In the Name of Love:

Construction of Romance and Gender on Bookstagram

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ABSTRACT

The knowledge of romance books has slipped through their initial recognition as tales of true love, to now taking shape of full-fledged online communities, stacked with accounts of micro-tropes, character arcs and more than a few attempts made to re-enact the plots of one's favourite books. This space on Instagram popularly known as Bookstagram is a hub of all such content and more, sparking spirited discussions about who is the best male main character of all times, and what trope they cannot digest. This research, situating itself in this buzzing dynamic, sought to examine how romance, romantic relationships, and gender roles are constructed and communicated within the Instagram-based book community. The central research question of this study is - How do Instagram based book communities construct and communicate discourses on romance?

Through purposive sampling, a hundred and fifty reels from Instagram were collected. These reels were then analysed through thematic analysis, while using critical discourse analysis as its analytical framework. The method allowed the researcher to question the implicit meaning behind the data collected and ask questions about how different concepts were being framed, and contested in this community. The findings lead to three key themes: The Discursive Construction of Love, the Representation of Romantic Relationships, and Gendered Discourses within Romance. The findings revealed that the content on Bookstagram is highly curated into stylized plots, tropes, and dramatic aesthetics, all employed to make the narrative consumable. The notions around love reflected a pattern of it being equated to emotional intensity. Relationship dynamics were put forward in a highly performative manner, often using techniques of sensationalisation. On the subject of gender, themes of male obsession, assertiveness and control emerged while the female characters were discussed in a more passive light.

By situating the online book reading community as a digital discursive space, this thesis highlights how platform-specific content, reels, captions, and trends, both reflect and reproduce dominant ideologies about love and gender. Drawing its theoretical foundation from Representation Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis and Feminist Media Theories, this research argues that Bookstagram is a cultural engine, producing, packaging, and propagating gendered narratives under the guise of literary fandoms.

Keywords: Bookstagram, Romance, Gender, Discourse, Social Media

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Preface

So often, we see so much and question so little. This thesis is an attempt to act as a mirror, more to myself than to anyone else.

The fact that I am in a position to engage critically with subjects of discursive practices that prowl through our society is a marker of my privilege—bestowed upon me by my parents, to whom I am eternally grateful, for always pushing me to pursue the answers I sought, even if they lay miles and oceans away from home.

For my sisters, for whom I will always seek answers to a better world, no matter how small the impact may be.

For my friends back home—Simran, Stuti, and Navya—my found family, always supporting me, whether through FaceTime or voice notes.

For Sanya and Anusha, my corner of comfort and warmth, home away from home, holding me up every time I found it hard to get back up.

For Julia, Maddie, Shreya and Sophie, who made my move to a new country not so scary—sometimes, safety comes in easy smiles and shared laughter.

Lastly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Carmen Longas Luque for her patience and insights and keeping an open mind about the topic always. I am grateful for getting to pursue a subject that genuinely sparks my interest. I would like to thank all my professors across the programme for their feedback, knowledge, and conversations that helped me broaden my viewpoints on a multitude of domains.

1. Introduction

What one picks to read next is as much dependent on the book's synopsis as it is on how much that book made a certain Instagram user cry, giggle, and express other exaggerated emotions. The social media appendage to the book industry is popularly known as Bookstagram, BookTok and BookTube. Bookstagram is a community driven by trending audio, clickbait hooks, and aesthetic appeal. A study by the Publisher's Associations discovered that over 55% of their respondents get influenced to read by what's trending on these platforms (Publishers Association, 2022, p.1). Literary agents have observed how recommendations on online platforms have steered up appetite for romance and romantasy (Romance and fantasy) books, which has also forced publishers to look more vividly into this genre (Barnett, 2023, para.6). ByteDance, TikTok's parent company expanded into publishing by establishing 8th Note Press, which has managed to acquire more than 30 books, in less than a year of its establishment, the focus being mostly on Romance and related genres (Alter, 2024, para.1). Many traditional publishers and booksellers have regarded this digital expansion of publishing as transformative shift in the industry (Alter, 2024, para.3). Given the anticipated impact of these online book communities, this research aims to analyse what kind of narratives are being promoted by the posts that surface and trend on the online book community on Instagram, especially in the area of romance, and how the patterns of these narratives shape discourses around romance.

The popularity of Romance has surged with the boom of Bookstagram and Book-Tok (Carpenter, 2023, para.2), with over 5.2 million posts under the hashtag of #Romancebooks on Instagram. As per the data reported by Publishers' Weekly, seven on ten bestsellers of 2024 were either romance or romantasy books (Milliot & Maher, 2024, para.9). However, this rise has also highlighted concerns about problematic themes. For example, bestselling author Colleen Hoover's It Ends with Us, gained widespread popularity through social media but has faced criticism for allegedly romanticizing domestic violence (Dwiastuti & Yamin, 2016. p.80). Hashtags such as #darkromance have over 4.2 million posts on Instagram, which often discuss themes of power imbalances and morally ambiguous characters. If one believes that these associations are limited to the world of fictional characters, the case of Luigi Mangione proves otherwise. Charged for murdering a top health insurance executive, the case of Mangione becomes peculiar because of the almost celebratory public support he garnered (Ax, McKay, & Brooks, 2024, para.2). Public trial of convicts is no news, but the sheer romanticisation of Luigi on social media platforms indicates of a concerning shift. Users regarded him as the new internet crush, with multiple video montages framing him in a romantically desirable eye circulating social media platforms (Ax, McKay, & Brooks, 2024, para.4). Not only that, multiple fans written fiction novels appeared on the popular fan fiction platform called

Archives of Our Own (Watercutter, 2024, para.3). The overarching narrative portrayed him as a morally ambiguous man who is bringing about a revolution, positioning his violent actions as justifiable within the larger story of systemic resistance. This case elucidates the blurring lines between fictional romanticisation and real-life moral judgements. Considering that media messages are actively interpreted and decoded by individuals to construct meaning and make sense of the world around them (Hall, 1980, pp. 53), the discourses that thus float on the online book community of Instagram, transcends its role as a simple medium of recommendations. Arias (2019) argues that messages disseminated through a public platform (social media in this case) can contribute to common knowledge and ultimately common beliefs, since people know that the information they consume is also being consumed and imbibed by others (p.565). Therefore, the content that circulates on this algorithm becomes a strong force in shaping our meaning-making process, emphasizing the need to explore the underlying dynamics of posts promoted within romance subgenres. This growing influence demands critical attention to the nuances and cultural implications of the themes being elevated. The aim of this research is then, to also look at how these discourses on online book communities compare to dominant ideologies on romance and gender, within young adults, since they are the primary demographic consuming this type of content. In this context, the **central research question** guiding this research is: How do Instagram based book communities construct and communicate discourses on romance?

In order to critically understand the nature and consequences of these discourses the research also aims to answer the following sub research questions:

1. What representations of love and gender are promoted or contested in the romantic discourses on Bookstagram?

2. How do these discourses relate to the dominant ideologies of love, relationship, and gender roles within young adults?

Existing literature surrounding online reading communities has addressed the revolution they have brought upon in marketing and user engagement. A narrative review of literature on BookTok presented by Dera (2024), highlight how these online reading communities affectively engage with the influencers, segment themselves based on genres and resultantly are transforming reading as a practice (pp.4-5). A study conducted by Rutherford and Redden (2024) highlights how searching tropes, especially romance on social media apps such as Instagram and TikTok are a popular way of discovery and promotion (p.26). Yet while these studies illuminate how social media content influences engagement and creates genre segmentation, there remains a critical gap in our understanding.

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The narrative content of posts within the subgenre of romance on Instagram, remains scarcely studied along with the discourses it reproduces or contradicts, about romance and gender and the power relations that exist within them. They also do not make broader ideological connections between the online discourses and societal norms surrounding romantic relationships. This research thus aims to bridge this gap, by studying what kind of discourses are promoted through the online book community of Instagram, with a specific focus on the genre of romance. An academic inquiry into how discourses prevalent on these online reading communities, specifically Instagram in this case, will render insights into the cultural and social processes that inform the online ecosystem of Bookstagram.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Representation Theory and the Construction of Meaning

Representation Theory presented by Stuart Hall (1997) argues that culture on its own has no meaning without its participants ascertaining one to it. Representation is the link we formulate between concepts using language (p.17). In the purview of the representation theory, language has been described as going beyond the written and auditory systems, while they are still relevant, the meaning also encompasses visual images, produced both by hand or through a medium, the language of facial expressions, gestures etc, when they are used to express meaning (p.19). This language formulates the system of representation which signifies the human practice of arranging, clustering different concepts and building complex relationships between them to make sense of the world (Hall, 1997, p.17). While these systems may vary for each one of us, what unites our meanings is what gives birth to culture. Codes play an instrumental role in this respect, they fix relationships between language and concepts, often normatively, so much so that one grows up learning what a certain behaviour, trait or word would mean in their respective cultures (Hall, 1997, p.22).

Media message in their multiple forms then become an important constituent of this language and hence the culture that constantly keeps developing. It thus becomes essential to examine what they represent, the connections they forge between ideas and concepts, the norms they may give rise to, and how what is merely a relation today could evolve into a norm tomorrow. While there are three broad approaches to meaning making discussed by Hall (1997)– Reflective (meaning lies in the object being talked about), Intentional (meaning lies in the hand of the author or the speaker) and Constructionist (meaning is neither wholly dependent on the object or an individual but is a product of constant construction)-this study uses representation theory most closely to the constructionist approach. This framework helps one view popular media beyond its value of entertainment, but as system of signs that are used to convey meaning (Hall, 1997, p.36), it encourages one to infer the text beyond its face value, and for what cultural practices, norms, and behaviours it connotes. On a cultural level, the construction of meaning goes beyond signs and semiotics, it becomes about groups of images, collective narrative, and highly cumulative in nature (p.42).

2.2 Discourses and Construction of Social Knowledge

The theory of representation deals with the limitation of semiotics by subscribing to Foucault's' argument of discourses, which is more concerned by how knowledge is socially produced through what is being said (Hall, 1997, p.43). The concept of discourses ties itself with that of language as it reflects not only what is said but the very practice of saying, and how that practice

leads to social knowledge. What is then dominant enough to prevail as common knowledge then becomes reflective of power dynamics prevalent in society. The argument of power through discourses is based on the premise that power does not come from one source but rather travels through multiple collectives of social knowledge (Miller, 1990, p.122). This mode of power is not just coerced but constructed, in the way that it gives birth to personas and practices. Often defined as normalisation, this is the practice of how institutes that channel and broadcast meaning making messages at large are responsible for controlling how we make meanings in our everyday life (Miller, 1990, p.122). Media being a key institute for a very long time, and now social media taking precedence makes this constructionist approach to language, discourse, and power highly relevant to the goals of this thesis.

To further strengthen the argument of representation theory, this study integrates critical discourse analysis as an aid to the research methodology, broadening and deepening the scope of analysis. For media does not merely reflect but constructs reality – through the choice of words, tonality, information that it chooses to broadcast and withhold. It impacts the perspective viewers form of incidents, people, and communities (Krishna & Prasad, 2025, p.1135). Thus, "Power in media discourses is exercised through control over representation." (Krishna & Prasad, 2025, p.1135). Critical Discourse Analysis helps identify the power structures present in the media text, discussing not just the existing realities but explaining them as effects of structures the researcher wants to evaluate (Fairclough, 1995). He argues that media text is riddled with power structure and that existing realities are actively created as an effect of these structures (Fairclough, 1995, p.33). While digital media does offer an opportunity of decentralising the dissemination of information, it is not void of linguistic manipulation, facilitated by the algorithm often giving priority to sensational and emotionally charged messaging and identity formation (Krishna & Prasad, 2025, p.1136).

As KhosraviNik (2014) articulates, CDA "Investigates how discourse (language and various semiotic resources) contribute to 'meaning structures,' which in turn construct social, political and cultural realities in society" (p. 284) .In the context of Bookstagram reels, where on-screen text, narration, background audio, and user reactions coalesce, CDA enables the analyst to trace how ostensibly neutral or celebratory romantic narratives function as explicit discursive power sources, legitimizing certain gendered behaviours while marginalizing others (p. 284). Moreover, with the advent of new media technologies, a growing "Portion of social communication and along with it, 'discourses of identity', is taking place in digitally mediated communication,"(KhosraviNik, 2014, p.284) creating both unprecedented data sources and novel modes of ideological circulation. Furthermore, CDA's commitment to examining both "Power behind discourse" (macro-structural forces) and "Power in discourse" (micro-level textual practices) makes it uniquely suited to unpacking

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how platform affordances and user-generated content collaboratively reproduce, or resist hegemonic norms of romance and gender (KhosraviNok, 2014, p. 290).

2.3 The Discourse of Romance

Media discourses play a significant role in framing the idea of romance. Bachen and Illouz (1996) highlight how the younger generation's idea of romance is constituent of the media they consume on a regular basis, and in this age, social media is largely dominant. They critique how media representations often codify romance through highly stylized and idealized images that emphasize luxury, leisure, and extraordinary settings, creating unrealistic expectations of romantic relationships (pp. 286-288). Galician (2004, p.70), argues that mass media seeks to base their stories on myths, stereotypes and archetypes, and romance is no exception to this tendency. She argues that the appeal of propagating a mythical narrative lies in their simplicity, plausibility of sometimes being true and the absolution of personal responsibilities it presents for the consumers. Some romantic couples have been iconized and idolised, both fictional and non-fictional, and even for the non-fictional ones, the media messaging remains equally mythical for their realities are highly mediated (p.71).

Galician (2004, p.73) further contests that since most mass media channels are highly commercialised it is worth investigating what motivates the construction of such narratives, and saleability is almost always at the top. Even when it is not overtly commercial, there is a high chance of something being sold. Romance and sex serve as an easy category to build sellable narratives in for they allow for simple story building, ample room for stereotypes, seriousness, and suspense, in the form of tragedy, reinforcing archetypes and conflict. (p.74-75). Since media is an agent of socialisation, the ideas it perpetrates, often take shape of societal norms, and while one would always assume that they are not vulnerable to such assaults, more of than not, in the name of entertainment, one ends up taking back a lot more than expected (Galician, 2004, p.82). In case of romance, sex and love, the meaning is mediated through multiple mediums – films, tv soap operas, advertisements, popular music, and romance genre books, etc- all giving rise to evolving and often unrealistic notions of various aspects of romance- courtship, normalcy, propriety in a relationship, intimacy, power dynamics, desirability etc (p.133).

Illouz (1998, p.162) discusses love in the context media mediation and capitalist consumerism. She argues that the more romance got represented, first through print, and now electronic mediums, the more it went away from reality, the belief that the representation could actually mirror reality of romance grew frailer as the theme of romance gained popularity in media. In her analysis she further discovered, that while the participants of her study acknowledged the

reality of relationships, they still very much subscribed the notions of passion, and impulsivity with true love, signifying the cultural power of the narrative of love that has been pushed by media outlets in multiple forms (Illouz, 1998, p.170). She further argues that romantic sensations are rooted in bodily experiences, these experiences do not exist in isolation, they are shaped by cultural codes, perpetrated by media representation and reconstruction (Illouz, 1998, p.175). Over time, these codes help structure how people talk about love and make sense of their own emotions, especially through stylized and media-influenced narratives. The two dominant ways of narrating love discussed in her work: routine vs. drama, are closely tied to how romance is represented in the media. When one side of the narrative dominates the media discourse, it is only natural, that it will impact how people experience love in their everyday life. Illouz suggests that such representations lead to conflicting expectations and beliefs for the consumers to navigate (p.175).

This mediation of romance through idealized narratives does not stop at traditional media. In the age of social media, these constructions are further amplified and internalized through everyday digital practices. A quantitative survey of 432 U.S. adults noted that passive use of social media is linked with lower satisfaction and commitment, attributed to unlimited access into other people's lives, a beacon of information that can be manipulated to be presented as desirable, and an unhealthy tendency of drawing comparisons (Yacoub, 2018, p.57). Seifert and Miara, (2019) further posit that social media disables intimate and unique discoveries in a relationship, where partners are more focused on enhancing their online image to meet the prevalent standards, thus radically impacting the larger norms of romantic relationships.

2.4 Gender Roles in Romantic Relationships

Finally drawing on Alison Harvey's work for Feminist Media Theory can help evaluate if content being analysed on Bookstagram reinforces gender stereotypes. Feminist media theory views media texts with criticality and seeks to observe if women are being framed as passive objects (Harvey, 2019, p.112). Harvey (2019, p.112) while discussing postfeminist sensibilities argues that while the overall nature of the text might be empowering, the internal nature may still be perpetuating gender norms. Harvey (2020) argues that representation is not about visibility alone but the range of expression, what stories are being delivered and the way the narrative treats women in within that story (p.77).

Tokenism is a form of representation that treats the marginalised subjects as symbol more than actual value adding elements, a practice that has often been observed when dealing with feminist narratives in media (p.79). In video games for example, children, people of colour appear much less, and in the case of women, they are hypersexualised through their appearance (Harvey,

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2020, p.80). Explanation of these skewed representations arise majorly from the fact that the production of content remains heavily dominated by men, and stereotypical assumptions about the audience not being receptive to content produced and featuring women in meaningful roles (p.82). Tropes are another important aspect when studying female representation in media, argues Harvey (2020, p.83). The gendered tropes, such as a nerd getting a makeover to meet the beauty standards, or a woman finding confidence when she interacts with her true love, have the power of instilling differences of hierarchy in notions about masculinity and femininity (p.83). "By linking women primarily to domestic activities, the family, and private matters, rather than to positions of power and authority, the media socialize a view of women as dependent, inferior, and subordinate." (Harvey,2020, p.84). No discussion of feminist media theory is complete without touching upon the concept of male gaze and the consequences it bears. Male gaze theory can be observed in gendered media representation, where men become the seer, the authority on public perception and women become the object, presented in consumable, sexualised narratives, always framed as either a prize, prey or an ornament (Harvey,2020, p.89).

One would imagine that with the advent of digital spaces of expression these dichotomies of representation will improve, and while women, and people of marginalised communities have been able to come forward with their narratives more easily, the visibility has been regarded with its own share of scrutiny. Kanai and Dobson (2016, p.1) in their analysis of Digital Media and Gender argue that through representation and regulation, digital spaces influence the gender politics. Initially, digital spaces like MUDs and MOOs, allowed freedom and anonymity to be able to explore one's gendered expression, but with growing accessibility, the need to present a coherent, socially acceptable self-image has become necessary (pp.3-4). Wide range peer influence monitors the self-expression of masculinity and femininity on these digital spaces, leading to a kind of context collapse, where norms yet again dictate the representation in spaces that were perhaps constructed to deter this very thing (p.4). Women have been subjected to double standards, of being expressive enough yet not so much to be regarded as narcissistic in their efforts of self-expression (p.3). Therefore, while the prolific advancement of digital spaces offers a new direction for feminist endeavours, one must not overestimate their role, rather it is prudent to look at what do they allow, and what do they inhibit, under the guise of freedom of expression and diversity in content (Harvey, 2020 p.157). This lens would allow the researcher to look past the face value of posts on the online book community of Instagram and decode the underlying meaning of the text.

When speaking of diversity of content, and examining what it permits and promotes, Butler's concept of Gender performativity provides a powerful lens for examining how love and gender reproduced on social media communities, like Bookstagram. Butler (1988) argues that gender is not a

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pre-existing phenomenon but is continuously produced through repeated, often ritualized acts. Gender is not what we already have, but it is the result of being moulded by the rules we are made to follow. We do not simply have gender, we become gendered by the very process of being regulated (Butler, 2004, p.41). "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results." (Butler, 1990, p.33).

This idea of performativity can be extended to understanding how captions, language, and hashtags on the posts circulated through this online community, can do more than just reflect gender norms and constitute them actively (Butler 1999, 33). Butler (1990, p.45) critiques how traditional structures, especially in kinship systems, treat gender, and particularly womanhood, not as an identity in itself but as a symbolic function within male-centred systems of meaning. Drawing on Lévi-Strauss, she argues that women are historically positioned as objects of exchange, traded between male-dominated groups through rituals like marriage. In this system, the woman does not possess a self-defined identity; rather, she exists only as a relational term, a sign of value that binds men to each other through symbolic acts like weddings or naming. Her identity is never her own, it is constituted by her absence as a subject, and her presence as a medium through which masculine identity and power are affirmed and circulated. In context of online communities of Instagram, this perspective will allow the researcher to enquire the transactional element of a female character's identity, if her description is described only in reference to the male characters. The cumulation of these theories form the feminist theory lens that will help the researcher dissect the latent gender roles within the discourse of romance. It will unpack the performativity of gender, the narrative it reproduces and the hierarchy it propagates between multiple gender identities.

2.5 Bookstagram as a sight of discursive practices

To begin with theorising Bookstagram as a discursive space, it is important to first look at the impact of romance novels, since they are the key subject of analysis for this thesis. Kirtley and Kirtley (1984) argue that romance novels form a corner stone of popular culture, reflecting the changing expectations of consumers. They reflect what is familiar, and known, for if the audience do not receive narratives like their own, they publishers will not succeed in selling the book (Kirtley and Kirtley, 1984, p.5). Radway (1983, p.54) argue that meaning making that takes place through literary text is a complex process, and while not all responsibility can be borne by the text itself, the interaction between the apparently static verbal construction and the evolving social dynamics, is perceived by the reader's through previously learned cultural codes. While romance novels have been viewed as a sight of vicarious emotional validation and fulfilment, they can also serve the

purpose of acting as excuses to behaviours readers encounter in their personal life, for example, for women who appreciate emotionally reticent male characters, may use this as a validation for the cold behaviour of male romantic partners in their real life (p.67).

Given this landscape, romance novels emerge as particularly influential cultural texts—already steeped in idealized tropes—which, when shared and aestheticized on social media, further contribute to shaping dominant discourses of love and gender. To further solidify the context of this research, the findings of a Garciano et. al (2023) on how romance books influence relationships, prove to be incredibly insightful. They argue that narratives in Romance themed novels may portray conflict as a destructive element rather than cultivating healthy communication, and emphasize on the need to differentiate between elements of fantasy from reality (Garciano et.al, 2023, pp-37-38). This is particularly relevant where certain traits of the male characters, such as overall dominance is unproblematized. Given the fact that romance as a genre is highly promoted and discussed within the online book communities of various social media platforms, this literature strongly informs the premise of this research.

Recent studies have also provided key insights into how this online community functions as a space for the negotiation of meaning around book content. A study conducted by Pretel-Jiménez et al, (2024, p.317), to understand engagement generated by influencers on the online community of books on Instagram, found out that the sentiment, for example sadness at the plot of the book and type of post positively impacted the engagement with the audience. These findings suggest that the discourses on Bookstagram not only promote literary works but also guide how followers perceive and interact with specific genres and narratives. Obreja and Manolica (2024) study of the 'Bookstagram Tour' in Romania highlights the changing dynamics of book marketing in the social media age, where influencers play a significant role in shaping public opinion and literary trends (pp.5-7).

Abidin (2018, p.4) argues the changing meaning of authenticity in the world of influencer culture. Coining the term "calibrated amateurism," she argues that influencers build a novice like personality on their social media platforms to seem more authentic and relatable. This relatability encompasses accessibility, authenticity, emulatability, and intimacy, yet it is carefully managed (p.4). The relationship between bookish influencers and their audiences is framed by the influencers' ability to position themselves as cultural authorities within the digital reading spaces. By leveraging social media platforms and blogs, these passionate readers craft public personas as "expert readers" and "trusted others," gaining attention and social status. Using authenticity and personal storytelling as tools, these influencers participate in the attention economy of social media which further allows

them to shape the social and commercial environment of these communities (Reddan et al., 2024, pp. 16–17). Elaborating on the nature of narratives dominating the space on Bookstagram and BookTok, De Melo, (2024) notes a kind of homogeneity seen in traditional publishing (p.5). Despite improved gender equity among authors compared to traditional publishing, there remains a deficiency in the representation of marginalized authors, particularly people of colour and LGBTQ+ individuals. As De Melo's (2024) study suggests, authors often write from their own lived experiences, which might contribute to a lack of diverse romantic representations (p.10). The limited inclusion of underrepresented groups can result in the reinforcement of traditional, often exclusionary narratives.

Given these insights, Bookstagram is more than a promotional space, it is a discursive arena, and the content circulated on it contributes to a larger narrative about romance, love and gender. However, it has also been observed that while the previous literature focuses on romance singularly, and the potential of such online communities, not much light has been shed on the discourse impact when the two come together. By examining how these discourses unfold within the genre of romance, this study situates Bookstagram as a crucial site for understanding how mediated storytelling participates in shaping contemporary understandings of love, relationships, and gender roles in the digital age.

2.6 Analytical Utility of this framework

Together these intersecting theoretical lenses, provide a robust analytical scaffold for understanding how meaning is constructed, circulated and normalised in digital spaces like Bookstagram. By recognising media as a powerful site of meaning making, and by foregrounding the roles of discourse in the construction of norms and social knowledge, allows the study to move beyond textual description and towards an interrogation of how romantic and gendered are produced, performed and reinforced.

The representation theory along with CDA, helps in the identification of familiar semiotic and narrative codes that are used to construct notions about romance and relationships. It helps in the recognition of the fact that these codes are not ideologically neutral, they are embedded within larger cultural systems, of power, taste and gender. The Feminist Media Theory sharpens this inquiry by drawing attention to the gendered asymmetries in these representations. Gender performativity by Butler, further allows the researcher to view the gendered expression on Bookstagram not as an authentic reflection of identity but as ritualised performances shaped by normative expectations and repeated discursive acts. In conclusion, the amalgamation of these theories and studies creates a robust foundation for critically engaging with Bookstagram as a cultural space. It enables the

researcher to investigate the ways in which language intersect to shape perceptions of romance, while also addressing the broader implications of representation and inclusivity within the platform's discourse.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in this research, which seeks to explore the discourses surrounding romance and gender within Instagram's online book communities. It begins by establishing the rationale for adopting a qualitative research approach, followed by insight into sampling, data collection, operationalisation of key concepts and data analysis. It concludes by addressing considerations of credibility, ethics, validity, and reliability to ensure the rigor of the study. explanation of why thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis were chosen as the primary analytical tools.

3.1 Rationale behind Qualitative Research

Silverman (1999, p.42) explains the need to conduct qualitative research from an understanding of society as a social organisation, with objects of analysis being more than "obvious" or apparent, he argues that it is the method, albeit chaotic at certain points, offers a researcher to objectively understand realities without compromising the complexities of everyday experiences as much as possible. "Doing qualitative research is in many respects no different than doing everyday life (Silverman, 1999, p.57). While quantitative research views media studies as a behavioural science, qualitative research on the other hand seeks to study the relationship between media and society (Brennen, 2017, p.5). Since this study seeks to examine the implicit meaning being cultivated around concepts of romance and gender within an online community, qualitative research is a suitable choice, for it seeks to examine not the influence but how language and symbols interact with its users, with a recognition that while we use symbols often to construct meaning, sometimes the usage itself becomes a symbol indicative of a broader trend in society (Brennen, 2017, p.4). It achieves this goal by combining CDA and Thematic analysis, where the former is used as an analytical framework and the latter is used as the key tool of analysis. This mixed method allows the researcher to interpret the results at multiple levels, one in terms of recurring patterns and the other at the level of discourses (Alejandro & Zhao, 2023, p.466). This approach is expected to render results that are more transparent and rigorous (p.466).

3.2 Sampling strategy and Sample

This study draws on a purposive sample of approximately 150–180 public Instagram reels created by users who form the online book reading community. These reels recommend, reviews, or discusses romance books, or focuses on characters in a romantic context (e.g., show scenes from the book between the lead protagonist, that are presented as desirable; discuss the romantic suitability of the characters based on the behaviour they exhibit). In some cases, content creator not only

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discuss but enact and perform key scenes from the books they aim to recommend. This performance includes, mimicking scenes, lip-syncing dialogues, and visually dramatizing scenes from the books. These performances, often accompanied by music, on-screen text, or trending audios of the platform, enhance the engagement associated with such content pieces. See appendix C for screenshots that represent the content that was selected for the purpose of this analysis. These reels are all under 60 seconds in duration, aligning with the short-form nature of Instagram Reels and ensuring uniformity in the type of content analysed.

Purposive sampling was selected as the most appropriate method to ensure that the collected data directly aligns with the study's research objective: to critically examine how dominant or resistant discourses around romance and gender roles are constructed within the Bookstagram community. This method is particularly effective for qualitative research that aims to engage deeply with specific discourses and representations (Shaheen et al., 2019, p.28).

To define the sample pool, reels were identified using three specific hashtags: #romancebooks, #bookstagram and #romancereader. These hashtags were chosen because they are widely used by Bookstagram creators engaging with romantic fiction and allow access to content that is actively positioned within the genre. In order to better reflect dominant or influential narratives circulating within Bookstagram, only reels created by public accounts with more than 10,000 followers were included. This threshold was selected to prioritise voices with larger reach and engagement, those most likely to shape prevalent discourses. Further, only reels posted in English and within the past 12 months were included. This timeframe ensures that the data reflects current cultural trends and ideological framings of romance. While this may limit the temporal scope of the study, it allows for a more precise capture of contemporary discourse. These initial filters are expected to yield an initial result of atleast 400-500 reels. To narrow it down further, a recency filter will be applied. Given that social media is organized in a highly clustered manner that enables rapid and frequent dissemination of information from multiple sources (Meng et.al, 2024, p.7), only the 150 most recently posted reels will be selected to reflect the most current narrative. Furthermore, it will be ensured that if the same user's content is surfacing again, no more than 10 videos per user will be selected to ensure an even and diversely represented sample.

The unit of analysis includes all textual elements visible in or associated with the reel: captions, subtitles, hashtags, and any spoken or written language present in the reel itself. All verbal communication was transcribed in a detailed manner, making note of pauses, emphasis, and tonal shifts as they contribute for consistency thus preparing them for thematic analysis. The emphasis on

language and symbolic representation aligns with the study's methodological orientation toward CDA and its goal of uncovering ideological processes embedded within digital romantic storytelling.

3.3 Operationalisation

The study operationalises its key constructs of discourses, ideologies and representation around gender and love, through a synthesis of the following theories – Representation Theory by Stuart Hall (1997) and Feminist Media Theory by Alison Harvey (2019) and Judith Butler (1988, 1993). The goal is to translate abstract concepts into measurable and observable practices. The analysis is centred around two interconnected discourses: (1) Discourses around romance, which will examine how love, relationship and related ideals are framed through language and intertextual references; (2) Discourses around gender, which will explore how gender roles, identities, and power dynamics within romantic relationships, are constructed, reinforced, or challenged. Each of these features will be analysed through focus on linguistic features (word choice, tonality, captions, and hashtags), visual semiotics (framing and composition) intertextuality (reference to popular romance novels) These tools would map recurring themes around romance and gender, and their role in shaping audience perception. See appendix A for the code book, that presents how these sensitizing concepts were used to inform the coding process.

3.3.1 Discourse about Romance

Romance as a cultural construct is a site of negotiation on personal, societal and gendered norms around love and romantic relationships. In this study, the discourse of romance will be explored by identifying the ways in which language and intertextual elements construct romantic ideals, desires and expectations in the content circulated within the online book community of Instagram. Building on Fairclough (2013, p.195) argument, language is more constitutive than descriptive, it constructs how social norms emerge, and are practiced amongst individuals (p.42). This extends to the understanding of romance and romantic relationships. This study will analyse the metaphors, word choices, and phrasing used to describe romantic relationships in the reels. For instance, terms like "swoon-worthy," "soulmate," or "heartthrob" are indicative of the idealization and fantasy associated with romance. By analysing these linguistic markers, the research will uncover the underlying ideological assumptions about what constitutes an ideal romantic relationship. Additionally, the use of hedging (e.g., "could," "might"), transitivity (who is the doer and receiver), observing any presuppositions, that is background assumptions taken for granted when stating something- for example, "Obviously he follows her till she said yes," may indicate an assumption that the result of constant pursuit is always positive, could help in analysing what perception of romance are being constructed.

Harvey (2019) argues that women in products of media have been presented to be choosing to be a part of dominant hegemonic practices such as, shopping, beauty, and romance, but this representation conveniently leaves out if they want to indulge in these societal norms or not (p.98). These representations not only portray how people should behave in romantic relationships but also what to expect out of them. By integrating this feminist media critique this study will critically examine normative expectations of submission, sacrifice, and emotional labour within relationships. For instance, are women in these reels portrayed as passive receivers of affection, or do they display autonomy and desire? Are certain romantic actions framed as "swoon-worthy," which often involve acts of submission or emotional vulnerability? By investigating these representations, the research will explore how Instagram reels contribute to or resist the hegemonic romantic ideologies that dominate mainstream media.

Finally, the study will also look for intertextual references, as they establish a shared cultural understanding of romance and influence how audiences interpret relationships in real life. These references could include indication to other popular romance books like, It Ends with Us, The Notebook, or other products of media popular in the romance genre such as The Twilight film franchise. The presence of intertextual references will be analysed to determine how often these texts are cited as exemplars of "romantic ideals" and how this shapes the audience's conception of love, ideal partners, and relationship dynamics.

3.3.2 Discourse about Gender and Interconnection with Romance

Gender as a social construct in maintained through the discursive practices that surround it, determining what is normatively positive and desirable in the society (Hall, 1997). Thus, the discourses around gender, in the context of romantic relationships, frame who holds control, who is expected to compromise and whose perspective is held dominant (Fairclough, p.94). This study seeks to examine how discourses around gender in romantic relationships are constructed through the reels posted on the online book community of Instagram. The gendered element of these discourses will be analysed by identifying dominant traits in male and female protagonists, focusing on whether female characters are placed in a passive position as compared to the male ones (Harvey, 2019, p.55). The research will also focus on how agency is framed for these characters through the language, reflecting on their positionality within this context (Harvey, 2019, p.59). This involves analysis of power dynamics and how different acts of characters, plot arch are framed (for example, control as a desirable trait). An important dimension of this study is its critical focus on the absence or marginalization of diverse gender and racial identities. This will involve coding for the representation (or lack thereof) of LGBTQ+ relationships, non-heteronormative gender identities, and

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racially diverse characters in the selected reels. The study will critically explore how the omission of these groups from mainstream romantic narratives reflects and perpetuates dominant cultural norms. Additionally, it will investigate how representations of LGBTQ+ and racially diverse characters (when present) are framed, are these representations subversive or tokenistic, and how do they challenge or reinforce the prevailing romantic ideologies?

It is also to be noted that the two discourses do not exist in isolation of each other, rather they are highly constitutive. Butler (2004, p.53) argues that gender is a "regulatory norm", which contributes to how other norms are formed and perceived. For instance, desirability in a romantic context becomes deeply gendered, as traits exhibited by individuals gets characterized under feminine and masculine heads, dictating which side gets more power and what expectations of actions are to be followed (Butler, 2004, p.53). Repeatedly followed romantic scripts thus become a medium of proliferating gender performativity, building narrative of romance guided by gendered expectations. Thus, this study will also reflect on how the two discourses impact and constitute each other when contributing to larger conversations about romance and gender.

Through this operationalization, the study seeks to examine how these discourses shape audience perceptions, both consciously and subconsciously, influencing the way users engage with, interpret, and produce content related to romance and gender. The methodological approach will ensure a rigorous, systematic examination of how dominant ideologies are negotiated within the online book community, offering insight into the role of platforms like Instagram in the construction and reinforcement of cultural norms.

3.4 Data Analysis Process

This study employs thematic analysis as its key method of analysis with critical discourse analysis as its analytical framework, which would inform the coding process as well as the

3.4.1 Thematic Analysis

The method of analysis for this study is Thematic Analysis. This method, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.79), allows for the identification and categorization of recurring patterns and meanings present in the text. It is a method not rooted in any theoretical framework and has been described as a method that informs the very core of qualitative research practices. It can be 'essentialist,' 'constructivist' and 'contextual' which means it can be used to – recognise experiences, concepts that inform those experiences and how these experiences and concepts form the very fabric of our reality (Clarke, 2006, p.81). This very nuance is the reason why this method is

appropriate for the study, it allows the researcher to not get constricted in theoretical limitations and derive from the data, elements that can further the understanding of different concepts.

3.4.2 CDA as Analytical framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) redefines the relationship between language and social power dynamics by bringing a critical tradition of social analysis into language studies. It views social reality as conceptually mediated, meaning social events have reflexive character, where people's interpretations are part of those realities (Fairclough, 2013, p.1). The reason why CDA is suitable for this study is because it analyses discourse's ideological character, such as commonsensical construal that sustain unjust socio-economic orders. Causes can be semiotic and material, and CDA shows the relationships between them. It analyses the relationships between semiosis and other social elements, such as power, institutions, beliefs, and cultural values (pp.2-4). This approach is particularly well-suited to the thesis, which explores how online book communities like Bookstore reconstruct or challenge dominant discourses around romance and gender roles. CDA aids in narrowing the analytical target for the research, on a micro level, it informs the coding process by guiding the attention to discursive strategies employed by the content creators. This included looking at how phrasing was being used to frame romantic behaviours, if there were any presuppositions involved indicating implicit power imbalance between the characters and finally if the content skipped touching on certain communities, groups, relationships. On a macro level, CDA allowed the researcher to connect these observations to broader ideological discourses. It also helps contextualise the way content creators with substantial number of followers exercise their visibility to either resist the normative narrative or further propagate it. Thus, its usage as the analytical framework allows the researcher to uncover the implicit meaning in the text, while thematic analysis as the method provides for a systemic approach to arrange and uncover recurring patterns in the data collected (Alejandro & Zhao, 2023, p.466).

3.4.3 Data Analysis

The analysis begins with employing the six steps of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step is familiarization, wherein the researcher immerses oneself in the text and gets deeply acquainted with it (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.87). Here it means going through all the collected video reels, transcribing what was being said, and taking note of other important elements that will be analysed. The next step is generation of initial codes, which involves identifying features of data and remarking what seems interesting at a very basic level (p.87). Here CDA as an analytical framework would guide the researcher's attention to: what phrases are being used to discuss romance and gender, who has agency, if any subject is omitted or overlexicated. This will be

followed by the third step of developing themes, which essentially entails grouping these codes on commonalities and differences into groups that would then function as units of analysis (p.89). The fourth step of the analysis is reviewing the themes – this occurs at two levels – ensuring the coherence of data within the theme, and the relevance of Individual themes to the overall data set. This involves looking at if the grouping made sense, if there are any themes that can perhaps collapse into each other or are becoming repetitive. The fifth step begins when a satisfactory map of themes is achieved, which is followed by carefully defining and naming each theme, on the basis of what makes them interesting and relevant to the aim of the research (p.92). This process will be shaped by CDA-informed questions such as: What assumptions are being naturalized? Who is granted or denied agency? What ideological positions are embedded in the language or visual framing? Finally, the sixth phase involves producing the report, where the themes are analysed and interpreted using CDA concepts as interpretive tools, along with other theories (Representation Theory by Stuart Hall and Feminist Theory by Harvey and Butler). The final step is to then produce a report analysing each theme and what they represent using the theoretical framework developed for the research.

As with any methodological approach, it is essential to remain cognizant of its potential limitations to ensure that the analysis remains contextually grounded and critically informed. Thematic analysis for one, offers great flexibility, but that is the disadvantage as it might leave the researcher perplexed on which area to focus on (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.98). Another notable shortcoming of the method is that it offers limited interpretation if it is not combined with a theoretical framework or another method altogether.

3.5 Research Credibility

Credibility in any academic research refers to the trustworthiness and plausibility of findings of that research (Tracy, 2010, p.842). In qualitative research, it is paramount to ensure that the process of the research yields findings that can be perceived as dependable and add enough value to inform decision making process of the readers (p.843). Reliability and Validity are two key concepts that constitute credibility of a research. (Silverman, 2011, p.360) Reliability refers to the reproducibility of the research project by future researchers, and whether it will yield same results and interpretations (Silverman, 2011, p.360). However, when put in context of qualitative research, it is not possible to measure the findings, thus reliability is achieved by ensuring transparency of research process and strategy, along with establishing a strong grounding in established theoretical frameworks when interpreting the results (Silverman, 2011, p.360,). To ensure reliability in this research, the video data was thoroughly transcribed, taking note of not just the speech but on-

screen texts, crucial pauses, and noticeable changes in tonality, as it represents a more objective and comprehensive recording of data, thus making it more reliable (Silverman,2011, p.366). Furthermore, the methodology outlines detailed steps followed during thematic coding, to maintain transparency, and a robust grounding in the theoretical framework (CDA, Representation Theory and Feminist Media Theories), when drawing final themes.

Validity refers to how accurately the research reflects the concepts it aims to discuss and uncover (Silverman, 2011, p.367). In a qualitative context, validity is ensured through thorough description of data, triangulation and multivocality (Tracy, 2010, p.843). To ensure thick description, each reel is described with regards to its context, making sure the researcher observes both implicit and explicit behaviours and dimensions of the text. Triangulation and multivocality is ensured by making sure that the reels collected represent an evenly represented sample (Tracy, 2010, pp.843-844) with no more than 10 reels being included of the same Instagram user. This makes sure that the research is a space for multiple opinions to be presented (p.844). A mix of three broad theories is used to ensure the discussion of "different facets of problems…. increases scope, deepens understanding, and encourages consistent (re)" (Tracy,2010, p.843). Following the methodology being cognisant of these concepts can strengthen the credibility of the research by ensuring that the analysis remains transparent, theoretically grounded, and reflective of the complexities within the data.

3.6 Reflexivity

A common myth associated with academic research is that the knowledge it produces is solely made up of the data and analysis conducted on it. Ignoring the contribution made by the researcher to that pool of knowledge devoid the research of credibility (Berger, 2013, p.221). Reflexivity is the practice of acknowledging where the researcher comes from when they engage with an academic project. It means taking responsibility for, "one's own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation." (Berger 2013, p.220). In this research, it begins with acknowledging that the researcher does not exist out of this discourse, being an active user of social media and on multiple occasions an active receiver of the content produced within the reading community of Instagram. Furthermore, as a member of the prime demographic of consumers of social media content, the researcher is prone to have biases when building themes, looking for codes, and interpreting them. To avoid the said biases, the researcher ensured that the coding is done in close alignment with the theoretical framework and only reports findings that are visible and observable in the data. The analysis will closely follow the methodological guidelines of thematic

analysis and use the tools provided by CDA to avoid making assumptions about elements of the text. Finally, the entire process will be documented, with the aim of providing reasons behind decision making as much as possible. Since the researcher is also a feminist scholar, this positionality is viewed as an advantage, as it will allow the researcher to look at the discourses with a critical lens, perhaps also providing deeper insights, informed by relevant theories. A deep-rooted awareness that, at the end of the day, we are part of the content we consume, combined with deliberate measures to ensure objectivity, is expected to yield a body of academic work that is both sound in its integrity and self-aware of its biases.

<div align="center">**4. Result and Analysis**</div>

This research set out to explore how online book communities on Instagram shape and circulate meanings of love, romance, and gender, particularly as they play out within the dynamics of romantic relationships. It did so by collecting a sample of a hundred and fifty publicly posted reels on Instagram that discussed, recommended, and situated themselves around romance novels and their related themes. It was also noted that almost all the reels were created by female content creators, less than five were created by men. This observation while not being a key focus of the study does indicate the core demographic of creators who are actively framing the narrative of romance through their content. A thematic analysis was conducted, informed by the principles of critical discourse analysis as its analytical framework on the data set. Through the process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (see Appendix B), three overarching themes emerged, that can further the understanding of how meaning is being constructed around the subjects of this research. Each theme also resulted in several subthemes in the form of selective code. This chapter outlines each theme in detail, along with their subthemes, explaining what they mean, quotations from the data set and their connection with the theoretical framework.

4.1 Discursive construction of love

The first theme sheds light on what notions and ideas constitute the concept of love. It answers the question of what the content creators found romantic, or how they even construct the concept the concept of romantic love, expressed through their appreciation, validation or resistance of different plots, tropes within the genre of romance books. The subsections below discuss the various definitions, approaches and notions observed.

4.1.1 Emotional Intensity as Love

The research found an overwhelming representation of love through emotional intensity. This subtheme, constituted by three axial codes, displayed how love, rather than being presented as something grounded, is synonymised with acts of devotion, dramatic gestures, and extreme behaviours. The content creators, while discussing romance novels, expressed urgent need to experience a love that is all consuming, and does not allow them to think straight. Themes of sacrifice and soulmates also surfaced, where the idea of fated mates between characters of several romance novels was highly validated. Yearning or deep longing was also expressed as one of the key indicators of a deep romantic bond. For example, one content creator said:

"You should be gargling blood, brother. You-you're-I should be brimming with tears. You can't even see me. You don't even know what I'm-But you just love me so much." (Reel15)

In another reel, a content creator was seen crying while they showed an excerpt where the male main character expressed his willingness to sacrifice himself for his romantic interest (Reel13). Dramatized gestures such as confessions, exaggerated display of affection were also observed to be characterizing what true love must look like. The constant validation of such gestures created a narrative where nothing less than the very extreme would suffice in the name of true love. This idea can be problematic in some cases, where certain content creators justified extreme measures as romantic endeavours. In one of the reels, a content creator appears to be deeply moved upon reading the following line from a book they are recommending, "There is very little I wouldn't do, very few people I wouldn't kill, just to ensure her well-being." (Reel5). The fact that they do not give any contextual warnings about this not being okay in real life, or a subtext of this being a fictional fantasy only makes it difficult to distinguish how much of such beliefs are confined to someone's reading taste as opposed to their standard in real life. Galician (2004, p.34) has argued that romance is often framed as a tale of drama and tragedy, because it is an easier escape than serving something real, myths are only propagated because firstly they are partially based on reality, and secondly, they provide an easy escape from accountability. Sentimentality is a tool used by media outlets when they want to reach their audience emotionally, than realistically, hence the use of a tragic, dramatic narrative in romance is a strong indication of these inclinations (Galician, 2004, p.75). These findings thus align with these arguments. However the question remains, what kind of aspirations do these proposed escapes invoke in the viewer, since what has also been argued by Hall (1997, p.36) is that what is framed in popular culture often times starts weaving the cultural fabric without our apparent knowledge.

4.1.2 Love as an aspirational fantasy

This desire formation provides us a segue into the second subtheme, that is framing love as a concept that exists in a fictional plane, framing it through desire of fictional characters to exist in real life, or for real life relationships to mimic the ones in romance novels. This subtheme, is characterized by two main axial codes – the desire of content creators for fictional men to exist in real life, and the second being the desire to have a romance like the book (See Appendix B). The former has been observed in the form of describing the male characters as desirable by women in general, the need to have someone who behaves and responds like they do, and often forming a parasocial relationship, a fanbase of sorts with the male characters. While the gender aspect of these discourses will be discussed in detail in the subsequent themes, it is interesting to observe how this desire for fictional characters is only extended to men and not women. Part of the reason for this could be that woman, and a heterosexual narrative dominated the data set, and partly it raises

questions if the gap between fictional and reality in men is greater as compared to women. One of content creators, while recommending a book said:

"My book club, we just read this in my book club this month and I fear we are now all Rhett girlies." (Reel9)

Another reel, although in humorous fashion stated how they would do anything, even sell their bestfriend for a fictional character called Nate (Reel34). The desire does not stop at wanting, it also took form of emulating the scenes and the dynamics, the content creators have been observing. A content creator in one of their reels is seen discovering a new nickname a character calls their romantic interest, and they then run to their partner to call them that. In another case, a content creator, compares their partner to "book-boyfriends," which implies that they embody all the characters of a male main character of a romance novel (Reel24). This combined with the fan-base behaviour, indicates that it is not just a desire that is being planted, but a narrative of the kind of romance one wants from their lives. It has the implication of subjecting our real life to the expectations of a fictional world. This falls in line with the analysis conducted by Illouz (1998, p.170) ,where people still the notions of true love with what was being represented more in media. Yacoub (2018) also found similar results in their study of relationship satisfaction and social media usage, where people, due to comparison and the pressure of idyllic representation, had low satisfactions from their relationships. Bookstagram frames romantic relationships not just as stories, but as emotional experiences to be desired, performed, and emulated. Users do not merely review romantic fiction—they participate in its discourse by expressing longing, aestheticizing emotional pain, or framing morally grey characters as ideal romantic partners. As Illouz (1998) notes, this process reflects a postmodern condition of romance, in which love becomes increasingly reflexive, performative, and emotionally contradictory.

4.1.3 Love as Chaos and Conflict

The final subtheme observes love being framed because of conflict, or popularly characterised by chaos and upheaval. Content creators have regarded miscommunication as a key indicator of a true romance. Emotional depth is measured through how much chaos a couple has sustained. Conflict and forced settings are seen as the basis of bonding. This is achieved by popularization of tropes such as the enemies to lover's trope, forced proximity trope or the mafia lover's trope. There is an undercurrent of representing romance as pain, suffering and trauma. The sentiment that a couple who is truly meant to be will and can work against all odds, is resonated deeply within the observations of this subtheme. For example, a content creator in one of the reels is seen dancing in joy when they read that the characters have only been given one bed, hence

insinuating forced proximity (Reel23). It takes intentionality away from romance, and validates situationally occurring developments in the plot. It also takes away responsibility on characters, for their actions, as they are considered to be an element of chaos, which is further naturalised. A content creator, discussing the kind of relationship they want, stated:

"They have such a farol attraction for me that they can't control because their whole life they they've controlled their emotions" (Reel1)

Bookstagram does not just platform morally ambiguous romances, it often constructs them as peak romance. By embedding conflict and ethical grey areas into romantic fantasies, the platform contributes to a broader discourse where pain, instability, and power imbalance are not anomalies, but aesthetic markers of true love.

4.2   Representation of Romantic Relationships

The second theme draws together the findings that throw light on how relationship dynamics are built within the online community of readers on Instagram. While the previous theme was concerned with how romance was being defined, this theme is concerned with how the dynamics are expressed on the platform, what tools are used to validate or resist ideas, and if there are any non-dominant discourses when it comes to romantic relationships. The two subthemes elucidated below, highlight how narrative tropes, aesthetic choices and performative elements present romantic relationships as a consumable, sensationalised concept. In this sense, the romantic relationship becomes a form of emotional storytelling, one in which characters are reduced to aesthetic archetypes and patterns that can be marketed, shared, and emulated.

4.2.1   Romantic Spectacle through Aesthetics

Reels posted within this community of readers is accompanied by audiovisual media that is chosen to enhance the dramatization of the content. This content does not just describe the relationship, sometimes they perform the relationship, further dramatizing it. Music in this case functions as a semiotic tool, the lyrics, used to present obsessive, problematic behaviours as romantic.

For example, in one of the reels where the plot describes the female main character being stalked and disregarded by the male main character, the song Breakin' Dishes by Rihana plays in the background with the lyrics : I'm breakin' dishes up in here, all night (uh-huh) I ain't gon' stop until I see police lights (uh-huh) (Reel2)

While one could argue that sometimes this is all about packaging the content in a consumable and entertaining manner, it can also be said that these choices of songs, impact the overall tone of the content and as a result the tone towards the subject the content addresses. Another constituent element of this sub theme is the focus on sexual themes, which have been used to sensationalise romantic relationships. A significant number of reels, almost always mention sexually explicit aspects, making them a key attention-grabbing element. This observation validates what Galician (2004, p.76) claimed about sex being a successfully sellable element. Sex is deemed as one of the elements, that have been used by media agencies countless number of times to keep their audience interested in the story, the sensationalisation of sex makes it sellable, and thus successfully consumed (Galician, 2004, p.77). However, it brings into question not the morality of romantic relationships but the depth with which one views them. If content creators represent them in a sensational manner, they risk limiting one's perception of what one should expect out of a romantic dynamic. Intertextuality is another technique used to boost the relatability of these kinds of reels. Often used to add depth of emotion to the reel, it makes the dynamic between two people, even more embedded in expectations set out by popular culture. It makes something deeply personal, generalised. One such reel a content creator is sharing the books they like based on the dialogue picked up from a show called XO Kitty: Dialogue from XO Kitty (a show on netflix) plays in the background, "So he remembers every single word you've said, but he still pretends he is annoyed when you talk too much? Classic." (Reel97)

The use of such dialogue typecasts romantic relationships, and place them in comparison to what we have already seen. A further fortification of this argument comes from observing how discourses that go against the popular narrative were not dominant. Queer romance novels, focus on development of characters outside romantic settings, desire for people to be more open minded when it comes to romance, were not present in large numbers. This finding falls in line with what Harvey (2020, p.79) argued about tokenism in representation, that media will only give voices to the marginalized groups when it benefits its diversity quotient. The reels that did discuss alternate discourses, and queer stories, still defined themselves in relation to the dominant discourse, thus while they steered away, they remained defined by the dominant norms and ideology.

4.2.2 Tropes and Defiance

Another element observed about the discourse on relationships within the bookstagram community is the tropification of plots, this is where narrative is weaved into set patterns, and then those patterns are used to promote the object of media, in this case, books. However, as it was observed, the tropes did not just promote the books, but the narrative itself. They were also used a

tool of defiance, where transgressive narrative was pushed as normal as a part of the trope. For example, the age gap trope, was a commonly observed trope, normalising relationship between people with a large age gap. While there is no question of judgement here, it was also noted that some of the content under this trope, promoted relationships between 18-year-old women and men above the age of 40. (Reel81)

The nuance of how this could be problematic was not discussed under the defence of it being an age gap romance. Tropes here then became a shortcut to discourse propagation, Hall's (1997) Representation Theory helps unpack this: Meaning is not fixed in a text but constructed through its circulation in cultural contexts. Bookstagram amplifies this process. When a reel quotes a toxic romantic line and labels it as something like, Book boyfriend energy, it anchors the relationship within a wider system of meaning where possession, obsession, or even violence are coded as desirable traits—because they've been seen before, loved before, and now, are being re-loved. This process normalizes problematic patterns not through argument, but through emotional familiarity. Harvey (2020, p.83) also argued that while tropes can be very culturally specific, gendered tropes hold the power to instil hierarchy between different groups and communities.

4.3 Discourse about Gender in Romantic relationships

The final theme, addresses the question about gender roles and dynamics that are being reproduced or challenged within the discourse about romance on Bookstagram. These gender dynamics were observed by taking note of what traits were most associated with masculinity and femininity. It was observed that these roles were not static, but constantly propagated through performative content, aesthetic visualisation which only reinforced the normativity of them. Across the data set, the traditional binary roles, of men as the leaders and protectors and women as the passive receivers of the plot, were observed. This theme consists of three subthemes, which further explain how these gender roles have been constructed, and if there are any particular trends of romanticization or resistance observed within this online discourse.

4.3.1 Assertive Masculinity

Masculinity through the content shared by the content creators is framed to fit the traditionally construct images of what an ideal man should do or look like. They have been categorized as tall, rich, and often shown having a predominantly male dominated profession, such as that as a hockey player, FBI agent or a Bodyguard. The desirability of their physical strength is reinforced when the content creators constantly focus on describing men in relation to how adept they are at jobs that require great physical strength.

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In one of the reels, the content creator while describing a scenario from a romance novel describes the male protagonist as the "the hot tattooed guy." (Reel100). In another example, the content creator fawns over the fact that the main male character Rhett is a bodyguard, indicating the desirability of their physical strength. (Reel9)

Men have also been framed to be leading and dominating, in measures beyond their physical strength. The fact that they are rich is highlighted by content creators, so much so that billionaire romances has become a trope on its own (Reel77). In fact, in one of the reels, the fact that male main character just casually gives his card to his partner to buy whatever she pleases, indicates the power that is associated with these characters because they are rich. (Reel45)

Men have been framed as the leaders of the narrative, where they know everything, about the female main character and their circumstances, and this all-knowing ability is presented as desirable by the content creators. For instance, while describing the plot of a book, the content creator said, "And dude, I literally would just fold the way Jack is able to read Elsy." This is referring to the way the male protagonist is hyper observant of the female protagonist. (Reel32)

This keen observance is then further used to justify their actions, always informed by this knowledge they have, often representing them as key decision makers in multiple situations. Another key observation is how obsessiveness is deemed as desirable as a display of commitment by the male characters. This trend was present in a great chunk of the data, where the fact that the man became obsessed with the woman in one glance is framed as highly romantic. This is by no means an attempt to question the decisiveness of their characters, but it is a question important to ask, when this very obsession or "deep love" is used to justify the protectiveness and possessiveness they show towards their romantic counterpart. In one of the reels, the creator while explaining the manipulative actions of a male character said, "because he saw you first, that means you're his," justifying their problematic behaviour as an outcome of their claim over the female main character. (Reel3)

Another interesting example can be observed when the creator was explaining what made them hooked to a book and it was the fact that the male main character called the female character "his wife" (Reel84). This also indicates towards another way in which this possession has been justified, and it is through the idea of hyper exclusivity, where a creator has even written in the caption, that they can tolerate murder but not cheating (Reel26). This sense of staking claim has only been observed to be exhibited by male characters, and then romanticised by the content creators by constantly reinforcing it through their content. Another trait that has been associated with masculinity, is the act of providing safety to the female character. It was noted that the female character was never discussed in a capacity of safeguarding the man, it was always the other way

round. In the caption of multiple reels, the content creator mentions a "protective mmc" (male main character) which indicates the romanticization of this trait.

In one of the reels, a dialogue from a romance book pops up on the screen, and the content creator can be seen expressing their emotional overwhelm at it. The text on screen says: "Take your hands off of my fiancé." "Apologies I didn't realise" "I do not give a **** what you did or didn't realise, touch vivian and I will kill you". (Reel68)

Such behaviour being reinforced by content creators, limits the way masculinity is expressed and understood. It associates it with brute strength and unmanageable emotions. Such stagnant associations can in turn impact the way we interpret men and their behaviour around us, posing a problem where their authority gets naturalized in society. This subtheme aligns with the analysis conducted by Radway (1983, p.67) where she found how women often use the narrative present in the books about men as an excuse to the behaviour exhibited by their partners in real life. It explains the tolerance the narrative and its participants seemed to have built for the blatant assertion of male characters as leaders and controllers of the story.

4.3.2 Passive Femininity

The female characters have been categorized as the receiver of the narrative; they have seldom been placed in a position of authority. Even if they are, the content creator highlights the anomaly of it, further fortifying the observation of how the discourse reinforces and aligns with patriarchal gender roles of women. Their physical beauty has been marked as a key casual factor of romantic feelings in the male characters.

A content creator, explaining the appeal of a book by putting herself in that plot, said, "you're so-you're so in love with my body," as a condition for the romance to take place, and as a response to be exhibited by the man towards her (Reel16). This narrative can be interpreted as objectification of the female character, where her actions are discussed in consonance with her appearance, that the way she can attain the affections of a man is by altering her appearance or physicality.

Another reel highlighted a scene from a book which said, "She finds something else to wear that's a little more revealing", to receive a reaction from the male character (Reel103). Their passivity, is further highlighted by how they are positioned as the damsel in different ways. The reels highlight how the female character is always in some kind of trouble, either through a mistake they made or just by chance, and the only way out is to seek help from the male main character.

An example of that would be in a reel where the female main character has been described as "Going through a divorce. Her brother is severely sick and is in need of a kidney transplant." (Reel32) In another example, she has been described doing something, to get away from marriage, again presenting them in a troubled circumstance. (Reel83)

This creates the opportunity for the man to act as a saviour, further perpetrating the power imbalance, where only a man holds enough power to help, save and change the dynamics of a situation. Many reels have highlighted scenes where the female main character seeks the male main character's help, and they have not been presented objectively, rather, they have been framed as extremely vulnerable romantic moments. The lack of such discourse for the male character is what highlights the imbalance in agency. In one of the reels, the content creator recommends a book highlighting this plot:

"What if I could give you a book where she calls her brother's best friend sobbing because she's at a party and her boyfriend just broke her heart, and he's like okay I'll come to you no problem." (Reel12)

Another example is of when the content creator can be seen dancing joyously as a popular microtrope flashes on screen: *he opens the door* "I had nowhere else to go" (Reel23)

"She's curled into herself; arms wrapped protectively around her knees." Is another example of how the female main character has been described in the one the reels (Reel88)

Furthermore, this agency is taken away by framing them as inexperienced or incapable of making decisions. The way their narrative is dismissed, to further the plot of romance shows how little control they are shown to have over the narrative. In one of the reels, while paraphrasing what the male main characters says to the female main character, said, "goes absolutely not you're marrying me. You can walk or crawl down the aisle."(Reel7). And this is accompanied by an impressed expression on the creator's face.

The way the absolute disregard is not flagged by the content creator shows how the discourse where narrative of a woman is always secondary is only getting validated. In multiple cases there is no mention of the female character's agency in the situation, they are subjected to outcomes and that is met with no critical argument from the content creator's side.

"She's on campus and the next thing she knows she's like rounded up into some bride hunt" is how one creator explains the plot of a dark romance novel. (Reel9)

Another example showcases how the creator completely glossed over the fact that there is a problematic behaviour was involved here, and skips to the more romantically appealing aspects of the book:

"So he stole their daughter He's a pirate and he sneaks into his enemies castle in the middle of the night and takes the princess and then keeps her on His like pirate ship pirate boat with him and the rest of his crew the banter in this book" (Reel47)

Another key finding is the representation of the female character as the emotional care taker, where their merit as a good romantic partner is only shown in how they help their very masculine partner cope with their emotions. A creator describing the plot of a romance book said: "The male main character is a formula one driver, and he's recently gone through a trauma. And the female main character kind of helps bring him back to life." (Reel70)

Another example is the grumpy – sunshine trope, which translates to a selectively emotional man and a woman who is always a modicum of positivity. It represents the role of a woman to bring emotional stability, and happiness in a man's life. Such representations contribute to a discursive structure where female submission is rebranded as romantic fulfilment.

Femininity here is performed multiple times in passive ways, and as the logic of performativity goes, the more an act is performed and perpetuated, the more it gets naturalised. That is the risk with such portrayal of women in the discourse of bookstagram. The characters might be more diverse and complex in the books separately but the angle that is highlighted in the reels by the content creators shows the patriarchal perceptions and ideas that are being reinforced. This aligns with the arguments that were made by Harvey (2020, p.152) about digital spaces reinforcing and intensifying normatively gendered power relations. She argues that the representations of beauty, care, and emotional availability are continuously disciplined through algorithmically rewarded aesthetics, trends, and narrative conventions. These expressions further indicate that digital visibility does not equate to digital equality (Harvey 2020, p.153). In the reels posted within this digital community, a female presented to be constrained by the layers of social expectations, where desirability of womanhood is repeatedly linked to passivity, emotional labour, and supporting a man's character development, thus reinforcing the heteronormative and patriarchal ideas of romance under the guise of relatability and fantasy.

4.3.3 Romanticization of Morally Grey Men

While this subtheme is a comment on how masculinity is framed, it was categorized separately to indicate the tendency of this discourse to normalise problematic behaviour. A large

portion of the data collected points to this trend where men who are criminals, indulging in problematic, borderline illegal activities are considered desirable. It raises question as to how such activities are passed on as tropes, and justification, under the guise of them being ultimately romantics at heart. One such reel, while playing into the social media trend of "He's a really good bad man" (where they illustrate the traits of a person that might not be ideal but overall, they are a good person) said, "But then also, holds her over the edge of like a water tower because he knows she's scared and has his way with her…". (Reel.29)

Such acts that border on the line of non-consensual interactions are only romanticised as display of passions. Violence has also been framed as romantic tension in certain cases:

"There's a lot of tension, there's gun to the forehead, there's knife to the throat, and number three" (Reel. 33)

The romanticization also comes from the representation of violence as an act of protection, where their actions are justified, because they felt protective towards the female main character. "When somebody oversteps with you, you end up finding pieces of his being wrapped up in a beautiful box the next day" (Reel. 44)

Stalking, and non-consensual invasion of privacy was also observed to be a dominating theme of content under this category. It has been justified by describing it as helpful, in acts which either helped the female main character or protected her. "Did he perchance break into her house while she was at work? Yes. Did he film his mask tok thirst traps in her room and post them? Yes. Did he leave his mask on her bed for her to find when she came home? Yes. Did he also place a camera in her bedroom? Yes. He did also order a bunch of home defence equipment. Had it delivered right to her door the next day so someone like him would not be able to break it next time." (Reel.10)

The above example illustrates how stalking, and invasion of privacy has been excused because firstly, they are the romantic leads, but also because its intentionality came from a place of concern and love. It has also been described as a trait of being in love with someone, where the male main character just beings stalking the woman, he falls in love with. All this content is accompanied with music that adds to the romantic feel of it all, expressions that hype it up and social media trends that make jest of such behaviour. Nowhere in this data, did any of the reels point out the problematic part of such tropes, there is not critical engagement with the content that is being promoted, only fantasies of extreme obsession being packaged as romance. The fact that stalking or threats are paired with romantic music or affectionate captions demonstrates what KhosraviNik (2014) describes as the power in discourse, the micro-level rhetorical moves that reframe domination as desire.

In fact, if someone is going beyond the limit, it is better than someone who would express their affections within considerable boundaries. An example of this is the romanticization of the villain, which also prevalent in the data collected. The morally grey FMC becomes a recurring caption when the creators recommend a book and it presents the narrative that romantic love excuses all, or that there is no limitation to the expression of romantic love.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Overview of the main findings

This research set out to find how romance, romantic relationships and gender roles within those relationships are communicated on the online book reading community of Instagram, also known as Bookstagram. By analysing a sample of reels through purposive sampling that either discussed or recommended romance books, through thematic analysis, informed by critical discourse analysis, three major themes surfaced – Discursive construction of Love, Representation of romantic relationships and Discourse around gender in romantic relationships. These themes uncovered how love and romance on the platform are shaped by affective intensity, stylized tropes, and deeply gendered power dynamics.

The first theme of Discursive construction of love revealed how love was being defined and presented within this community. One of the key characteristics was it being represented through emotionally intense expressions. The creators reinforced the narrative by appreciating, heavily discussing and promoting characters who exhibited such extreme tendencies. Another tendency of framing romance as an aspirational fantasy, surfaced, where fantasies of having men like those in the books, relationships that mimicked the ones they read about was prominently observed. The second theme was about how relationships were represented and what practices were being perpetuated to propagate ideas about romantic relationships. One of the key aspects of this theme was the usage of tropes to subvert dominant discourses. Sensationalisation of themes was also heavily employed the creators, where they highlighted sexual themes wherever they could to keep their audience interested in their content. Songs, performative displays of the scenes, were other core observations that marked this theme. The final theme was about gender discourses. The findings under this theme indicated that masculinity was framed as being assertive and dominant. More than that, a lot of problematic behaviours were normalised under the guise of romantic expression. Female characters on the other hand were rarely described beyond their passive roles; their narrative strength was not explored by the creators.

It is essential to note that these reels are actively produced by creators who not only participate in but also shape these discourses through the specific moments they choose to highlight, the scenes they perform, and the ways they frame the books they recommend. The selective emphasis by creators on book scenes and character behaviours suggests that they are not passive transmitters of the books' content, but active participants in shaping how romance is communicated within this space. These performances reflect the creators' conscious choices about which storylines to amplify and which affective cues to draw attention to, thus playing a critical role in shaping the

emotional and ideological resonance of these romantic narratives. The ways in which these creators selectively celebrate or remain silent about certain gender dynamics further contribute to the reinforcement of these discourses.

It is essential to note the agency of content creators in producing such pieces of social media content. The reels do not exist in isolation, they occur as a consequence of conscious choice made by these creators of storylines, scenes and dynamic they choose to highlight. They are not passive transmitters but active participants in shaping how romance is communicated within this space. The ways in which these creators selectively celebrate or remain silent about certain gender dynamics further contribute to the reinforcement of these discourses. Every choice of music, dialogue, expression is intentional, raising questions of what motivates them to produce such content. Does it reflect their actual beliefs or is it a pursuit for views that motivates such choices? And if latter is the case, it draws critical concern about the underlying preferences of the algorithm and the types of narratives it subtly amplified.

Reflecting on the central research question- How do Instagram based book communities construct and communicate discourses on romance? - This study finds that Instagram based book communities play an active role in shaping the discourse around romance. It is represented through intense emotional displays, a fantasy that people cannot have yet always desire and a conflict without which true love cannot surface. Romance is gendered, it is ridden with extreme expressions of devotion, sacrifice and an obsession that has not be problematized by the creators who post their content within this community. The sheer volume of content that had themes of stalking, criminality, and other violent behaviours indicate how the narrative of romance has been equated with intense expression, and one does not question in what form they arrive. When it comes to the topic of relationships, bookstagram narrates, performs, and spectacularizes them, embedding desire into tropes, audio-visual aesthetics, and intertextual codes. Relationships are made emotionally consumable not through realism, but through spectacle and fantasy. While some of these representations challenge mainstream norms, many simply repackage patriarchal or power-laden ideals into more aesthetic, emotionally resonant forms. Through these performances, Bookstagram contributes to a larger discourse that treats romance and romantic relationships not as complex negotiations, but as plots to be watched, admired, and desired.

The first sub question asked - What representations of love and gender are promoted or contested in the romantic discourses on Bookstagram? – The findings indicated that while love itself is professed as something that breaks boundaries, same cannot be said about gender roles, which remain rather traditional. The scenes have become modern in the setup but the way the narrative

that floats around male and female characters remains rooted in patriarchal standards. The woman might be a nurse but she is still regarded as incapable of taking care of herself, they are rarely the doer of the plot. This is not to comment on the plot of the books, but what is highlighted, repeated and performed by the content creators when they discuss the said books. The impact the female character is said to have been always through her physical expression, while the male characters are portrayed as a modicum of stoic affection. They are pillars of strength and this very difference in power gets highlighted in what actions of the characters get romanticised. The man is shown as the protector, and the woman the damsel, the narrative that has been going on for ages, only now it has become more intense. A new area of appreciation for morally grey men emerged from the analysis, showing the lack of context such content, provides to its viewers. What is sold as entertainment is often more powerful and impressionable than what we believe it to be.

The second sub question asked - How do these discourses relate to dominant ideologies of love, relationships, and gender roles within young adults? The study showed that the content that is posted within this digital space does not exist in isolation of the broad socio-cultural construct. As some of the creators enact the scenes they read in books with their partners, some set the "book-boyfriend" as a new standard, it actively contributes to the construction of romance in the real world. The repeated exposure to possessiveness as love, dominance as masculinity, and vulnerability as femininity may in fact contributes to the normalization of these scripts, particularly within young, impressionable audiences who turn to online communities for cultural orientation and emotional insight.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

This research employed four key theoretical frameworks—Representation Theory (Hall, 1997), Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995), Feminist Media Theory (Harvey, 2019, 2020), and Gender Performativity (Butler, 1990, 1993). The findings revealed that these frameworks were not only well-suited to the research aims but also evolved meaningfully in light of the digital, user-generated context of the study.

The findings of the study reinforce the argument of representation laid forth by Stuart Hall (1997). Meaning does not exist in vacuum but is a product of cultural codes that may vary for all of us. On social media, the repetitive hashtags, trends, captions, and caption specific features like lip-syncing and dance sequences make up the codes that reinforce or resist narratives. The study also extends Hall's ideas into the visual-linguistic logic of platform culture, where affect and virality significantly shape what gets circulated and naturalized (Hall, 1997, p.36).

It falls in alignment with what Miller (1990, p.122) argued about how the people who dissipate content can be held liable for the way we make meaning in our everyday life. While sole responsibility for perpetuation of narratives related to toxic masculinity or obsessive love cannot be borne by creators, it is undeniable that the fact that every time a romance novel is discussed, there is a sexual theme there, is because that is the narrative they are choosing to promote. For instance, there are over 40 quotes that indicate possessive, protective, and violent behaviour exhibited by male main characters, being framed as romantic and desirable by the content creators. The ideal behaviour of a man in a romantic relationship thus has the probability of getting defined by the repeated focus, content creators put on their traits of violent displays.

Galician's argument of mythical and stereotypical notions of romance being prevalent was further validated in the digital space of bookstagram. In fact, the idolization of romantic couples and their mediated realities (Galician, 2004, p.71) could be observed in the content collected for the research. Creators treated the fictional couples of books and their stories like benchmarks, they created fan-bases over male main characters of such novels, propagating the idea that what those relationships or characters represent, is ideal, if not attainable, at least desirable. The meaning of romantic love explained by Illouz (1998), was also affirmed in the tropes that were popularised in the bookstagtram discourse. The dichotomy of routine vs drama, that has been argued by Illouz (1998, p.175), to represent what people thought as romantic and not, was found to be true in this case as well. The romantic plots were always ridden with chaos and conflict, no story with a simple realistic narrative was discussed, the characters represented relief from everyday life for each other, and a disruption of beliefs was presented as desirable through this narrative. Tropes such as Enemies to Lovers, Forbidden Romance, Mafia Romance, were highlighted prominently by the content creators in multiple reels, further substantiating the argument of romance being presented as a beacon of excitement and break from mundanity.

The feminist media theory was instrumental in analysing the way female and male characters were represented. Despite the platforms apparent participant and inclusive nature, women were still represented as passive objects, indicating the sustaining relevance and urgency of the feminist critique of media. For instance, a strong female main character is presented as an anomaly by the content creator in one of the reels, where they highlight how shocked the people are when the female character does not simper or cower, "Everyone watches as she walks to the row of bikes, raising a brow he shakes his head before she kicks." (Reel98). The fact that only one or two reels out of the entire data set highlight active action on the part of the female main character is an indication of the passivity the discourse within this community, propagates. This propagation, of course does not occur by mere expression of one's opinions, but is highly tailored in nature, the theory of gender

performativity by Butler (1998) is only corroborated by this tendency. Gender was not just performed by but also curated, edited, and aestheticized for digital consumption. The creators reproduced gender norms not only through the textual promotion of tropes, but also via platform-specific performances - facial expressions, stylized narration, music use and reaction formats, that naturalize gendered romantic behaviours. Butler's concept of repeated acts constituting identity (1990) is thus vividly illustrated in how possessiveness, emotional labour, and submission are reified through content formats that reward repetition, virality, and affective intensity.

So far, the literature on online spaces related to books and reading only focused on how the platform markets the books, but the findings of this research suggest that role it plays in shaping discursive trends about romance and gender. As Bookstagram creators perform, remix, and popularize specific romantic scripts, they contribute to the normalization of certain relational templates, particularly among young audiences. This underscores the need for ongoing theoretical engagement with new digital genres, particularly as participatory culture becomes increasingly central to how young adults learn about love, identity, and intimacy.

5.3 Societal Implication

From a societal standpoint, these findings raise concerning questions about how young adults understand love, romance and gender. It shows the potential of interaction with content that is present online, a digital space that will only get saturated by the minute. The themes of possessiveness, obsession and control were some of the most socially problematic findings, and it is important to enquire how they are being perceived by the consumers of this digital space. The way the content on Instagram under this community goes without any contextualisation of what is real and what should be left in fiction creates a dangerous environment where managing expectations is conflicting for the people who visit such spaces frequently.

These representations also narrow the range of acceptable gender expressions by consistently promoting heteronormative, cisgendered, and often white-centric ideals of love. They risk the alienation of communities and people who do not follow the dominant script. Thus, the findings of this research also highlight the need for better media literacy and critical choice when it comes to content selection and production.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

While the study provides important insights, it is equally essential to recognize its limitations. Firstly, the sampling is purposive, for the platform of Instagram, and reels in English. It does not capture the content posted on other platforms, nor does it consider other formats of content, for

example static posts, blogs, threads etc. This limits the findings of the study to include narrative from smaller communities or people who have been posting this kind of content differently. Future research could examine similar discourses and dynamics on other platforms such as YouTube, TikTok etc, which may have different community practices and guidelines. A cross-platform comparison can also be conducted to better understand how format, platform guidelines and variating algorithm rules impact the discourse of romance within the book reading communities.

The second limitation comes from the subjective and interpretative nature of the analysis. While the researcher has tried their best to maintain reflexivity and stay rooted in the academic framework, since the analysis is qualitative in nature, the possibility of a bias cannot be denied. Another researcher, coming from a different background, conducting this research at a different time may uncover alternate themes and patterns. Future research can perhaps expand the methodological triangulation, adding additional coders or even quantitative measures to improve the generalisability of the study.

Finally, the thesis focuses on representation and construction of meaning, it does not consider the audience perception of the content, which can limit its understanding of how exactly are these discourses being translated. Future researchers can integrate the reception element into the analysis, in the form of surveys, focus group interviews of avid users of the community, to make the findings more enriching.

Furthermore, future research can potentially explore this topic from the perspective of the content creators who contribute to these discourses. It has been acknowledged that the content analysed in this research was a product of active choices made by the content creators, thus it can be interesting to study how they perceive the kind of content they post, what roles is played by the algorithm in the choices they make, and if the increasing paid collaborations between content creators and publishing houses is a contributing factor. In depth interviews with leading content creators can enrich the question of causality behind dispersion of discourses around romance and gender on online platforms.

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Appendix A

Table 1: Code Book (Sensitizing Concepts)

Sensitizing Concepts	Description	Example from Text
Gender Performativity	How are gender roles performed within romantic relationships and scenarios discussed in the text? Who is active, passive, emotional, dominant, etc., and how are those roles framed?	"Someone covered in tattoos neck down to hate my guts" "he goes all alpha"
Representation and Construction of Romance	Given the fact that meaning does not appear on its own but is rather constructed on what we see, interpret and then present - Romance and behaviours associated with it are a product of how they have been framed - represented through language, visuals, and references — not just what is said, but how it is said.	Stalking the female protagonist Users swoon on screen when the Male lead is ready to kill anyone to ensure the well-being of the female lead. "Endearing Stalker" "Sweet Obsession"
Visibility and Absence	Whose narrative is present, and who is being silenced? This concept will help the researcher in observing not only the ones who are being given the centre stage, but also take note of the absence of certain groups and communities.	"And course, no one believes her." - User describing a scenario where the female main character is not believed when she is reporting a stalker
Intertextuality	Note when reels reference books like Twilight, It Ends with	

	Us, etc., and what values or ideals those texts bring into the reel.	

Appendix B

Table 2: Coding Tree

Themes	Subthemes	Axial Codes	Open Codes.
Discursive Construction of Love	Emotional Intensity as Love	Devotion and Longing	- Desire for an all consuming love - Devotion framed as romantic - Sacrifice framed as romantic by the content creator - The idea of soulmates - Tragedy framed as romantic by the user - Yearning framed as romantic by the user
		Dramatic Gestures	- Dramatic confessions - Grand gestures deemed as romantic by the user
		Extreme Expressions	- Extreme emotions as a sign of love - Extreme actions framed as romantic by the content creator
	Love as an aspirational Fantasy	Desire for fictional male characters to exist in reality	- Male main character described desirable by women

Themes	Subthemes	Axial Codes	Open Codes.
			- Need to have a man who is very attuned to their partner's need - Parasocial relationship with male main characters
		Desire to have a romance similar to the books	- Desire to emulate the relationship read about in the books, in real life - Implementing things the content creator reads in the books
	Love as chaos and conflict	Conflict as a causer of love	- Angst as a desirable element in romance - Miscommunication deemed as normal by the content creator in romance - Enemies to lovers is a popular trope - Forbidden romance is a popular trope - Mafia romance is a popular trope
		Forced Setting for emotional bonding	- Fake dating as a well appreciated trope - Forced proximity as a popular trope

Themes	Subthemes	Axial Codes	Open Codes.
		Romanticization of lack of control	- Desire for attraction that is uncontrollable - Lack of control of male characters described as a justification of their love
Representation of Romantic Relationships	Romantic Spectacle through Aesthetics	Songs as emotional enhancer	- Songs used to enhance romantic appeal or excitement - Songs used to add to sad/melancholic theme of the reel
		Sensationalisation of Romance	- Male main character described as sexually dominant - Sexual themes as key attention-grabbing points when describing a plot
		Intertextuality to create relatability	- Intertextual reference to borrow romantic appeal - Intertextual reference to borrow depth - Intertextual reference to Taylor Swift songs
		Transgressive Tropes	- Age gap trope

Themes	Subthemes	Axial Codes	Open Codes.
	Tropes and Defiance		- Murky description of consent in sexual acts
		Notions about romance against popular discourse	- Cheesy romance disliked by the content creator - Desire for people to be more open minded when it comes to romance - Consent described as romantic by the content creator - Focus on the character's traits beyond their romantic plot by the content creator - Queer Romance
Discourse about Gender in Romantic relationships	Assertive Masculinity	Anger as an acceptable trait in men	- Anger in the man as an expression of love - Rage by the male character framed as an act of deep love
		Justification of problematic behaviour	- Cruel main character becoming gentle for the female lead - Intellect used to justify problematic behaviour - Usage of social media trends to

Themes	Subthemes	Axial Codes	Open Codes.
			justify questionable actions
			- Problematic behaviour framed as romantic by the creator
		Possessiveness framed as romantic	- Cheating frowned on by the content creator
			- Cheating having lower moral equivalence than murder
			- Hyper exclusivity as romantic
			- Jealousy claimed to be desirable
			- Staking claim deemed as romantic
			- Possessive MMC a common trope
			- Obsession framed as the first mark of true love
		Protectiveness deemed as desirable	- Male main character described as the saviour
			- Protective attributes framed as desirable by the content creator
	Passive Femininity	Description of femininity	- Anomaly of a strong female lead

Themes	Subthemes	Axial Codes	Open Codes.
			- Female main character is a librarian with reading as her hobby - Physical attributes described by the creator - Physical traits represented as the causal factor for romantic emotions in the male main character
		Female characters described in need of saving	- Dependence on the male main character highlighted - Female main character described as often making mistakes
		Female characters represented as emotional caretakes	- Engaging with a cruel male character deemed as romantic - Female main character described as the emotional revivor - Grumpy guy, sunshine girl as a popular tropes - Female main character described

Themes	Subthemes	Axial Codes	Open Codes.
			as sacrificial by the content creator
		Inexperience or incapability of making decisions	- Female main character often has very little sexual experience - Female main character is described to have been manipulated in the name of romance by the content creator
	Romanticization of Morally Grey Men	Morally questionable male characters	- Cheating justified by the content creator because the previous partner was not good - Criminal male main character regarded as attractive - Forcing a relationship normalised - Villains described as attractive
		Stalking as a romantic theme	- Stalking is described in terms of things the male main character does for the female lead - Stalking deemed as romantic

Themes	Subthemes	Axial Codes	Open Codes.
		Violence described ad love	- Use of physical force not flagged under the guise of romance - Violence framed as tension - Violent protectiveness (ie killing, physically harming someone) normalised in the name of romance by the creator
		Justification of blurring boundaries	- Captivity framed as romantic by the content creator - Coercion justified in the name of romance - Conditional coercion justified as romantic by the content creator - Control over the female main character's life explained as care by the content creator - Intrusion of space by the male main character justified as romantic tension by the user

Appendix C

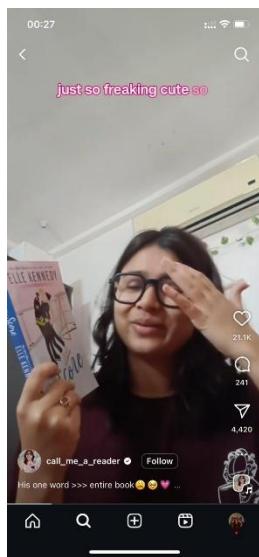Screenshots depicting the variety of content collected across the sample

Figure 1. Screenshot from Instagram reel posted by @ call_me_a_reader on March 10, 2025

Figure 2. Screenshot from Instagram reel posted by @ tjmaguire_author on May 19, 2025, enacting the scene that is displayed on screen

Figure 3. Screenshot from Instagram reel posted by @ bookwormclub00 posted on December 12, 2024

Appendix D

Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information

Name: Atulya Jain

Student ID: 738154

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Carmen Longas Luque

Date: June 06, 2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

-        Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).

-        Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)

-        Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.

-        Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)

-        Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☐ ✓ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically Grammarly and ChatGPT, in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

Extent of AI Usage

☐ ✓I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☐ ✓I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: Atulya Jain

Date of Signature: June 06, 2025   ☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: Atulya Jain

Date of Signature: June 06, 2025

Prompts used for AI:

1. Please correct the grammar in this section…

2. Suggest 10 relevant keywords for a thesis that is based on….