

More Than Words: How Books Act as Icons of Style, Status, and Subcultures

Project Report

Submitted by

Aishwarya Urmila Bhaktha (SB22CE002)

Under the guidance of

Dr. E. Priscilla

In partial fulfilment of requirements for award of the degree

Of Bachelor of Arts

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous), Ernakulam



College With Potential for
Excellence Accredited by NAAC with 'A++'

Grade

Affiliated to

Mahatma Gandhi University

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Declaration

I do affirm that the project “MORE THAN WORDS: HOW BOOKS ACT AS ICONS OF STYLE, STATUS, AND SUBCULTURES” submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the Bachelor of Arts degree in English Literature and Communication Studies has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or any other similar title or recognition.

Ernakulam

Aishwarya Urmila Bhaktha

20-03-25

SB22CE002

B.A. English Literature and Communication Studies

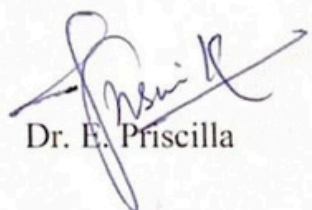
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Certificate

I hereby certify that this project entitled "MORE THAN WORDS: HOW BOOKS ACT AS ICONS OF STYLE, STATUS, AND SUBCULTURES" BY AISHWARYA URMILA BHAKTHA is a record of bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance.

Ernakulam

20-03-25



Dr. E. Priscilla

Department of Communicative English

St. Teresa's College (Autonomous)



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I take this opportunity to offer my humble prayers and thanks to God Almighty for His mercy and blessings for the completion of this project.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Books, once simply regarded as repositories of knowledge and entertainment, have now metamorphosed into cultural artefacts beyond their literary content. Today, they serve as identity, social status, and aesthetic expression signifiers. This study is about the transition of books into particular fashion symbols, indicators of status, and marks of subcultures and how they shape and mirror the societal values of contemporary culture.

The study becomes even more relevant in light of the emerging influence of visual and digital platforms like BookTok and Bookstagram on how people consume books. No longer limited to being mere objects of intellectual pursuit, books have transformed into curated lifestyle accessories, tools of self-expression, and status indicators across social and economic lines, thus making this a critical understanding for grasping how literature engages contemporary branding and fashion within identity formation.

This particular paper throws light on broad headings like the role of books in the fashion space, their function as cultural and class symbols, and their integration into niche subcultures and aesthetics. It brings forward how these high-fashion brands use books to show sophistication, how private libraries and curated bookshelves become status symbols, and how preferences for particular texts create meaning in subcultural identities such as Dark Academia and Goth culture. Furthermore, it studies the impact of social media on literary culture, showing how platforms influence individuals' reading habits, the selling of books, and the commodification of literature.

To study these topics, this particular research employed a quantitative methodology through a survey-based study to elicit what respondents think and how they use books outside their literary significance. Through the survey, reactions from respondents were taken regarding their ownership of books, how they display them, motivation in buying, and emphasis on social media in understanding reading. The research would also provide quantifiable insights into the changing roles of books as aesthetic and cultural objects in modern society by quantifying trends in their uses.

This research had some limitations, including time and resource constraints. A more extensive qualitative study involving interviews and ethnographic studies could have unearthed more insights into the personal and symbolic meaning ascribed to books. However given the scope of this study, the survey method was the best possible feasible approach to capture broad trends and statistical patterning in behaviours surrounding books.

Thus, examining books beyond their textual aspects will reveal their changing roles in cultural discourse, consumer behaviour, and the formation of identity. Findings will also add to an ongoing discussion on how literature remains relevant in a digital-driven age, not only as a means of telling stories but as an indicator of style, intellect, and belonging.

Chapter 2

Books as Fashion and Lifestyle Accessories

2.1 Use in Branding and Advertising

Now, even in today's high-fashion advertising campaigns that would market a brand reputation, books still act as more than mere props; they act as symbols just like these other accessories' manipulation. This would not fail to indicate that this particular brand is closely associated with its users' knowledge, culture, and refinement. Incorporating these books within the campaign setting in itself creates a narrative of sophistication, nostalgia, and intellectualism. Open books, bookshelves, and antique literary elements are just common aspects used by the brands in these campaigns' aesthetics. This explicit elaboration is to build a better perception towards each brand, which is not just a clothing manufacturer or other luxury goods but is essentially a curator of an entire lifestyle, a lifestyle that takes the initiative for art, history, and literature appreciation. Prada and Gucci have also made images of such usage by the primary focus using books used in their pictographs for conveying a story visually. Let's find out some more samples here.

Prada has continually drawn from literary inspiration, and this is illustrated by the 2020 possibility of “Prada Possible Conversations”. This was an informative discussion about fashionable theory concerning the arts and literature. Through these discussions, they aimed to draw an analogy between culture and fashion. They made use of literature as a medium of storytelling and moulded their brand into an identity where everything is not only materially defined but also as an intellectual cost.

On the other hand, for Gucci, there was too much disturbance in being different from the other players on the competitive side as it had almost lost its value in 2015 but then Alessandro Michele was appointed as the creative director. Michele then came up with the Geek Chic campaign to bring it back to life and redefine the brand's identity. The Geek Chic aesthetic brought about differences from the sleek sensual feel dominating that time's luxury fashion industry. On the contrary, it embraced modesty, eclecticism, and vintage influences from literature, history, and art. In this new aesthetic, Gucci even partnered up with major culturally significant brands, such as Maison Assouline, the high-end bookstore and publisher that specializes in luxury coffee table books on art, design, and culture, to create a space within this new aesthetic. Thus, this partnership would place Gucci in the company of a literary and intellectual identity that led to the development of accessories, such as bags and backpacks adorned with literature-themed patches and embroidery.

"Not only is the act of reading luxurious in itself because it takes time to finish a book, it's also the conception of luxury brands: they quietly get recognized for their sophistication and grace-not out there begging to be welcomed but commanding all that it deserves into the fashion streets at their own pace, enjoying every inch of the bargain with them." Thus, a bit of synergy is created between books and reading; a fashion brand coupled with books brings a feeling of "quality, permanence, and delayed gratification."

Fashion brands do not just use books for campaign visuals; inspiration is drawn from books and reflected in the designs. Olympia Le-Tan's famous book clutches copy their counterparts by imitating classic novel covers like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and more. These clutches lend literature some physicality in the form of wearable luxury. These designs emphasized the idea that luxury fashion, just like books, is an

everlasting investment, so through literature, these luxury companies are trying to build an image for themselves as culture curators rather than just fashion houses.

2.2 Bookshelves as Aesthetic Elements in Fashion and Lifestyle

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a bookshelf is defined as "a shelf that holds books"; however, in modern times, a bookshelf is no longer a mere platform for storing books and has come to designate personal identity, taste, and status. This shift is most apparent in the realms of fashion, interior design, and social media culture, which place equal credibility on beautiful bookshelves as representing one's lifestyle. Placed in the right light, bookshelves organized in a myriad of arrangements- whether by colour, matter, author, title, etc.- contribute to the aesthetic narrative, conveying the hopes and dreams of the persons exhibiting them.

Currently, colour-coordinated style is among the most enduring trends in bookshelf styling. The appeal of colour-coordinated shelves lies in their ability to merge literature and design so that the books become more than an object of knowledge but also a decorative one. Publishers and bookstores are using this trend to put together book collections whose covers gain importance since visually appealing books have a greater chance of being picked up. Assouline, Taschen, and Rizzoli are luxury brands that publish books with stunning, lavish covers that appeal to the dual function- Pandora's box appeal- for intellectual stimulus and decoration. Such luxury books often gain the epithet "coffee table books".

Bookshelves reflect more than just individual titles; they mirror the common overall aesthetic preferences and personality traits. Minimalist bookshelves come from the modern methods of building interiors. These bookshelf spaces display monochromatic, neutral tones in neatly arranged volumes. Just look at it, and you will see Scandinavian simplicity, balance, and functionality. Luxuries such as boutiques and residences tend to adopt this minimal

design and apply it mostly on minimalist bookshelves. The design creates clean lines and uncluttered spaces yet somehow evokes a feeling of exclusivity and sophistication.

In contrast, maximalist bookshelves embrace turfing and provide space for cluttered collections, including aged vintage books and a riot of colours and textures. Aligning with the hyped grand millennial and eclectic interior aesthetics, these bookshelves are taken as a personal archive of knowledge, passion, and artistic expression. And just in time, the ever-eclectic Gucci is launching maximalism with ornate bookshelves and raiding vintage literary elements as props for its campaign environments, the latest reinforcement for the intellectual and artistic image of the brand.

This is evidenced in the increasing attention given to curation on bookshelves, a function of more cultural capital in a digital age. Just like a luxury fashion item is indicative of the person's identity and where he comes from, a well-decorated bookshelf speaks volumes of someone's intellectual depth, artistic sensibilities, and value for heritage. This is to say that both in fashion and interior design, bookshelves have become statements of identity, taste, and lifestyle, thus cementing literature with aesthetics and luxury.

Chapter 3

Books in Media and Pop Culture as Symbols

3.1 In Film and Television

Originally, books were sources of knowledge, but they have also become symbols of culture and a means to reinforce identity, status, nostalgia, and personal aesthetics.

Books in film and television function overwhelmingly as devices of exposition through which audiences learn more about a character's personality, social standing, or worldview. They become indicators of intelligence, identity, and emotional depth that frame audiences' perceptions of characters, ultimately shaping their characters' navigation through their respective worlds. The connection between books and intelligence is a cliché: oftentimes, bookworms are depicted as introspective, curious, or socially awkward.

A classic example is *Gilmore Girls*' Rory Gilmore, where her voracious reading marks her as an academically oriented intellectual, her reading choices reinforcing her aspirations and values. Frequent references to classic literature create the illusion that books are central to her character development. Likewise, in *Matilda* (1996), books represent freedom, knowledge, and independence. Neglected at home, Matilda Wormwood finds in a book her way of escaping and enlarging her world while asserting her intellectual agency. In both instances, books are not passive background props; they shape key facets of the protagonists' journeys and their sense of self.

In a coming-of-age or dystopian tale, a book is often seen to symbolize rebellion against authority or mainstream conventions. This is especially evident in stories where reading is censored or discouraged. In *Fahrenheit 451*, books are dangerous objects within a censored society, where characters risk their lives to save them. The film reinforces the idea

of literature guarding free thought and opposing authoritarianism. The Dead Poets Society expresses poetry as an act of rebellion. The students celebrate literature with their teacher, opposing societal norms in favour of self-expression and independent thinking. In these narratives, books are not merely tools for gaining knowledge; they are representations of defiance and personal rights.

Books have a lot to do with nostalgia, memory, or connections to old emotions; they remind people of former personal ties or past events. They usually become a medium of expression that an individual can visit from time to time throughout the individual's life and reveal how an individual feels- by bringing in historical or emotional artefacts, including books. In *The Book Thief*, Liesel turns to books to cope with the tragedy of war, while in *Interstellar*, books in the room of Murphy function both as an important part of the story as they represent her intelligence and emotional ties to her father. The physical presence of books in her space reinforces that knowledge and discovery will shape her life while also representing the lingering influence of her father's guidance. Books become beyond their literal meaning in these movies and become symbols of personal memory and emotional resilience. Most frequently in period dramas or films set in wealthy environments, books function as indicators of wealth, sophistication, and cultural refinement. Some indicators of wealth include huge libraries and rare book collections. The over-the-top library in *The Great Gatsby* (Baz Luhrmann's adaptation) shows how an extravagant library in Gatsby's palace is more an idea of self-confined image than a true love for literature. The scene where a guest admires the books (only to find out they are unread) underscores how houses can act as props for social prestige instead of intellectual engagement. Again, *Bridgerton* brings the books into the aristocratic culture that supports the presence of characters reading or talking about literature to further emphasize education and refinement as ideals at some echelon of society, demonstrating another context in which books become more status symbols than intellectual

journey objects. Books will, therefore, always have multiple functions in film and television, from character development to symbols of rebellion, as emotional anchors, and vehicles for social standing.

3.2 Social Media Influence: Shelfies, BookTok, and Bookstagram

With the rise of social media, books have, rather freakishly, become visual and cultural accessories instead of mere sources of information. Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest have only enhanced the symbolic function of books in the digital culture.

The emergence of the #Shelfie trend on both Instagram and Pinterest points to pastel-coloured, impeccably organized, or densely packed bookshelves as mere decorations as opposed to collections of literature. The BookTok community on TikTok has brought the combination even more to the fore, with an emphasis on selecting books to appeal to the eyeballs as opposed to the heart. Cover design has now taken on an aesthetic dimension from the publishing perspective; after all, that is one way to shift copies.

People were seen as smarter if they displayed books, whether they had read them or not, according to a Nevada University study. Bookcases act as backdrops in video conferences to signal knowledge and sophistication. Luxury brands such as Dior and Louis Vuitton have jumped in and produced high-end coffee table books that serve as status symbols. Essentially, bookshelves are no longer considered personal collections but instead reflect identity, taste, and culture, the result of an intersection where literature meets fashion and digital culture.

Social media has transformed books from literary oeuvre to symbols of lifestyle, where visual appeal often takes preference over literary depth. TikTok, Instagram, and Pinterest have, therefore, largely aided this, with trendsetting influencers and content creators

shaping reading trends based on uncritical analysis. From such an approach arose the pour of certain book aesthetics that saw the books being curated to suit the individual's branding and social identity rather than purely content.

For instance, the It Girl aesthetic celebrates pastel-coloured romance novels, which usually follow themes of self-discovery, young love, and emotional growth. Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us* and Taylor Jenkins Reid's *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* stand as close to totemic, not just for their contents but also for the cover art that is soft, muted, and pleasing to the eye: art that fits right into a stylized feed. The publishers have jumped onto the bandwagon and altered the design of the editions for the specific purpose of online visibility so that these books would fit into a trending aesthetic. Also, dark colours embody the Gothic aesthetic, filled with deathly yet moody illustrations and stories concerned with mystery-horror-dark academia themes. In this sense, *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt and *Mexican Gothic* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia have reaped quite some accolades, courtesy of atmospheric covers that resonate with the curated bookstagram world. Meanwhile, the rise of dark academia is a subculture that also emphasizes classical literature, vintage aesthetics, and an appreciation for intellectualism, thereby strengthening the position of books as status symbols. The publishers of leather-bound classics rarely consider the content of *Wuthering Heights* or *Frankenstein* when posting on social media, as it presents an image of the smart and cultured individual.

One of the strongest legacies of the minimalist aesthetic is in book advertising, where it caters to those who see beauty in pristine, pragmatic print-on-paper design. Books with covers in clean, neutral tones—like Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*—are showcased daily in finely curated minimalist surroundings. This aesthetic is supported by

lifestyle influencers who incorporate the book into their design, situating reading inside a refined, organized lifestyle.

Another aspect promoting this transition is consumerism, where readers are now starting to buy books mainly for their design rather than the literary content. The BookTok culture made it normal for people to buy certain books just often only because they have been trending regardless of whether they plan on reading them. This developed a new market for very gorgeous-looking books as publishers started to prioritize cover aesthetics following what was trending on social media. Therefore, books have gradually metamorphosed from being strictly literary objects to curated lifestyle accessories that abide by the intersections of fashion, design, and digital culture.

Imagination and ideas embodied in books draw upon incredible symbolic power in film, TV soap operas, social media sites, and literary culture. Whether they are legitimating intelligence or rebellion, status or nostalgia, books anchor the concern for identity and a shared reference point for defining selfhood in old and new media.

Chapter 4

Books as Cultural and Status Symbols

4.1 Libraries and Private Collections

Libraries have historically stood for power and cultural dominance. In ancient times, such civilizations as the Greeks and Egyptians placed knowledge in great institutions such as the Library of Alexandria to maintain the intellectual and political edge. In a modern context, libraries are ever-present as architectural symbols for upholding cultural identity, for example, the Seattle Public Library. Conjointly, private libraries have regained status among the wealthy as a sign of their desire to exhibit private wealth and cultivated taste. Wealthy patrons often commissioned their home libraries, thus reinforcing book ownership as a class marker.

4.2 Books as Class Markers

Book ownership, in general, has societal class implications. With an extensive library, families frequently signify their educational backgrounds and social standing. The work noted that pride in owning books existed in some middle-class families, thereby enhancing their identity of having been "well-read" and cultured. The current craze of taking and showcasing "bookshelfies" provides further evidence that book ownership continues to be a marker of class distinction. Family members lacking ownership of books said that they sometimes felt embarrassed about this deficit, thus bringing social pressure to bear upon literary possessions. Such a cultural framework corresponds with the notion of cultural capital introduced by Pierre Bourdieu, positing that books are tangible indexes marking class status and intellectual preeminence.

High literature, or classic novels, is frequently thought to be intellectually superior and lends itself to elitism, while mass-market genres are deemed lower-status. Coffee-table books, meanwhile, are often large and attractive decor items in affluent homes, signalling a refined taste rather than any real literary engagement.

4.3 Books and Economic Power

The publishing world itself is a microcosm of wider socio-economic trends; hence, the authors or books promoted through relentless marketing, often with alliances to elite status, tend to become bestsellers. Those considered luxury publications- leather-bound classics, limited first editions, and personalized book collections- are frequently acquired for investments as well as heirlooms.

Book ownership intersects with privilege. Buying books for children is sometimes directly correlated with educational success, therefore perpetuating roaring societal inequalities. Inscriptions in books throughout history, such as personal bookplates back in the Edwardian era, have served to mark high social status, as in the case of aristocrats and libraries of influential politicians.

Chapter 5

Books and Subcultures/Aesthetics

5.1 Books and Niche Subcultures

Books help define and solidify the identity of niche subcultures and are often said to inspire and legitimize their aesthetic and philosophical values. In Dark Academia, literature is more than a pastime; it is a way of life. This subculture, rooted in intellectualism and a wistful longing for classical education, endows romanticism with literature by authors such as Oscar Wilde, Emily Dickinson, and Donna Tartt. Leather-bound editions and heavily annotated 'read' copies have become status markers, indicative of depth and intellectual sophistication.

Gothic literature has similarly thrived as a pillar of Goth culture, affirming the tenets of rebellion, existential angst, and the supernatural. Not only present in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Edgar Allan Poe's poetry, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, these texts also serve as cornerstones aesthetically and philosophically for the movement. The haunting, melancholic themes in these works resonate with the gothic identity that rejoices in introspection and embraces darkness rather than fleeing from it. Gothic literature grants an emotional stronghold to those who are inclined to the subculture and provides validation for their ethos.

5.2 Social Media Trends

The internet has given books a new aesthetic and social function, and this has been furthered by platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Be it later known as BookTok or Bookstagram, books are now curated as commodities for entertaining reading; books are now seen as tools for personal branding. Stylistically arranged bookshelves for Instagram, books with colourful spines, and books with colour-matching collections. The desirability of books

as aesthetic décor has birthed “aesthetic reading,” wherein such concern for visual appeal might sometimes even overshadow a book's literary quality. For instance, certain TikTok trends for books have helped launch certain authors, such as Colleen Hoover, into superstar status, often favouring books fitting an emotional or aesthetic story over books truly dense with literary merit.

While many people believe that the presence of social media somehow trivializes literature into some kind of trend, it cannot be denied that it has enhanced the reading culture for the younger population. Viral references have widened their tastes in literature, directing them toward not only different genres but also ignored voices in literature. The opened doors through BookTok for uncrowned authors and independent publishers have also made them reach out to audiences across the globe, giving rise to a more inclusive experience in literary spaces. Most argue that aesthetic reading promotes mere touch-and-see practices; however, it shows how books continue to be that other force in the cultural artefact: moulding of characters, communities, and personal expression in both historic and contemporary contexts.

Chapter 6

Analysis of the Survey

The survey explored whether books function solely as literary objects or also as aesthetic and social symbols. Findings suggest that while reading remains a motivation for book ownership, a significant portion of respondents view books as decorative items, status symbols, and tools for personal branding.

Notably, 27.5% of respondents admitted to buying books without the intention of reading them at least a couple of times, while 47.5% had done so multiple times. Additionally, 37.5% purchased books exclusively for display, reinforcing the idea that books are increasingly seen as lifestyle commodities rather than just sources of knowledge. Special and collectable editions are particularly appealing, with 40% purchasing them for their exclusivity rather than content.

Aesthetic appeal significantly influences book purchases, with 47.5% considering it somewhat important and 40% highly value it. This aligns with social media trends where books are curated as visual elements. More than half (52.5%) frequently take aesthetic book pictures with props like coffee and candles, and 42.5% integrate books into their fashion aesthetics.

Beyond visuals, books also serve as intellectual statements. 55% believe certain books project an intellectual image, while 40% display books at home or work to reflect their personality. In public, 40% carry books for aesthetic or intellectual appeal, with 25% occasionally doing the same.

Social media significantly shapes reading and purchasing habits. 42.5% buy books based on online recommendations but never read them, while 40% follow this pattern

regularly. However, 50% prefer accounts that critique books over those focused on aesthetics, while 35% frequently engage with aesthetically driven book content.

The rise of digital reading has reshaped the perception of physical books, making them objects of desirability rather than just literary tools. 55% believe books are now more about collecting than reading, while 40% acknowledge this shift but still value their literary purpose.

Overall, the survey highlights the evolving role of books as both intellectual and aesthetic artefacts. While 37.5% still prioritize content, a larger 55% balance both aesthetics and literary value. This dual function underscores how books have transcended their primary role, now serving as cultural symbols reflecting taste, intellect, and social status.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Books in contemporary society continue to bear multiplicity in appearance; they are seen as cultural artefacts, social objects of prestige, and current intellectual signifiers. They shape personal and collective identities within the realms of libraries, private collections, and niche subcultures, be it with opulent historical libraries or the curated bookshelves of social media influencers. Books have remained ever so linked to considerations of knowledge, taste, and class. Though literature continues to inspire and educate, one cannot help but wonder how much of the focus on books as beautiful objects interferes with their authentic engagement and encourages performative consumption.

These dualities between books enshrined as cultural artefacts and those treated as commodities can be seen manifesting in the rise of various digital monocultures like BookTok and Bookstagram. Against this backdrop, reading culture has been almost reborn, giving literature access while also helping to influence certain consumer behaviours. Viral trends play an important role in determining whether a book becomes a bestseller as the industry presently exists, sometimes at the expense of literary substance. This dichotomy reflects the metamorphosing nature of the relationship between readers and books, where old-world reverence meets modern-day branding and commercialization.

Going forward, the aesthetic and practical existence of books will thrive in how far they have been able to compete in the technological realm. Digital formats are great for ease and access, but the value of a physical book lies in its emotional and symbolic significance. With shifting landscapes of literature, it is at this juncture that books must preserve their identity as transmitters of knowledge and cultural development while embracing the new mediums and technologies that dictate their current relevance.

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