**Readers use social media to host geographically diverse book clubs**

Stream: Communities and Social Media

Hashtags: #bookclubs, #readers, #goodreads, #instagram, #libraries

**Abstract**

This paper explores the way in which readers are turning to a variety of social media platforms to engage in niche book clubs that are not accessible in a localised setting. It discusses the methods of using broader social media platforms to host these virtual reading circles to ­invite open, public discussion, often facilitated by social influencers. For example, Instagram connects users via a number of hashtags dedicated to the wider reading community or specific fandoms, and readers can use these online groups to explore the social aspect of reading within a niche environment. Further, the visual premise of Instagram encourages users to post fanart, video reviews, or decorative images of a book itself. By extension, this encourages subjective discussion surrounding the themed posts. Alternatively, the use of social digital libraries such as Goodreads or LibraryThing encourages content-specific discussion, giving heavier focus to the book in question than any related content. While this approach to virtual book clubs is typically less personal, it creates the opportunity for activist groups to examine and debate social justice literature. In some scenarios, however, users may blend the two platforms together, creating a book club that spreads across multiple sites. While any virtual book club requires supervised discussion from moderators, it can be concluded that virtual book clubs are successful, removing geographic boundaries and creating opportunity for niche reading communities.

In an age of instant communication, many traditional book clubs opt for an additional online presence, such as a website or a discussion board (Fajardo, 2010). The increasing popularity of Young Adult (YA) fiction has seen an increase in loosely defined book groups that exist only on social media, where readers can form fandoms. On platforms such as Instagram, users connect via tagged posts, such as fan art, excerpts, and other related content (Peeples et al., 2018). While these platforms encourage individuals to not only engage with content, but also with other users, the social elements of these groups rely largely on the content of particular posts, which can prompt a broad depth of discourse, ranging from words of affirmation or intense debate, rarely delving into the personal socialisation seen in physical book clubs. Further, many book groups are hosted on dedicated literary social platforms such as Goodreads, which invite discussion around the content of the book itself, rather than any remixed or re-imagined work relating to the book, as seen on broader social media platforms. However, whether a dedicated or broader platform, the overall successful transition to online book clubs and fandoms, as blogging platforms, whether text-, image-, or video-based, cannot support a community due to the one-sided nature of the platform. Taking into account these various host sites, this essay will explore how effectively readers can build social book clubs on dedicated platforms such as Goodreads, as well as broader social media platforms like Instagram. As such, readers often use social media platforms as a third place to connect and create niche book clubs and forums that would otherwise be limited by geographic boundaries.

**Social media creates a third place for communities to connect**

Where first and second places drive a binary approach for community interaction, third place creates hybrid sites for communal gatherings. Where the first place typically refers to the home and the second refers to the workplace, the theory of a third place suggests the existence of an overlapping location for communities to meet. This creates a hybrid location that often acts as a "bridge" (Pane, 2012, p. 79) between first and second place boundaries. Displaying these characteristics is the evolution of social media, which encourages connection without locational limits (Casero-Ripollés et al., 2020). In cases such as Instagram, the platform itself is considered to be the third place, but interactions are connected to one another through hashtags, establishing public conversations hosted online (McArthur & White, 2016). Although such hashtags are typically included in the content of a post, such as the caption, some users opt to include these in personal descriptions on their accounts. While interaction via hashtags is not considered a club in itself, the sense of belonging created by frequent interactions with other users and posts attached to the tag builds a non-exclusive reader community that exists outside of the boundaries that limit first and second places.

**Connecting via groups and hashtags**

Book clubs have long encouraged a sense of connection amongst readers (Clarke, 2017), but the modern transition to virtual gatherings and discussions has shifted connections away from broader relationships and towards more content-focused interactions. (Foasberg, 2012). While this is particularly evident on platforms such as Instagram, these digital groups still fulfil and satisfy key elements of a book club; intellectual stimulation, forging communal bonds, and solving "the eternal quest for the next book" (Foasberg, 2012, p. 33). These platforms have evolved into third places for community groups to connect and share knowledge, creating a digitised habit that is being picked up by social readers. Due to the nature of Instagram, the communities formed can be labelled "communities of interests" (Serafinelli, 2017, p. 93), where such groups revolve around frequent visitation of particularly themed content (Serafinelli, 2017). As a result, many posts intended for a particular group of users ­– in this case, readers – lean towards mimicry of existing posts, therefore creating easily identifiable contributions to the intended community. Further, the visual premise of Instagram means many readers turn to popular hashtags among the reading community, such as #bookstagram, #amreading, and #tbr. For example, the Bookstagram hashtag alone currently has over 58 million posts to its name (Instagram, 2021). This allows users to explore new genres, engage with reviews and discussions, and connect with like-minded readers, rather than searching for key words among posts, as seen on other social platforms. Although connecting through hashtags is more closely defined as a social network (Can & Alatas, 2019), Instagram users who connect to book-related content on the platform often describe themselves as members of the Bookstagram community (Maarit, 2019). While often described as a narcissistic take on virtual book communities due to the aestheticised nature of the posts, the sensory approach to book club-style debate provides instant gratification among users in search of particular themes and narratives in the community. Further, an image depicting the reader holding the featured book, or even a close-up shot of the reader's hand on the pages, creates "embodied re-enactment" (Thomas, 2021, p. 3) that can promote empathy on a platform that, in other circumstances, can become disconnected (Garas et al., 2012). Through this embodied re-enactment, contributions towards the Bookstagram community give the impression of currency and relatability, inviting connection between the content creator and viewer (Tolins & Samerit, 2016). While many featured posts among the community feature a novel resting among cups of tea, chocolates, or fabric (Thomas, 2021), the personalised nature of images featuring the reader alongside the book gives rise to a more interactive community, and by extension, social influencers.

A number of popular users on Instagram, known as influencers, use their public platform to engage with other users, acting as leaders within their community. While in some scenarios, these influencers use their platform to create a market surrounding a product, others, such as those in the Bookstagram community, use their influence to prompt discussion and content creation in the community. However, it should be noted that the virtual community found using Instagram and its book-related hashtags is able to influence the market, due to the deeper connections between readers, authors, and, in some cases, cover artists (Lo, 2020). A typical post from one of these users could include a recent collection of books purchased, a review, or even a short skit relating to a particular novel, any of which can take the form of a standard post, or, introduced more recently, an Instagram reel. In some cases, these Bookstagram influencers encourage the community built on Instagram to further personal connection by engaging in a dedicated book club on host sites such as Goodreads.

**Social communities hosted by digital libraries**

Created with the intention of connecting users to authors and fellow readers, readers use literature-driven social media platforms to review novels, log recommendations, and interact with users who enjoy similar material. Referred to as "social digital libraries" (Makri, 2020, p. 1409) networking sites such as Goodreads or LibraryThing introduce the concept of digital libraries to social media, and encourage users to interact through groups, discussion boards, quizzes, and "ask the author" (Goodreads, n.d., para 1) events. The social world perspective put forward by Anselm Strauss in 1978 says a "social world" (Strauss, 1978, p. 119) is defined by a shared primary activity, platform, technology used for carrying out the primary activity, and an intention to further an aspect of the world's activities. Drawing on this, users of these platforms' community pages and groups create a number of subcultures embedded in the site's ecosystem. Further, a participant in a study conducted by Florida State University likened the interaction between users through reviews and discussion boards as "like a real friendship" (Worrall, 2015, p. 7), with another participant suggesting the more private groups on the platforms were akin to being part of a tavern community, bonding over similar interests (Worrall, 2015). Furthering the bonds formed among such communities, some users engage in similar groups that exist on a multi-platform level.

On occasion, these clubs can be hosted across a number of platforms when introduced to broader social media. For example, popular Instagram user, Jaysen Headley – identified as @ezeekat on the platform – uses his digital reach to facilitate a YA book club for his followers (Headley, 2021a). This group, known as Ezeekat's Book Club, is hosted on Goodreads, where members are invited to engage in subjective discourse relating to the group's latest novel (Headley, 2021b). This complements the accessibility of digital community groups while creating a niche environment for his target audience – other YA readers. However, the group is primarily advertised via Headley's Instagram profile, rather than his user profile on Goodreads. This, therefore, suggests virtual book clubs may need external support from a number of related platforms to thrive. Drawing on the theory of networked individualism, this highlights the rising prevalence of readers shifting from close-knit book clubs, such as those hosted in a localised setting, to the loosely defined clubs and communities that exist as a result of cross-platform communications (Wellman, 2001). This also exists on blogging platforms, where book bloggers utilise links to social media accounts to encourage viewers to engage with the blogger's content on a personal level, as opposed to the detached setting of a blog and its potential comment section (Foasberg, 2012). While fiction-driven book clubs established via social digital libraries require this multi-platform approach, some activist communities use social digital libraries to examine the literature on various social issues as a group without the need for additional platforms.

Virtual book communities on social digital libraries, while often sharing an admiration for similar genre-fiction novels, can also take the form of educational activism. Book clubs such as Emma Watson's *Our Shared Shelf* group, hosted on Goodreads, focus on building knowledge communities and prompting informed debate around social issues. For example, *Our Shared Shelf* picks broader social issues, such as disability awareness or feminism, and invites members to analyse the philosophical and academic concepts explored in the corresponding book for those topics (Haastrup, 2018). Despite the link to Emma Watson, and by extension, her affiliated social media accounts, this book club and others like it do not rely on cross-platform interaction as they are not reliant on personal relatability. As many readers join these book clubs in pursuit of information, it could be said that the resulting groups become knowledge communities (Sedo, 2003). Further, the lack of geographic boundaries among virtual communities allows these book clubs to become an aggregate of distributed knowledge and expertise, independent of locational biases (Hauser et al., 2017). Where many physical book clubs are hosted by libraries and therefore engage with a variety of literary genres, the accessibility of virtual book clubs and their niche content creates the basis through which activist book clubs can thrive. However, these communities are heavily reliant on frequent contribution from members and leaders alike.

**Maintaining virtual book clubs and communities requires frequent interaction**

Although access to niche book clubs via social media and social digital libraries is empowered by availability and lack of geographic boundaries, the upkeep of such communities requires greater input than physical book clubs. Further, these communities thrive under leadership supervision, such as club coordinators, administrators, or moderators (Gazit, 2021). This is largely a result of the expertise many book club leaders bring, therefore allowing them to curate, edit, and create content for an online book club, thus shaping the discussion (Colladon & Vagaggini, 2017). Where a group of individuals meeting digitally require discussion supervisors to prompt engagement, the format of traditional book clubs requires little, if any, organised conversation. Instead, members often approach the meeting with particular elements to discuss (MacGillivray et al., 2019). While such interaction exists in communities of virtual equivalent, some users say online forums and chat groups do not hold the attention of a user enough for a community member to find the time to interact with online discussions (Huang et al., 2018). As a result, supervision roles in these groups not only involve discussion prompts, but also requires introducing entertaining content for members to interact with, such as fanart or related videos. Despite the need for supervision in these groups, virtual book clubs are empowered by the lack of geographic boundaries and themed, niche content.

**Conclusion**

As readers continue to evolve the social element of reading via the formation of online book clubs and communities, it can be concluded that the introduction of social media furthers this endeavour, allowing users to form communities around niche areas in literature. Where a traditional book club requires limited guidance in order to thrive, virtual book clubs rely on supervision to maintain member engagement. As a result, some of these reading circles, such as those hosted on social digital libraries, reduce the personal relationships between users. This is likely a result of the tendency for guided discussions to lean into content-heavy discussions, rather than exploring personal relationships with the reading material and other members. However, broader social media, such as Instagram, is emerging as a platform for virtual reading communities, and often drives relatability and subjective discourse amongst members due to the visual nature of the platform. As this essay was limited to the functionality of virtual book clubs, further research could establish a connection between these groups and the publishing industry and genre demands.

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