

Fragmented Dissemination of Literature on Social Media in the Digital Age: Mechanisms and Cultural Implications

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Abstract. This study reviews the fragmented sharing of literary content across mainstream social media platforms. Drawing on twenty relevant academic studies published between 2010 and 2025, the paper explores the driving forces behind literary fragmentation, how platform design reshapes literary texts, and its practical influences on public reading behaviours. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok structurally split complete literary texts into short, digestible snippets. People circulate these fragments for various purposes, including time-saving reading, commercial profit-making, and building online reading-centred communities. Fragmented communication lowers the access threshold for literary works and helps literature reach broader audiences. Nevertheless, it also brings visible drawbacks. Isolated excerpts may trigger audience misunderstandings of original texts and promote superficial reading habits. Most existing research focuses on Western social media environments, while literary fragmentation on Chinese domestic platforms remains underexplored. This paper argues that fragmented literary dissemination cannot be simply judged as positive or negative. Its actual cultural effect largely depends on how audiences, content creators, and platforms use this form of communication.

Keywords: fragmented literature, social media, reading habits, digital platforms, literary culture

1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the dissemination of literature has undergone a profound transformation. In the past, novels and poems often spread in physical form in quiet places like libraries. And now, more and more text contents spreads on social media in a fragmented way. The migration of literature from the printed page to digital screens constitutes one of the most significant cultural transformations of the twenty-first century. On social media, we can find lots of cut-up sentences which come from classic literature or philosophy works. Literary content is constantly compressed, repackaged, and circulated on social media.

Scholars have studied this problem from many different angles in their previous research, but these studies have not been integrated. The five are shown in the table. The first is the mechanism of media adaptation, and platform interaction conflicts with literary texts [1]. The second is the motive for spreading of literature. The third investigates reader behavior and remixing on social media platforms, revealing some alternative patterns, explaining from the reader's behavior [2]. The fourth

studies the reasons for and spread of literary works. The fifth introduces the cultural connotations of the digital attention economy and fragmented communication [3].

However, the above types of studies lack systematic integration. Currently, there are no all-encompassing studies on how dissemination mechanisms, motivations and cultural significance relate to these three mutually reinforcing impressions in different contexts. Existing research has not established an all-encompassing system to consider the technological mechanisms, various motivations, participatory dynamics, infrastructure conditions and cultural connotations of literary fragmentation on social media simultaneously; thus, these factors have been studied in isolation and their interconnections across different platforms remain unclear.

Based on previous research, this paper will review the contents of prior studies and explore the fragmented dissemination of literature on social media. This paper will connect the above contents to provide an all-encompassing system for studying changes in literature under the influence of digital media. The three main purposes of this paper are as follows: First, to identify and classify how different digital platforms fragment literary works; Second, to explore the reasons for the behaviour of all main actors, including institutions, commercial developers, authors and users; Third, to assess the cultural impact, particularly the conflict between democratizing reading and commodifying it, and the change from reader to digital user. Based on the above theories and empirical studies, this paper presents an all-encompassing system for exploring changes in literature on social media.

2. Method

This paper adopts a systematic literature review methodology to comprehensively synthesize existing research on the fragmented dissemination of literature on social media. The review follows established guidelines for qualitative synthesis, emphasizing thematic integration and critical evaluation rather than statistical meta-analysis. This systematic search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Web of Science, Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, to ensure broad disciplinary coverage spanning media studies, literary studies, digital humanities, and communication studies. The search period was defined as 2010 to 2025.

To find relevant studies, we searched academic databases using keywords like "fragmented literary dissemination", "mechanisms", "driving forces" and "cultural implications". We only looked at SSCI journal articles. After removing duplicates and checking titles and abstracts, we chose papers that directly studied the mechanisms, reasons, or cultural impact of fragmented literary spread on social media. In the end, we included about 20 SSCI papers that were highly relevant to our review.

Elliott shows that breaking literature into small pieces both expands readership and enables profit-driven tricks like cliffhangers and pay-to-wait, which may reduce literary diversity [2]. Jones argues teenagers' light reading preference, fragment digital literacy, social demands and TikTok's algorithm jointly motivate the mass circulation of fragmented literary snippets on BookTok [4]. King states fragmented text extracts on Twitter reshape literary evaluation. Readers judge works via partial snippets, forming emotional, simplified value standards that challenge traditional professional literary criticism and diversify public literary discourse [5, 6].

3. Main content

3.1. Mechanisms of media adaptation

Shakargy provides a detailed answer through her study of the New York Public Library's Insta Novels project [1]. She found that when classic books were put onto Instagram Stories, the platform's design worked against the act of reading. Instagram Stories are meant for quick viewing. They auto-advance, disappear after 24 hours, and require users to tap or hold the screen to control the flow. When readers had to hold their thumb on the screen to stop a page from moving forward, reading became a physical task rather than a mental one. The interface did not support immersion. Instead, it created urgency and stress. Notifications from other apps kept breaking concentration. If the story was accidentally closed, it restarted from the beginning, making it hard to keep one's place.

Shakargy calls this "reverse remediation." Normally, when a new medium adapts an old one, it tries to improve the experience—for example, a film adds visuals and sound to a book's story [1]. In this case, however, the new medium was used to imitate the old one. The project copied the look of a printed book: cream-colored pages, page numbers, and traditional fonts. But it ignored what Instagram does best—interaction, visual storytelling, and real-time sharing. This mismatch between platform mechanics and literary form is the core mechanism of failed adaptation.

Elliott approaches mechanisms from a different angle [2]. She focuses on "bite-sizing" as a broad process across digital platforms. She points out that digitization itself is a mechanism of compression. It squeezes thousands of books into a small device. This compression is not just physical. It also changes the time we spend reading. Some apps, like Serial Reader, use bite-sizing to slow reading down, delivering small portions daily so readers can process dense texts more deeply. Others, like Radish, use bite-sizing to speed reading up, with short, punchy episodes ending on cliffhangers to keep users clicking. Elliott shows that the same mechanism, breaking texts into small pieces can produce opposite effects depending on how it is designed and used [7].

Mannell and Smith offer a different view of mechanisms by looking at the underlying technical structure [8]. They study Scuttlebutt, a decentralized platform where data is stored on users' own devices instead of central servers. This changes the mechanism of participation. On corporate platforms, users only interact with content. On Scuttlebutt, users can also participate in designing the platform, managing funds, and making decisions about governance. The mechanism here is not about how text is presented but about who controls the infrastructure. This shows that media adaptation is not just about format—it is also about power and ownership [9].

3.2. Motivation for literary dissemination

Elliott provides the most comprehensive account of motivations [2]. She identifies several distinct reasons. The first is time management. Apps like DailyLit were created to help busy people read classics when they are free, like commuting, waiting, or resting. The second motivation is deep reading. Serial Reader's founder wanted to slow down and think more carefully about dense books. The third motivation is commercial profit. Apps like Radish use a "wait-to-unlock" system to push users into paying for the next episode. The more episodes there are, the more money the app makes. The fourth motivation is democratization. Rupi Kaur and other Instapoets turned to Instagram because traditional publishers rejected them. On social media, they found millions of readers without needing a publisher's approval [10].

Elliott also points to a deeper motivation named the attention economy [2]. Digital platforms make money by keeping users on their sites. Bite-sized content keeps users coming back more often.

Each small episode is a chance for the platform to show ads or ask for payment. Therefore, many literary works have been released in series. It is also to help people learn better. It will make reading more enjoyable [11].

Shakargy provides another reason: institutional branding [1]. The New York Public Library did not create Insta Novels to promote reading. It also wanted to be spread. An Advertising Agency was chosen for this project. The library hoped to attract more young people and show that it was still relevant in the digital age. However, Shakargy believes that this reason backfired. The classics became advertisements for the library instead of stories people could enjoy. The media praised the campaign, but these were marketing professionals speaking; it was not the public.

Mannell and Smith propose a different reason: building a better social media model [8]. The Scuttlebutt community is not motivated by profit or branding. Their Reasons are ideological. They want to build a platform that is safe, all-encompassing and democratic. Volunteers give their time out of a belief in the project's values. The community will determine how to distribute the grant funds reasonably after receiving them. This is a very different motivation from what drives corporate platforms. It shows that not all literary fragmentation is commercial. Some of it is driven by a desire for social change.

3.3. Cultural significance of fragmentation

Elliott addresses this question through the lens of cultural debate [2]. She shows that bite-sized literature has sparked strong opinions on both sides. Supporters say it revives poetry and fiction for a new generation. Rupi Kaur's millions of followers are mostly young women who might not otherwise read poetry. Critics say it reduces literature to fast food—easy to consume but empty of nutrition. They argue that the compressed, simple language of Instapoetry lacks depth and craft. Elliott does not take sides. Instead, she shows that both views have some truth. Bite-sizing expands readership, but it also changes what literature is and does [12].

Elliott also examines the food metaphor that surrounds bite-sized literature [2]. Writers and app makers often describe reading as "feeding the mind" or "snacking on stories." This language suggests that literature is good for you, like vegetables. But the metaphor also implies that some reading is fast food—tasty but not nutritious. This debate reflects deeper anxieties about cultural decline. Every new medium, from the novel to the radio to television, has been accused of lowering standards. Bite-sized digital literature is just the latest example [13].

Shakargy offers a more critical cultural reading [1]. She argues that Insta Novels did not just fail as a reading experience. It also reinforced the very problem it tried to solve. By placing classic books on Instagram as static text, the project made literature look old and out of place. Instead of showing that classics are still relevant, it showed that they do not fit on digital platforms. The project became a symbol of the library's struggle to stay meaningful. In Shakargy's view, the cultural significance of Insta Novels is that it reveals how hard it is for old institutions to adapt to new media. She also points out a troubling pattern in how the project was received. Most media reviews were written by advertising and marketing professionals, not book critics or readers. The conversation about the project happened among PR experts who praised each other's work. Actual user experience was almost never discussed. Literary value is being replaced by media buzz.

Mannell and Smith provide a hopeful counterpoint [8]. They argue that alternative platforms like Scuttlebutt show that a different kind of digital culture is possible. In Scuttlebutt, users are not just consumers. They are contributors, decision-makers, and community members. The platform's culture emphasizes care, inclusion, and reflection. Of course, this ideal is not fully achieved. The community struggles with technical barriers, governance issues, and the difficulty of keeping

marginalized voices involved. But the effort itself matters. Mannell and Smith think it tries to build the future you want in the present, even if it is imperfect.

4. Discussion

This review brings together studies on how literary fragments spread on social media, why they spread, and what they mean for reading culture. Rather than just listing what others have found, this section highlights where scholars disagree and connects their findings to what we see on real social media platforms.

Researchers mostly agree on what drives fragmented literary content: algorithms, users' social needs, and fragmented media habits all help literary snippets travel widely online [4, 14]. These driving forces shift reading from a traditional private and deep activity into a public, interactive, and fragment-based form of cultural participation. However, a clear disagreement remains among scholars. Some see the popularity of fragments as a sign that people are losing the ability to read deeply. Others point out that many users go on to read full books after coming across fragments online [4]. This disagreement comes from different research angles. Scholars who only look at users who never move beyond fragments tend to conclude that fragmentation hurts reading. Those who track readers from snippets to full texts may overstate the positive side. Therefore, the cultural effect of fragmentation depends not just on the content itself, but heavily on how readers engage with these fragments.

Most existing SSCI studies draw on examples from BookTok and Twitter [4, 5]. They show that ordinary online users have gradually gained equal say in judging and talking about literature, breaking the long-standing monopoly of academic elites in literary criticism. However, applying these Western findings to Chinese social media is not straightforward. On overseas platforms, literary discussions are mostly driven by everyday amateur readers and spontaneous community sharing. In China, commercial accounts, professional book influencers, and profit-driven marketing teams are far more active in producing and spreading literary fragments. The large-scale circulation of snippets is not purely reader-led behaviour. Commercial promotion and traffic logic play a big role, a key contextual difference rarely discussed in existing research [11].

On communication mechanisms, existing studies identify excerpting, user-led adaptation, and algorithm-driven distribution as the core paths for fragments to spread rapidly [3, 4]. Most researchers do not know the whole story, so this work has not been fully understood. However, the present studies have not distinguished between the two behaviours. One is a reasonable simplification for sharing. The other is to change the original meaning intentionally. Some online excerpts are suitable for one's own study. On the other hand, many popular fragments intentionally select dramatic scenes solely to attract attention and may be inauthentic to the original work. Although both are forms of fragmented communication, their cultural impacts are very different and should not be regarded as the same.

There are many different views on the cultural connotations of fragmentation among scholars. Some people believe that it has reduced the barrier for accessing high-quality reading by bypassing elite cultural institutions [8]. Thus, fragmented reading expands the public sphere of literature and promotes grassroots participation. At the same time, some people believe that quick-read habits have reduced the depth of literary understanding and a sense of complexity in texts. This paper proposes that the two sides have different ideas of literary value. The first kind of ideas is that only after reading the whole work can one be truly moved. The third new digital view holds that literary experience is a changing social practice that develops through online sharing and discussion [5, 9].

Today, literature on social media is frequently shared, commented on, and adapted by users in an open-source manner.

The following are some practical applications of this study: A general ban on fragmented content would be neither feasible nor effective given the widespread dissemination of fragmentation in digital media today. We can help the readers learn to think critically instead. Social media snippets can be used as the starting point, but not the whole work. Platforms and content creators can add short contextual annotations to the excerpts to reduce one-way reading [14].

5. Conclusion

Existing SSCI studies on fragmented literary communication via social media can be divided into three categories: communication modes, motivating factors and cultural values.

Driving forces include platform algorithms, users' demand for light reading, and social sharing; together they promote the dissemination of literary snippets. Reading is no longer a private activity; it is now a public one.

Mechanisms for the spread of this include content excerpting, user re-creation and algorithm-driven distribution. Short videos reduce the threshold for reading and help more people enjoy classic literature. Without the entire story, these parts may lead to a single interpretation of the original work.

The Scale of Cultural Influence Varies Among Scholars. Some believe that this will enable more ordinary people to participate in the evaluation of literature and reduce the authority of expert-led criticism. Others believe that scattered browsing will prevent deep reading and promote a fast-food model devoid of literary depth.

Most current research has drawn from overseas platforms such as TikTok and Twitter and focused on technology and user behaviour. Scholars do not generally have a simple good-or-bad judgment, and fragmentation is considered an unavoidable outcome of digital media with both strengths and weaknesses. However, few studies have considered the local social media environment or provided an all-encompassing analysis of production, dissemination and value changes; more research is needed [13].

This paper has some deficiencies. It is based on English-language SSCI journals, and research from abroad is relatively scarce. International publications on Chinese short-video and social-media literary practices are still rare, which limits cross-context comparison. Existing research has not studied the long-term changes in these phenomena either. Few studies have followed readers over time to determine whether exposure to fragments leads to prolonged deep reading. In the future, more studies will be carried out on Chinese social media to determine whether fragmented content motivates people to read the whole article. It would be possible to see the actual cultural value in practice [12].

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