

Enchanted by Monsters: Werewolf Smut in Young Women's Social Worlds

by

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*“Everything is erotic.”*

*Giselle Levy, Mona Lisa Smile*

## **Dedication**

To Allison, who is “enchanted by monsters.”

**Abstract**

Romance and erotica literature have been popular among women for hundreds of years. Today, young women readers of these genres are establishing online communities to interact with one another regarding these books. Within these communities is a faction of readers who seek out novels with a werewolf as a central character, known as “werewolf smut.” This study is an examination of the cultural practices taking place within this werewolf smut community and the broader erotica community. To best understand this, I conducted a discourse analysis by collecting and reviewing an archive of videos posted to TikTok, a prominent social media platform that hosts the #BookTok space. I interpreted these posts with a Symbolic Interactionism framework. I find that contemporary smut practices do more than allow women to read about shapeshifters; they allow women to become shapeshifters through technological affordances that create a convergence of public and private, individual and communal performances.

**Keywords:** Erotica, Smut, Werewolf, #BookTok, Discourse Analysis, Symbolic Interactionism

## Introduction

One of life's greatest pleasures is sitting on a North Carolina beach in early summer. This is where I happily lounge like a lizard after a sizeable meal, often next to my best friend, and listen to the Grateful Dead's *Dick's Picks Vol. 29* while drinking Diet Cokes. I pass the time staring at the ocean, entrenched in my own thoughts, avoiding every notion of self-actualization. My redheaded companion, however, sits in the shade reading her book, praying she does not get sun poisoning again, and muttering meaningless complaints about the wind. She always carries her Kindle e-reader everywhere she goes, pulling it out at opportune times to get a few pages in, or getting sucked in so deeply that she fails to acknowledge the outside world for half a day. She likes her books. Many do. I remember asking her what she was reading one day at the beach, and her response was unsurprising yet intriguing. "It is called *Zodiac Academy: The Awakening*. Kind of like dark romance. I am finally getting to the sex scenes. It's werewolves and vampires fucking."

She covered her face and giggled, hummed "Ah...oh my god..." and tapered off shamefully, but I saw her deviant smile anyway; she could not hide it. I left her alone to get back to her monster romance, and I returned to fixating on the surrounding people, trying to figure out everything about them. There is a phenomenon I have identified in public spaces, particularly beaches, that I like to call Women Will Read. My observational data, gathered across multiple continents and in a handful of countries with varying demographics, led me to this prediction: On a beach, only women will be reading, and they will be plentiful. Maybe tanning on a towel or sprawled out in a Tommy Bahama chair, sometimes holding a sandwich or child in one hand and their book in the other, but they are reading. Oftentimes, their book is not even a tangible cover-to-cover filled with damp, sandy pages, but a Kindle or other e-reader that is just as

effortless to read in the violently bright sun. As I peered around, post the vampire-werewolf sex revelation, I remember wondering who else on this very beach is reading something salacious and taboo? What is living inside the devices these sun-screened women are gripping? These questions have haunted my brain since. Every time I see a lady reading with her Kindle on the bus or in a waiting room, I cannot help but think there is more to it than meets the eye.

This work seeks to explore the community of smut consumers and investigate the meaningful happenings in the reader's social worlds. My beach companion sparked my interest in this research. She is in no way a reserved or traditional woman, but she is rather private about her sexual desires, and this werewolf-vampire revelation contrasts with people's understanding of her. Because of her unidentifiable consumption of smut in public, I aim to better understand the complexities of the smut reader community and consider broader occurrences. To do this, I analyze an archive of TikToks from within the smut consumption community and discover relevant themes, narratives, identities, and communities. In this discourse analysis, I utilize a symbolic interaction framework to help interpret the results of my research. I find and argue that werewolf smut is not just another lazy day beach read, but a community-and identity-building genre.

### **Werewolves and Smut: The Culture of Sexy Shapeshifters**

With this investigation, I explore how young women craft smut communities and cultivate their sense of identity through public consumption of werewolf erotica. I examine how stigmatized genres afford self-expression and constrict interpersonal interactions in order to help my readers better understand the complexities and significance of public smut consumption across social, cultural, and psychological domains. To do this, I need to articulate what smut is, establish profiles of smutty readers, and explain the werewolf as an object of desire. From there,

I cultivate and examine an archive of TikToks from the werewolf smut #BookTok community to identify themes and further explore community-building, identity-making, and self-concept.

### **Smut as Evoking Desire**

*Smut* is not singularly defined but understood and (un)appreciated differently across historical and cultural contexts. A quick Google search will lead people astray. Many dictionaries host the definitions of smut as “a particle of soot” (Merriam-Webster, 2025), “a plant disease that mainly affects grasses such as wheat” (Cambridge, 2025), or “To mark with some black or dirty substance; to blacken, smudge” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). The first *Oxford English Dictionary* does not support the definition of “smut” that we will use here. We will understand smut as one of the lower, “alternative” definitions. Merriam-Webster says one of smut’s definitions is “obscene language or matter,” while Cambridge’s is “magazines, books, pictures, films, or jokes that offend some people because they relate to sex.” On top of that, Fanlore, a Wikipedia-esque style website that any “fan” can edit, defines smut as “a term for fanworks, such as fanfic or podfic, that contain an overwhelming majority of explicit sex scenes or are, in themselves, one explicitly detailed sex scene” (Fanlore, 2025). There is no Wikipedia page dedicated to “smut” in terms of sexual media material, but only “Erotic Literature” with “smut” as a term that the former is sometimes referred to as (Wikipedia, 2025). In Murray Davis’ 1983 book *Smut: Erotic Reality and Obscene Ideology*, he posits that people have “often characterize[d] sexual activity, the sexually active, and pornography in terms used to describe dirt- ‘pollution,’ ‘filth,’ ‘garbage,’ ‘trash,’ ‘slime,’ ‘smut,’ ‘dregs’ (as in ‘dregs of society’)” (p. 89). Smut is all the definitions thus far and more. The point of this gloss of definitions is to show that, while it is easy to find definitions of smut, many lack the nuance readers find in the genre (as will be demonstrated later). Here, though, I focus on smut closer to Fanlore’s definition, but

with some adjustments. Smut, as discussed in this paper, is a highly erotic or sexual fiction to derive sexual arousal. In essence, smut is a complex genre of romance fiction with the aim of high sexual pleasure or intrigue.

### **Fifty Shades of Grey, Twilight, and fan fiction: Reading the Taboo**

While romance books have been consumed for many years, primarily by women, there was a shift in the culture in 2005 when author Stephanie Meyer released her young adult novel *Twilight*. This four-book vampire romance series was wildly popular, especially after Catharine Hardwicke and Melissa Rosenberg's 2008 film adaptation of the same name, which gained a cult following and grossed over \$384 million globally (Barnes, 2009). By 2009, Meyer had sold more than 70 million copies of her books worldwide (Barnes, 2009). The work inspired numerous works of fan fiction. Fan fiction, also called fanfic, "refers to stories produced by fans based on plot lines and characters from either a single source text or else a 'canon' of works; these fan-created narratives often take the pre-existing storyworld in a new, sometimes bizarre, direction" (Thomas, 2011, p. 1). British writer E.L. James published *Master of the Universe*, a *Twilight* fan fiction, on the website "fanfiction.net" under the pen name "Snowqueens Icedragon" in August 2009 (Cuccinello, 2017). James' fanfic was quite popular, leading her to remove the fan fiction and its attachments to *Twilight* (i.e., "scratching off the serial numbers" according to Cuccinello), and write a full-blown book of her own, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Cuccinello, 2017). *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the first book of an erotic trilogy, became a public phenomenon. By 2013, James topped *Forbes'* Top Earning Authors of 2013 list, with earnings of \$95 million (Bercovici, 2013). In this list, Bercovici noted that the availability of this trilogy on e-reading devices was "a key factor, giving readers an easy way to purchase the sex-filled sequels, and a discreet way to read them in public" (para 1).



The financial successes of both Meyer and James signaled a change in the consumption of romance and erotica novels among readers, who are primarily women, with audiences seemingly wanting more sexually explicit texts. In the early 2010s, publishers took notice of Meyer's and James' rapid successes and started paying attention to fan fiction writers for the next "big thing" (Cuccinello, 2017). One of the internet's most popular fan fiction websites, *Archive of Our Own* (abbreviated as Ao3), is a poignant example of the changing market. Ao3 began in 2009 with 189 users and around 2,000 published works on the website (Archive of Our Own, 2013). By the end of 2013, Ao3 had 234,232 users and just shy of 1 million published works, and by 2020, Ao3 claimed they averaged around 60 million site views per day (Archive of Our Own, 2020). It is important to remember that not all fan fiction is romantic or erotic. For example, *Archive of Our Own* uses a content rating system: General Audiences, Teen And Up Audiences, Mature, Not Rated, and Explicit, with authors choosing which category their work falls under. Many "fics" in General Audiences and Teen And Up Audiences would be considered "G" or "PG" relative to films and television. However, the amount of fan fiction that exists under Mature or Explicit on Ao3 alone is monumental. As authors choose the content rating for their work, they can also add "tags" specifying certain content for readers, with "Sexual Content" and "Smut" among the most popular tags across the entire website (Archive of Our Own, 2025). Outside of Ao3, there are other platforms people use to publish and consume fan fiction content, including Wattpad and fanfiction.net.

### **E-readers**

The continued explosion in consumption of this genre could be attributed to digital access to these works. I have established that fan fiction is an extremely popular literary genre, and that its online medium is crucial to appreciating its production and circulation. Bercovici (2013)

claimed that e-reading devices, in the case of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, were a major accelerant in the trilogy's popularity, as people could read the titles discreetly wherever they were. E-readers allow individuals to carry more books than they could in physical form, and their portability enables people to have books they may not otherwise be able to. E-readers, then, can be understood as important materialist media actors (Bollmer, 2019).

The major player in e-reading is Kindle Unlimited. Amazon's Kindle Unlimited membership offers access to over 5 million books, as well as thousands of audiobooks and magazines (Chen, 2025). Subscribers can borrow up to 20 books at once, with no time limit on returning, eliminating "late fees" at the library. Kindle Unlimited books are available on Amazon's Kindle e-reader or through the Kindle Unlimited App, which can be used on any smart device (Chen, 2025). For people who read books on e-readers, this subscription is attractive for its low cost compared to buying books individually. A paperback werewolf smut book can run anywhere between \$9.99 and \$29.99, but dozens of titles in the genre are available on Kindle for \$11.99 a month. Given the rates at which werewolf smut readers devour these titles, Kindle Unlimited is a bargain. This enables users in the werewolf smut community to consume large quantities of material privately and economically.

One well-known feature of e-readers and digital consumption is the algorithmic recommendations provided to users. Amazon owns Goodreads, an online platform known as the "most visited social media site built around sharing books" (Kaufman, 2013, para. 1). Kindle users, unlimited or not, may also have Goodreads accounts where they research, review books, or build community. Regardless of whether a Kindle user has Kindle Unlimited or a Goodreads account, Amazon uses data from both to inform its recommendations algorithm. Kindles will show users recommendations based on their reading habits and on what other users have read.

This means once a user reads a title like *The Alpha's Fated Mate: A Rejected Mate Paranormal Wolfshifter Romance*, they are likely to get recommendations for other titles, such as *The Alpha's True Mate*, *The Wolf King*, and *The Alpha's Reclaimed Mate*. The algorithm begins to recognize the user as a werewolf smut reader and will provide them with all relevant texts.

### **Who reads it?**

Fan studies is an academic area devoted to examining the relationships between consumers and media. In 1992, Henry Jenkins wrote *Textual Poachers*, a foundational text in the field of fan studies. In *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins describes fans who “poach” media to produce their own meanings and culture through practices such as fan fiction and fan art. Jenkins’ work drew from Michel de Certeau’s theories of everyday resistance and tactical consumption. These “fandoms” use their creativity to engage in social and cultural practices that rewrite traditional understandings of power between fans and media (Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1992), with fans not being passive consumers, but active ones. In *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (2017) identified three waves of fan studies: (1) an approach to examining fans as a collective, (2) cultural studies with hierarchies within fans, and (3) “everyday fandom” where fandom is a part of daily life. This analysis operates within fan studies, and now I am going to describe this particular fan community.

In studying werewolf fandoms, I examine how the fandom helps constitute everyday experience and how new media platforms, like TikTok, contribute to that experience. TikTok has undoubtedly shaped the world of romance novel consumption in recent years. #BookTok is a phenomenon on TikTok that “focuses on promoting, reviewing, summarizing, or re-enacting certain books. This community is highly connected to the kink, BDSM, and non-vanilla subsets

of TikTok, with many of the most popular and viral TikToks featuring and idealizing dark romance or toxic relationships” (Gay, 2023, p. 11).

Users on TikTok who post or interact under the #BookTok hashtag are overwhelmingly women, white-presenting, and presumably American. The women who post videos on #BookTok with recommendations, analysis, or reviews are arguably conventionally attractive. There are dozens of coded messages #BookTok users use to categorize the types of books they are discussing and communicate with each other. For example, “spicy” is an alternative term for the smuttiness of a book, sometimes represented by the “🌶️” pepper emoji, and may be used alongside the hashtag #Cliterature (Fortune, 2024). The level of smuttiness can be indicated by the number of “🌶️”s included in the description. Other hashtags on #BookTok include #smuttok, #spicybooktok, #yaoi, #darkromance, #bookspice, #romantasybooks, and #smut. This indicates that readers are actively seeking out books based on their sexual explicitness in tandem with content like werewolves.

### **Why Werewolves?**

That day on the beach, my best friend was reading a novel about a romantic, sexual relationship between a vampire and a werewolf. What is the erotic appeal of fictional beings? Within the dark romance and smut category of #BookTok, there is a notable focus on fantasy. It is common for books under this hashtag to feature supernatural characters, such as vampires or werewolves. The presence of werewolves in these texts piqued my interest. Vampires are supernatural beings, yes, but they are physically identical to humans, minus the fangs. Werewolves, on the other hand, are not human-like in their werewolf form. So what accounts for their widespread sex appeal? One can assume there is a niche community for just about anything, but as so many people are consuming these smutty werewolf books, is it still “niche”?

Werewolves have been a center of desire in romance books for decades. In 1933, Guy Endore published *The Werewolf of Paris*. This gothic horror follows a man who grapples with his shifting into a werewolf as he navigates life and falls in love. His relationship with the woman is violent, and he often desecrates her body in an attempt to control his werewolf desires (Endore, 1933). Kayla LaFroth identifies in her thesis, *Blue Moon: Exploring the Complexities of Human Love Through a Werewolf Romance Novel*, that “while early werewolf tales often centered on horror and fear, modern iterations have expanded to explore complex relationships, societal hierarchies, and the blurred lines between human and animal instincts” (p. 9). She continues by claiming that werewolves are used in romance novels today as objects to explore sexual or erotic relationships (LaFroth, 2024).

The “Fated Mate” trope, which offers guaranteed devotion from the werewolf mate, is one example of sexual exploration. In Cate C. Wells’ *The Tyrant Alpha’s Rejected Mate*, readers follow the story of Una, a low-class “omega” woman, and her mate, Killian, who initially rejects her. Still, eventually, the sexual desires are too difficult to ignore, and they become mates. This work is an example of what is referred to as “fated mate” and “shifter romance,” in which a shifter is born a werewolf and can “shift” between human and werewolf forms.

Another common trope in werewolf romance is the “Alpha” archetype, which usually involves the “alpha” maintaining a fierce protectiveness over their mate. Wells’ book exists in the “Omegaverse”, or “Alpha/Beta/Omega” (A/B/O). As Kelsey Entrikin did in her dissertation, *Romancing the Beast: Intersections of Power, Gender, and Sexuality in Omegaverse Fan Fiction*, the best way to understand the Omegaverse is to refer to Kristina Busse, a professor at the University of South Alabama, who is often credited with pioneering Omegaverse research in fan studies. In Busse’s *Pon Farr, Mpreg, Bonds, and the Rise of the Omegaverse*, she explains the

Omegaverse as “societies where biological imperatives divide people based on wolf pack hierarchies into sexual dominants (alphas), sexual submissives (omegas), and everyone else (betas). Beyond the biologically determined hierarchy, these wolf-like humans often have other wolf-like traits: they may scent their partners or imprint on first sight, and often mate for life. Sometimes the alphas and omegas are rare, sometimes they are only males, sometimes they have altered sex organs. Often omegas go into heat and release pheromones that drive alphas wild” (p. 289). There are many themes and archetypes in werewolf romance literature. The werewolf smut genre affords women the ability to explore taboo desires, fantasy, and thrills within the safe confines of a book. However, beyond those safe confines, there is a vibrant digital network in which readers publicly share their explorations, and it is there that the present analysis picks up.

### **Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis is a qualitative research approach that examines how language enacts social and cultural perspectives and identities (Gee, 2014). Another way to define discourse analysis is to study language “beyond the sentence,” focusing on what language achieves (Rholetter, 2024). Language is understood as an active force shaping who people are, creating structures of power, and generating meaning which individuals use to know themselves and the world around them. Discourse analysis empowers analysts to see communication as a dynamic process that constructs the world. This approach allows an examination of how TikTokers discuss books, build community, create identity, and address stigmas through their engagement with language, humor, hashtags, and narrative in these videos. This method allows an engagement with the social and cultural work happening through these TikToks. These creators are publicly presenting their positions and analysis on traditionally taboo or “unspoken” topics, and they are doing so freely, willingly, and enthusiastically. When studying these encounters,

discourse analysis will help illuminate how young women make sense in this space and how their shared discourses shape identity, community, and desire.

To perform my discourse analysis, I went to the platform that hosts #BookTok, TikTok. TikTok is a behemoth social media platform that offers a wealth of information regarding these literary genres and the audiences that consume them. As stated before, #BookTok is a TikTok hashtag for creators to post about books, with a large subset focused on dark romance or smut. These videos offer a rich, real-time dataset for analysis, with creators freely and publicly giving up information, some of which may be personal. It would be impossible to analyze every TikTok under the #BookTok hashtag, with videos being posted every minute. Upon searching “#BookTok” in tandem with “werewolf” on TikTok, an enormous feed of search results appeared. TikTok does not allow users to see the exact number of videos returned for a specific search. Therefore, after scrolling through the page for multiple minutes without any particular video appearing twice, I inferred that there were hundreds, if not thousands, of these videos on TikTok. To discover a sufficient sample, I began at the top of the natural search results that were returned for my initial search of “#BookTok” and “werewolf.” From here, I built an archive of the videos provided. After reviewing 60 TikToks, I reached theoretical saturation. Kathy Charmaz (2014) explains in *Constructing Grounded Theory* that data saturation has been reached when “gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories” (p. 113). This does not mean themes are constantly repeated; instead, it means no new patterns emerge from the data. I viewed each video multiple times and documented the captions, hashtags, keywords, and overall message. After doing this for 40 TikToks, I recognized three recurring categories: Shifter Romance, The Secrecy of Smut, and “I’d Rather Be”. I continued analyzing TikToks until I reached 60. I found no new categories

between videos 40-60, signaling data saturation. Below, I briefly describe the content and characteristics of these three categories before moving into my analysis.

### ***Shifter Romance***

By searching “#BookTok” and “werewolf” on TikTok, you will find a plethora of videos of young women detailing their recommendations and analysis. In the comments sections of these posts, many more users offer their thoughts and personal analyses. Some of the most commonly referenced keywords, themes, and tropes are as follows; “Alpha”, “Hunter”, “Kidnapping”, “Rejected Mate”, “Fated Mate”, “Shifter”, “Spicy”, “Read in A Day”, “Omegaverse”, “HEA” (Happily Ever After), “Standalone”, “Enemies to Lovers”, “Touch her and Die”, “Forced Proximity”, “Series”, and “Good Girl”. Users say “MMC” (Male Main Character) and “FMC” (Female Main Character) in place of character’s names. “Shifter” was one of the most common terms in #BookTok werewolf book recommendation videos. “Shifter” refers to an MMC or FMC who “shifts” into another form, in these cases, a werewolf. See Appendix A for examples.

### ***The Secrecy of Smut***

Cleis Press is “the largest independent sexuality publishing company in the United States. With a focus on LGBTQ, BDSM, romance, and erotic writing for all sexual preferences, Cleis Press books are consistently changing the way people read and think about sexual behavior, culture, and education” (Cleis Press, 2025, “about” page). One of their associate publishers, Brenda Knight, told The Wall Street Journal in a 2012 interview with Katherine Rosman that Kindles and e-readers are “the ultimate brown paper wrapper” (Rosman, 2012, para. 4). In *Forbes’* Top Earning Authors of 2013 list, Bercovici wrote that Kindles and e-readers were “a key factor, giving readers an easy way to purchase the sex-filled sequels, and a discreet way to



read them in public” (Bercovici, 2013, para. 1). When exploring posts under #BookTok, after reviewing videos associated with “werewolf” and “smut”, the algorithm produces videos of young women demonstrating their ability to “hide” what they are reading. In these posts, women are typically silent, record themselves reading, use a popular TikTok sound (a song), and display text. Overlay text is included in Appendix B.

### ***“I’d Rather Be...”***

Another aspect of these TikToks is the “I’d rather be” theme, where creators post that they would rather be reading smut than doing anything else. This usually points to a social activity, like work or spending time with friends, where users outright claim they would prefer to be engaging in a solitary activity, such as reading in bed at home. The comment sections of these videos feature users sharing their recent experiences and stating where they are when they would “rather” be reading smut. Many of these videos have thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of views and many other engagement metrics that signal their popularity. Appendix C offers a selection of these posts.

## **Analysis & Conclusion**

The themes of Shifter Romance, The Secrecy of Smut, and “I’d Rather Be” are central to understanding the functions of werewolf smut in the lives of young women. To better illuminate these themes, I turned to Symbolic Interactionism to make sense of the role that werewolf smut plays in the construction of self and social identity. George Herbert Mead is credited with developing Symbolic Interactionism, which holds that people act on the symbolic meanings communicated in a given situation (Mead, 1934). Three assumptions frame Symbolic Interactionism: Individuals construct meaning through communication, self-concept motivates behavior, and a unique relationship exists between the individual and society (Carter & Fuller,

2015; West & Turner, 2018). Symbolic interactionism was helpful in this research to analyze TikToks posted in this smut reading community because it offers a flexible framework for identifying narratives, motivations, the construction and maintenance of identity, and community building. The meaningful interactions taking place within this space are valuable and rich, fostering relationships and further understood by a symbolic interactionism framework.

In werewolf dark romance, erotica, or smut, it is unsurprising that “Shifter” is a prominent theme. A MMC, or on the rare occasion a FMC, is commonly a human male who shifts into his werewolf form. Shifter romances and werewolf smut as a whole repackage heteronormative and hegemonic gender roles. In these books, audiences typically encounter an MMC that is possessive, dominant, stronger, and aggressive. Hierarchy in these works can be described as a “pack structure,” which strikingly resembles patriarchal hierarchy. The alpha male is a leader, protector, and possessive mate due to biology. With this, his territoriality, aggression, and emotional restraint are understood as primal and instinctual. All of this together creates a narrative that is natural instead of socially constructed, with readers believing his behavior is truly inherent. He is, after all, a wolf. Sticking to traditional gender roles, the FMC is often portrayed as physically smaller, weaker, and more susceptible to the alpha’s influence. The FMC typically submits to the alpha, whether yielding to the mate bond, submitting to sexual desires, or accepting their destiny, rather than freely choosing. However, these FMCs are described as “strong” because they can “tame” or regulate the MMC’s instinctual actions. For instance, the FMC's existence (1) awakens the MMC's insatiable, primal urges, (2) challenges the MMC to control his behavior to “protect” the FMC, and (3) gatekeeps his outlet for sexual desires. The alpha male is overly jealous, which is portrayed as passionate devotion, and frequently says phrases such as “You’re mine” in both erotic and non-erotic situations.

In the Shifter Romance TikTok space, the women who consume and review these books are doing so ironically. They are aware of the problematic elements of these works, the sexism, misogyny, and violence. However, something these TikTokers discuss in their videos is the need to suspend belief while consuming the genre. The pleasure derived from reading these titles stems from the exaggerated, unrealistic, and fanatical stories that challenge readers' sense of reality. This practice can be understood as strategic positioning: Women readers do not have to feel any shame or guilt when they publicly share their suspension of belief and describe their encounters with these texts as “feral”, “delulu” (delusional), or “unserious.” The space they create through their ironic, even camp, engagement—and the work of terms like “feral” to demarcate a linguistic space set apart from “serious” reading—allows them to explore taboo desires without judgment.

And explore their desires, they do. These TikTokers are unabashed in their recommendations of these books. They discuss the books’ contents frankly and explicitly state their satisfaction with the material. In many instances, creators in this community blatantly say in their recommendations that “this book is not good,” or something to signal awareness that the work is “trash” or “less than.”

Although users linguistically segregate smut from “good” books, they still adore them and recommend, consume, and discuss them. Following Symbolic Interactionism’s first assumption—that meaning is made through communication—I found that #BookTok users were constructing multiple meanings in their videos: They simultaneously devalued the texts’ literary value and celebrated the books’ community. The content and engagement in these TikToks suggest that a significant part of the appeal of the werewolf smut genre lies in its online community.

Through observing the interactions within this community on TikTok, I found that online interpersonal communication—including self-disclosure and social support—is an essential aspect of community building and identity management for readers of werewolf smut. Individuals post comments to the tune of “I’m so glad I found my people” or “I can’t discuss this with anyone else.” This allows for a more intimate discussion with other community members to agree and share further. One comment that sticks out is, “I ran to TikTok after finishing this [book].” Implicit in this comment is the claim that online community building is a major player in meaning-making throughout this community. The individuals who consume and post about these books are active consumers, choosing to engage with “lesser than” media and not shying away from confronting that face on. In fact, they run with it and use it to build their identities and social worlds further.

While these BookTokers may relish openness within their in-group, they seek to constrain the performance of Smut Reader in their everyday public lives. With the wide availability of e-readers, these TikTokers have been able to consume their smut books covertly. Many videos in this category feature a young, attractive woman self-recording as she holds up her e-reader in public. As previously mentioned, this content is paired with overlay text that makes the claim, “no one knows I’m reading this.” The dichotomy within this secrecy category is worth examining. The overarching idea is that these e-readers provide users with an invisibility cloak that shields them from public view. Yet they go out of their way to record themselves in public engaging in this activity, and then post it online for the world, particularly their communities, to see. This performance allows them to evade scrutiny from those around them in public spaces, but not from the rest of the (#BookTok) world, which knows what they consume and enjoy. With this public posting, there is no secrecy about smut consumption;

instead, the facade is maintained and validated. When these videos are posted on TikTok, they receive an outpouring of attention and engagement from within and outside their communities.

Some videos in this category amassed millions of views, while others have thousands.

Regardless, the comment sections are filled with other users affirming the behavior and identifying with the sentiment. One user commented, “That’s why I love my Kindle; I’m in camouflage 🦋”. Even in the few videos that show the creator holding the actual book, not an e-reader, the desire for privacy is expressed: One creator commented on her own video, “The only people who recognize the cover are those who also read the same stuff, so we’re safe 😂.” The desire to perform one identity while enacting another is highly compatible with the women’s interest in shapeshifters.

Other TikTokers post about their longing to read when they are in situations where they cannot. The overwhelming majority of these videos showcase social situations the creators wish to avoid so they can return home, read their smut and dark romance books, and get back to their erotic lives. One creator posted a video with the text “When I’m starting to not have fun at any outing because I’d rather be in bed reading mafia werewolf enemies to lovers smut on my Kindle.” Another posted a video with “how it feels spending every Friday night in bed reading yaoi smut instead of going out 😍!!” One commenter remarked, “Every night. I don’t remember the last time I hung out with somebody.” A majority of the comments on each video are in solidarity with the poster; they explain their similar experiences and desires. This subset of smut readers is enthusiastically removing themselves from real-life social interactions in favor of the pleasure derived from consuming smut and the community they build when posting this action online. This symbolic performance signals to other TikTokers that they are not alone in their

urges and should not be ashamed. As others on TikTok echo their solidarity or shared experience, users feel more comfortable posting online about their desire to be at home reading.

When these themes are braided together, a new story emerges—less about werewolf smut and more about the affordances of e-readers and social media platforms to allow women to perform their own shapeshifting identities through their access to safe spaces to privately and publicly explore their sexuality. E-readers enable women to tap into their sexuality in spaces where they might otherwise feel at-risk or embarrassed, and social media platforms provide the place to make meaning out of the performance. The space created is, at least partially, afforded by unwritten community norms in which users “agree” that the desires are not *literal* desires in the sense of wanting to be physically mauled during an intimate encounter. By co-creating an ironic community, women can freely share, discuss, and recommend books that feed all appetites.

When I initially developed the research idea that day on the beach, I assumed the e-reader smut community was likely small. My best friend next to me, of course, was my contact into the realm, but I did not personally know others who read the genre or participated in the fandom. How many women on this particular beach could be reading salacious, dirty, sex-riddled novels? I assumed the answer was, “Not many.” Through this work, I have unveiled a substantial online community of women who are enthusiastically consuming smut books in public, with the private protective shield offered by the e-reader. Before analysis, it was understood that people purchased e-readers for convenience and digital access to titles. However, my research indicates that it is not the sole, nor even primary, motivation of the women in this community to use an e-reader. The affordance of privacy seems to be of higher value to these readers. They care less

about the convenience of the technology and much more about the protection it provides from public scrutiny.

Although smut readers seek degrees and kinds of privacy, they engage in a variety of public theatres. Paradoxically, they champion the privacy affordances of the e-reader while they equally participate in a public showcase of this “private” act. Community members use their e-readers to engage in private, public performances of smut consumption on #BookTok. The consumption is no longer a taboo, private, and personal act but rather a ticket to display their performance and establish themselves within their community. The private-public performances become construction materials for personal identity. The comment sections of “The Secrecy of Smut” posts are filled with fellow smut readers validating and affirming this performance of the private public. The facade of secrecy is maintained by users and upheld by the community at large. The front and back stage have converged to create a space where smut consumers reap the benefits of private consumption in physical public spaces, and the attention, affirmation, and community building in digital public spaces.

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## Appendix A

### Shifter Romance

This archive contains titles or overlay texts of TikToks posted under #BookTok with “werewolf” discussing Shifter Romance, The Secrecy of Smut, and the “I’d Rather Be”. These are a selection of videos from this community to showcase how creators are establishing themselves in the space.

“Dark Romance Lycan Werewolf Recommendations” (@Chai\_tea\_reads)

“My Top Werewolf Romance Books 🐾🌹” (@heaths.bookclub)

“🌟5🌟 Underrated Shifter Romantasy Book Recs” (@andrea\_eea)

“Three of my favorite books with werewolf’s 🐾” (@heaths.bookclub)

“Let me show you some of my favorite werewolf books that are criminally underhyped” (@thtgrlreads)

“ “*You look happier*” thank you all these werewolf romantasy books are coming out this year and people are finally getting the hype” (@steffyreads)

“Wolf King Review ★★★★★ No spoilers” (@rheas\_shelf)

“I have unlocked a new favorite sub genre.. Werewolf romances. Comment all of the recs because I’m in desperate need to keep this going.” (@larryreads)

“In honor of everyone finding out what 🐾 is bc of Bride by Ali Hazelwood, here is one of my favorite werewolf books with 🐾 ” (@jasminesbookthoughts)

## **Appendix B**

### **The Secrecy of Smut**

“No one here knows I’m reading the most gut-wrenching smut on my Kindle.”

(@Isabellareadingggg)

“When nobody knows I’m reading the most ✨diabolical✨ smut on the plane.”

(@\_tayinpages\_)

“No one knows I’m reading the smuttiest, most graphic wh0re piece of literature. I look like an intellectual. Everyone has been duped.”

(@rosiefsd)

“No one at the pool knows I’m reading smut rn.”

(@satellitativ)

“Me with the most serious face ever reading the smuttiest thing known to man.”

(@mrsslarsen)

“how it feels to read my romance books in public and no one knows what I’m reading.”

(@eileentnguyen).

## Appendix C

### “I’d Rather Be”

“When I’m starting to not have fun at any outing because I’d rather be in bed reading mafia werewolf enemies to lovers smut on my Kindle.”

(@brig.geee)

“welcome to the side of booktok where we’re in grad school but we’d much rather read smutty romance books than academic texts so even though it’s almost midterms and assignments are piling up we still make time for reading for pleasure.”

(@satrayreads)

“When I have to go to work but I’m in the middle of reading the best smut of my life.”

(@xaligracex)

“Me listening to my friends talk about their situationships and alcohol but all I do is watch anime and read smut.”

(@secretcofffeejellylover)

“How it feels spending Friday night in bed reading yaoi smut instead of going out 😊!!.”

(@tiffyycat)

“When my friends cancel plans on a Friday so now I get to stay in and read fantasy smut all night.” (@chelseyseye)

“Welcome to the side of booktok where we’d much rather be in bed on a Friday night with our snuggies on and kindles in hand then out partying at a bar or club.”

(@kaylawiththebookproblem)