

## The #bookstagram: distributed reading in the social media age

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### Abstract

Social media platforms have given rise to diverse 'reading formations' (Bennett and Woollacott 1987) from bespoke reading communities with strong affective bonds to the 'ambient affiliation' (Zappavigna 2014) more typical of followers of reading-related hashtags (#amreading). What makes all of these formations distinctive is that they 'bring into visibility an entirely new social dimension to reading' (Pinder 2012:68), and a sociality that is often reliant as much on the sharing of images as on words.

This article will focus specifically on shared acts of reading on Instagram, a social networking service for sharing photographs and videos. In particular, I will explore the phenomenon of the #bookstagram where readers share images of the book they are currently reading aestheticised and personalised through the use of evocative backdrops and objects. Such activities are all too often dismissed as empty displays by narcissistic millennials keen to make their mark in the 'attention economy'. However, I will argue that the #bookstagram offers a way for readers to share acts of reading with others in a way that evokes the sensory and the sensual, and also provides a form of 'embodied reenactment' (Tolins and Samermit 2016) that can generate discussion and empathy between users. My analysis will focus on the ways in which body parts, especially hands, feature in the images to evoke a sense of an embodied connection between reader and book. I will also examine how the images create a strong sense of reading as a situated activity that is associated with calmness, serenity and being close to nature. My discussion of emerging reading practices is informed by theories which move away from an exclusive focus on reading as a series of mental processes or the decoding of signs, to consider reading as a distributed, embodied activity that involves interacting with others and one's environment.

The analysis of the #bookstagram will examine how the activity can be located in relation to culturally and historically grounded practices relating to the book as object of display and to representations of reading bodies from visual art. However, I will also be arguing that the specific affordances of social media help produce readerly interactions that are dialogic and reliant on an ethos of participation where displays of intimate and private acts are routinely commented on and repurposed by others.

Keywords: distributed reading; bookstagram; social media; embodied reading

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### Introduction: Revisiting Theories of Reading for the Digital Age

Digital technologies and the world wide web have provided unprecedented access to contemporary reading practices, for example through the discussions taking place in online book clubs and book recommendation sites (Thomas and Round 2016; Nakamura 2013). This has led to studies of reading which look more and more beyond the book (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2015), both to engage with 'real' readers and to consider reading in the context of increasing media convergence. Interest has focused on whether the data available to researchers from these sources, in such huge amounts, 'bring into visibility an entirely new social dimension to reading' (Pinder 2012:68), countering the image of the solitary reader mentally adrift and detached from her surroundings as constantly perpetuated in visual art and in literary representations of reading (McLaughlin 2015; Camplin and Ranauro 2018). Meanwhile, studies of fanfiction and online fan cultures have demonstrated the active participation of readers in the production of new content, bringing to the forefront the 'processural' aspects of both writing and reading (Thomas 2011).

The study of new 'reading formations' (Bennett and Woollacott 1987) appearing online has often focused on bespoke reading communities where strong affective bonds (Thomas 2011) between members develop over time, much as with offline book clubs. Far less attention has been paid to the 'ambient affiliation' (Zappavigna 2014) formed around reading-related hashtags (#amreading; #ireadeverywhere) based not on direct interaction between individuals but on a mass communion of feeling and shared values that may be very short-lived. Also key to understanding the distinctive affordances of social media platforms is the emphasis on recency and 'nowness' (Page 2012; Thomas 2014), resulting in a shift of focus from the idea of producing some kind of fixed or definitive reading to the sharing of ideas and experiences around reading while the reading is still in process. Moreover, on some social media platforms, images and visual materials may be the preferred currency, providing new evidence of what readers are doing with their reading, as well as reflecting how their reading is embedded in and informed by their engagement with transmedia content. This visual and multimodal display or performance of reading may offer new kinds of data on reading and reading practices, removed from the traditional focus on reading as the processing of meaning or sharing of interpretations, to instead offer insights on reading as a practice that is material, embodied, and responsive to environment.

### Distributed Reading

This article draws on key concepts from distributed language as a framework for approaching readerly practices on social media. For example, the emphasis on language practices as real-time behavioural events or displays of 'intersubjective nowness' (Thibault 2011: 32) that characterises theories of distributed language is particularly useful for theorising some of these shifts affecting the way we understand reading in the context of the emerging practices of readers using the internet and social media spaces. Moreover, rethinking readers as 'coacting agents who extend their worlds and their own agency through embodied, embedded processes' (Thibault 2011: 2) could be said to be particularly suited for digital environments where reading is increasingly conceived as active and

creative, and where embodiment and situatedness are constantly being reconceptualised and redefined.

Understanding reading in the context of a network culture also brings into focus the importance of analysing the 'totality of the *meshwork* of interactions' (Steffensen 2015: 9) where acts of reading are shared across platforms, devices and languages as an ongoing process. Furthermore, the metaphor of the mesh brings with it connotations not just of interconnectedness and interlacing, but also of texture and tactility often missing from discussion of interaction and exchange in online social networks. As I shall argue, images of reading shared on social media celebrate not only books as material objects but the relationship of the body of the user with that object, providing a view of reading as being fully 'immersed in biological life' (Linell 2015: 120).

Furthermore, the return to Bakhtinian concepts of dialogicity in accounts of distributed language (Linell 2013) helps provide a way of understanding how social media posts chronicling or representing acts of reading are constantly looking outwards for uptake and response, most obviously through the kinds of instantaneous mass communion made possible by the hashtag. Importantly, this opens up a view of social media practices not simply as providing affirmation or a sense of community from others, but as a more complex ongoing process whereby sense-making and interactivity are dependent on input from others.

### The "Look" of Reading

This article will focus specifically on shared acts of reading on Instagram, a social networking service/social photography app primarily associated with the sharing of photographs and videos. According to Zappavigna, Instagram 'nostalgically positions itself in relation to past photographic practices' (2016: 273), especially the Polaroid and its promise of 'instant' images, while at the same time exploiting the affordances of smartphones and

drawing on the culture of following, liking etc made familiar by social media. The specific combination of hardware and software involved helps create the 'unique "look"' (Zhao and Zappavigna 2018: 668) that makes Instagram posts distinctive and recognisable. Instagram images are timestamped and tagged to facilitate sharing and a sense of 'visual co-presence' (Zappavigna 2016: 272), while also offering users access to post-processing software for editing and enhancing images, particularly through the use of filters to create distinctive visual effects. While Zappavigna (2016) claims that the 'selfie' (a self-portrait usually taken with a smartphone) is the most common type of image found on Instagram, also popular is the sharing of images around certain themes or activities, for example the #foodstagram, where users post images of dishes they have created or are about to enjoy. With the phenomenon of what Zappavigna and Zhao call the 'still life self-image' (2019), fetishized objects (coffee cups, specific foodstuffs, but also books) serve as a way of 'forging interpersonal alignments around a shared positive experience' (208). Zappavigna and Zhao link this to the tradition of the still life from art, illuminating the aesthetic value in everyday objects, but also using those objects to positively reflect the subjectivity, expertise and social status of the artist.

Posting images of these everyday objects and activities can be understood as a kind of archiving and curation of content that goes beyond the purely visual to appeal to all of the senses and to invite affective responses from viewers encouraged to imagine how 'you could be here with me' (Zappavigna 2016: 272). Users create their own profiles and regularly update images to generate a 'feed' which creates the impression for followers of being intimately involved in the minutiae of their daily lives. But posts are also 'multi-voiced' and polyphonic in the Bakhtinian sense, as they are taken up and recirculated across platforms by users and, through the use of shared hashtags, connect intertextually with other content across multiple contexts (Zappavigna and Zhao 2019). This kind of ongoing and open-ended 'lifestreaming' (Wargo 2015) is not necessarily confined to the one feed or even platform and involves often sophisticated kinds of multiliteracy to both create complex

'laminations of "selves"' (13) and to generate connective threads to reach out to other users. Furthermore, according to Georgakopolou (2016), participants in these activities display their appreciation and engagement both ritually, using conventionalised language and emojis, and through 'knowing' participation whereby they reflect on their own unique understanding of the activities and techniques of representation acquired from repeated engagement over time.

### The Reading Body

As McLaughlin (2015) has argued, literary critical theories of reading are dominated by a mind/body dualism to the extent that, even with reader response theories supposedly focused on the act of reading, 'the body of the reader is curiously absent' (6). McLaughlin therefore turns his attention to the 'gross physical body' (22) to examine the operations of readers' eyes and hands, physical posture and how reading connects to other bodily activities such as eating. This is vital, McLaughlin argues, not just to document individual habits and how readers develop bodily competence over time, but also so that we can begin to understand how reading as a social practice connects to language, culture and history.

McLaughlin's study turns to fictional and artistic representations of reading for evidence of acts of reading and to demonstrate how 'any image of the reading body reveals a historically-situated reader framed by a historically situated style of representation' (2015, 37). He also refers to vernacular photography as a means of documenting reading practices and reading bodies, and places great emphasis on the importance of understanding reading spaces and environments in shaping the reading experience. An important call to arms for contemporary studies of reading practices, McLaughlin's volume also takes into account the impact of new reading platforms and devices, arguing that the digital requires even greater haptic intelligence from users. Nevertheless, his discussion of the digital is largely based on the reading of hypertext and interactive fiction rather than on ereading devices such as the Kindle and little or no mention is made of social media as a site for readerly engagement.

## Looking at Bodies and Books on Instagram

Studies of social media and Instagram in particular have focused on how images of the body circulated on these platforms impact on contemporary notions of the self and the social, often negatively. In particular, the place of the body in new digital environments has been examined in relation to feminist activism (Baer 2016) which aims to 're-establish the grounds for a collective feminist politics beyond the realm of the self-styled individual' (19). Linking body politics with the notion of affect, theorists have also extended discussion of the body to include body positivity and trans activism (Hynnä et al 2019). Although in many studies Instagram is celebrated as providing a space where these issues and debates can be played out, there is also an acknowledgement that increased visibility inevitably entails high levels of trolling and toxicity in the kinds of interactions that take place between users.

In this article, my focus is on the phenomenon of the #bookstagram where readers share images of the book they are currently reading, aestheticised and personalised through the use of evocative backdrops and objects. Such activities are all too often dismissed as empty displays by narcissistic millennials keen to make their mark in the 'attention economy'. However, I will argue that the #bookstagram offers a way for readers to share acts of reading with others in a way that evokes the sensory and the sensual. In particular, I draw on the notion of 'embodied reenactment' (Tolins and Samermit 2016) developed in relation to online text-mediated conversation where the use of GIFs (graphical interchange formats) as affective responses stand in for the user's own nonverbal behaviour where the ability to present embodied displays and copresence may be constrained. In the analysis that follows, I will demonstrate how #bookstagram likewise present followers with re-enactments or stand-ins of affective responses (in this case to acts of reading) in ways that are highly affective and involving.

In many ways the renewed interest in the materiality of books and ‘the shape of reading’ (Piper 2012) can also be understood as a direct response to the digital and the shift from reading print texts to reading on screen. Thus, Mangen and Schilhab (2012) argue that the popularity of digital reading devices has returned us to examination of the ‘motor actions’ associated with reading, as well as the impact of digitisation on tactility and the sensory responses of readers. Meanwhile Piper (2012: 3) goes to far as to claim that ‘To think about the future of reading means, first and foremost to think about the relationship between reading and hands’, reflecting as to how the digital will provide alternatives or correlates for the ‘handiness’ (11) of the book, and commenting how ‘the more screenish our world becomes, the more we try to reinsert tactility back into it’ (16).

Across the web and social media, users engage in various kinds of curatorial activity involving books, for example creating virtual bookshelves for their reading (Library Thing), or creating book related objects and artefacts on virtual pin boards (Pinterest). Such activities have been made possible in part at least by the fact that the world wide web has made it so easy to access and share images of all kinds, and to repurpose these for use in tweets, memes and so on, seemingly at will and without restriction. According to Rodger (2019), such practices have been associated with a renaissance in a ‘bookish’ aesthetic, but can also be understood as giving physical expression to readerly urges and desires, and as illustrating the myriad ways in which readers’ bodily selves interact with the material form of the book as an intersensory object.

However, it is the sheer scale of engagement with bookstagramming (37m as of November 2019), and the fact that the activity is so reliant on the visual and the staging or crafting of a response, that make it a particularly fascinating area for exploration, especially in relation to the notion of reading as a distributed phenomenon. In particular, I hope to demonstrate that the practice reminds us once again how ‘language arises as people do things together’ (Steffensen 2015:5) and crucially moves us away from a preoccupation with reading as



information processing solely confined to the inner operations of the mind (Järvillehto et al 2009).

### Material and Methods

My discussion will be based on close analysis of specific examples of the #bookstagram. I am not claiming that these examples are wholly representative of existing practices. For one thing, #bookstagramming is constantly evolving, most notably as authors, marketers and publishing professionals increasingly use the platform to promote new titles, and as hashtags for different languages and sets of readers have appeared (#bookstagramespana; #audiobookstagram; #harrypotterbookstagram). Rather, my analysis will try to account for the multimodality of the posts and will draw on terms from film theory and narratology (*mise en scène*; perspective/point of view), social semiotics and Bakhtinian dialogism to attempt to account for some of their distinctive features.

My approach follows that of Rodger (2019) in utilising qualitative rather than quantitative methods, and in drawing on some of the central tenets of visual ethnography, namely engaging in ongoing interaction with the subject matter and subjects of the research, and asserting the validity of a visually based analysis. Moreover, as Rodger argues, concentrating on the visual does not mean that other senses are ignored: the 'sight' of books, combined with the personal memories of the user, can mean that the book as an object in fact triggers a wide range of bodily sensations, including those of smell and touch.

In particular, the examples chosen will focus on the ways in which body parts, especially hands, feature in the images to evoke a sense of an embodied connection between reader and book. I will also examine how the images create a strong sense of reading as a situated activity that is especially associated with calmness, serenity and being close to nature.

Following McLaughlin (2015, 37) I am interested in how the images captured via this shared hashtag can be said to constitute a 'historically situated style of representation'. My analysis

is also informed by a distributed approach to reading in moving away from an exclusive focus on a series of mental processes or the decoding of signs, to consider reading as an embodied activity that involves interacting with others and one's environment.

I also draw on Zappavigna and Zhao's (2019) studies of the discourse and social semiotics of Instagram to examine both the interactional and interpersonal functions of images, and the specific ways in which the viewer is positioned through the composition of the images, but also through the various perspectives offered by the shared social media stream. For Zappavigna and Zhao, these perspectives importantly allow the viewer the opportunity to identify with subject positions beyond their own in terms of ethnicity, age or gender, resulting in the possibility of producing a new form of the public and of experiencing different ways of seeing, being and doing.

My analysis of the #bookstagram will also attempt to locate it in relation to culturally and historically grounded practices relating to the book as object of display for example as a widely used prop in photography (Flint 2011) or as an aspect of the design of domestic interiors (Colclough 2011). As previously mentioned, theorists have long recognised the importance of visual art in shaping our cultural conceptions of readers and reading (McLaughlin 2015; Camplin and Ranauro 2018), and I will be following Zappavigna and Zhao (2019) in tracing some of the distinctive practices and styles of #bookstagramming to the history and traditions of the still life.

My aim in the discussion that follows is to go beyond treating the #bookstagram as a quirky and superficial expression of bookishness to try to understand how the practice may touch on what makes reading and our intimate connection with books so rich and complex. In his essay on the joys of collecting books, Benjamin (1955) described the sense of profound anticipation and passion that the collector feels experiencing 'the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects'. He also subverted the whole notion of collecting as involving a

relationship between a necessarily passive object and active collector: 'Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them' (67). The cultures from which the #bookstagram has emerged have arguably further problematised distinctions between active (creator) and passive (consumer), the material and the immaterial. Furthermore, as I will demonstrate, the phenomenon of the #bookstagram relies on an ethos of participation and sharing where displays of intimacy and affective and bodily engagement - including those relating to objects and activities predominantly associated with the internal mechanisms of the mind - are not only accepted but expected and routinely commented on and repurposed by others.

### Results and Discussion

As with any hashtag, particularly ones that attract large followings, searches for #bookstagram will include images completely unrelated to books and reading. In addition, even where there is some kind of shared focus there may be lots of variations in terms of how the practice is interpreted by users: for example, although not common, some users include themselves or their children in the images, and there is also variation in terms of whether the #bookstagram features just one book or many. Nevertheless, browsing the hashtag will readily provide insights into recurring tropes and themes. The #bookstagram shares certain features with the selfie, notably in conveying certain aspects of the subjectivity of the poster to followers even where the subject him or herself may not actually appear in the image. However, perhaps more so, the #bookstagram can be understood as a modern variant of the still life, with its focus on inanimate objects used symbolically or as inspiration for formal experimentation particularly with regards to perspective and texture. Rather than the constant updating which characterises the selfie, the #bookstagram usually relies on careful staging and the arrangement of the objects chosen to appear in view. Most commonly, the book appears centre stage, surrounded by various props, with a high camera angle looking down on the scene in a manner reminiscent of product photography where depth and emphasis is provided by lighting and contrasting backgrounds. As discussed earlier, Zappavigna and Zhao's (2019) concept of the 'still life self-image' brings to the fore

the specific and perhaps unique ways in which features of the selfie and the still life are combined in the images posted on Instagram.

Books can appear open to view, sometimes in extreme close up so that the viewer can actually read the pages. However, more common is a view of a closed book cover, usually the front, with the surrounding objects and background often matching or blending in with the dominant colours of the book's design. Props commonly include hot drinks, especially coffee (or, less often, tea), drawing on longstanding cultural links with reading from the days of the coffee house, and candles, often helping to consolidate the impression of the capturing of the moment as a ritualistic act. Food, especially comfort foods such as chocolate, also feature prominently, again drawing on a longstanding association between reading and eating (McLaughlin 2015). As Rodger (2019) has argued in relation to images captured on Pinterest, in addition to functioning ritualistically, the images can also be understood as restorative, with users taking time out from busy routines to enjoy indulgent, comforting activities (other popular props include various items of knitwear or cushions). As well as offering the viewer a recreation of the intersensory nature of reading, Rodger (2019) argues that these images serve to invite the onlooker to imagine what it would be like to share the moment, drawing on their own memories and associations in response to what they are viewing.

The fact that a majority of #bookstagramms are interior shots, evoking domestic, feminised spaces can mean they are easily dismissed as trivial or escapist – for Rodger (2019) in particular, the association with passivity is problematic. The images also to some extent replicate tropes familiar from art and advertising where female pleasure is presented as a solitary, private, even shameful pleasure taking place in enclosed spaces (for example a locked bathroom). Although there is a long tradition of locating reading in confined locations and zones (Piper 2012; McLaughlin 2015), the particular ways in which these spaces and how readers fit into to them (or not) may be gendered has received much less attention.

Nevertheless, another popular subgenre of the #bookstagram involves picturing books in the outdoors, most often placing the book and the reader in a setting close to nature, for example surrounded by autumnal leaves or facing the sea. The account #booksinsitu explicitly sets out to depict 'good books in nice settings' featuring international locations and prompting discussion of the setting alongside the subject matter of the featured book. Meanwhile #bookfacefriday sets out to seamlessly match book covers to backgrounds (and faces), in an activity shared on a particular day by a particular, though not exclusive, group (public librarians).

As well as including both interior and exterior settings, #bookstagramms reflect the changing seasons, with Halloween themed grams, beach scenes etc. helping to ensure that the experience is shared with the viewer in the 'now', but also enhancing its discoverability and reach to users who may be searching for seasonal related images rather than bookish content.

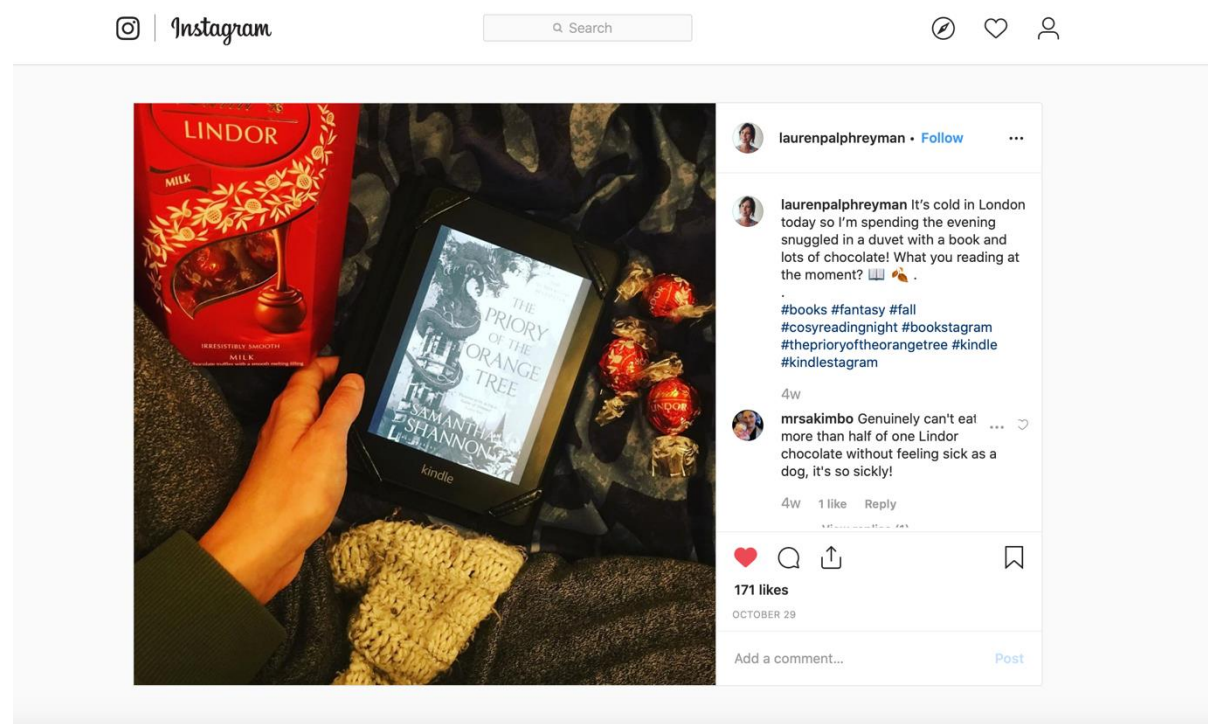
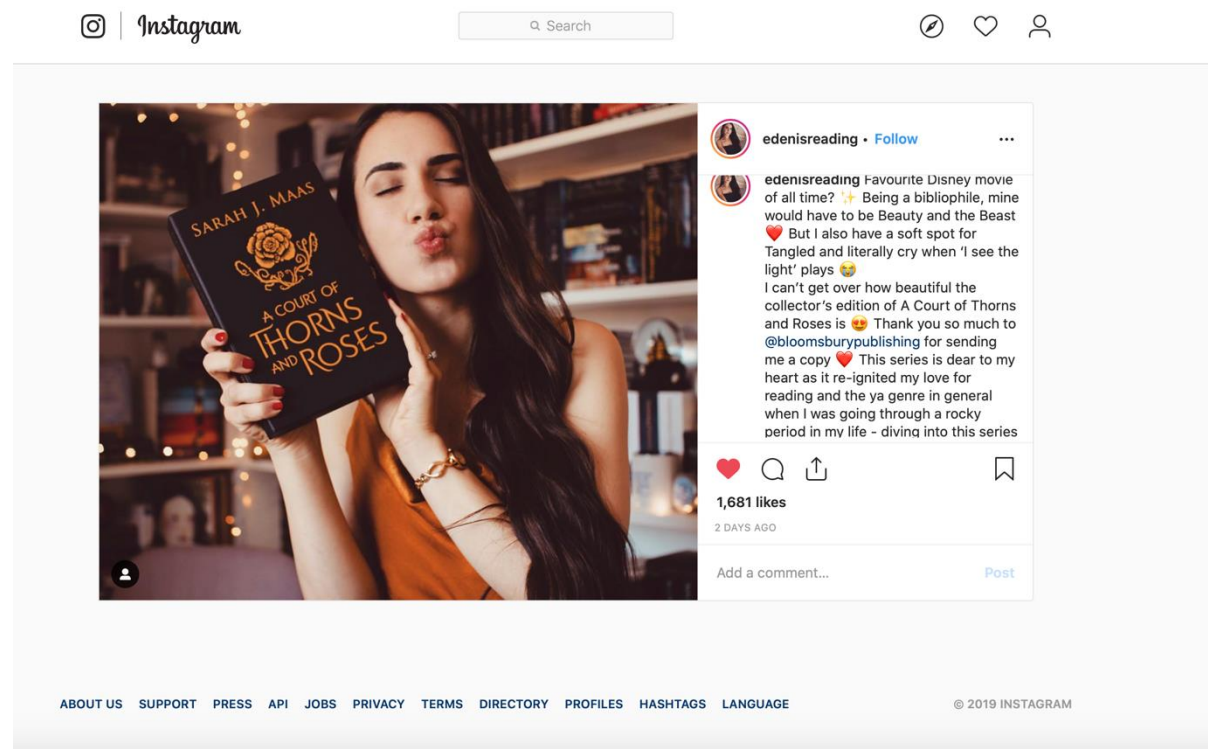


Fig 1, posted in October 2019 by author and 'book lover' laurenalphreyman, features brightly coloured chocolates, knitted objects and a blanket and duvet, with the tag #cozyreadingnight and the reference to the subject 'snuggled up' appealing to the 'ambient social media viewer' (Zappavigna 2016: 271) as someone likely to be similarly seeking respite from the cold. The chocolates, warm colours and thick textiles connote comfort and the book held up for our gaze (in this case on a Kindle) is positioned as though to invite us to share in the reading experience as we look down on the featured text. In this case the subject's hand acts deictically to direct our gaze to the Kindle and the book. Unlike hands appearing elsewhere (for example Fig 2 below), this subject's hand is unadorned by nail polish or jewellery and is presented side on so we only see the thumb and the side of the index finger.

The book featured in the post, Shannon's *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, is a fantasy novel, one of the most popular genres for #bookstagrammers, and #fantasy is also tagged to explicitly include this community of readers. The accompanying caption for the image also uses a direct question ('What are you reading at the moment?') to prompt responses from viewers (the post had 171 likes and 3 comments as of December 2019), with one of the responses from mrsakimbo reacting to the chocolate rather than the book, demonstrating how readily reading is integrated into other activities and pleasures by users. In addition, as argued earlier, the interaction and use of hashtags shows how #bookstagram is dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense, anticipating and reliant on responses from other users.

Although people do not feature routinely in #bookstagrams, cats do (and less frequently dogs), again contributing to the impression of the #bookstagram as 'immersed in biological life' (Linell 2015:120) as argued, earlier, but also strongly suggesting a feminised space created from the curation of cute things. Often the cats pictured appear to be interacting with the books, touching them with outstretched paws, sitting on them, poking out of shelves

or curled up next to them. As discussed above, #bookfacefriday sometimes features people's faces (or parts of them) while elsewhere #bookstagram features books held up over the face so that the identity of the person depicted is kept hidden. However, images also place books in close proximity to faces, often with the face touching or tilted towards the book in a gesture suggestive of intimacy and affection.



In Fig. 2, edenisreading, a book vlogger (video blogger) who also posts on YouTube, Goodreads and Pinterest, is featured posing with a book that she has been sent to review by the publisher. In her Instagram feed, edenisreading is often pictured holding or reading a book, facing the camera with a bookshelf in the background, though it is not immediately clear whether the photographs are taken by her or someone else. She also posts #bookstagram where she holds out a book in front of her with only her hands visible, #bookstagram where her body is visible but not her face, and #bookstagram where single or multiple books feature without her or any part of her body appearing. In the image featured here, not only does edenisreading hold the book close to her face but she also

puckers up for a kiss, presumably to convey how much she loves the book (and/or her audience).

The #bookstagram posted on 30 November attracted over 1700 likes (as of 3 December 2019) and 67 comments, and it is clear from her form of address to her followers ('angels') that this #bookstagrammer is very keen to cultivate a following. As with laurenalphreyman, many of edenisreading's #bookstagramms open with questions inviting followers to express their opinions, in this case on their favourite Disney movie. While this bears no obvious relation to the book she is holding, a Young Adult novel, the author Sarah J. Maas's profile on Goodreads mentions 'an unhealthy appreciation for Disney movies' and her adoration of fairy tales, suggesting that the topic has been chosen to align with readers of the book in mind. In the accompanying text to her post, edenisreading refers to how reading has helped her through 'a rocky period in my life', and as with many other social media vloggers and influencers, her willingness to share intimate information about herself, as well as to regularly picture herself in her posts, contributes to her 'relatability'.

Although in some cases the face or body appearing in the #bookstagram may be that of a model or someone standing in for the poster, the assumption in the vast majority of instances is that the body which features is that of the person posting the image, and taking the photograph as a variant of the 'selfie'. The subject is surrounded by objects carefully designed and staged as in the *mise en scène* from theatre and film to help tell the story or evoke an atmosphere, with the positioning of the objects relative to one another and to the surrounding space also contributing to the overall effect. With the #bookstagram it is understood that the selection of objects and creation of the scene reflects the personality of the #bookstagrammer. In particular, the relationship between book and reader is projected as one that is intimate and revealing of the self. As Gibbons (2010) notes, the conceptual metaphor People Are Books ('I could read him like an open book') reinforces a strong sense of the close interrelationship between book as body and body as book. With the



#bookstagram, therefore, the figuring of the body of the reader, combined with the way the images create such a strong sense of personal space, goes beyond the idea of staging, display and performance to suggest something much more like a glimpse into the confessional, or privileged access to the inner sanctum usually kept hidden.

As suggested earlier, rather than full body shots, most common are images featuring fragmented body parts, especially hands (holding books) or legs (propping up a book or stretched out in recline), positioning the viewer with/as the reader so as to 'enact the perspective of the photographer' and his or her physical presence (Zhao and Zappavigna 2018: 669).



Fig 3 features a familiar pose where the camera is positioned in such a way as to align the viewer with the photographer/reader who in this case has taken a pause from reading. The legs and feet of the subject are dappled in sunlight with the feet pointing towards the river pictured below. The book is positioned in such a way as to suggest it has just been placed

down by the reader, with the cover and title just about visible. peppercorn.j's caption for the post (The bearable niceness of chilling) puns on the book's title (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*), but unlike edenisreading no other information or attempt to engage with the viewer is offered. The post attracted far fewer likes than edenisreading's and no comments were left.

peppercorn.j's tags for the post strongly suggest an interest in photography as the brand of camera is mentioned along with several other references to photography and nature before any reference to books or reading. peppercorn.j's post is also unusual in featuring a male bookstagrammer's body parts. This, combined with the outdoors setting, could be taken to be clear evidence of gendering of posts, with female subjects most closely associated with interiors, and males with the great outdoors. In particular, the image may be closely associated with the phenomenon of park reading as described by McLaughlin (2015) with its strong connotations of freedom and a relaxed, easygoing form of reading practice. The hashtags associated with the post (#trip #adventure, #swim) suggest both that the subject is taking a time out from his daily routine, but also that he wants to connect his form of #escape to physical activity. Adding to this, the feet pictured strongly connote masculinity and ruggedness. The solitude of the subject and his relation to the book also contrasts sharply with edenisreading's #bookstagram where the subject is almost literally reaching out beyond the camera to embrace the viewer. Here, the subject seems much more content to be alone with nature, and his (and our) gaze is fixed on his surroundings rather than seeking intimacy with or approbation from the viewer. The fact that peppercorn.j's chosen reading material is high literature could also be taken to indicate that perhaps he is more concerned to display his erudition rather than to engage with other readers. Nonetheless, the use of multiple hashtags again points to the inherent dialogicity of the post, reaching out to potential interactants implicitly rather than through direct questions.

In addition to aligning the viewer with the point of view of the pictured reader, images which feature books propped up on legs also help recreate a familiar recurring trope of the reclining reader, fully relaxed, even sensually stretched out. More common (as in Figs 1 and 2), and with a much longer history of representation in visual art, books and hands appear together both in the purely functional sense of holding the book up to the gaze of the reader (and by association the viewer of the captured image), and in the more symbolic sense of conveying a sense of devotion or intimacy with that object. For example, in his discussion of the central significance of the act of holding a book, Piper (2012: 3) argues that the openness of the gesture mimics both that of greeting and prayer, and that the embodied nature of reading is important to understanding this 'integral part of our lived experience (xiii).

Meanwhile, hands not only direct the viewer's gaze to the book as the central focus of the image, but also convey something of the personality and gender of the (hidden reader), whether this is by their shape or size (predominantly female), the colour and condition of the skin (predominantly white, young), or through ornamentation in the form of jewellery or nail polish. Of course, another connotation of the hand pictured holding or cradling the book is devotional, but coupled with intimacy and even sensuality where the effect is one of gently touching or almost stroking the page, in the case of books pictured held open.

As discussed above, captions also perform an important function in reaching out to other users from the 'totality of the *meshwork* of interactions' (Steffensen 2015: 9) from the social media stream. Sometimes they provide contextual information for the image, for example by providing short summaries or reviews of the plots of the books featured. But as in the posts discussed earlier, questions are also used to prompt discussion and elicit responses, especially where those questions explicitly ask for opinions, for example whether a film adaptation was better than the book, or questions relating to plot devices or aspects of characterisation. Despite these attempts to prompt dialogue, likes far outnumber comments,

and comments are often more affective rather than discursive, for example stating simply 'I love this' or posting an emoji or series of emojis. Nevertheless, as Zappavigna (2011) has observed, activities taking place around shared hashtags can perform a variety of functions, from interpersonal bonding to helping users to enact certain identities, in this case that of the 'reader' and the 'bookstagrammer'. As in the examples discussed earlier, tagging of posts also serves to extend their reach, drawing in followers whose interests may be less in books or reading than seasonal images, locations and so on. For Zhao and Zappavigna (2018), hashtags are crucial to creating the kind of polyphony and multi-voiced discourse which Bakhtin argued for in relation to the novel, serving to put into circulation a contribution which anticipates an 'answering word' (Bakhtin 1981:280) from unknown others. The idea of 'ambient affiliation' further helps convey how even if there may not be much evidence of verbal interaction between users, the hashtag provides them with a sense of an 'always there' or 'always on' audience who wait for and value their contributions.

Bookstagramming thus provides users with a way of expressing themselves creatively with, through or around their reading, using both images and language. As such, it provides an interesting counterpoint to the perhaps more widespread practices of 'writing it all down' (Thomas 2010) associated with web based fanfiction, where users create short works of fiction of their own based on pre-existing worlds from books, but also film, TV and video games. One of the possible reasons for this turn to the visual is that sharing images has become much easier and an intrinsic aspect of popular social media platforms such as Pinterest and Instagram. However, another reason for the appeal of these visual responses is that they offer a space for the expression of affective responses traditionally eschewed in the discussion of literature in academic settings, and a space where users can perhaps identify with being a 'reader' aesthetically rather than discursively, thus avoiding challenges by others on details of plot or characterisation. Another explanation for the popularity of the practice may be that it provides a way of overcoming the paradox, noted by Piper (2012: 85) whereby 'Reading is a technique of socialization with a deeply asocial element'.

In terms of what #bookstagramming may tell us about reading environments, tastes and preferences or the contemporary marketplace, young adult (YA) fiction and classic texts feature prominently, with poetry, autobiographies and nonfiction (art books, atlases, cookbooks) also appearing though much less frequently. Another distinctive feature of the #bookstagram is the regularity with which books in translation feature - for example non-English language editions of the Harry Potter books - suggesting the importance of paratextual materials and an interest in design and marketing as much as in what might lie between the book's covers. As with other forms of social reading in online spaces, #bookstagramming has a strong 'commodity fetishistic undercurrent' (Pinder 2012), a fetishizing not just of the books, but of an associated aspirational lifestyle. Moreover, especially where multiple books feature, the images can be linked to the quantification of reading observable across social media, whether that is the BookTuber's 'book haul' or the reading challenges and goals common to sites such as Goodreads.

### Conclusions

It needs to be acknowledged that shared acts and displays of reading on social media could be said to convey romanticised, nostalgic conceptions of reading, as well as perpetuating potentially harmful gendering of reading tastes and spaces and excluding or alienating readers outside of the main demographic of younger, white women. Moreover, taken in isolation, individual #bookstagrams may appear to offer little beyond individual and instantaneous snapshots of reading. In particular, #bookstagramming has been heavily criticised by some for fetishizing the book and reducing it to a mere lifestyle accessory (Connolly 2018). For others, the prevalence of genre and young adult fiction may itself be ample evidence of an impoverished reading culture.

A distributed approach to reading, combined with perspectives from social semiotics and book history has proved especially helpful in trying to account for the popularity of

#bookstagramming and what it might tell us about contemporary reading practices and cultures. Notably, distributed language theories provide a framework for exploring how reading is concretised as embodied and embedded in the environment, in the images circulating between readers on social media. Moreover, the inherent dialogicity of reading so crucial to the distributed model can be related to the #bookstagram in the way in which both images and accompanying text constantly seek out response and connection with others. Finally, the concept of the meshwork has also proved to be important in accounting for the ways in which individual acts of reading not only interconnect with each other on these platforms, but also speak of a culture where readers and books are part of a complex media ecosystem in which the boundaries between media, texts, producers and consumers are much more fluid. When we look at how individual posts interlace to create a meshwork, what we find is that reading is (re)conceived as a collaborative activity in which each individual reading is partial, incomplete, dependent on and constantly searching for connection with other readings and readers.

What I hope to have demonstrated in this article is that #bookstagramming can be understood as the latest in a long history of readers finding ways to curate, share and display their reading and to engage with other readers. Yet, particularly in their combining of textual and visual responses, and embrace of media and platform agnosticism, these acts of reading are not just individually rewarding but also reflective of wider cultural shifts brought about by technological change and increasing media convergence. Rather than dismiss such acts out of hand or focus purely on analysing the textual traces left behind, we need to engage with emerging practices and those who participate in them to fully understand how the meshwork of readers and reading is operating and evolving.

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