BookTok and Dark Romance: The Rise in the Romanticization of Unhealthy Relationships and Behaviors

Giulia Scaravelli
MA student, University of Rome "Tor Vergata", Italy
Professor Elisabetta MARINO, PhD (coord.)

Abstract

In the last couple of years, BookTok (a community on TikTok where people express their love for books through reviews, recommendations, and discussions) has significantly boosted the popularity of Dark Romance: a genre characterized by intense emotional depth, taboo and unconventional relationships, and the exploration of dark themes. As Dark Romance becomes more popular, it is only natural to pay more attention to the content of this genre, particularly its portrayal of harmful behavior and the potential romanticization of abuse by normalizing toxic relationships – factors increasingly highlighted by those readers (usually more experienced and mature) capable of recognizing the dangers of literature's influence on young and impressionable minds. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the relationship between BookTok and Dark Romance literature, and its consequences in terms of users' consumption and production of books and online content related to this genre or similar to its typical plots (with particular attention to the "romanticization" factor), in order to understand whether there is actually a correlation between the consumption of this genre and the internalization of unhealthy mechanisms in the relational and romantic sphere.

Keywords*: BookTok, Dark Romance, (literature's) influence, romanticization, unhealthy mechanisms*

Introduction

In the digital age, social media platforms have radically transformed the way in which we consume, discuss, and produce literature. Among the various platforms, TikTok has emerged as a powerful cultural force, particularly through its subcommunity known as BookTok.

Since its explosive rise during the COVID-19 pandemic, BookTok has redefined how books reach different audiences, and it has also contributed to the mainstream popularity of a specific literary genre: Dark Romance. The paper aims to investigate the symbiotic relationship between BookTok and the rise of Dark Romance, paying close attention to the sociocultural implications of this interaction.

1. Let us make it clear: a couple of definitions

Before diving into the subject of the paper, it is important to contextualize the topic we are about to address. First, I will present a detailed definition of what BookTok is and a chronological reconstruction of how the BookTok community was born. Then, I will explain in depth what exactly Dark Romance is.

1.1. Discovering BookTok

BookTok (the term comes from the union of "book" and "TikTok") is a subcommunity originated within TikTok, a video-sharing platform centered around book lovers who create, share, and engage with content related to reading, literature, and book culture in general. BookTok creators, often referred to as BookTokers, use their platform to: recommend books (book recommendations and "book hauls"), review or rate books (often emotionally or humorously), share aesthetic or genre-specific content (e.g., "dark academia," "enemies to lovers"), create fan content like edits, reactions, quotes, cosplay (Muldowney), discuss tropes, themes, and character development, spark viral trends around specific titles or authors.

The genres that this community promotes mainly are: Young Adult, fantasy, romance, thriller, and contemporary fiction; but other genres, such as literary fiction, nonfiction, and niche genres, see growing interest.

Regarding the demographic, users engaging with this community and its content are predominantly Gen Z and Millennials; they include a mix of readers, aspiring or emerging authors, and influencers. The cog that keeps the machine running, ensuring content ends up on the right "for you pages," is TikTok's algorithm. It amplifies emotional, authentic, or visually engaging videos, allowing unknown authors to become bestsellers overnight. TikTok was first launched globally in 2018; ever since its debut, book-related content has been present but unorganized and scattered under general hashtags (e.g., #book or #reading). Slowly, creators started experimenting with activities such as "reading challenges", "book stacks", and reaction videos to popular series.

The first use of the hashtag #BookTok began appearing in late 2019; some of the first creators to gain early traction for their passionate and emotional book reviews were *Ayman Chaudhary, Kendra Winchester,* and *@abbyslibrary*. After this initial delayation, videos using the hashtag began to cluster around romance and YA fantasy books, particularly emotionally intense or evocative titles.

BookTok finally exploded in popularity during mid-2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic led to a global lockdown, boosting screen time and TikTok's user base.

At first, the authors that emerged as the center of this community were Colleen Hoover, Medeline Miller and Taylor Jenkins Reid; this authors mainly own their popularity to the viral recommendations and the emotional reaction videos (e.g. tears of commotion after reading a book) of the users that often resolved in the selling out of viral books like *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*.

Moreover, just like that, in a few weeks the BookTok hashtag reached hundreds of millions of views (later even billions) and, starting from it, a lot of subgenres and trends emerged (e.g., "smutty reads", "books that got me out of a reading slump", "reads of the month").

After the 2020 boom, BookTok rapidly became a driving commercial force, responsible for the fame of new books and the revivals of older books; after seeing the effects of its force, the publishing industry started recognizing the impact of BookTok, and during 2021-2022, many publishers, bookstores, and authors began to engage with BookTok actively.

With the creation of new profiles and the migration of new users into the community, the digital environment has slowly and progressively diversified, and BookTok evolved beyond just romance and YA and other kinds of genres like horror, classic literature, and indie books started to gain a foothold; with the consequent birth of hashtags to represent the sub-niches like #BlackBookTok, #QueerBookTok, #SpicyBookTok, and #BookTokMadeMeBuyIt.

Another significant change that took place in 2022-2023 is that BookTok influencers began receiving Advanced Reader Copies (ARC), sponsorship, and even publishing deals; TikTok itself started explicitly promoting BookTok through editorial campaigns and reading lists.

As of today BookTok is a powerful influence on the global literary market: in 2024 BookTok trends drove over 50% of top-selling fiction title in both the US and Uk; which is precisely why there is a growing debate about the effects that the popularity of this community has on the book market, more specifically the salient points are those of quality vs popularity, the diversity of recommendations and authenticity vs commercialization: more precisely the 'accusations' leveled at the platform are those of influencing readers to consume certain books because they are popular rather than for the quality of the work, of destroying diversity by endlessly re-proposing the same clichéd plots (called "tropes" by those who frequent the community) and of spreading biased reviews and opinions, driven by sponsorships or paid collaborations.
Furthermore, the success of this community is not limited to the TikTok platform, but also extends to YouTube and Instagram, with their own versions, BookTube and Bookstagram, respectively, which contribute to maximizing the effects of this phenomenon.

1.1.1. BookTok's influence on the literary market (2020-2025)

As stated in the previous paragraph, since its emergence in 2020, BookTok has had a transformative effect on the global publishing industry. What began as a collection of enthusiastic (usually amateur) reader recommendations has evolved into a multi-million-dollar economic force, driving unprecedented book sales, reviving backlist titles, and reshaping publishing and content production, especially in dark romance and its associated subgenres.

One of the most quantifiable outcomes of BookTok's influence is the explosion in book sales, particularly for genres like romance, fantasy, and dark romance. According to NPD BookScan, U.S. print book sales reached 825.7 million copies in 2021, marking the highest total recorded since 2004 and representing a 9% increase from the previous year (Alter).

This surge was not just due to new releases but also to the revival of older titles, which are often overlooked (labeled as "blacklist" books). For example, Medeline Miller's The Song of Achilles soared back to bestseller lists years after publication. The book reportedly sold over 2 million copies due to its continuity virality on TikTok, with "customized" hashtags (such as #SongOfAchilles) amassing millions of views (Rogers).

This phenomenon illustrates how BookTok functions as an alternative, decentralized marketing machine driven by passionate readers-creators and not publishers.

Dark romance (a genre once considered too niche or taboo for mainstream publishing) has been among the biggest beneficiaries of this digital attention economy.

As previously explained, dark romance books have found a massive audience through BookTok, thanks to the popular hashtags that serve as genre tags, community signals, and discovery tools.

One major success story is the *Twisted series* by Ana Huang, which includes King of Sloth, a book that became a #1 New York Times bestseller with help from BookTok campaigns and spicy teaser content. A similar case is that of Sarah Rivens, a French-Algerian author who began on Wattpad; she leveraged her fanbase to secure a major international publishing deal for her *Addicted series* (centered around mafia themes and toxic love) that was embraced by readers hungry for emotionally charged and high-stakes fiction (Moussa).

BookTok has reshaped the economics of book marketing and distribution: major retailers like Barnes & Noble, Waterstones, and Fnac have created BookTok sections both in-store and online. Publishers now engage BookTokers by offering them ARCs and even hiring creators as consultants or authors. The result is a more democratic influence, meaning books no longer need critical acclaim to succeed; a simple viral memento is enough.

This new system disrupted traditional publishing pipelines; now indie authors using platforms like KDP can bypass agents entirely, relying instead on viral exposure on BookTok to secure major deals and film adaptations.

The BookTok-to-Hollywood channel is now well established too; "BookTok-flued" properties such as *It Ends With Us* by Colleen Hoover (which became a movie in 2024) and *Daisy Jones & The Six* (which was adapted into a Prime Video series) have reached the screen with already large fanbases.

This represents a certainty for publishers, because if a book goes viral, it has already been audience-tested and the success is guaranteed.

Moreover, a new economy of experiential romance events has emerged: fantasy-themed ball and acotar-inspired live experiences now offer immersive fan content, selling tickets for about $400 per person. These events blend activities like cosplay, theatrical performance, and romantic "fantasy tourism", creating new (and lucrative) revenue streams that connect the literary and entertainment sectors.

Despite its successes, the BookTok model has raised important questions about sustainability and literary value. Some critics argue that the algorithm favors formulaic and emotionally manipulative writing with "spice" (term used in the community to refer to sexually explicit scenes) and shock, often prioritized over narrative complexity; others point out that the platform's volatile trends can result in inconsistent income for creators and publishers, making it whisky to build long-term strategies around TikTok virality and algorithm.

1.2. Dark Romance 101

Dark Romance is a subgenre of romantic fiction that explores love in its most twisted, morally complex, emotionally intense, and often psychologically challenging forms. Unlike traditional romance (which typically emphasizes emotional safety, mutual respect, and happy endings) dark romance dives into stories that can be disturbing, raw, and ethically gray, often involving themes of power imbalance, obsession, trauma, revenge, or even violence.

Contrary to what one might think, the concept of Dark Romance is much more "ancient" and has long earned the attention and appreciation of readers.

Some of the main concepts present in DR, like obsessiveness and darkness, were first introduced by gothic novels in the 1800s, think Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre, and *The Phantom of the Opera*. These novels explore brooding, obsessive love and morally complex characters, especially regarding the male leads. Even though they were, obviously, not labeled as "dark romance", they laid the emotional and thematic foundation.

Then, between the 1970s and 1990s, we saw a rise of what were called "bodice-rippers": highly sexual, often problematic romance novels involving forceful or domineering men. It was authors like Kathleen E. Woodiwiss and Johanna Lindsey that introduced themes of passion through power struggles; these kinds of novels - that we would consider highly problematic by today's standards - have the merit of breaking taboos and opening new spaces for non-traditional romantic fantasies.

Fast forward to the 2000s, with the advent of the internet, a whole new branch of the literary market was born: Fanfiction and Online Erotica exploded on platforms like FanFiction.net, LiveJournal, and Wattpad. The users of these platforms became writers themselves and started exploring darker, more taboo relationship dynamics, mainly centred on villain romances and non-canon pairings involving obsession, manipulation, enemies, and sometimes even kidnapping.

For the first time, every user had the opportunity to write and publish their own story in a non-traditional way, usually targeting specific fandom circles.

One of these fandom circles - probably one of the most, if not the most, fruitful - was *Twilight*'s. *Twilight* fanfictions were crucial for the development and diffusion of this genre, not only because of their content (which was pretty dark on its own) but above all because of the scale of their influence.
A great example is *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James; the book series (from which a worldwide successful film adaptation was derived) actually started as a *Twilight* fanfic and then gained attention, affirming itself as its own phenomenon, bringing dark themes into the mainstream.

Still it was only between 2010-2013 that the term "Dark Romance" was coined and popularized via Indie Publishing (the process of publishing a book without the traditional support of a major publishing house): as Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) and Goodreads gained popularity and took off, self-published authors began experimenting with taboo and non-traditional romance theme such as: captivity, trauma, obsession, villain/antihero love stories; it was in this instance that many books, then became famous, (e.g. *Captive in the Dark* by C.J. Roberts, *Tears of Tess* by Pepper Winters) started using "dark romance" in their Amazon tags, book descriptions and Goodreads genres.

Moreover, in a short time, readers interested in books with gritty, emotionally intense, and morally grey plots began using this label themselves, marking the birth (in a functional sense) of the term, which first appeared in metadata and reader reviews.

From around 2014 to 2019 the term "dark romance" became more defined as its own subgenre, to the point of being officially recognized as a category by the big brands standardized across book blogs, review platforms

(e.g. Goodreads) and retail categories (e.g. Amazon, Smashwords); when indie authors began marketing books directly as dark romance and the genre gained its own tropes, reader expectations and community identity.

Then, in 2020, BookTok catapulted dark romance to mass visibility. Subgenres like mafia romance, stalker romance, and reverse harem became incredibly popular, with thousands of videos often portraying the subject through rose-tinted glasses. This normalization of trigger warnings as a standard practice helped create a culture of informed consent in fiction.

The term resonated because people needed a specific label for a new product that did not fit into the polished world of traditional love stories, creating a space for the messy, controversial, and dangerous sides of romance. The term works because it has a double function: it warns and invites the readers at the same time (acting as both a trigger warning and a marketing hook); embodying that tension and contradiction that characterizes the genre.

2. Online controversies: how DR divides the web

Dark romance walks a fine line between fantasy and harmful (and unfortunately real/realistic) tropes. Some common debates concern the content of the genre: many readers started worrying about the possibility that DR could contribute to the romanticization of abuse or trauma.

Another critic moved to this genre underlines that the line that marks the limit of consent is not always respected and/or is often blurred and unclear, thus creating an opening for further doubts regarding the effect these books have, whether they truly empower or are a symptom of a regression and fetishization of violence.

In the following paragraphs, I will present a nuanced analysis of the Pros and Cons of DR and provide examples of the different effects this genre can have on various kinds of readers.

2.1. Pros

Like almost everything in life, dark romance also has its potential benefits, which we are going to explore together.

Firstly dark romance gives the reader the possibility to feel intense emotion - which can range from fear or tension, to arousal - in a supervised and fictional space over which the reader has almost absolute control: they can choose to stop, to skip the most critical parts if they do not feel like dealing with them and can expose themselves (in total safety) to trigger topics, serving as a cathartic outlet, thus fulfilling a function similar to that of horror or melodrama (Neda).

Dark romance has also proven to be a handy tool for trauma survivors, providing them an opportunity to engage with emotional extremes in literature in a way that helps them reclaim their power. Many report that writing and/or reading erotic fiction aided recovery by offering narrative control and consent that had been absent in their past (Sloan); these people claim that the physiological arousal triggered by dark rom-coms - which often can have symptoms similar to anxiety attacks (racing heart, face flushed hot and quickened breath) - can distract from anxiety by reframing stress (and its symptoms) into something pleasurable.

Another potential benefit has to do with the concept of empathy, perspective, and social connection: in fact, deep fictional engagement (especially emotional and relationship-heavy narratives) can boost the reader's empathy and social understanding; books can provide a sense of connection and companionship based on similar feelings and reactions, often based on shared experiences (Currie, Wilkinson, McGeown). This concept is clearly true not only for dark romances but also for other genres that generally help readers decode emotional cues and feel connected to others, potentially countering loneliness and anxiety.

2.2. Cons

With potential benefits also come potential risks.

The first element that comes to my mind (that I already introduced at the start of the chapter) is the risk or romanticizing abuse and normalizing toxic behavior: as already introduced, dark romance often contains morally ambiguous or abusive characters, which with their actions may contribute to the blurring of boundaries between fantasy and acceptable behavior - especially when it comes to younger readers (McGreal). Furthermore, this kind of blurring can then translate to reality. Think of the incidents that occurred where real criminals (e.g., Ted Bundy, Wade Wilson) were eroticized by fans, reflecting how fictional glorification can easily extend into toxic admiration (Totten), mainly if not correctly processed.

Another possible danger is the desensitization to violence; it is indeed not unreasonable to fear that prolonged exposure to dark and violent romantic narratives may dull emotional responses to aggression, lowering empathy towards real victims in some readers. Some readers have made statements and told their stories regarding this subject, as in the case of Pranshi Singh that in *Love in The Shadows: Unhealthy Side of Dark Romance Novel* states "I was addicted to dark romance novels until I realized it is affecting my mental health", in this texts she also points out that "Spending too much time immersed in books can lead to reduced social interaction, which can impact one's social skills and relationships"; in fact sometimes the overconsumption

of intense genre - including DR - can become an unhealthy form of avoidance and reading can turn to a means of isolation.

Dark romance may also lead to the development of distorted expectations in relationships, since teenage readers are especially vulnerable to erotic and manipulative content, which can skew their understanding of consent and intimacy, therefore reinforcing the acceptance of controlling behaviors as romantic; the readers themselves note that dark romance can lead to anxiety, depression, and blurred memory of reality, disrupting daily functioning.

2.3. Effects on the readers

Different readers are affected differently, both for better and for worse:

- A young adult/adolescent could benefit from dark romance if the content of the book is read through a critic lens, if appropriately guided by the parents or addressed in an education framing, the discussion can be a way to explore complex emotions (La Jeunesse); otherwise, the tee-reader - lacking developed critical thinking and/or emotional maturity - may take fantasy dynamics seriously normalizing toxic patterns.
- An adult who survived trauma could find in dark romance a tool of potential healing, but they should also approach the genre with caution because explicit trauma-based content may trigger PTSD symptoms.
- An average adult reader (with no trauma behind them) might enjoy the intense and boundary-pushing stories, using them to boost mood, reduce stress, and enhance empathy. However, they have to be particularly careful not to fall into overexposure, which may lead to emotional dysregulation, a rise in anxiety, or a distorted view of healthy romance.
- When it comes to male readers, unfortunately, we have way less specific data, but general psychological studies of horror and emotionally intense media suggest that men may be less affected, but are still at risk of normalizing displays of dominance and power, and violence.

Conclusions

The relationship between BookTok and Dark Romance literature is emblematic of a broader cultural shift that regards the entirety of the literary market; this shift has undoubtedly reshaped the literary landscape, democratized the promotion and discovery of books while fostering a social

reading community - creating the virtual version of an enormous book club - affecting some genres more than others.

As shown throughout this analysis, BookTok has amplified the visibility of Dark Romance, bringing the genre's emotionally intense and morally ambiguous themes to the forefront of literary discourse (especially among younger people), elevating Dark Romance into a cultural and commercial force.

While this virality has contributed to greater genre diversity, empowerment, and emotional catharsis, it also raises serious questions about readers' vulnerability, ethical boundaries, and the social responsibilities of both content creators and platforms. These opposing effects emphasize the importance of media literacy, guided discussions, and critical engagement with literature (particularly when it comes to emotionally intense or morally ambiguous genres).

The romanticization of abusive or toxic relationships - in particular when stripped of critical context - can blur the line between what is imaginary and fictional and what is instead real and "acceptable"; this is all the truer for audiences who may lack the maturity or analytical tools to engage with such content thoughtfully.

In conclusion, the relationship between BookTok and Dark Romance reveals the power of online communities to shape literary consumption. However, it also highlights the responsibility that comes with having such an influence on people ìs lives and minds.

As this genre continues to thrive, it becomes increasingly important to foster media literacy, nuanced conversation, and critical engagement. Nowadays, a deeper conversation about how literature, digital culture, and audience maturity intersect is fundamental to have a deeper understanding of the strategies we must adopt to foster a reading environment that celebrates complexity without overlooking consequence; since only by acknowledging both the empowering and potentially damaging effects of this phenomenon, we can honestly evaluate its impact on literary culture and reader's psychology.

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