

Browsing, Borrowing & Buying: Bookstores As Community Spaces & Troubling Discrepancies Among Book Covers and Content

**Anna Kuglin
Gabrielle Piccirilli**

Abstract

Most scholars of the publishing industry argue that bookstores are a vital aspect of the community. Scholarship on literature as an industry reveals the careful and comprehensive process readers take to selecting the material they choose to not only read, but purchase. Thus, the bookstore emerges as a place of study for book consumerism. This article considers how the types of books are retailed within these stores and the layout of these offerings impacts the experiences of those who enter the space. Drawing on a semester's worth of ethnographic research from February to April concentrated on a Barnes & Noble Booksellers located in Plymouth Meeting, PA, we provide an empirical case that underlines the worrisome features of book covers and the content within them. Based on narrative and informant interviews and ethnographic observation, this article delves into the contemporary role of bookstores by examining consumer behavior and its correlation with the communities fostered by it. Our observations demonstrate how shoppers' habits alter the functionality of a bookstore, contending that dangers can exist for uninformed consumers in a seemingly safe. Bookstores, and subsequently the book community, reveal the important role of ethnographic research in gaining insight into the formation of communities both in-person and online. Considering our insights, bookstores can strive to satisfy consumer demands by conceiving and implementing new ideas in order to increase their book sales and harness positive public opinion among readers.

Key Words: ethnography, bookstores, consumer behavior, books, publishing, readers

Introduction

“As a mother, I’m extremely troubled by avenues like TikTok that promote inappropriate books to young audiences. These are voices that you don’t necessarily agree with or approve of and they have a lot of influence over your child,” (Kara, 47 years old).

“I feel like what always annoys me is when there are all these romance novels with really similar covers and you just see it and you’re like, ‘I know that’s not gonna be a good book. I know it’s gonna be so generic’ ... [and] that annoys me,” (Hope, 20 years old).

“People are very strong about their opinions [on TikTok and Social Media], and I think a lot of, like it’s a kind of herd mentality, if someone sees that a bunch of people are saying something then they are probably gonna think that same thing instead of just forming their own opinions,” (Taylor, 21 years old).

“I think that it’s important to browse because not everyone can afford books from Barnes & Noble and then they can get a book somewhere else or from a library. But people frequently go to read whole books while in the store and don’t buy the book afterward, and I think that’s a bit unfair,” (Lily, 20 years old).

These words come from four avid female readers, all of whom are regulars at their respective local Barnes & Noble Booksellers locations. While each reader has their own tastes, they all exist in the same passionate, tight-knit, and everchanging book-loving community and share many of the same concerns, such as explicit content finding its way into the hands of youth and the transition to homogeneity in book covers. These readers are also troubled by the effects of social media on book-buying habits and the need to shop cost-effectively in the current market, warranting exploration that can aid us in reshaping the culture of book-buying.

Based on a semester-long qualitative research study conducted from February to April, we demonstrate how readers function as consumers in the publishing and book-selling industry, and how their preferences dictate the practical functionality of bookstores in a society dominated by a digital age and inflation.

Through the mixed qualitative methodology of ethnographic observation at a Barnes & Noble location in an affluent suburb of Philadelphia, we present our conclusions about book buyer habits and consumerism by showcasing the purpose and societal function of bookstores in

2024. Participation in and observation of the store at various times and days of the week allowed for an immersive understanding of how customers navigate the space and documentation of those experiences. Subsequent informant and narrative interviews with those familiar with the store worked to clarify those observations and provided a method for inquiry about new questions that arose through observation.

Our fieldsite, the Barnes & Noble of Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania, sits in a large shopping complex surrounded by several popular stores such as Lowe's and Target. The Barnes & Noble occupies the front left of the shopping complex, host to an entire wall of windows where customers can see an array of books from the parking lot. This initial view is warm and welcoming, inviting book lovers to come inside and explore the endless possibilities housed inside. Entry is gained by ceremoniously crossing the threshold of two sets of large glass double doors, and once inside, you are instantly tranquil. Kara described the feeling of walking into this location as, "excitement in never knowing exactly what you'll find." Monday through Saturday from 9:00 am to 9:00 pm and Sunday from 10:00 am to 8:00 pm, customers can experience that excitement and immerse themselves in a world of whispered voices, bright signage, turning pages, feet pattering, and most importantly, books.

As regulars to the site, each of our visits served a new, unprecedented purpose for us: carefully observing customers and their interactions within the store in order to make sense of them in the broader context of the publishing industry and its trends. As we took feverish notes, we devoted particular focus to how the varying demographics navigated the space, their browsing patterns, buying behaviors, reactions to different genres, and the stereotypes between demographics related to certain genres and authors. Following this fieldwork, informal interviews solidified much of our initial findings, bringing us to the solid case we aim to provide.

We strive to offer insight into how bookstores help to foster community both in the real world and through online apps, such as TikTok.

Scholars articulate that physical bookstores exist as community and cultural spaces (An, 2020), as well as “thoughtful confines” (Deutsch, 2023), but face competition from online retailers. Hence, research that empowers bookstore managers with the insights needed to gauge consumer demand precisely is crucial to keep this market afloat. Research has also highlighted discrepancies between cover art and a book’s content (Iwana et al., 2017), and how this unintentional deception exposes younger audiences to explicit content prematurely.

We ask (1) how do customers react to various genres, titles, or cover designs while browsing bookstores and what are their buyer behaviors, and (2) how do a customer’s shopping and reading habits alter a bookstore’s function in society?

Literature Review

Our argument begins with a discussion of our theoretical framework that discloses the various complexities in book customers surrounding their buyer behaviors, in turn reflecting the function of a bookstore within society today.

Use and Societal Function of Bookstores

The year 2024 presents a troubling time for physical bookstores in the United States with the growth of digital bookstores and the availability of e-books, as well as inflated prices that motivate readers to borrow books from libraries rather than purchase them in bookstores.

Scholars have concluded that the income of the physical bookstore is affected by the digital reading rate and the number of social public libraries (An, 2020). Therefore, research that can equip bookstore managers with the information necessary to accurately grasp consumer demand is vital.

A bookstore's significance in society has been examined by many scholars, emerging as more than just a retailer but a "specific cultural facility" (An, 2020). To the bookseller, a bookstore is a place for deep thought and intellectual stimulation. In a successful bookshop, the browser's attention is "simultaneously focused and diffused," and a customer is invited to find solitude in the community (Deutsch, 2023). One bookseller reflects on what the ideal experience in a bookstore ought to be, writing that "Time contracts as one is profoundly engaged with the materials that span ages; time dilates and somehow contains the timeless" (Deutsch, 2023). Bookstores are meant to exist in a state of curiosity and receptivity, allowing one to chew "intellectual cud" and the space of a bookshop must be "conducive to unhurried rumination if only to promote good digestion" (Deutsch, 2023).

A bookstore has also been explored as a tranquil place for relaxation. Booksellers often take responsibility for the transformation of patrons as they "leave their everyday concerns at the door, as though stepping into a more thoughtful confine" (Deutsch, 2023). Bookstores, with their relaxing nature, are an "engine for community" (Laties, 2011).

The Book-Buying Decision-Making Process

Scholars recommend that the physical bookstore leans into advantages that digital reading cannot offer and establish a loyal customer base, which can be accomplished through aesthetics such as innovative bookstore decoration that creates a visual experience for the shopper (An, 2020). Store layout also plays a significant role in the books that are picked up by customers, which is the first and arguably most crucial step of the decision-making process. Shoppers are drawn to price promotions, staff recommendations, and bestseller sections or tables of promoted books near the store's entrance (Laing & Royle, 2006).

However, scholars have also discovered that the number of books available for purchase far outweighs the demand for them (Leitão et. al, 2018). Therefore, publishers and bookstores have to fight hard for consumers, making it vitally important to better understand the range of variables that influence the book-buying decision-making process. When readers walk into a bookstore, they seek new books to dive into, characters to feel for, and worlds to immerse themselves in. The store presents tens of shelves stacked head-to-toe with reading options of a large variety, requiring deliberation on a customer's part when it comes to selecting which books they will purchase. In the decision-making process, a customer considers a few features, many physical, of the book. The features most valued in a book are the "Title," "Synopsis," "Subject covered in book," "Recommendation of family and friends," and "Books with discount/on sale" (Leitão, et. al 2018). It has also been reported that paperback books are the most preferred choice when it comes to buying books (Santhosh, 2020).

There is also literature that reveals the role of the browsing in-store experience itself in the buying decision. The act of browsing, comparing books or "going for a coffee or being brought in the human enjoyment of physically going shopping and seeing other people and being seen" (Laing & Royle, 2006) can be crucial to whether or not a book is purchased.

Influence of Social Media on Reading Preferences

As social media has become increasingly prevalent in our modern society, its growing popularity has influenced the daily choices of many. The COVID-19 pandemic allowed the influence of those on social media to explode as people tried to create online communities with one another in this time of isolation. This need to connect with people combined with the freedom to be creative sparked people around the world to join the online book community (Jerasa & Boffone, 2021). One app where the book community shines is TikTok, or as those in

this sub-community call it, BookTok. BookTok permits readers to interact with other users about the literature they are reading, forming valuable connections over what takes place in the book, memes, skits, future predictions, fan art, and thousands of other possibilities. As the popularity of the BookTok community continues, so have several now-popular books thanks to the influence of users of the app (James, 2022). When users generate content about their cherished books, it leads to word-of-mouth promotion, resulting in increased book sales as more people buy them after watching reviews and theatrical videos shared by others. The formation of this community has led stores like Barnes & Noble to take action to appease and relate to those online. One way in which this is done is through making set table displays with the current and popular BookTok books, making their accessibility easier for incoming customers while simultaneously skyrocketing sales as younger audiences are more likely to purchase books already deemed popular, especially online.

Impact of Peer's Opinions on Book Selection

Recommendations from friends can often be a deciding factor in whether or not to purchase a book or even seek it out in the first place (Leitão, et. al 2018). Research suggests that among contemporary adolescents, the low social appeal of books lowers the frequency of conversations about recreational reading among friends. However, women receive higher levels of friend encouragement surrounding recreational reading than men do (Merga, 2014). This is not the case, however, among adults who shed labels such as “nerd” and “uncool” placed onto reading by younger people (Merga, 2014).

Scholars have studied the value and strength of book recommendations from friends for various readers, discovering that they were consistently better than the recommendations provided by online recommender systems, such as Amazon (Sinha & Swearingen, 2001),

encouraging interpersonal recommendations. Literature refers to these individuals as book fans, defined as people “who transfer [their] reading to a cultural activity by sharing emotions and thoughts about books with other fans. A fan participates in fan associations, where they connect and interact with people that have similar interests to them” (Jenkins 1992). These fan associations play a heavy role in how books rise to fame and come off the shelves in bookstores. In stores such as Barnes & Noble, these interactions often play out in real-time among the bookshelves between friends or peers.

Deceiving Covers and Concern for Explicit Content

Most people have likely heard the idiom “Don’t judge a book by its cover,” but often, it is the artwork on the cover of a book that draws readers to seek out more information about the titles around them. Each cover design is carefully designed and marketed for an intentional purpose that helps to communicate the genre and tone of the book to its potential readers, providing a peek into the content found within. Furthermore, cover art is typically bounded by specific tropes per genre, such as shiny snakes representing the fantasy genre or dark backgrounds and ominous imagery representing the crime, thriller, or mystery genres. However, as a cover’s main function and ultimate purpose is to draw in a reader and maintain their attention long enough for them to decide to make a purchase, many designs become deceiving to readers (Yampbell, 2005).

Yet, it is often not the book’s author that intends to trick the reader, but the publishing company producing the book. Each author’s contract with their publisher limits the input they have over the final design of their book cover, and this is delegated to a marketing department. Creating these covers necessitates collaboration among multiple teams to produce a marketable product. Often, there isn’t ample time to review numerous manuscripts, and sometimes, they are

not even provided (McCullogh, 2021). With tight deadlines and little information provided to designers, book covers run the risk of being misleading to readers, even if it was not intended.

Research has shown that when asking a computer to sort book covers based on design alone into each respective genre, the accuracy rate ranges from 13% to 24% (Iwana et al., 2017). Given that programmed software incorrectly predicts content based on cover art, it is challenging for a human to make correct assumptions regarding these relationships.

Even though book covers can be deceiving across all genres, this issue is most prevalent when it comes to younger audiences, particularly those within the age category of thirteen to eighteen, labeled as young adults. For young adults, a plethora of books are designed with covers that appeal to their demographic, while housing content meant for mature readers, typically aged 18 or older. As teenagers and young adults are more impressionable than other audiences, their book covers must balance a variety of factors. For example, they cannot invoke feelings of embarrassment, so they must look more mature than middle-grade books, and should also have the “wow” factor (McCullogh, 2021). Due to the ambiguity of these design factors, many books are mistakenly perceived as being intended for younger audiences when, in reality, they are not. As a result of this phenomenon, guardians of this age group are led to believe that the reading material is suitable, often without scrutinizing the content within the pages. This is most typically experienced in the category of romance books. With this genre’s latest trend of bright colors and cartoon-esque covers, the average individual would conclude the content is age-appropriate teen romance. However, a deeper dive into these stories reveals highly explicit scenes that provide great detail on sexual interactions and otherwise inappropriate content for younger audiences. While explicit content is normal for adult audiences and often sells well, the young adult standard for these topics is allusion and what is called fading a scene “to black.” Covers that do

not indicate a difference in content or present trigger/content warnings pose a common problem in the publishing industry as young audiences are continually exposed to this material prematurely. Our research seeks to further explore this phenomenon at our local Barnes & Noble.

Methods

As long as our memories serve, the two of us have always loved reading books and the thrill of being immersed in new worlds. We both share a deep passion for our long-standing hobby and are intrigued by how it impacts the world around us. From the first day of partnering up for this endeavor, we were overjoyed to discuss the book world with one another, enabling our research to be infused with a unique kind of enthusiasm.

Observational Fieldwork

Barnes & Noble provided an ideal setting to conduct our research as it is one of the largest book retailers in the United States, with over 600 locations. These stores can be found anywhere, from independent locations to inside shopping malls. As these stores are readily available to the public, their participants range a large variety of demographics depending on the day and time of the week. Young children and teenagers can be found running through the store after school hours have ended and even more frequently during the weekend. On the other hand, adults and the elderly usually occupy the store at any time of the day or week, not bound by school hours or reliance on others for transportation. Barnes & Noble is not just a book retailer. It is also home to a Starbucks Cafe, creating a quiet place to complete work via laptop or grab a quick and tasty drink. However, regardless of why one enters the store, the bookstore offers thousands of titles and activities to pique anyone's interest.

As this is the case, we decided to examine each section of the bookstore, which is organized by genre, individually to obtain a more comprehensive data set. This included observing the children's section to the front registers and the genre sections of fiction, non-fiction, young adult, romance, and fantasy. In addition to systematically observing the bookstore geographically, we also found it beneficial to follow the trajectory of select participants throughout the store to examine how they navigate and interact with the space or their shopping companions. Many of these participants were simply observed from a respectful distance in the public space, while some participants were friends of ours who volunteered for observation. This allowed us to observe their natural reactions and decisions while browsing the store. Some participants may have had guesses at what we were up to, pencil and notebook in hand, but every interaction we had with customers while in the store, from gentle smiles to offering book recommendations, was overwhelmingly positive. We functioned as complete participants, as we consider ourselves members of the book community and engaged with others in the space. This functionality, described as "researchers who study contexts in which they already are members" (Tracy, 2020) allowed us to better understand book buyer trends. Between the two of us, we completed fourteen hours of fieldwork recorded via notebook and pen as behavior played out before us. Shortly after conducting the observations, we elaborated on the observations using thick descriptions to write up seventy-one pages of field notes to consider in our analysis.

Interviews

After completing our fieldwork, we each conducted two interviews, both forty-five minutes in length. This provided us with a total of four interviews with four different individuals for a total of 180 minutes of recorded audio content converted to a written transcript.

Our interviewees consisted of people we know in our personal lives who are frequent visitors of bookstores and avid readers. The purpose of these interviews was to provide insight into what people are truly thinking about while in a bookstore, enriching our hypotheses created during observation.

Each interview began the same way, with informed consent and a brief background on the research. We then followed with the same series of questions, from factual to experience to generative to directive. These questions were crafted to generate conversations about the book industry, whether that be personal shopping habits, opinions, and ideas. Examples include, “Do you ever notice a theme in the titles, authors, or cover designs of the books you are drawn to?” and “When you step into a bookstore, do you more often go with the intention of making a purchase, or do you simply enjoy browsing through the books?” All four of our interviews also contained a series of visual elicitation questions, in which we showed interviewees three to five book covers and asked for their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to them. This allowed us to gain real-time open-ended reactions to a specific variety of covers we could control.

The ideal sample of people for the narrative, informant style of interview we sought falls under the category of purposeful sampling, which is described as “choosing a meaningful sample that fits the parameters of the project’s research questions and goals” (Tracy, 2020). For ease of convenience, interviews were conducted in person, local to Villanova, Pennsylvania.

Following the interviews, audio recordings were uploaded into a transcription program and then refined and corrected manually.

Navigating the Data

After the acquisition of our data set in the form of field notes and interview transcripts, our next step was conducting an analysis of the findings. The final data set consists of 71 pages

of field diary entries and 4 audio interviews totaling 180 minutes. In order to navigate the data, we divided it into overarching themes. To qualify as a theme considered for analysis, it must occur at least three times throughout each set of data. The three most prominent themes found in our research were (1) a tendency to browse over buy, (2) influence from media and peers for reading material, and (3) the dislike of deceiving, cartoon-esque, and repetitive cover designs. We then sorted all of the data relevant to each category into thematized documents, making them easily accessible for further study.

Limitations of Present Study and Future Research

As a research team of two, our research had its limits. For future study, it would be more beneficial to have a wider variety of interviewees to gain insight from several demographics about each of the three themes. Our interviewees included all self-identifying women, mostly ages 20-21, with one of our interviewees was 47 years old. Greater variation would allow research by generation or gender, in which we could analyze differences or similarities on book preferences and buyer habits among these groups. We were also limited by our personal perceptions of those we were observing. We did not conduct interviews on-site at Barnes & Noble, and therefore, in our thick descriptions lie inferences as to why participants acted the way they did. Future research could include conducting live interviews with those in the field, yet we did not find it appropriate in this early-stage project. Finally, our research was conducted in two affluent suburbs of Philadelphia (Plymouth Meeting, PA, and Villanova, PA) which has the ability to skew the data. In future research, a project of this scope could be conducted in a less affluent area or region of the United States.

Analysis

Extensive research in the form of qualitative fieldwork, interviews and systematic review of the available literature has led us to present an analysis of our findings. Our team of two researchers collectively completed 14 hours of fieldwork and 180 minutes of interviews, but individually divided the labor, conducting 7 individual hours in the field and 90 minutes of narrative interviews each. Therefore, we employ “I” and “my” pronouns throughout our respective analyses, but both stand behind this presentation of the findings.

Browsing Over Buying: A Preference for Leisure-Looking

Throughout my time in the bookstore, I noted a high frequency of shoppers who entered the store, browsed the shelves, and then exited empty-handed, sometimes not even pausing to remove books from the shelves. Although I witnessed a lot of purchases at the register, I witnessed many more lack thereof. I also noted a few browsers reading rather lengthy excerpts from books, only to return them to their shelves. This calls into question a bookstore’s practical functionality in a society more concerned with the activity of shopping rather than the deliberate action of purchasing, as well as the ethics of reading an author or poet’s work without paying for it. I wonder, then, if a bookstore’s function is to (1) sell books, (2) get books read and gain exposure for various titles, ideas, and authors regardless of profit or (3) to be a spot to hang out with like-minded individuals. Most simply, Barnes & Noble is a retailer and hopes to sell books, however, shoppers seem to enjoy the act of browsing more than the act of buying a book. I also wonder what authors think of this practice; do they simply want their work read and payment for the art is of little importance to them, or do they feel robbed and taken advantage of by readers stealing glimpses of their work without owning copies?

"I've purchased books [at Barnes & Noble], but it's not, it probably wouldn't be my first go-to for where to buy. I go to browse, to look, sure, but I'd probably make the purchase somewhere where the books are a little more affordable. I usually go when I have time to actually spend shopping, looking or just sort of engaging, rather than just going to make a single purchase." - Kara, 47

Customers (or more accurately browsers) exhibit rather intense browsing behavior, approaching the act of surveying books as a full-body experience. One afternoon, I witnessed a man alongside his wife and children, carefully scrutinizing the Military History aisle. He scratched his chin, furrowed his brows, placed his hands in his pockets, and tilted his head as he scanned the titles before him. He spoke to his wife with his hands and moved slowly, sometimes reaching to shelves to hover a hand before a book, but not quite grabbing it. He seems very hesitant in this manner, and only actually takes down two books into his hands for further reading. However, he ultimately walked away empty-handed.

I noted similar behavior another afternoon among two women, both browsing in separate aisles. The first was a middle-aged woman. She browsed the Romance section, entering the first quadrant of the space, and beginning to browse there. Her demeanor was very relaxed and she seemed pleased to have the afternoon to browse. She did not indicate any signs of being in a rush or growing bored and picked up five to six different paperback books, which she flipped through and read excerpts from. Even after observing a few other customers in the store, I made note that the woman remained in the very same quadrant of the Romance section, about thirty minutes after my initial note of her presence there. She still wore a content, pleased face and I wonder if she had even noticed the passage of time, or if she had gotten lost in the worlds of the books before her.

Just a few yards away in the Young Adult section, a woman in her twenties deliberated over a single book. She pulled it down from the shelf, read the front and back, and then began to

repeat the process. She flipped back and forth rather quickly after she had obviously fully read both sides. She repeated this for about five minutes while shifting her feet uncomfortably. When a middle-aged woman, whom I assumed to be her mother, arrived from another section of the store, she asked, “How are you doing?” and looked down at the book she held. The young girl hesitated and then replied, “Good. I think I’ll get this one,” and finally left the section with the book in hand. She did purchase the book, after much careful deliberation.

After observing several people at Barnes & Noble walking leisurely around the store, leaving with a purchase or empty-handed, it can be concluded that although the store serves the purpose of selling books, its other purpose is to provide a safe and comfortable environment for the community to let their minds wander.

An Expensive Hobby: Cost-Conscious Shopping & Comparison With Other Retailers

As prices of the retailed items in the U.S. continue to soar, collecting books has become an expensive hobby for most. Given that the average price of a recreational book in 2024 is about \$20 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), I observed many customers of Barnes & Noble pulling out their mobile phones to “price check” the books they were holding in order to determine if they should ultimately make their purchase at said store or a different retailer for better value.

“I definitely think that people will look for cheaper options. I know personally, if I'm in Barnes & Noble, and I really want to get a book, I'll look and see if it's cheaper at like Target, because I know Target often does, like 20% off their books. So I look up the price difference in different stores before going to purchase one at Barnes & Noble.” - Lily, 20.

“I also get books from Thrift Books, which is like three, four dollars for a book. I mean, they don't have like newer stuff on there for that cheap. It's like older stuff. Like I got the Percy Jackson books for like three dollars each. I'll usually price check. I think the most I've paid for a book at Barnes & Noble was The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes. It was \$27, I remember. Which

was kind of absurd for a book, but, I mean, it was worth it. It's a good book. And it was also hardcover, which is great." - Taylor, 21

Amidst my fieldwork, I witnessed a middle-aged woman engage in this comparison in real time. She pulled down a book from the Horror section, read its front and back cover, and then pulled it closer to her face, looking at its barcode, where the price is noted. She then placed the book back and retrieved an iPhone from her pocket. I began to browse the shelf opposite her and was able to catch a glimpse of her screen. She was searching the book's title on Target.com. Given the fieldsite's close proximity to a Target location, this was not the only time I witnessed similar behavior. Although the woman carried several books in her arms for the duration of her visit, she ultimately purchased one book at the register, perhaps opting to buy the other titles at Target.

This was not the only way Barnes & Noble shoppers opted to save money while in the store. In my time there, I overheard two friends interested in the same books strike a frugal deal. One woman exclaimed, "Wait! Can't we just exchange after?" to which her friend replied, "Stop, I was just thinking that!" The two headed to the register to buy one copy of each book. This not only functions as an intelligent economic decision for the avid reader, but serves as an example of books creating a community among friends.

As cost-conscious behavior seems to be commonplace in higher-end book retailers such as Barnes & Noble, it calls into question how much profit is lost to cheaper retailers, such as Target, Walmart, or even libraries, that offer the same titles completely free of cost. Though it might be less convenient to browse titles at Barnes & Noble only to purchase elsewhere, many budget-conscious shoppers find it worthwhile to seek better deals elsewhere.

"I feel like for the most part, I would try to go for the cheapest option. Or, I guess if there was like a better cover, of a hardcover, for some reason it was different. And I was like, oh my gosh, this edition's way nicer. I could see myself buying that." - Hope, 20.

Furthermore, this gravitation to cheaper reading options puts into question the sale of paperback books versus hardcovers, even within Barnes & Noble itself. One of the many marketing strategies of the publisher is to publish the first book in a series in both formats, but then publish the rest of the series in hardcover first, selling the paperback version of these books several months after the initial release of the book. Although this is a common strategy to drive up sales, it may be interesting to study how many customers actually fall victim to this marketing strategy, especially given that many people both read and collect books, desiring to have a series collection of the same consistent format.

Libraries vs. Bookstores: The Cost-Effective Alternative

Many people who adore reading care just about that: reading. Not all book enthusiasts feel compelled to expand their collections or annotate the pages they read. For many, simply absorbing a story and eagerly moving on to the next book is enough to satisfy their love for the hobby. In this case, a library presents itself as the natural alternative to purchasing a book. This allows one to read books quickly and consistently, free of charge. The library also presents as an option to those who cannot afford to keep up with their consumption of books.

"I wish they'd not make books so expensive. If you're gonna read, you're gonna read a lot. They don't need to make the books quite so expensive that you can't afford to buy more. And on the flip side of that, then [publishers] have got to know that I'm going to use the library," - Kara, 47.

While some opt to borrow rather than buy, this isn't to say they don't visit bookstores. During a day of observation at Barnes & Noble, I closely followed a woman in her forties, accompanied by a young woman. The two scanned the titles, starting with the new fiction positioned beside the store's entrance. The older woman paused before a book, *End of Story* by

A.J. Finn, and retrieved an iPhone from the pocket of her jeans to take a photograph of it. She repeated the process wordlessly for several titles as she navigated the store, until she reached *Night Will Find You* by Julia Heaberlin. She took a photograph, and this time remarked to the younger woman, “I’ll have to wait a while for these to get to the library.” I was then able to assume that she was photographing the titles she wanted to read so she could look for them at the library for free, rather than purchase copies at Barnes & Noble.

My assumptions were confirmed about an hour after I first spotted the duo. I noticed the women had taken seats in the Starbucks Café at a small circular table with two chairs that faced each other. The older woman was reading a hardcover book, the title obscured by her hands, with a barcode sticker from a library on its upper right-hand corner. I could only assume that she had brought it with her in her purse, as it was large enough to fit a book that size. The younger woman was also reading a book, but its cover was face down on the table, so I couldn’t be sure if it was a personal copy, an unbought book or a library loan as well. In this way, the older woman was still able to enjoy the community space of the bookstore and gain exposure to titles she’s excited about, without spending anything.

Although book-buying is becoming an expensive hobby for most, it is still important that spaces such as bookstores exist within communities. Even though not every person who walks into a bookstore leaves with a purchase, the space invites people to explore the wonders of the world surrounding them. Stepping back and assessing all of my research, I can conclude that it is important to have a space where people can go to be productive and form a connection with others of a similar interest, especially as it costs nothing to roam around a Barnes & Noble.

Dangers of Deceiving Covers: Young Audiences & Exposure to Mature Content

Sex sells. This is the unfortunate reality of marketing. Authors and publishers are no strangers to the idea, infusing “steamy” scenes into books for the ‘wow’ factor that turns novels into bestsellers. It’s a win-win for booksellers and adult readers; readers devour the scenes and booksellers profit from them. However, with the prevalence of social media such as TikTok quickly (and often inaccurately) promoting popular books with plain or deceiving covers to anyone on the app regardless of age, these books can fall into the wrong hands. 77% of the general population is concerned that school-age children are being exposed to sexual material that is not age-appropriate through books, while 69% believe books containing explicit sexual depictions of sex acts should not be present in public high school libraries (Capitol Resource Institute, 2022).

“Like Red, White, and Royal Blue, that has some of the smuttiest stuff I ever read in my whole life. And that is such a cutesy [cover], like, oh my gosh, this guy's a prince and this guy's wearing a suit, like, oh, they're so cute, blah, blah, blah. No. I read that in the airport and I was like, I hope my parents aren't looking. A trigger warning and, like, explicit content warnings would be very helpful, especially since the books do not look like they have that in them. I think it would be helpful to have those on there for the readers and if they're, like, little for their parents to know that maybe they shouldn't be reading this right now.” - Taylor, 21

While not much research presents findings on the prevalence of explicit books in bookstores like Barnes & Noble, the issue presents itself within its shelves. In my time at the store, I witnessed a family of four fall prey to a deceiving cover:

A young girl, about 12-14, returns to her parents and younger brother with three books in hand, all of which I recognized from a *BookTok* feature table. She holds them up to the young boy and he points to one, which prompts her to place the other two on a nearby history shelf. I recognize the selected book to be *Twisted Love* by Ana Huang; it is incredibly popular on TikTok and is a book I have read myself. This book, however, has an 18+ warning and contains highly explicit sexual material and violence intended for a much older audience than this little girl. This

warning is located on the book's third page and is not visible unless one opens the book and flips to it. She looks at it excitedly, as its plain pale blue cover and enticing scripted font would not suggest anything particularly wrong with its content. She shows it to her parents, who smile and nod to their daughter. I felt the urge to warn her parents of the book's material, which even I at 21 found too graphic, but opted not to, simply watching the family of four head toward the registers. The father purchased *Twisted Love* for the young girl and a book for the little boy.

Another example I noticed while in the field was that of a group of middle school girls. They all wore full faces of heavy make-up and appeared to have been dropped off at the store by their parents. In today's digital age, children have unprecedented access to technology, leading them to mature at a faster pace than previous generations. As the girls passed a feature table filled with popular TikTok romance books, they stopped at it briefly. One girl remarked, "I love smut books! I wish they had these at school," to which the other three agreed. As I overheard this, I was appalled and saddened that children that young had been exposed to books with extreme details of sexual interactions so extensively that they've developed a preference for them.

This presents a troubling reality for parents who believe they are doing right by their children by encouraging and supporting reading as a hobby, while meanwhile, they are unknowingly exposing their children to inappropriate themes prematurely. Conversations about violence and intimacy should be reserved for parents and their children privately when a parent deems it appropriate to explain to the child, not through a fictional story that often does not have the young and impressionable reader in mind. This begs questions about the age we, as a society, should allow children to select their own books, and what a bookstore's role in labeling and

separating explicit content is, to avoid a purchase such as this one occurring, or if the burden falls on a parent to check the material they purchase for their children.

“I personally, as a parent, would limit and did for as long as I felt it was appropriate to be able to limit, other people, especially on social media, to influencing my child in that way. These are voices that you don't necessarily agree with or approve of and they have a lot of influence over your child. Not every parent can constantly keep up with what type of book your kid wants to read. I mean, who has time for that? As an adult, I can tell you, that I don't have time to monitor every book my child reads. I don't have time to read them all first, and then say, ‘Okay, this was acceptable’ or ‘No, I didn't like the themes of this one’.” - Kara, 47.

Finding a solution to this issue is complicated. With busy parents unable to vet each of their children's reading selections, perhaps the burden falls on stores like Barnes & Noble to protect these children by shelving explicit books separately or marking them with age-restriction stickers. However, this would require publishers to indicate the presence of graphic material on each book it produces, so booksellers can shelve accordingly without conducting scans of each book, which would require far too much time and resources. If publishers shoulder the burden of labeling books, who then makes the call on what falls under 'explicit'? This definition will vary across religions and personal values, and even U.S. lawmakers have struggled to define obscenity. Research surrounding the prevalence of adult material making its way into the hands of youth is the first step to tackling the issue.

“This looks like a kid drew this for art class!”: Cartoon Covers & What It Takes to Actually Attract Readers

While conducting fieldwork at Barnes & Noble, one of the issues I came across was the homogeneity of book covers, particularly those in the romance section, making it difficult to distinguish one story from another. These book covers typically feature bright colors that catch the eye and bubble-lettered titles. Another popular feature of these covers is that of cartoon

people. This emerges as problematic, as images on the front of book covers are imperative as they are “the thing that first attracts potential readers to a book” (Iwana et al., 2017).

“I feel like what always annoys me is when there are all these romance novels with really similar covers and you just see it and you're like, I know that's not gonna be a good book. I know it's gonna be so generic. I feel like I would look for things that don't look similar. Like, I was saying about the romance novels and how I didn't want to all look the same style or whatever. Like, I want to see that the book is unique.” - Hope, 20

“I'm getting, like, bad high school life. There's a chemistry lab-looking thing in the back, and cartoony character people. This looks like a kid drew this for art class! I'd just never buy this book,” - Kara, 47.

“I'm not a personal fan of cartoon covers. I know a lot of the romance books do have those cartoon characters and super corny, cheesy titles. I would not personally buy those books, just because I don't like how they look,” - Lily, 20.

Our interviewees were not shy about their distaste for the new trend in romance novels—cartoon-esque covers and one to three word titles. Rather, they expressed preferences for covers of a “whimsical” nature, such as a faraway house or an oceanscape, or with florals and a standout object. They also unanimously concluded that a title that leaves the reader guessing and a work of relatively short chapters make a book desirable.

Throughout fieldwork, many consumers gravitated to books that depicted nature on the covers, or had distinct features that made them stand out among other options. I witnessed an older woman pause her browsing upon reaching *The Refuge Ocean* by Paul S. Toutonghi and ran a gentle finger over its textured, reflective cover that depicted an ocean with a teal film over it. “Ooh, this is a cool cover,” she exclaimed to her shopping companion.

BookTok: Its Toxicity and Influence on Book Tastes and Quality

Social media is more popular today than it has ever been. This increase of users has helped to create subcommunities across these platforms for all niches and interests. One of these subcommunities that has been gaining more and more traction is that of ‘BookTok’, a space for

readers of all ages to connect with others about well-loved books via TikTok. Although the BookTok community has helped propel smaller authors to fame and further the sales of their books, all while connecting people around the world, many of the users have become toxic.

On the platform, one can find many videos and comments of users trashing other users for loving books that they themselves did not care for. This behavior then makes those who enjoyed certain titles feel bad for simply liking the story an author created.

“When I really was on BookTok, I found it can be kind of toxic a little bit. When they like something, they like something. And when they don't like something or it doesn't live up to their expectations they trash it like crazy and treat it like it's complete garbage. Which, it's not!” - Taylor, 21

Due to this behavior, many people on the app have developed a herd mentality. As users attack others of opposing opinions, it's simply easier for those who have not yet formed opinions to blindly follow what the majority of users are saying to avoid being targeted as well. Users on the app are no longer standing up for themselves or forming original ideas and thoughts about what they are reading. This is detrimental for society as a whole, as it causes others to fear independent thinking that may be different from that of others. It is also interesting that the book community takes this stance, given a recent push for further diversity in publishing. As diversity, equity and inclusion efforts across publishing houses and smaller presses produce more diverse stories by underrepresented authors, the BookTok community is simultaneously penalizing people with less popular ideas, putting a double bind on readers.

Another negative consequence of BookTok is a push from readers for authors to churn out and publish sequels to their successful books as quickly as possible. Writing is a form of art that requires quality time and effort to produce an outstanding product. Book series are often intricately preplanned by their writers, sometimes years in advance. However, as the social

media masses demand the next book, the author is also faces a dilemma of wanting to please their readers while creating a piece they are proud of.

As some authors fall victim to a fear of failing their anxious readers, they are left producing books that is not fully thought out. This has occurred with series such as *From Blood and Ash* by Jennifer L. Armentrout and *Fourth Wing* by Rebecca Yarros. In these scenarios, the first book within each series contains a thoughtful, intriguing, and emotional plot along with well-developed characters, but unfortunately took BookTok by storm and quickly gained a ton of popularity, prompting both authors to opt to publish the next book in the series around six months after the original. Typically, books take around nine months to two years to be published and rushing the process degrades the quality of a book. In the case of Armentrout, the latter books in her series possess grammar and plot mistakes, and even the misspelling of characters' names. While rushed, low-quality publications tend to please BookTok, especially if they contain a sexually explicit scene or two, those who do not frequent BookTok are left abandoning a series after the second or third book as they value quality over quantity.

"I feel like this is like the whole thing with books versus like social media [is that] people just want instant gratification and want to have their content quickly because that's what we get used to with a new episode of the TV show releasing every week. I feel like the whole thing with books is like, it's slower and that's the thing, like it takes more time to read a book. You're going through like the slow pace of life more often when you're reading a book. And then that's the same thing when you're like, waiting for the book to be published. It's a lot of work to create something actually good. And if you're just gonna demand something, then you're not gonna get that same quality in it. It's a gift of respect that these things take time." - Hope, 20

Cultivating Community and Conversing with Strangers

Often, a bookstore functions as a facilitator for building communities and connections among those with a shared love of literature.

“I definitely think there's a community. A lot of people, if they're shopping in the same section, will ask how books are like, ‘Oh, have you read this book?’ or they'll recommend books if they see you looking at a certain area,” - Lily, 20.

This phenomenon can be clearly be seen in the children's section of Barnes & Noble. From my observations of nuclear families who shop at this location, one parent typically always accompanies a child in the children's section while the other takes their time to look through the rest of the store themselves. Although the children's section is located off to the side of the store, it is the perfect meeting place for these families due to its open space. The children do not have any particular browsing patterns like adults would, but are instead captivated by whatever catches their eye as they run around the space (Lee, 2001). All of the children I observed exhibited emotions of excitement and curiosity with the books, and were ecstatic to be able to flip through the various pages of these stories no matter the title. The smaller bookshelves located in this space are perfect for children as it allows them easy access to all of the books with their short stature. All of the furniture, besides one chair, is also child-sized, allowing for easy access of use for these tiny humans. Both the stage and train table located on opposite sides of one another offer the children a variety of imaginative play, turning the bookstore into a fun and inviting place for their tiny but mighty minds. This setup is extremely important as it helps to create a community while fostering a love for reading, allowing for children to further explore their curiosity (Cremin et al., 2014). With its warm colors, open space, and inviting atmosphere, Barnes & Noble offers the perfect place for children to foster joy with reading and let their love for books grow as these kids continue to get older.

“It just takes me back to when I was little because we used to go there and my mom would just give us free reign. We would go to the kids section and there would be like Thomas the Trains to play with and we would just be playing with those and then we would get like a drink from Starbucks. It was just like a little outlet of fun. I would go there with my grandparents too, and they would spend hours just sitting. Like my Papi, he would just pick a book off the shelf and

sit there for hours. He would finish books while he was there, so we wouldn't have to buy them."
- Taylor, 21

At another point in my observations, my research took me to the very center of the store, proximate to a girl I estimated to be about 17. She browsed the store alongside who I presumed to be her older brother, and held a specialized copy of Sarah J. Maas's *A Court of Thorns and Roses* in her hands when I approached her. We were similar in height and age, and I opted to tell her how much I loved the book she was holding, as well as all the other ones by that author. She flashed a huge smile and excitedly told me that she also loved the series, which was why she was getting the special edition of the book. The girl and I then proceeded to discuss our preferences for the reading order of the *Throne of Glass* series also written by Maas. She looked at me with wide eyes and utter intrigue as I told her all of my opinions and reading experience with the author. The two of us conversed for a while, and she later remarked that she completely trusted the information I had given her. Throughout our interaction, we had both been overcome with joy at our ability to create a bond over the love of the popular fantasy series Maas has invented.

Being able to converse with strangers on this level is something that is truly special and often difficult to do in a society that tends to be self-centered. Lily, age 20, contends this, and remarked, "I enjoy talking with strangers at [Barnes & Noble], but I think I would be more comfortable being approached than approaching someone myself." Places like bookstores, where most shoppers are there seeking to widen their minds, allow for open conversations, fostering the community built in each location.

Conclusion

Why study bookstores? Although an unexpected culprit, books can be catalysts for new ideas, actions and behaviors for people of all demographics. The bookstore makes these influential hunks of bound paper readily available at one's fingertips, but they can unfortunately

end up in the wrong hands. Studies such as ours are vital to protect children from potentially harmful material and to guide booksellers in addressing consumer demand precisely. Our research contributes to the ongoing conversation about the publishing industry and changes that can be made to improve the way books are sold in an ever changing digital and economic landscape.

This study answers questions about the ways in which shoppers respond to the characteristics of the books before them and how these behaviors alter the function of a bookstore in contemporary society. We found that through a bookstore's function in society, it helps to create community both in-person and even online. The communities created through those who share a love of reading appear pleasant through in-person interactions, but can turn toxic when people find themselves behind a screen on social media.

Future research should draw on large-scale qualitative data that takes into account Barnes & Noble retailers outside of Eastern Pennsylvania, such as across the U.S. and perhaps expand beyond chain locations to include research at privately-owned bookstores. Furthermore, limited to only four interviewees, most of whom are of the same demographic, future research should also take the time to gain the opinions of a larger variety of people. One consideration is to include perspectives from both within and outside the book community to gain insights into the similarities and differences of each individual's viewpoint on the functionality of the bookstore.

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