree, in-degree, out-degree, betweenness and closeness centrality. Degree centrality counts the number of links connected to a node, in-degree measures the number of incoming connections, while out-degree captures the outgoing connections. Betweenness centrality measures the presence of a specific node in the shortest path between two nodes, highlighting its role as a

bridge or intermediary. Closeness centrality measures the average distance from one node to all the other nodes of the network, indicating how quickly information can spread from that node to others.

Modularity is another essential measure, used to detect clusters or communities within a network. It quantifies how densely connected nodes are within clusters compared to nodes outside of them. High modularity suggests that the network is divided into distinct sub-communities or topics, providing valuable insights into how conversations are organised and interconnected in the digital environment. Content analysis is one of the best research techniques to uncover the socio-cultural meanings embedded within texts. The term "text" in this context is broadly defined, adopting a semiotic perspective and, so, including various forms of communication such as books, images, sounds, films, videos, tweets, and more. Content analysis considers both the manifest and latent content of text by categorising, tabulating, and evaluating their symbols and themes (Krippendorff, 2012). There are two approaches to content analysis: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative approach emphasises the counting and statistical analysis of symbolic units within a text. In contrast, the qualitative approach, often referred to as ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987), focuses on understanding the deeper meanings and contexts of the content, interpreting the cultural and social significance of the text.

A key distinction between these approaches lies in their methodological processes. In quantitative content analysis, the steps are linear and sequential: formulating the research question, defining coding categories, collecting data, sampling, analysing results, and finally interpreting the findings. This structured approach ensures a clear and systematic examination of the text. On the other

hand, ethnographic content analysis is more flexible and iterative; the research steps are not fixed and can be revisited as new insights emerge, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the content (Caliandro and Gandini, 2017).

Although network analysis and content analysis are often considered as traditional research methods, they can be enhanced using digital tools and techniques. With the advent of data extraction tools from social media platforms, the ability to collect and analyse metadata, such as hashtags, has greatly expanded this research methodology. Organising this data into structured datasets and employing advanced digital tools for analysis and visualisation enables researchers to discover insights that were previously difficult to detect. These enhancements allow network and content analysis to leverage the power of digital methods, making them more effective in exploring complex digital environments.

In the next chapter the research will be conducted using both techniques to gain a deeper understanding of digital consumer imaginaries within the book culture. Co-hashtag analysis will be employed to identify communities within the book culture, thanks to the modularity measure. The emphasis on hashtags is due to their role as key affordances in mapping cultural imaginaries. Following this, content analysis will broadly explore the socio-cultural imaginaries present within these communities, providing a comprehensive understanding of the digital consumer landscape in the book industry.

CAP. 4 CASE STUDY: #BOOKTOKITALIA

In this chapter, platformisation of consumer culture in relation to books will be explored, focusing specifically on the case study of #BookTokItalia.

At the beginning an overview of TikTok's rise and main characteristics along with a brief explanation of books communities' evolution will be provided. Later, the research methodology and its goals will be explained to better understand the results. Through this case study, this work aims to understand the broader implications of platformisation of consumer culture on books and discover which digital consumer imaginaries characterise book culture.

TikTok

TikTok is a popular social media platform that has revolutionised the way people create, share, and engage with short-form video content. It was launched in 2016 by the Chinese company ByteDance with the name Douyin, rebranded in 2017 as TikTok. This innovative social media platform became one of the most downloaded apps in the last years, in particular it gained high popularity in 2020 with 1.035 million users compared with its 652 in 2019. In 2023, the number of active users on the platform was approximately 1.9 billion users globally, with almost 70% of people between 18 and 34 years old (What's the big data, 2023), so it is one of the most used social media apps among Gen Z and Millennials.

TikTok popularity can be attributed to two main factors: Covid-19 pandemic and TikTok features. Firstly, the Covid-19 pandemic forced millions of people to stay at home, leading to an increase in social media usage. TikTok has been able to emerge as an innovative digital space to entertain users through the creation of videos, dances, memes and challenges. Secondly, the platform has managed to combine and enhance the main features of other social media platforms, creating

an even better product. On TikTok, users can easily find and connect with communities, unlike on Twitter; they can access shorter and more engaging videos than on YouTube; and “the content is not as self-righteous or preachy as Facebook and filtered or polished as Instagram” (Jerasa and Boffone, 2021: 220).

Initially, TikTok allowed users to create videos of 2-60 seconds. Later, in response to user demand, the time limit was extended to three minutes in 2021 and then to ten minutes in 2022. These changes characterise TikTok’s attitude toward innovation to attract new users. Another variation concerns the type of videos because TikTok became famous for music and dance videos, but today it hosts a wide array of content, including cooking tutorial, political discourses, humorous skits, educational videos, challenges, trends, beauty and fashion videos, life hacks, storytime and vlogs, fitness, animal, and more. Users can also experiment with different video formats such as duets, stitches, and live streams, all enhanced with music, effects, and filters (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022). Moreover TikTok provides editing tools to allow all users to create creative and original content in a simple and fast way.

But the most unique feature that enabled TikTok to become one of the most popular apps in the last few years is its sophisticated algorithm, which curates the feed called "For You Page" (FYP). Schellewald (2021: 1438) defines FYP as an “endless stream of TikTok clips selected by the platform’s algorithms do so by observing and reinforcing a user’s past viewing habits”. Unlike other social media platforms, TikTok’s homepage is not a feed that displays content from friends or followed pages, but it is a collection of videos created by the algorithm, according to user’s preferences. The algorithm recommends content based on three key factors: user interactions, content information, and user information. The first one regards actions such as likes, comments, shares, and whether a video is watched

fully or skipped. The second one comprehends sounds, hashtags, and the number of views in the user's country. The last one concerns "device settings, language preference, location, time zone and day, and device type" (TikTok, nd).

Furthermore, TikTok's design plays a crucial role in its addictive appeal. The For You Page embraces the entire screen while the icons for comments, likes, follow, shares are small and "presented as secondary to the content presented by the algorithm" (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022: 5). This design choice, combined with the algorithm's accuracy, keeps users engaged for hours, scrolling through an endless feed of personalised content. As a result, the FYP has become the most popular feature of TikTok, strengthening its leader position in the social media landscape.

Another important feature that has a profound impact on communication and interaction processes is TikTok's tendency toward viral and memetic contents (Caliandro et al., 2024a; Zulli and Zulli, 2022). Zulli and Zulli (2022) have demonstrated how TikTok's design and logic encourage imitation and replication, spreading standardised video contents that impact on socio-cultural processes. Not only the kind of video produced, often with popular sound or effects, influence imitation but also "the user signup process, default page, icons and video-editing features" are essential elements to spread memes (Zulli and Zulli, 2022: 1872). Memes are defined as "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience" or as "groups of content items that were created with an awareness of each other and share common characteristics" (Shifman, 2013: 367). Additionally, the process of replication and imitation fosters the creation of online networks that Zulli and Zulli (2022) defined as imitation publics.

In recent years, TikTok has also evolved unexpectedly into a popular search engine, especially among Gen Z (Cavender, 2022; Huang, 2022). Unlike traditional search engines like Google, which rely on text queries and indexed web pages, TikTok leverages its video content and the power of its algorithm to show relevant videos. The most researched topics are video's recipes, restaurants and travel recommendations, but young users are increasingly expanding their field of research, looking for news, workouts, tutorials, and reviews. With its visually and engaging format, TikTok offers a more dynamic and immersive search experience. The platform's search functionality is enhanced by its use of hashtags, sounds, and keywords, which help categorise and connect related content, making it easier for users to find what they're looking for. As a result, TikTok is not only competing with other social media platforms, but it is also becoming a "one-stop shop for content" as affirmed by the director of the internet and technology research department at Pew Research Center, Lee Rainie (Huang, 2022).

So, after the presentation of the main features of TikTok that have contributed to its unique social media experience, it is essential to delve into how these elements converge within specific communities, particularly in the case of #BookTokItalia, where they can influence book culture in Italy.

BookTok

BookTok is a TikTok subculture, where readers, authors, and creators share their love for books and reading. However, it is not the first online book community to gain significant popularity. The birth of online book communities can be traced firstly on YouTube with BookTube, which obtained popularity around 2011-2012 (Reddan, 2022). BookTube is characterised by creators who aim to offer a more authentic and personal approach to books, in contrast to traditional media. To achieve this, BookTubers actively engage with their audiences through a variety

of interactive content. Examples include Q&A videos where creators answer users' questions about both literature and their personal lives, as well as videos that address comments left on their YouTube channels. This constant interaction fosters a deep connection between the creators and their audience, making the community feel more intimate (Reddan, 2022).

Following the rise of BookTube, another book community emerged on Instagram, known as Bookstagram. This community is famous for its emphasis on aesthetics, where the #bookstagram hashtag groups beautiful and curated images of books with carefully designed backgrounds. These visually appealing posts celebrate reading as a desirable and aspirational activity, creating a community that connects readers through the shared appreciation of books and aesthetics (Reddan, 2022).

The BookTok community, which began to emerge in early 2020 alongside the rapid rise of TikTok itself (Chaudry, 2022; TikTok, 2021), represents a fusion of the content styles found on BookTube and Bookstagram. On TikTok, creators have adopted and combined various content formats from these earlier communities, including book reviews, recommendations, unboxing videos showcasing bookshop hauls, videos of bookshelves (often called “shelfies”), TBR (to-be-read) lists, and videos that show reading habits (Low et al., 2023). One of the most popular and distinctive categories of content within BookTok, according to Reddan (2022), involves creators sharing their emotional reactions to books. Additionally, this type of video has made several books popular, also rediscovering old classics like the *Song of Achilles* and increasing sales of these books (Flood, 2021).

Since its birth in early 2020, the BookTok community has rapidly grown into one of TikTok's most influential subcultures (TikTok, 2022), gaining over 165 billion views by 2023. The platform's ability to combine the authenticity of BookTube with the visual appeal of Bookstagram, while also introducing a new dimension of emotional engagement, has turned BookTok into a place to rely on within the book industry.

BookTok is not only capturing the attention of Gen Z but is also revolutionising the publishing industry by launching new author and driving book sales to unprecedented levels (TikTok, 2022). It is also renewing interest in reading, especially for the young adult and contemporary fiction genres, prompting publishers to rethink their marketing strategies and capitalise on this trend (Chaudry, 2022; Wiederhold, 2022).

BookTok content tends to focus on a relatively small selection of books (Chaudry, 2022; Flood, 2021), often referred to as "BookTok books." These titles have become so popular on the platform that they are almost synonymous with BookTok itself. These books are predominantly drawn from the young adult and romance genres, reflecting the tastes and interests of the community.

In response to BookTok's influence, bookstores have introduced a dedicated category on bookshelves for "BookTok books" and reading lists across the internet highlighting these titles (Chaudry, 2022). BookTok's cultural impact extends beyond the digital sphere, as evidenced also by TikTok's role as the Official Entertainment Partner for the Italian Book Fair, "Salone del Libro 2024." This partnership underscores TikTok's growing significance in the broader cultural landscape (TikTok, 2024a).

Moreover, TikTok has further incremented its influence by launching the TikTok Book Awards, where the community can vote for winners across seven categories: “Book of the Year,” “Romance,” “Revival,” “Adaptation to Movies and TV Series,” “BookTok Creator of the Year,” “Publisher of the Year,” and “Author of the Year” (TikTok, 2024b). The voting process has been guided by a pre-selection carried out by an exceptional jury, led by Annalena Benini, the director of the Salone del Libro (TikTok, 2024a). This initiative highlights how BookTok is not only shaping the reading habits of a generation but is also becoming a major player in the literary and cultural sectors.

Considering the profound impact of BookTok on the book industry, this research aims to delve deeper into the dynamics of this community to explore the broader implications of platformisation in consumer culture and the formation of digital consumer imaginaries. In recent years, scholars have begun to investigate this phenomenon from various perspectives. Merga (2021) examined how the BookTok community on TikTok provides insights into young people's reading engagement and community building, with implications for enhancing libraries' readers' advisory services. Jerasa and Boffone (2021) focused on how BookTok is increasing digital literacies, suggesting its potential use in classrooms by teachers. Low et al. (2023) investigated how algorithmic awareness influences cultural production through the hashtag #BookTok. Additionally, Maddox and Gill (2023) explored how user practices and app features contribute to establishing distinct "sides" of TikTok, such as BookTok.

This research will specifically focus on the Italian context, investigating *how TikTok content tagged with #BookTokItalia contributes to the formation of digital consumer imaginaries around books, and in what ways this hashtag serves to*

platformise book culture in Italy. Also, the main tensions of platformisation of consumer culture, mentioned in Chapter 2, will be investigated.

By exploring these questions, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how platforms influence consumer perceptions and cultural practices within the literary world.

Methodology

In order to achieve the goal of this research, the focus will be on the hashtag #booktokitalia for two main reasons. Firstly, the choice of the hashtag is significant because it plays a crucial role in content discovery and community formation on the platform (Zulli and Zulli, 2022). Hashtags on TikTok are essential for categorising content and making it discoverable to a broader audience. Secondly, this research's focus is on the Italian context and #booktokitalia was the most used hashtag with around 741 thousand of contents at the time of the research (August 2024). Recognizing the importance of hashtags in amplifying content visibility and engagement, the focus of data collection is on videos tagged with #booktokitalia.

To ensure unbiased data collection, a new TikTok account was created specifically for this research. This step was essential to eliminate any potential biases or personalised content that could arise from using an existing account, which might have been influenced by previous interactions, likes, or follows. To further reduce bias, a Firefox profile was set up “by cleaning the browsing history and deactivating the tracking of cookies” (Caliandro et al., 2024a: 212). This ensured that the dataset reflected organic trends within the community.

Data were collected using the Firefox extension “Zeeschuimer”, a tool developed by the Digital Methods Initiative¹. Zeeschuimer is designed to capture data from the TikTok web interface through a method that involves both scrolling and scraping, “mimicking users’ behaviours and experiences of the platforms” (Caliandro et al., 2024a: 212). TikTok’s search bar was chosen over the For You Page (FYP) for collecting the first 155 videos under the “Best” result page. This decision was based on two key considerations. Firstly, users seeking for a community, or a specific content will use the search bar. Secondly, this approach enables an analysis of how TikTok suggests content to a new user specifically searching for BookTok contents (Maddox and Gill, 2023).

To further examine how TikTok proposes book-related content to new users, this research adopts a “follow the medium” approach, investigating the role of TikTok’s algorithm in shaping user experiences and content discovery. The decision to use the search bar rather than the FYP is completely in accordance with this principle. By focusing on TikTok's algorithmic infrastructure, this study explores how the platform encourages community formation and content consumption, addressing how digital platforms shape consumer imaginaries by guiding user behaviour toward specific types of content.

In addition, this research applies a “follow the traces” approach, focusing on the engagement metrics of the collected videos, such as likes, views, shares, and comments. These traces offer insights into how users interact with book-related content, suggesting the collective interests for the #BookTokItalia community. By analysing these interactions, the study investigates the mechanisms of platformisation, where user activity not only amplifies content visibility but also shapes cultural trends and consumer perceptions.

¹ <https://www.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/DmiAbout>

But the research mainly employs a "follow the users" approach to understand how TikTok users actively engage with and reappropriate digital devices and content for communicative and interactional goals. This includes how users create and share content, the types of narratives they build around books, and the use of hashtags. By examining user-generated content and their interactions, the study will identify patterns in how users leverage TikTok's features to contribute to the platformisation of book culture. This perspective highlights the active role users play in shaping digital consumer imaginaries around book culture.

Two key methods were used to analyse the dataset: co-hashtag analysis and content analysis. Co-hashtag analysis was done thanks to 4CAT² (Capture and Analysis Toolkit) and Gephi. The first tool allows downloading and importing a co-hashtag network into the second tool Gephi, where the dataset was examined both visually and textually. Modularity metric was employed to identify sub-communities and thematic clusters within the #booktokitalia ecosystem.

For content analysis, the videos were manually reviewed to develop a coding book, categorising content based on different variables. The coding book provided a structured way to identify and analyse digital consumer imaginaries within the community. Two videos were removed from the dataset due to unavailability, and two were excluded for irrelevance to book-related content.

This combined research methodology is designed to better address the research question, which integrates a theory-driven approach—focusing on consumer imaginaries—with a data-driven analysis of content tagged with #BookTokItalia. By integrating theoretical insights with empirical data, this study aims to provide

² <https://4cat.nl/>

Among these communities, the five largest are:

1. BookTok Community (pink): this community is the biggest one and reflects the main characteristics of the BookTok community. It revolves around reading routines, habits, and preferences. It reflects a broad interest in reading culture.
2. Virality and For You Page (green): the second-largest community highlights the attempts of users to appear in the For You Page or to go viral (e.g., #foryoupage; #foryou; #fy; #goingviral; #andiamoneiperte).
3. Book Recommendations & Reviews (light blue): this community clusters around recommendations and book reviews, where users share their opinions and suggestions for what to read next. It can highlight a space for exchanging book reviews and critiques, helping readers make informed decisions.
4. Romance & Dark Romance (black): this group focuses on the genre of romance, particularly dark romance, reflecting the interests of readers who are fans of these specific literary subgenres. The hashtags here connect users to discussions, recommendations, and reviews about romance novels.
5. Wattpad and Spicy (orange): the final major community is centred around the community of people who read books and stories on Wattpad and use the hashtag #spicy to refer to books with hot stories.

The remaining 11 communities contain fewer than 10 hashtags each and so, they will not be analysed in depth in this study.

Although the network is fragmented in different groups, the network diameter is 4, meaning that the network is relatively compact. So, information can spread quickly, with any hashtag being reachable from another in just four steps. Moreover, the average degree, which is 20, indicates that on average, each hashtag is directly connected to 20 others. This high level of connectivity reflects a densely interconnected network where hashtags are often used in combination with others. But the hashtags with the highest degree centrality, that are those most frequently connected to others, making them central to the community's theme and acting as local influencers are:

1. #booktok
2. #booktokitalia
3. #libri
4. #perte
5. #books
6. #fyp
7. #booktoker
8. #bookish
9. #booktokita
10. #bookworm

This study aims to explore how TikTok contents tagged with #BookTokItalia contribute to the formation of digital consumer imaginaries around books and, in particular, how this hashtag plays a crucial role in platformisation of book culture in Italy. Generally, by using these hashtags, users navigate the platform's logic of visibility, categorising their content into discoverable units that can be amplified

by the algorithm. For example, hashtags like #BookTokItalia and #foryoupage are central to TikTok's grammar, as they help content become discoverable and amplify its reach. But, through the co-hashtag network analysis, several key insights emerged that help address this research question.

Firstly, the heterogeneous but dense structure of the network allows information to spread quickly across the network, suggesting that content and trends related to books have the potential to gain popularity and reach a wide audience efficiently. Additionally, the average degree of 20 points out the high level of connection within the network, suggesting that hashtags are frequently used together, amplifying the visibility and impact of content within the community.

Secondly, among the 16 communities identified, the five largest ones highlight the thematic diversity within BookTokItalia. Users not only engage in broad discussions about reading culture but also dive into more specific topics, such as precise genres like dark romance or online platforms like Wattpad. The centrality of hashtags like #booktok, #booktokitalia, #libri, and #books further demonstrate how these tags function as hubs, connecting various topics and acting as key influencers within the community. These hashtags lead users to engage with a wide variety of content, shaping how digital book culture is curated and consumed.

Thirdly, the presence of attention-seeking hashtags like #foryoupage and #fyp highlights how TikTok's grammar rewards content that is designed to go viral. This reinforces the platform's logic of ephemeral consumption (Caliandro et al., 2024a), where TikTok's design encourages short-lived visibility of contents, influencing the nature of consumption.

This ephemeral nature of TikTok consumption also plays a crucial role in the formation of digital consumer imaginaries around books. As content becomes viral for a limited time, the community continually shifts focus to new books, genres, and trends, contributing to a highly dynamic and fast-paced book culture. Users are not merely passive consumers, they are active participants in the process of determining which books or genres gain visibility and popularity, further connecting reading culture with platform's logic engagement.

Moreover, another key aspect of this analysis is the role of the hashtag itself as a feature that mediates interactions and drives imitation within the community.

Hashtags like #BookTokItalia have two main functions. They act as both organisational tools within TikTok's grammar, categorising content for discoverability, and as vehicles for vernacular expression, enabling users to engage in shared cultural practices. By using a specific hashtag, users can join a community where they can share the same interest. But often, the role of the hashtag is to promote imitation in order to gain visibility and popularity. Users mimic popular trends, formats, and topics, amplifying certain books, authors, or genres, and reinforcing collective consumer imaginaries.

In this way, the hashtag becomes a tool that not only organises content but also fuels the formation of trends, facilitating the rapid spread of the platformisation of book culture. By influencing what becomes popular, hashtags like #BookTokItalia drive cultural consumption patterns and ensure that certain books and genres are continuously promoted.

Content analysis

According to the research question, the aim of this study is to understand and discover how creators structure their content and the types of narratives they

emphasise in order to uncover the socio-cultural meanings that form digital consumer imaginaries. To achieve this goal the first step is to detect which type of videos are usually created by users, and then analyse specific features of videos, combing them with the related relevance of engagement metrics.

Type of videos

In order to address the first point, which is to detect the types of videos created on TikTok under the hashtag #BookTokItalia, all the videos have been categorised using 10 categories:

1. Recommendation: These videos offer positive (*Figure 2-3*) or negative (*Figure 4*) recommendations of books or authors, typically highlighting a specific number of books (e.g., "10 books to read in the summer") or reasons why a book should be read (e.g., "Books to read once in your life"). TikTok's fast-paced format invites creators to simplify and speed up contents through listicles, which is a specific TikTok's platform grammar.



Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

2. Book Humour: The vernacular of TikTok invites creators to use irony (Figure 6), humour, and exaggeration to discuss book-related topics, often through point-of-view (POV) formats (Figure 5), situational comedies (Figure 7), or memes (Figure 8).

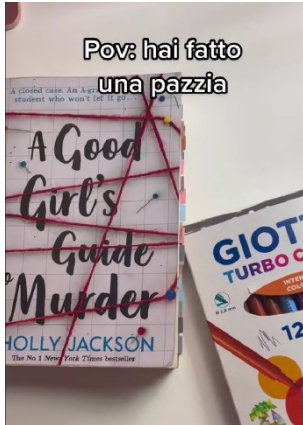


Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

3. Book Quotes: These videos focus on sharing quotes from books, typically romance novels. Creators present these quotes with aesthetic visuals or emotional narration.

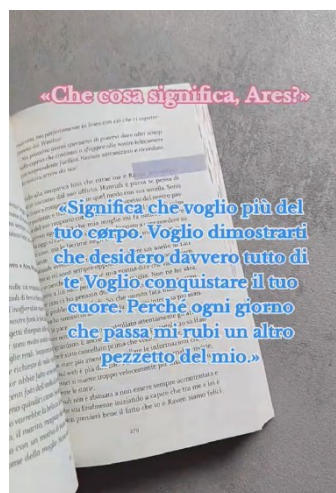


Figure 9

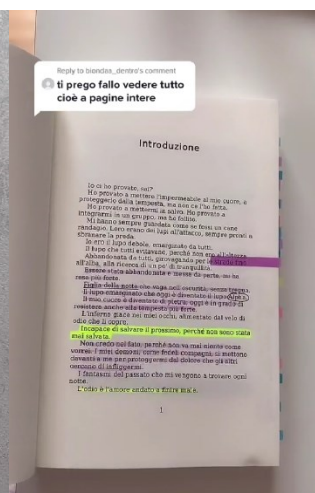


Figure 10

4. Reading Vlog: Creators document their reading journeys over several days (Figure 11), providing progress updates (Figure 12) and sharing the books they are currently reading. This type of content reflects TikTok's grammar, which supports video stitching and storytelling, allowing users to provide continuous updates on their reading experiences. This format is a vernacular practice that resonates with community members who enjoy following others' reading progress in real-time.

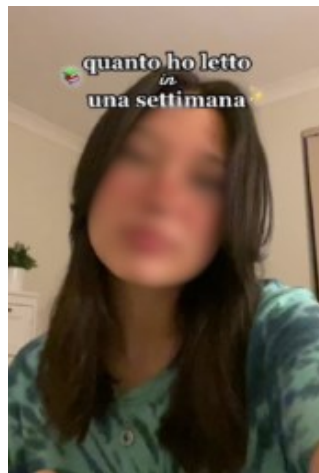


Figure 11



Figure 12

5. Bookstore Vlog: Filmed in bookstores, these videos often include tours of the shelves, with creators discussing or reflecting on the books they've read or want to read.



Figure 13

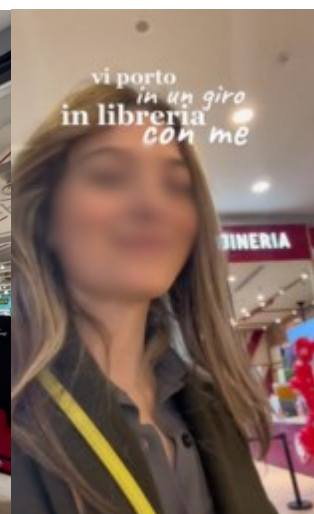


Figure 14

6. Reaction: These videos show creators' emotional responses to specific books, often highlighting dramatic (*Figure 15*) or emotional moments (*Figure 16*). The vernacular of emotional expression is central to these videos, where creators leverage TikTok's tools, such as music, filters, and quick editing, to enhance their emotional reactions and build a personal connection with their audience.



Figure 15



Figure 16

7. Bookhaul: Creators display the books they've recently purchased, often using stacks (*Figure 17*) or bookstore shopping bags (*Figure 18*) to present their new acquisitions.



Figure 17



Figure 18

8. Book Preferences: These videos compare aspects of book production, such as flexible (*Figure 19*) versus hardcovers (*Figure 20*) or different publishers, often with a humorous tone.

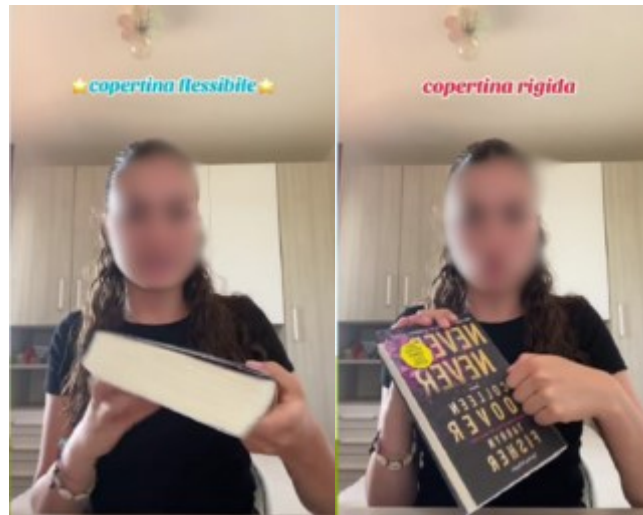


Figure 19

Figure 20

9. BookTok Community: This category includes videos that reference the BookTok community itself, with creators promoting other BookTokers (*Figure 21*) or discussing community-wide topics (*Figure 22*).



Figure 21

Figure 22

10. TBR (To Be Read): In these videos, creators show their upcoming reading lists, explaining their choices and often aligning them with seasonal themes (e.g., summer reading).



Figure 23

Figure 24

By examining the various video types, the kinds of narratives that shape digital consumer imaginaries around books and Italian book culture can be understood. Here’s a breakdown of the occurrences of each video types:

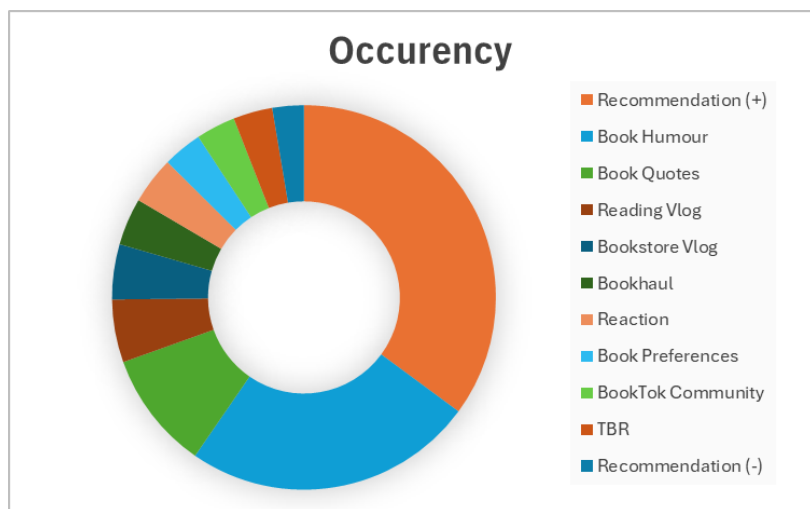


Figure 25

Looking at the graph it is clear that the most popular category is “Recommendation”. Positive recommendations appeared in 53 videos, highlighting the community's role in sharing and promoting books. On the other hand, negative recommendations were rare, with only 4 videos dedicated to this type of content. This suggests a focus on celebrating books rather than critiquing them. Recommendations contribute to the formation or maintenance of specific reading trends, influencing the popularity of certain titles and possibly leading them to an increase of sales. These videos act as guides for readers, creating a sense of authority around the creator’s opinions and tastes. This category embraces the power of digital platforms in shaping cultural consumption.

Secondly, there is the “Book Humour” category appearing in 37 videos, emphasising the playful side of book discussions. By making literature fun and accessible, these videos break down the more traditional image of reading, as a serious activity. This shift enlarges the perception of books to a wider cultural conversation, attracting more users.

Although the other categories are less relevant, in order to figure out digital consumer imaginaries, it is important to make a note about “Bookstore Vlog” and “Bookhaul”. They both reflect the importance of materiality; the first category highlights the importance of physical spaces for book culture. While the second category emphasises the joy and satisfaction derived from owning books. Bookstores underscore the experience of wandering through shelves and being surrounded by books, in this way they become cultural hubs. Furthermore, book haul videos promote consumerism within the book culture, focusing on the material aspect of reading and the physical possession of books becomes a status symbol within the community.

Finally, “Reaction” videos leverage the emotions that reading a book can provoke, from joy and laughs to tears and anger. These videos emphasise the personal connection readers can have with stories and characters, contributing to the idea that books are not just intellectual experiences but emotional journeys.

Features of video and correlation with engagement metrics

In order to complete the content analysis, some specific features of the videos will be analysed, considering also the related engagement metrics. In the graph below all the features considered in the coding book are represented (Figure 26).



Figure 26

From the graph emerges that the main features in the videos are “Book Covers” and “Creator”.

In the first case, showing book covers can be considered a trend, appearing in 101 videos, emphasising the importance of visual appeal. The practice of showing the book cover is relevant for different reasons, firstly it is a visual signal to quickly

identify a book, especially in the case of famous books. Secondly it can be considered a proof of possession and authenticity, signalling that the creator owns and has read the book, which enhance credibility. Finally, it is a strategy to attract users because videos that show the book cover gain higher views, likes and shares. This reflects the vernacular practice of using books as aesthetic objects that hold social and cultural value within the community, while also using the platform's grammar, which gives priority to visual engagement to drive interaction.

While in the second case, the presence of the creator in the video proves reliability, build trust, creates an emotional connection with users and a sense of belonging to the community. Consumers feel a deeper connection to books recommended by creators they follow and admire, as they see the creators' preferences and personalities reflected in their book choices. In addition, videos that include the creator tend to attract higher engagement in terms of views, likes, and comments. This engagement highlights how TikTok's grammar facilitates relationships between creators and followers, while the vernacular emphasises the value of authentic interactions in building trust within the BookTok community.

Then, to answer the research question other two features are relevant: "Stack of books" and "Aesthetic books". In the first case, displaying multiple books at once serves as a signal of authority and expertise. Creators who show stacks of books seem more credible and reliable, enhancing their role within the community. This feature emphasises the importance of materiality and physical presence of books. The grammar of TikTok promotes the quick and visually stimulating presentation of books, while the vernacular culture highlights the importance of book collection.

In the second case, the feature “Aesthetic books” refers to all the videos that show books annotated with post-it notes, pencil or highlighter underlining and writings. This can convey different meanings: it can be a symbol of active reading, a sign of authenticity and involvement, and/or an invitation to do the same, highlighting the aesthetic feature of a book. Furthermore, this trend emphasises the performative aspect of reading on digital platforms, where books are not only consumed but also curated and shared.

While the previous graph (*Figure 26*) underrepresents the features “Spicy” and “Wattpad”, the co-hashtag analysis revealed their crucial role as a subgroup within the BookTok community, influencing digital consumer imaginaries. With the term spicy creators refer to explicit sexual content, erotic scenes or passionate romance, attracting users to read something more emotionally engaging or stimulating. It also creates a common language that link all the users within the community, and it allows to discuss openly about sexuality, desire and emotional intensity, normalizing these issues and creating a safe and shared space. Often, the features “Spicy” and “Wattpad” are connected because Wattpad became famous with emerging authors who want to publish stories with a strong romantic and erotic component. Furthermore, for many young readers, Wattpad is a first introduction to erotic fiction, as it is accessible for free and often written by authors of the same age group. So, these features have a strong impact on digital consumer imaginaries within this subcommunity.

Another relevant feature is “Kindle and Audiobook” present in only 7 videos, highlighting the preference for physical books over digital formats of reading. This reinforces the importance of materiality in the digital consumer imaginary along with the show of book covers, stacks of books and videos recorded in bookstores.

The last two important features are “Effects” and “Cover with emoji” that can be grouped in the broader aesthetic trend. The use of effects such as the freckles filter and emojis on video covers are used to make the videos more engaging and visually appealing. These elements reflect the overall aestheticization of book content on TikTok, where the visual presentation of both the book and the creator is just as important as the literary discussion itself.

In sum, the specific features of the videos work together to shape a multifaceted digital consumer imaginary. These features not only platformise books as desirable objects but also embed them into personal identity, lifestyle, and subcultural engagement, amplifying their role in the broader digital ecosystem. This is due to their significant role in shaping digital consumer imaginaries and, consequently, in how books are perceived and consumed within the BookTok community.

Conclusion

The main goal of this research was to discover how TikTok content tagged with #BookTokItalia contributes to the formation of digital consumer imaginaries around books, and in what ways this hashtag serves to platformise book culture in Italy. Through co-hashtag analysis and content analysis, it was possible to address these questions, providing relevant insights.

Digital consumer imaginary refers to the collective, macro-level representation of how consumers imagine, understand, and interact with products, services, or brands within a digital environment. It is the result of micro-level interactions and representations created by users on digital platforms (Caliandro et al., 2024b). In the case of #BookTokItalia, the digital consumer imaginary around books is shaped by the content that TikTok users create and engage with, and it reflects

the shared perceptions and values around popular books. TikTok's affordances (grammars and vernaculars) play a significant role in shaping this imaginary.

The analysis revealed that the digital consumer imaginary within #BookTokItalia is shaped by various vernaculars and grammars: recommendations, humorous videos, materiality, aesthetic presentation and use of hashtags. Firstly, both the co-hashtag and content analysis have highlighted the relevance of the vernacular of book recommendations and the importance of peer-to-peer content in shaping consumer decisions. This kind of interaction is able to influence reading choices according to the personal taste of the creator and it can have a strong impact on which books or genres become popular.

Secondly, humorous videos is a vernacular that reflects the informal nature of TikTok's culture. This kind of videos, as already seen, present book related content in informal and playful ways. This easy-going approach makes the reading culture more accessible, amplifying the audience interested to books.

Thirdly, the vernacular of materiality is particularly evident in this community, especially in relation to immateriality. Although TikTok is a digital platform, the emphasis on the materiality of books, through book covers, bookstore vlogs, and book hauls, demonstrate its importance within digital consumer imaginaries. Books are presented not only as cultural symbols but as desirable and tangible objects. So, the immateriality of the platform converges with the materiality of books and bookstores.

Fourthly, aesthetic presentation is a relevant vernacular, emphasising the performative and curated aspects of reading. Many videos emphasise the visual and aesthetic aspects of books, through post it notes or highlighter's underlining.

This practice transforms reading into a lifestyle activity, where books are not only consumed for content but are also displayed as part of one's identity.

Finally, the use of hashtags is a particular grammar able to categorise content and connect specific subcommunities within the largest one of BookTok. They also encourage the replication and imitation of popular trends, facilitating the rapid spread of certain books and genres.

By leveraging these grammars and vernaculars, creators on TikTok are able to shape and reflect digital consumer imaginaries around books.

Moreover, in Chapter 2 the main tensions that characterise platformisation of consumer culture have been presented. In order to fully answer the research questions, it is relevant to refer to the tension between standardization and ephemerality, as well as the tension between materiality and immateriality already addressed in the previous paragraph. The platform, on one side, encourages people to create standardised contents and so, popular content formats are replicated. But, on the other side, TikTok's algorithm wants the trend to change rapidly to stimulate users to create new content and new trends. But in this way contents are contingent, influencing and reflecting the ephemeral nature of consumption.

So, TikTok has a strong impact on book culture in Italy, considering also its role as the Official Entertainment Partner at the "Salone del Libro 2024". This partnership underscores TikTok's capacity to platformise not only individual creators and content but also entire sectors.

While this study provides valuable insights into how #BookTokItalia contributes to the platformisation of book culture, future research could expand this field of investigation to other countries to make comparisons or explore the role of influencers and publishers in navigating these digital spaces. TikTok's ability to shape literary trends could potentially influence publishing practices, prompting authors to align their work with popular trends, which could impact the diversity of literature in the future.

In conclusion, #BookTokItalia exemplifies how TikTok has become a platform where traditional reading culture is transformed into a dynamic, consumer-driven digital ecosystem. As users engage with content, share experiences, and participate in trends, they contribute to a digital consumer imaginary that shapes not only what books are read but also how they are perceived, discussed, and valued.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to explore how TikTok, through the hashtag #BookTokItalia, contributes to the platformisation of book culture in Italy, focusing on how digital consumer imaginaries are formed around books.

The findings revealed that TikTok, through its algorithm and affordances, has a strong impact on platformisation of book culture. The hashtag #BookTokItalia has proven to be a powerful tool in the creation of a digital space where reading is not only promoted but also reframed as an aesthetic and emotional experience. Platformisation has led to the amplification of some specific genres, predominantly young adult and romance, and the transformation of books into objects of cultural and social status.

However, this study has some limitations. First, the research is limited to the Italian context, and it would be valuable to conduct comparative studies across different cultural settings to explore variations. Additionally, while the analysis provided insights into user behaviour, further research could explore the role of influencers and publishers within the BookTok ecosystem to better understand the relationships between content creators and the publishing industry.

In conclusion, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on the platformisation of consumer culture by offering new insights into how TikTok is reshaping book consumption practices in Italy. It also highlights the potential of digital platforms to act as key mediators in cultural production and dissemination. Future studies could further investigate the long-term implications of platformisation on cultural industries and explore the ethical considerations surrounding algorithm-driven cultural consumption.

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