

A Comparative Study between China and Abroad: BookTok, an Effective Way in Converging Traditional Reading with the Digital Media?

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Abstract: As reading practices increasingly migrate into short-video environments, platforms such as TikTok and its Chinese counterpart Douyin have reconfigured how books are encountered, interpreted, and emotionally experienced. BookTok has emerged as a prominent site of this transformation, where reading is mediated primarily through audiovisual storytelling rather than direct textual engagement. Drawing on remediation theory, this study conceptualizes videolized reading as a platform-mediated reading practice in which narrative condensation, embodied performance, and algorithmic circulation jointly shape textual meaning and visibility. Using a mixed-methods comparative design, this paper analyzes BookTok content from China and abroad to examine how videolized reading operates across different cultural contexts. The findings reveal that while short-video platforms share similar technical affordances, the remediation of reading is culturally patterned. Chinese BookTok practices tend to emphasize instructional explanation and knowledge-oriented reading functions, whereas international BookTok foregrounds emotional immersion and affective performance. These differences reflect distinct cultural logics of reading that are re-articulated through videolization rather than displaced by it. By theorizing videolized reading and empirically demonstrating its culturally specific forms, this study extends research on media convergence and social reading. It argues that remediation processes in digital reading are not technologically neutral but are shaped by culturally embedded understandings of reading, emotion, and media practice.

Keywords: BookTok; media convergence; videolized reading; platform-mediated reading; short-video platforms

1. Introduction and Literature Review

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The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped global communication environments by intensifying social isolation, emotional uncertainty, and informational disorder. Under such conditions, reading has re-emerged as an important cultural practice for emotional regulation and meaning-making. Yet in the digital era, reading is no longer confined to text-based or solitary forms. Instead, it has increasingly become mediated, visualized, and embedded within platform-based social interaction.

Research on digital and mobile communication highlights how smartphones and app ecologies integrate media consumption, social interaction, and self-expression into everyday cultural practices (Campbell, 2018). Short-video platforms such as TikTok exemplify this transformation by combining audiovisual affordances, algorithmic circulation, and participatory culture. Within this context, BookTok has emerged as a prominent form of videolized reading, in which users create short videos to share book recommendations, reading experiences, and emotional responses to texts.

From a theoretical perspective, BookTok reflects broader processes of media convergence, whereby traditional cultural forms are not displaced but re-articulated through new media logics (Jenkins, 2006). Through short videos, reading becomes a socially visible and emotionally expressive activity, reshaping both the spatiality and sociality of reading practices (Frith & Özkul, 2019). Books are no longer presented as static textual objects but are transformed into affective and performative media experiences mediated by platform logics.

The influence of BookTok is also evident at the industry level. Despite disruptions caused by the pandemic, book markets in major regions demonstrated notable resilience. Print book production increased in the United States in 2021 (McLean, 2022), while publishers in the United Kingdom reported continued growth under adverse economic conditions (Joynson, 2021). In China, short-video platforms and livestreaming have become central channels for publishing promotion, significantly contributing to book sales and reading engagement (Wei, 2021; Zhu, 2022). These developments suggest that videolized reading operates not merely as a marketing strategy but as a communicative mechanism through which traditional media adapt to digital environments.

Academic research on BookTok has expanded in recent years, particularly in international contexts. Existing studies emphasize audience motivations, community participation, and literacy practices. Guíñez-Cabrera and Mansilla-Obando (2022) identify social influence, hedonistic motivation, and community belonging as key drivers of participation. Merga (2021) highlights BookTok's role in re-engaging young readers, while Jerasa and Boffone (2021) demonstrate its educational value in digital literacy and language learning. Collectively, these studies frame BookTok as a socially and emotionally driven reading environment.

In contrast, Chinese scholarship has primarily approached BookTok-related practices from the perspectives of marketing and publishing. Research has focused on short-video promotion strategies, platform-based business models, and brand construction of institutional reading accounts on Douyin (Meng & Qin, 2020; Tian, 2020; Cui & Huang, 2022). While these studies provide important industry insights, they tend to conceptualize BookTok mainly as an economic instrument rather than as a cultural and communicative practice.

As a result, several gaps remain. First, limited attention has been paid to the narrative and visual strategies through which reading is represented and mediated in short-video formats. Second, emotional expression and affective communication—central to BookTok practices—are often under-theorized, despite their relevance to theories of emotional contagion and mediated

self-presentation (Hatfield et al., 1994; Goffman, 1956). Third, comparative studies examining how similar platform infrastructures generate culturally differentiated forms of videolized reading remain scarce.

Addressing these gaps, this study conducts a comparative analysis of BookTok practices on Douyin (China) and TikTok (international), focusing on three interrelated dimensions: (1) book genres and reading functions, (2) visual editing practices and production styles, and (3) narrative strategies and emotional expression. By examining how videolized reading is re-mediated across cultural contexts, this paper makes two theoretical contributions. First, it offers a conceptual clarification of videolized reading as a platform-mediated reading practice. Second, it empirically demonstrates how remediation processes are culturally patterned, thereby extending media practice theories within the context of digital reading..

2. Methods

This study adopts a mixed-methods comparative research design combining quantitative content analysis and qualitative narrative analysis. A sample of BookTok videos was collected from Douyin (China) and TikTok (international) between 2020 and 2022. Videos were selected based on hashtags related to book recommendations and reading experiences, such as #BookTok, #ReadingVlog, and their Chinese equivalents. The quantitative phase involved coding videos according to book genre, functional orientation (e.g., knowledge acquisition, emotional healing, entertainment), visual style, and narrative form. The qualitative phase focused on in-depth analysis of representative videos to examine storytelling techniques, emotional expression, and embodied performance. This mixed-methods approach allows for both systematic comparison and nuanced interpretation, enabling a comprehensive understanding of videolized reading practices across cultural contexts. Coding categories were iteratively refined, and representative samples were cross-checked to ensure analytical consistency.

3. Findings: Comparative Analysis of Videolized Reading Practices

Table 1 provides an overview of the key dimensions through which videolized reading is re-mediated on BookTok across Chinese and international contexts. The following sections elaborate on these dimensions in detail.

Table 1. Cultural Logics of Videolized Reading on BookTok: A Comparative Overview

Dimension of Videolized Reading	Chinese BookTok (Douyin)	International BookTok (TikTok)
Dominant book genres	Novels; prose; self-help; popular science; educational books	Novels, especially young adult, romance, and fantasy
Primary reading functions	Knowledge acquisition; self-improvement; emotional regulation; practical value	Emotional immersion; imagination; aesthetic pleasure; escapism

Visual editing practices	Longer videos; stable camera setups; curated backgrounds; background music; explanatory voiceovers	Shorter videos; handheld cameras; rapid cuts; everyday settings (e.g., bedrooms, bookstores)
Narrative strategies	Oral explanation; structured summaries; thematic interpretation; creator positioned as interpreter	Embodied performance; affective storytelling; visual symbolism; creator positioned as emotional participant
Mode of emotional engagement	Verbally articulated and relatively restrained emotion	Performative, embodied, and visually intensified affect
Remediation logic of reading	Instructional and institutional remediation emphasizing clarity and authority	Affective and experiential remediation emphasizing immersion and resonance

3.1 Book Genres and the Functional Orientation of Videolized Reading

Across both Chinese and international samples, novels remain the most frequently recommended book type on BookTok, indicating that videolized reading is primarily anchored in fictional narratives. However, clear differences emerge in genre diversity and functional orientation, suggesting distinct cultural understandings of what reading is expected to accomplish when mediated through short video platforms.

Chinese BookTok exhibits a broader range of book categories, including prose, self-help, popular science, and educational texts. These genres are commonly framed in relation to practical value, personal development, and emotional regulation. Reading is frequently presented as a purposeful activity, through which books function as resources for self-improvement, healing, or knowledge acquisition. In this context, videolization serves to translate textual content into accessible audiovisual explanations while preserving the instrumental logic traditionally associated with reading.

In contrast, international BookTok concentrates more heavily on fiction subgenres such as young adult, romance, and fantasy. Rather than emphasizing utility or instruction, these videos foreground imagination, emotional immersion, and aesthetic pleasure. Books are introduced as affective experiences, with creators highlighting emotional intensity, atmosphere, and personal resonance. Videolized reading in this context thus prioritizes experiential engagement over informational value, framing reading as an emotionally immersive rather than goal-oriented practice.

3.2 Visual Editing Practices and the Mediation of Reading Authority

Differences in videolized reading practices are further reflected in visual production styles and editing strategies. Chinese BookTok videos tend to be longer in duration and more professionally produced, often featuring stable camera setups, carefully arranged backgrounds, background music, and explanatory voiceovers. Such videos resemble curated recommendations or mini-lectures, reinforcing the role of the creator as a knowledgeable intermediary between the text and the audience.

These stylistic choices suggest a remediation process that emphasizes clarity, authority, and instructional efficiency. Videolization, in this case, enhances the communicability of reading while maintaining a relatively structured and hierarchical relationship between creator, content, and viewer.

International BookTok videos, by contrast, are typically shorter, more spontaneous, and embedded in everyday environments such as bedrooms, bookstores, or public spaces. Handheld cameras, rapid editing, and expressive facial reactions are common, creating an atmosphere of immediacy and intimacy. Rather than presenting reading as curated knowledge, these visual styles foreground personal experience and emotional response, positioning videolized reading as an extension of everyday life rather than a formal interpretive act.

3.3 Narrative Strategies and Affective Modes of Videolized Reading

Narrative strategies further differentiate how videolized reading is performed across cultural contexts. Chinese BookTok creators predominantly rely on oral explanation, structured summaries, and thematic interpretation. Narratives are often organized around clear argumentative or informational frameworks, positioning the creator as an interpreter who guides viewers through the text. Emotional expression, when present, is typically articulated verbally and integrated into explanatory discourse.

In contrast, international BookTok favors embodied and performative storytelling. Creators frequently use exaggerated facial expressions, gestures, cosplay, and symbolic visual elements to convey emotional responses to books. Rather than explaining plots or themes in detail, these videos aim to evoke affective resonance and emotional recognition. Viewers are invited to experience the emotional atmosphere of the book through visual and bodily cues, emphasizing feeling over cognitive understanding.

These contrasting narrative strategies indicate that videolized reading operates through different modes of mediation: one prioritizing interpretive explanation and communicative clarity, and the other emphasizing affective performance and emotional immersion.

4. Discussion

4.1 Videolized Reading as Re-mediated Reading Practice

The findings of this study suggest that videolized reading on BookTok is not merely a visual representation of books or reading experiences, but a re-mediated reading practice shaped by platform affordances and cultural expectations. Consistent with remediation theory, BookTok does not replace traditional reading; rather, it reorganizes how reading is made visible, meaningful, and socially shareable.

In both Chinese and international contexts, books are condensed into short audiovisual narratives that foreground affective cues, symbolic imagery, and personal expression. However, the comparative analysis reveals that remediation operates through different logics. In Chinese BookTok, videolized reading tends to preserve elements of instructional and knowledge-oriented reading traditions, emphasizing explanation, summary, and personal growth. In contrast, international BookTok prioritizes emotional resonance and embodied storytelling, transforming reading into an affective performance rather than an interpretive explanation.

These differences indicate that videolized reading is not a standardized global phenomenon but a culturally inflected media practice in which platform affordances interact with pre-existing reading cultures.

4.2 Cultural Logics of Remediation in BookTok Practices

The comparative findings demonstrate that remediation processes on BookTok are deeply shaped by cultural orientations toward reading and media authority. Chinese BookTok creators often position themselves as knowledgeable mediators, offering structured interpretations and practical value. This reflects a cultural logic in which reading is associated with self-improvement, moral cultivation, and instrumental knowledge acquisition. Videolization, in this context, enhances accessibility and efficiency while maintaining hierarchical relationships between the content creator, the text, and the audience.

International BookTok practices, by contrast, reflect a more affect-centered remediation logic. Reading is presented as an emotionally immersive and personally transformative experience, conveyed through facial expressions, gestures, and performative cues. Rather than explaining books, creators invite viewers to share emotional reactions, fostering horizontal relationships among audiences who recognize similar feelings. Here, remediation amplifies affective engagement and collective identification rather than cognitive interpretation.

By situating these practices within remediation theory, this study shows that the re-mediation of reading is not solely driven by technological affordances but is actively shaped by culturally embedded understandings of what reading is for and how it should be experienced.

4.3 Conceptualizing Videolized Reading in Platform Environments

Building on the comparative analysis, this paper proposes videolized reading as a conceptual lens for understanding contemporary reading practices on short-video platforms. Videolized reading refers to a platform-mediated reading practice in which texts are encountered through condensed narratives, emotional performance, and algorithmically amplified visibility rather than sustained textual engagement.

This concept highlights three defining features. First, videolized reading relies on narrative condensation, transforming complex texts into emotionally legible fragments. Second, it foregrounds emotional presence, using embodied cues to simulate intimacy and immediacy. Third, it is embedded within platform logics, where algorithmic circulation shapes which reading experiences become visible and influential.

By applying this concept to a cross-cultural comparison of BookTok, this study demonstrates how videolized reading takes culturally specific forms while operating within shared platform infrastructures. In doing so, it extends existing research on social reading and media convergence by showing how reading practices are reconfigured through audiovisual platforms without losing their cultural grounding.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined BookTok as a site where reading practices are reconfigured through short-video platforms, offering a comparative analysis of videolized reading in China and abroad. Rather than treating BookTok as a peripheral promotional phenomenon, this paper conceptualizes videolized reading as a platform-mediated reading practice shaped by audiovisual affordances, embodied performance, and algorithmic visibility.

By applying remediation theory to a cross-cultural comparison, this study demonstrates that the re-mediation of reading is not a technologically neutral process. Although BookTok operates within

shared platform infrastructures, its reading practices are culturally patterned. Chinese BookTok tends to re-articulate instructional and knowledge-oriented reading traditions, while international BookTok foregrounds affective immersion and performative engagement. These findings suggest that videolization does not displace existing reading cultures but reconfigures them in culturally specific ways.

Theoretically, this study contributes to research on media convergence and social reading by clarifying videolized reading as an analytical concept and by empirically showing how remediation processes in digital reading are shaped by cultural logics. More broadly, it highlights the importance of examining platform-mediated reading as a situated media practice, in which technological affordances and cultural values jointly structure how texts are experienced, shared, and valued in contemporary digital environments.

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