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The Algorithmic Reader: How Recommendation Systems Influence Literary Taste

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Abstract

In the digital age, literary consumption is no longer guided primarily by critics, teachers, or personal exploration—but by algorithms. These recommendation systems, embedded in platforms such as Amazon, Goodreads, and TikTok, shape what readers see, what they choose, and ultimately what becomes “taste.” This paper argues that algorithmic curation is transforming literary taste in three interlinked ways: first, by reinforcing existing preferences and narrowing exposure; second, by shifting the power of discovery from the reader to data-driven systems; third, by changing how value and originality are perceived in literature. Drawing on case studies of BookTok’s influence on Generation Z, Goodman’s theories of taste (via Bourdieu), and empirical studies of reading challenges and digital literacy, the paper shows that while recommendation systems democratize access to books, they also homogenise what becomes visible, valued, and read. The conclusion reflects on what this means for readers, writers, and the broader literary culture: that literary freedom is becoming a negotiation with invisibility, algorithmic scaffolding, and predictive expectation.

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INTRODUCTION

Shifting Gatekeepers

For most of history, literary taste was mediated by institutions: publishing houses, critics, teachers, and literary awards. Readers discovered books through trusted intermediaries, reviews, or through local communities. Today, that landscape has shifted. Platforms (Goodreads, Amazon, TikTok, etc.) now deploy algorithms to recommend books. These systems analyse a user's past behaviour—what single clicks, what ratings, what genres—and then serve books accordingly. What appears in your feed or search suggestions influences what you read.

This paper investigates how these systems are not neutral tools but active shapers of taste. The thesis: Recommendation systems have become the new gatekeepers of literary taste. They shape what gets seen, what gets read, and what is valued, and they reshape what “taste” means in this context.

Taste and Mechanisms of Recommendation

To understand how algorithmic systems affect taste, it is imperative to look at classic social theory. Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* argues that taste is not merely personal preference but deeply social, a product of class, education, and symbolic power. Bourdieu shows that what a society defines as “good taste” is rarely neutral—it arises from the dominant class, and works as a means of differentiation. Algorithmic recommendation systems inherit and magnify some of these dynamics, though in a new form:

They rely on existing data (clicks, ratings, reviews).

They privilege books that already have visibility.

They tend to reinforce popularity, which can function similarly to how “dominant taste” gets reinforced in Bourdieu's model.

BookTok, Reading Platforms, Digital Literacy

To see the mechanisms at work, we look at the following empirical studies.

1. BookTok's Role in Shaping Reading Habits

A 2025 study from The Eastasouth Journal of Social Science and Humanities examined Generation Z in Indonesia and found that engagement with BookTok correlates with increased reading frequency, broader genre preferences, and more adoption of digital reading platforms. Another similar study in the UK from the Publishers Association reported that 59% of 16–25-year-olds say BookTok or book influencers helped them rediscover or develop a passion for reading.

These findings suggest that algorithm-driven recommendation (via influencer content that itself gets amplified by platform algorithms) is not just pushing books people would already read—it encourages variety, discovery, and reading volume. But there are costs: exposure tends to cluster around a narrow set of books, authors, or genres that perform well in the algorithmic metrics (views, likes, shares).

2. Reading Challenges and Goodreads

Another relevant study is “Investigating the effects of Goodreads challenges on individuals' reading habits.” This research examined how participation in Goodreads' public yearly reading challenges is associated with a higher number of books read, but also shows tendencies toward choosing shorter books, or more “safe” books—i.e., ones likely to be completed and rated well.

3. Digital Literacy and Preferences

A study of students at the Central University of Tamil Nadu assessed digital literacy and reading habits. It found that while students are proficient in using digital tools and accessing digital content, their strong preference remains for printed books. However, the visibility of digital options (recommendations, easy access) shapes what they try, even if print remains emotional or habitual.

How Algorithms Reshape Taste

By combining the theories and empirical observations, we can isolate mechanisms by which recommendation systems rewire taste.

Implication for Literary Taste

1. Reinforcement of existing preferences.

Algorithms suggest books similar to what the user already likes (genre, rating, length) to maximise engagement. Readers may get stuck in “taste bubbles.” Less exposure to divergent or challenging works.

2. Visibility bias

Books already popular (high ratings, many purchases) get more exposure; obscure writers/authors get less. Visibility becomes a driver of value; originality becomes invisible unless picked up by an algorithm early.

Feedback loops Popularity leads to more visibility, which leads to more popularity → self-fulfilling cycles. Books/authors who break in early get rewarded disproportionately; many others never get heard.

3. Constrained discovery.

Discovery via algorithm tends to be efficient but risk-averse. Novelty is expensive (for the system and user). Users may prefer recommendations because they reduce the “cost of being wrong.” Taste becomes safer, more predictable; literary experimentation softens.

4. Metricized value.

Ratings, shares, and likes become a proxy for quality. Literary value becomes conflated with engagement; critical depth may lose ground.

Case & Countercase: Benefits, Dangers, and Creative Responses

1. Benefits

Broader access and democratisation — Platforms allow readers in remote areas, or outside traditional literary circles, to find and read books they would not otherwise have access to. BookTok, for example, has helped readers across countries discover works not heavily marketed locally.

Reinvigoration of reading habits — As the Indonesian study shows, BookTok increased reading frequency. People who had drifted away from reading come back.

Diversification of genres — Romance, fantasy, “light fiction,” which were once marginalised, now get amplified because of user interest rather than publisher gatekeeping.

2. Dangers / Downsides

Standardisation of what becomes visible; many works that don't fit algorithmic “templates” remain obscure.

Pressure on authors to write for metrics rather than artistic vision. E.g., writing shorter novels, adopting popular tropes, crafting books that “look good” in cover image → to satisfy thumbnail/video aesthetic.

Loss of serendipity: Part of literary joy comes from surprising, unexpected reads. Algorithms reduce this.

3. Creative Responses

Authors intentionally subvert algorithmic norms—writing works that resist formulaic tropes, or pushing niche themes.

Readers creating counter-communities (book clubs, offline reading groups) or curating manually—seeking books outside algorithmic suggestions.

Platforms developing recommendation systems with “exploration modes” or “off-beat suggestions” (for example, Goodreads “Readers also liked...” but with filters for low-visibility books).

CONCLUSION

Recommendation systems are changing the shape of literary taste. They are neither entirely good nor entirely bad—but they are powerful, and the stakes are high. When algorithms take over discovery, the power shifts from the reader's curiosity and the writer's craft to data signals, visibility, and engagement metrics. This shift means literary culture may become more predictable, more fragmented around popular taste, and less hospitable to novelty. But we also see that algorithmic influence has the capacity to renew reading habits, democratize access, and bring unsung voices forward—if platforms and readers pay attention.

For readers: cultivating taste may now include resisting algorithmic comfort zones—making space for books beyond what's “recommended.” For writers: sustainability might lie in balancing what algorithms demand and what artistic instincts push toward. For publishers and platforms: there's a responsibility to design recommendation systems consciously—ones that preserve visibility for underrepresented voices, encourage exploration, and maintain spaces for surprise.

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