

Research on the Marketing Strategies of International Bestsellers in the Digital Age: A Case Study of It Ends with Us

Yanhua Qin¹, Fengyi Wang^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Journalism and Communication, Beijing Normal University, No. 19 Xin Jie Kou Wai Street, Haidian District, Beijing, China*

a. 641616822@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: In the digital age, the rapid development of new technologies and new media has introduced fresh ideas for book marketing by publishers. It has become increasingly important for publishers to utilize new media and technology, understand the strengths and preferred content of various platforms, and develop targeted marketing strategies. The advantages of online marketing, such as timeliness, diversity, strong social interactions, quick feedback, and the ability to integrate with offline activities, can be leveraged to activate user engagement, enhance emotional investment from fans, and strengthen the connection between fans, books, and authors. Using the international bestseller *It Ends with Us* as a case study, this paper explores new pathways for marketing bestsellers in the digital era.

Keywords: Digital age, new media, bestseller, marketing.

1. Introduction

It Ends with Us is a popular novel that explores the themes of how to love and be loved. The central themes of the novel are "female empowerment" and "domestic violence," with the title conveying the message "It (domestic violence) ends with us."

The protagonist, Lily, witnessed her father abusing her mother during her childhood, leaving her with deep psychological scars. As a result, Lily grows up with a heightened sense of caution towards love and marriage. By chance, Lily meets a neurosurgeon named Ryle on a rooftop, and the two fall madly in love, despite not knowing much about each other, and soon commit to spending their lives together. Lily believes she has escaped the shadow of her family's past and that Ryle is the right choice for her, until she finds herself reliving her mother's experience—becoming a victim of domestic violence. Lily is both horrified by the parallels between her experience and her mother's, and desperately hopes that Ryle is different from her father. Although Lily finds domestic violence completely unacceptable, she continues to forgive Ryle repeatedly after each incident. When Ryle abuses her for the third time, Lily discovers that she is pregnant. She suddenly realizes that if she does not make the right choice, the terrible cycle may repeat itself with her child. Finally, Lily bravely chooses to divorce Ryle and finds love and stability with Atlas, a man she had met and been protected by since her youth.

Colleen Hoover, the author of *It Ends with Us*, commented on Goodreads about the book: "This book is really heavy. If you rip out most of the pages, it won't be as heavy. But when you do that, the book loses all meaning." There is no doubt that the subject of domestic violence is extremely heavy, but when you have the courage to refuse to sink into the nightmare and bravely jump out of it, a new life begins for both you and future generations.

Colleen Hoover is a renowned American female novelist. She was born on December 11, 1979, in Sulphur Springs, Texas, and grew up in the small town of Descartaux, Texas. She has won multiple literary awards, including the Goodreads Choice Award and Best Romance Novel, which are among the most popular reader-voted awards from the world's largest online reading community. As described in Colleen Hoover's personal profile on Goodreads: "I don't like being confined to one genre. If you put me in a box, I'll climb out myself." Her works span various genres, including romance, emotional novels, and young adult fiction.

Colleen Hoover initially started as a self-published author, releasing her debut e-book in January 2012 through the "Amazon Self-Publishing Program." Within just a few months, the book received widespread praise and became a viral hit through word-of-mouth and enthusiastic reviews on social media platforms, solidifying her status as a true internet sensation.

According to *Publishers Weekly*, Colleen Hoover dominated the top three spots on the 2022 bestseller list. *Publishers Weekly* even referred to her as the "Queen of the 2022 Bestseller List." [1] The American film and book magazine *Vulture* praised Colleen Hoover as a gift to the American publishing industry from God, noting that her books kept printing presses busy. The bestselling author who "dominated the charts" in 2022, Colleen Hoover, continued to reign over the 2023 bestseller list as well.

On the international version of TikTok, a community of book and literature enthusiasts known as "BookTok" is often referred to as a "bestseller-making machine," and Colleen Hoover is hailed as the "Queen of BookTok." She is also the most followed author on the book review website Goodreads. Currently, Colleen Hoover has more than 1.3 million followers on TikTok. In addition to being a writer, she is the founder of *The Bookworm Box*, a subscription service that sends books and other book-related items to subscribers every month. The profits from *The Bookworm Box* are regularly donated to various charities.

The publisher of the English edition of *It Ends with Us* is Atria Books. Since its launch in 2002, Atria has published hundreds of bestsellers, including a wide range of genres such as commercial and literary fiction, mystery and thrillers, narrative non-fiction, politics and pop culture, science, personal development, and spirituality.

Atria is committed to publishing works from a variety of literary styles and cultural backgrounds, encouraging and supporting innovative and experimental literary works. The publishing house's openness to emerging literary styles and themes has made it a preferred partner for many authors. As stated on their official website, Atria fosters an environment where creativity thrives, best-selling authors rise to new heights, and the best voices of tomorrow are discovered and nurtured. The publishing house places great emphasis on the diversity and inclusiveness of literary works, striving to provide a platform for more diverse authors to publish and shine. Atria has already published many bestsellers, whose success has not only enhanced the reputation of the publisher but also established a solid base of loyal readers.

In terms of marketing, Atria Books actively adopts digital publishing technologies and constantly experiments with new strategies in market promotion. The company makes extensive use of social media and online platforms to engage with readers while closely collaborating with bookstores and other partners to promote their works.

According to data from Goodreads, *It Ends with Us* was first released on August 2, 2016, and won the 2016 Goodreads Choice Award for Best Romance Novel. As of April 22, 2024, nearly 3.35 million readers have rated the book, and almost 250,000 readers have written reviews.

According to incomplete statistics from the international market research company NPD Group, Colleen Hoover sold over 14 million books in 2022. Of the top 25 books on the bestseller list, eight were authored by Hoover, with *It Ends with Us* and *Verity* each selling over 2 million copies. [2] As reported by *Publishers Weekly*, Colleen Hoover, who dominated the bestseller charts in 2022, continued to reign in 2023, with *It Ends with Us* securing the top spot in English book sales for 2023.

Currently, *It Ends with Us* has been translated into more than 20 languages worldwide. On Amazon in the United States, the book has garnered over 240,000 five-star reviews, with a five-star rating percentage as high as 78%.

A film adaptation of the novel is currently in production, with Hollywood actress Blake Lively set to star as the protagonist, Lily Bloom.

2. Marketing Strategy of *It Ends with Us*

2.1. Riding the Wave: Spontaneous Promotion by Readers on Social Media

Most bestsellers rely on two major factors: the author's fame, which naturally attracts attention, and continuous exposure of the book through various channels such as television programs. However, many of today's bestsellers have taken a different path, gaining popularity online before transitioning to offline success. *Slate Magazine* believes that social media played a crucial role in the rise of *It Ends with Us*. "BookTok" (#BookTok) is one of the most popular book-related topics on TikTok, and Colleen Hoover is one of the most frequently mentioned authors within this topic.

The trend of book sharing on TikTok began during the COVID-19 pandemic, giving rise to the "BookTok" channel, which brought emotional comfort and thoughtful reflection to people during those difficult times. Numerous publishers and booksellers quickly seized this market opportunity, actively collaborating with high-profile influencers, inviting them to preview new books and promote them through videos once they were released. For example, Penguin Random House successfully utilized the BookTok platform to achieve significant revenue growth. Social media marketing and promotion have increasingly become vital channels for online promotion, playing a key role in creating bestsellers for the global book sales industry. [3]

BookTok is the hub for book- and literature-related videos on TikTok, where users can share their favorite books. This form of video sharing has garnered massive attention on the TikTok platform, and many books have regained exposure through these shared videos, sparking consumer purchases. James Stafford, TikTok's Head of Partnerships and Community, believes that BookTok is a community made up of "creative individuals from around the world who share a common passion for literature." As of November 10, 2022, videos under the #BookTok hashtag had accumulated more than 88.3 billion views. [4]

Short videos on BookTok that share good books have propelled many new and great books to bestseller status, directly influencing the fate of *It Ends with Us*. Although the book debuted on the bestseller list in its first week, subsequent sales were lackluster, with weekly sales remaining below triple digits. It wasn't until the summer of 2021 that sales surged, with an average weekly sales of 17,000 copies for the paperback edition. Notably, during the week of August 14, sales soared to 29,000 copies, once again leading the bestseller trend. This boom was largely attributed to a video posted on BookTok in March 2021 by a 17-year-old girl named Eloise Hampson, who shared her emotional experience reading the paperback edition of *It Ends with Us*. In the video, she gazed at the book's pages in melancholy, sighed, buried her face in her hands, and shook as tears flowed

uncontrollably. The somber background music enveloped not only the girl but also resonated with countless viewers in front of their screens.

From that moment on, *It Ends with Us* and Colleen Hoover began to dominate BookTok. Atria Books quickly seized the opportunity, posting related short videos on their TikTok homepage. With the strong promotion on social media, *It Ends with Us* sold 12.5 million copies in 2022 alone. As of now, the related hashtags on TikTok have garnered over 1 billion views.

2.2. Leveraging Personal Branding: Strengthening Fan Loyalty and Purchasing Power

As a novelist who benefits from the power of the internet, Colleen Hoover, like many non-traditional authors, places great emphasis on cultivating her personal brand and maintaining close relationships with her fans.

Hoover's success is no accident. As early as 2016, she keenly recognized the power of social media and created a Facebook fan group called *Colleen Hoover's CoHort* for her followers. The group has since grown to over 118,000 members. In this community, which upholds strict "kindness" and "respect" policies, fans exchange book recommendations, share photos of Hoover's books displayed in various stores, and arrange to send each other fan memorabilia and special editions of books. In addition to her active and engaged Facebook group, Hoover has 1.3 million followers on Instagram and over 870,000 followers on TikTok. She excels at crafting her social media accounts from a relatable and fun perspective, giving fans the experience of being friends with her.

For Hoover's publisher, Atria, the explosive growth of word-of-mouth on social media has validated their decade-long belief in Hoover. In 2012, Atria first signed a two-book deal with her, which included her self-published debut novel. Ariele Fredman, the publicity and marketing director for *It Begins With Us*, mentioned that Hoover's fans play an important role in her writing. Fredman noted: "She wanted to give Atlas and Lily a happy ending, and I truly believe she did. Colleen has all these advocates on social media—on Facebook, Instagram—real romance readers who are her evangelists."

Colleen Hoover places great importance on readers' opinions and feedback. Atria Books had originally planned to release a spin-off picture book, but this decision was met with criticism from the book community and readers. After all, *It Ends with Us* is a novel about domestic violence—how can that subject be portrayed with color? Fortunately, Colleen Hoover listened to the criticism, and the day after the official announcement, Hoover and her publishing team at Atria decided to halt the project. Hoover apologized on Instagram, saying, "I heard you, and I agree with you. No excuses, no blaming. I've contacted the publisher to let them know I'd prefer we not move forward with it. Thank you for your respectful discourse and accountability. Nothing but love." [5] This sensitivity to reader feedback allowed Hoover to avoid a potential crisis. To some extent, Hoover has successfully made readers feel that she is their friend—someone who listens to their opinions and needs their support.

Hoover's commitment to personal branding is also reflected in her charitable efforts. Since publishing her first novel, she has received immense support from her readers, which led her to seek ways to give back to society. In 2015, Hoover and her family founded *The Bookworm Box*, which helps independent authors gain exposure, provides readers with high-quality books, and financially supports numerous charities. *The Bookworm Box* hosts an annual book signing event, inviting hundreds of authors to participate; it also holds an annual auction to raise funds for food banks and other charitable organizations. To date, *The Bookworm Box* has donated over \$1 million to help those in need.

Colleen Hoover is not afraid of being "labeled"; she embraces her identity and uses her personal brand to drive book sales and expand her own business empire. She understands that in today's social media-driven and digital era, the power of personal branding is more important than ever before. Thus,

she has devoted her energy to creating an impressive brand—one that is not just her name but a perfect combination of her image, values, and style.

2.3. Innovative Approach: Eye-Catching Online and Offline Events Boosting Engagement and Traffic

Colleen Hoover always knows how to make a splash at her book launch events. She employs various strategies to stir excitement and anticipation among fans and potential readers, such as exclusive sneak peeks and interactive countdowns on social media. By involving the audience in the launch process, she creates a sense of exclusivity and urgency. These efforts elevate the book's buzz to its peak, significantly increasing pre-orders and laying a solid foundation for her new book to reach bestseller status.

When marketing her books, Hoover is not afraid to break the mold, consistently hosting unique and innovative events that capture attention. Whether organizing fan contests, hosting live Q&A sessions, or collaborating with charitable organizations, she always finds creative ways to engage audiences and promote her works. These creative marketing activities not only attract readers but also garner media coverage, further boosting the book's visibility. While promoting her book series *It Begins With Us*, Hoover and her marketing team used the rising photo-sharing platform BeReal for promotion. She encouraged readers to comment for a chance to receive a signed copy of the book, and 40,500 users responded to the campaign. Although Hoover uses social media as her primary marketing battleground, she and her marketing team have not neglected offline events; instead, they seek to bring readers together whenever possible. After the Lily Bloom bookstore pop-up event at New York's Rockefeller Center, Waterstones in the UK created a similar immersive experience to celebrate the book's release in the UK. These themed events partnered with local creators, including pop-up workshops where readers could make their own flower crowns, design their own book covers, and replicate character Lily Bloom's henna tattoos. Each participating Waterstones store offered custom tote bags filled with themed merchandise for attendees to take home, encouraging visitors to become readers and potential long-term fans. Moreover, event attendees could purchase exclusive merchandise and special editions of the book, drawing countless Hoover fans eager to make purchases.

The accelerated shift of the publishing industry towards online channels is an inevitable trend, and for some publishers, the role of physical channels has become more about showcasing rather than direct sales. The display function of physical bookstores compensates for the sense of distance inherent in online marketing. Bookstores are not only places to sell books but also crucial channels for cultivating potential readers, strengthening fan loyalty, and building fan communities. No matter how successful online marketing becomes, offline marketing should not be neglected, and both Colleen Hoover and Atria Books understand this well.

3. Insights from the Success of *It Ends with Us*

3.1. Platforms Reshape the Relationship Between Publishers and Book Content Creators

Take the BookTok topic as an example: BookTok has become a significant reference point for determining which books get published and which books are adapted into films. Since 2020, millions of books have been sold directly through BookTok, hundreds of trending topics surrounding new book releases have emerged, and an organic word-of-mouth book marketing structure is taking shape.

BookTok brings together individuals of various identities, including authors, readers, and critics, forming an independent TikTok community that has transformed the way literary works are published and redefined the relationship between the publishing industry and book content creators. In the past, book retailers introduced new authors to readers. Now, publishers learn about phenomenon-level authors from readers, take note of exciting videos about upcoming books, and compete for regional

publishing rights. Meanwhile, on BookTok, authors can easily adjust and customize content for specific niche audiences, bringing their new books to the attention of readers or pushing already published books back to the top of bestseller lists. Madi Lim, a 23-year-old BookTok user, mentioned that she posts short book reviews, creates book-related memos, and has launched a BookTok news section, aiming to help diversify the development of books on TikTok. Lim said, "The only thing we can truly control is that we keep promoting, diversifying, and personalizing our bookshelves. When we successfully showcase and elevate other titles and related discussions, just as we did with 'mainstream books' in the past, the publishing world will take notice." BookTok not only fosters communication between authors and readers but also shortens the distance between the publishing industry and readers. Readers, in addition to being consumers, also assume the roles of editors and marketers.

The reshaping of the relationship between platforms, the publishing industry, and content creators is not limited to the category of popular fiction. In recent years, the rapid development of paid knowledge services has given rise to many "internet celebrity courses," bringing considerable economic returns to both platforms and instructors. These general knowledge courses, offered online and later adapted into books, are not directly written by the authors or derived from their lecture notes. Instead, they undergo market validation by the online platform and its users, and only after being deemed worthy of publication by the publisher are they planned, revised, edited, and produced.[6] In the history of publishing, there have been numerous examples of books adapted from courses or lectures, or of writing books designed as lecture notes. Today, platform media serve as both intermediaries between scholars and book publishers, facilitating the flow of knowledge between instructors and learners, and as initial evaluators for publishers, assessing the flow and quality of content.

To capitalize on this, publishers can take two main approaches to promote their books, making effective use of public traffic channels. On the one hand, publishers can invite authors to share short videos about the book's creative process, inspiration, and behind-the-scenes stories, showcasing the book's "readability." On the other hand, publishers can encourage users to share their reading experiences and insights through short videos, launching related hashtags to highlight the "writability" of the book, facilitating interaction between authors and readers.

Publishers should regularly update content on social media and platforms, maintaining good interaction with readers by releasing new book previews, bestseller lists, and book pre-order services. This can help channel traffic from the public domain to the publisher's private domain, transforming traditional public traffic into private traffic and creating a dedicated private traffic pool. Additionally, publishers can use online accounts to announce offline events such as exhibitions and bestseller discussion sessions. By relying on physical bookstores and book salons, they can facilitate the flow of offline public domain traffic into the online private domain.

3.2. The "Mainstreaming Trend" of Romance Novels Strengthens, Becoming a New Driver for Physical Book Sales

According to *Publishers Weekly's* 2022 annual bestseller list, the political-themed bestseller *Red Glove* sold approximately 240,000 copies, while another bestseller, *Confidence Man*, which critiques former U.S. President Trump, sold over 120,000 copies. *Publishers Weekly* noted that after nearly three years of the COVID-19 pandemic and an increasingly divided political environment in the U.S., readers tend to escape from unpleasant realities through reading. This form of escapism continues amid the increasingly volatile international situation and declining economic conditions, influencing the types of bestsellers.

Notably, while BookTok has sparked a passion for reading among young Americans, it has also led to the gradual "mainstreaming" of romance novels, with sales growth currently limited to authors

who have gained popularity on the platform. Caroline Hardman, a literary agent at Hardman and Swainson, stated: "BookTok has greatly fueled the appetite for romance and 'romantic fantasy,' so it has had a significant influence on what publishers are looking for." [7]

The "mainstreaming trend" of romance novels is strengthening, becoming a new driver for the purchase of physical books in the U.S. The surge in physical book sales, as opposed to e-book sales, is largely due to the visual nature of BookTok videos. When young people discuss books on BookTok, they are showcasing physical copies. E-books lack visual appeal and are not suitable for short video presentations. A Nielsen report surveyed the reading and buying habits of young people in the UK (ages 14-25). The results showed that YouTube is the main online platform for discovering books among young people (34%), followed by TikTok (32%), and Instagram (27%). [8] Readers prefer sharing their handwritten notes in physical books through videos, flipping through pages to showcase their favorite passages. It's also common for videos to feature readers filming themselves reading a book in a single day in front of a bookshelf filled with hundreds of books.

Unlike ordinary book communities, the reader consumption surge driven by BookTok is now beyond estimation, particularly within the romance novel category. Additionally, BookTok, relying on its unique social platform attributes and big data technology, has formed a distinct industry chain in the book market: content creators attract more readers with eye-catching videos, the platform uses data from these videos to identify reading market trends, readers follow these trends to purchase books, and stores stock better products based on these trends. This industry chain has created an efficient revenue stream for bookstores, significantly impacting the sale of physical books. Gail Macwhinney, Sales Manager of Australia's largest bookstore chain, Dymocks, remarked, "BookTok has had a tremendous impact on book sales. Last year, at least half of the top ten books in weekly rankings were related to BookTok, and in the first quarter of this year, eight out of the top ten bestsellers were popular works from BookTok." Due to the immense popularity of BookTok books, Dymocks even created a dedicated BookTok ranking list, and many bookstores in Australia now regard BookTok as a key indicator of book sales trends. [9]

3.3. The Rising Voices of Female Writers and the Trend Toward Diverse Reading

In recent years, the focus on women's issues has continued to gain momentum, and the power of female lives, female destinies, and perspectives is increasingly being recognized. The voices of female authors in the literary world are growing stronger. In 2023, female writers dominated the U.S. bestseller lists, with seven of the top ten books authored by women. Colleen Hoover, who led sales in 2022, continued to perform exceptionally well in 2023. *It Ends with Us* sold approximately 48,000 printed copies, surpassing *It Begins with Us* to become the best-selling book of the year. Hoover's third novel, *Verity*, sold over 935,000 copies. Together, these three books sold a total of approximately 3.4 million copies on Circana BookScan, a data service for book publishers. Rebecca Yarros' *Fourth Wing* and *Iron Flame* sold around 1.2 million and 1 million copies, respectively. The third female author with a 2023 bestseller was Bonnie Garmus, whose 2022 novel *Lessons in Chemistry* just exceeded 1 million copies in sales, thanks in part to the success of the Apple TV+ series of the same name. [10] Overall, 17 of the 25 best-selling print books of 2023 were written by women. The sensitivity, storytelling, and unique perspectives of female authors increasingly resonate with consumers, evoking emotional connections from readers.

Additionally, diversified reading is becoming a new popular trend. Readers are increasingly aware that traditional media often fail to highlight books from other cultures, which can limit their exposure. Coco, a 26-year-old born in Somalia and currently residing in the UK, noted that as a member of the "minority" community, she believes BookTok has created an excellent space "where various cultures can be seen." Initially, most of the books on her shelf were by white authors, but BookTok introduced her to many great books by Black authors, as well as Kenyan folklore and novels about the history of

Chinese dynasties. She stated, "BookTok has opened the world for me; I'll be a Tokker for life!" [11] The internet and social media have driven cultural dissemination, making it easier for niche and minority cultures to enter the public consciousness. Readers' desire to understand more about the world is growing, and diversified reading has become a new trend.

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