

Tertulia: personalised recommendations for avid readers

CASE STUDY | 28 Nov 2022

For book publishers and authors, marketing is a crucial step in reaching new audiences – but the way people discover titles remains something of an enigma. Tertulia is looking to tackle this problem with an AI-led approach that aims to better serve readers' needs with personalised recommendations.

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HIGHLIGHTS

- 01** Book discovery now largely takes place online, but it is scattered and fragmented across various channels
- 02** Like Netflix for viewing and Spotify for listening, Tertulia hopes to become the recommendation engine of choice for reading
- 03** The app uses AI and machine learning, as well as human curation, to scour through conversations online and deliver personalised recommendations

DATA

- 62% of people say a brand will lose their loyalty if they deliver an un-personalised experience, up from 45% in 2021
- In 2021, 55% of Americans said they discovered a new brand, product, or service via word of mouth in the previous year
- 56% of Gen Zers consider themselves to be regular readers and 45% are aware of BookTok

SCOPE

One of the biggest challenges facing authors and book publishers is product discovery. How can they help readers discover titles they'll want and love but have never heard of? Pre-internet, there were a few select channels for book discovery. Book stores often provided recommendations, newspapers and magazines reviewed them, and book clubs (such as Oprah's) gave choice titles some much-needed word-of-mouth marketing to boost sales. In the post-pandemic landscape, however, book conversations largely take place online. TikTok has become home to one of the world's foremost book communities due to its fun and informal nature, with [BookTok](#) posts generating over 92 billion views. The platform was credited with helping physical book sales in the US reach a record 825.7 million in 2021, representing a 9% rise from 2020. [1]

Several book-related apps have launched in an attempt to fill the gaps that traditional publishing channels have left, turning discovery from a fragmented process to one that's inspiring. A notable addition to this space is [Tertulia](#), an app that uses data and artificial intelligence to sift through online conversations and offers readers personalised recommendations. "There's Netflix for movies, there's Spotify for music. But there really wasn't an equivalent discovery experience for books," said Sebastian Cwilich, co-founder of Tertulia, to The New York Times. [2] "In a world full of rich discovery services for movies, music, television, and fine art, there is, remarkably, no existing equivalent for books. And that is what we have spent the last 18 months working on," he additionally noted in a press release. [3]

Tertulia, which means ‘literary salons’ in Spanish, uses AI technology and human editorial curation to pull data through various sources and generate book recommendations. The app is free to download and lets users browse through selections that are curated from different websites, social media, and newspaper reviews, speaking to the growing preference [for personalised content](#). If a reader likes a book, they can buy it in-app. Tertulia has over 15 million available titles and plans to add audiobooks and e-books in 2023. “We believe that a books company co-owned by a community of readers will better serve them and the books ecosystem,” says Cwilich. [3]



How is online book-selling growing beyond Amazon?

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CONTEXT

PERSONALISED EXPERIENCES THROUGH AI

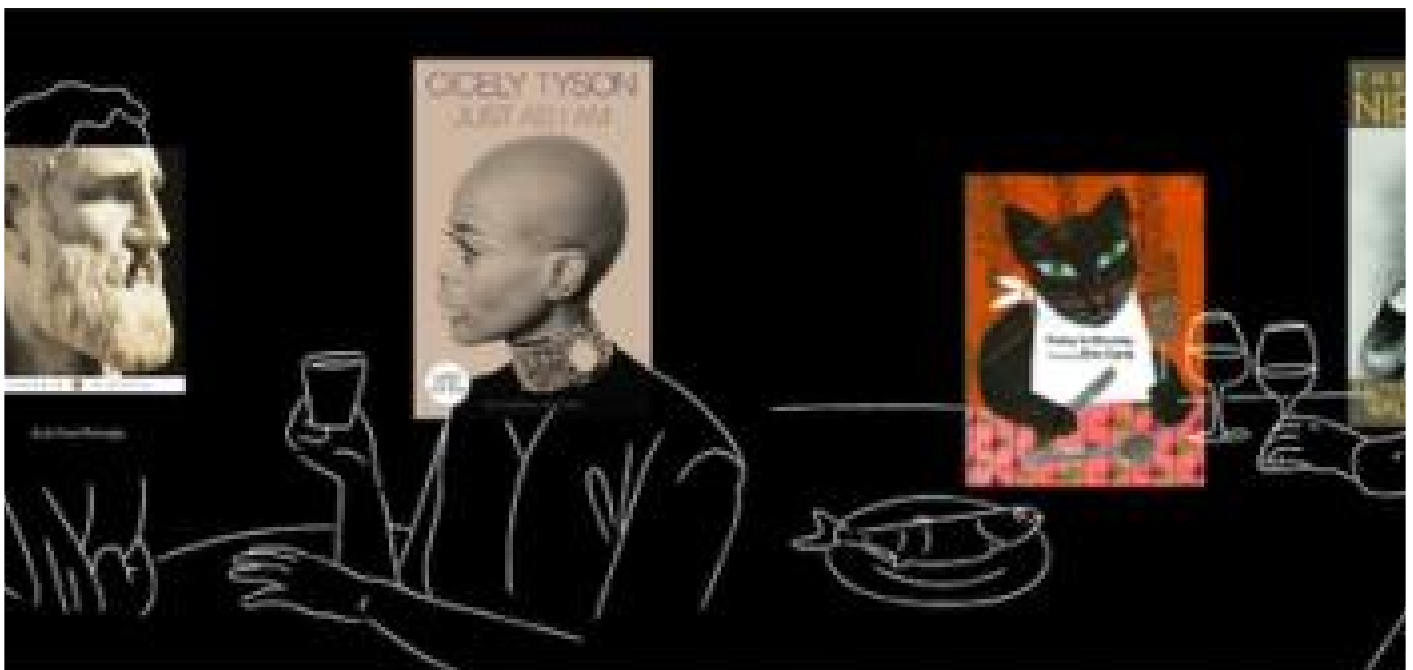
In the age of Netflix and Spotify, where algorithms identify user preferences to determine what they might like next, why should book recommendations be any different? After all, according to a multi-market study conducted by Twilio, 62% of people say a brand will lose their loyalty if they deliver an un-personalised experience, up from 45% in 2021. [4] To help readers discover books they'll love, Tertulia uses both AI and machine learning as well as editorial curation. It claims to harness 10,000 different sources, including reviews, social media posts, awards, podcasts, bestseller lists, book clubs, and critics' picks, with all of this information factoring into its personalised recommendations. [5] When readers sign up for the app, they're asked to specify what kind of books they read and what type of people they would like to hear from (critics, journalists, celebrities, chefs, entrepreneurs, athletes, etc.). Based on these choices, the app serves up five daily recommendations tailored to each user's interests. The more someone uses the app, the smarter the algorithm becomes about their preferences.

TAPPING INTO ONLINE CONVERSATIONS

Tertulia also makes available lists of notable titles in different genres, ranking them by buzz rather than sales. The hope is that these lists will tap into word-of-mouth conversations, which are an important aspect of bookselling. [6] Rachel M. Anderson, a marketing and PR consultant and book publicist, believes it's important to build word-of-mouth through connections and conversations. "Somebody you know recommending something means a lot more than simply seeing an advertisement or a graphic on social media with information about a book," she says. "You need to have some kind of buy-in for you actually to take that next step." [7] It's that next step that Tertulia is interested in. By delivering recommendations from the sorts of people users are likely to trust, the app brings a level of legitimacy to the process that random online conversations don't – and can't. A survey conducted by RRD in 2021 found that 55% of Americans discovered a new brand, product, or service via word of mouth in the previous year – beating out social media (53%) as the top source – and 40% actually bought a product after discovering it this way, highlighting the sales impact of a trusted recommendation. [8]

BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF READERS

During the height of the pandemic, the future of independent bookselling did not look bright. According to the US Census Bureau data, book store sales fell nearly 30% in 2020. But in 2022, book stores are reportedly booming in the country and – what's more – becoming more diverse. Over 300 book stores have opened since 2020, hinting at the fact that many people still appreciate real recommendations from real people. Among the new, diverse book stores identified by The New York Times are Manhattan-based Yu and Me Books, which focuses on titles by and about immigrants and people of colour; The Salt Eaters Bookshop in Inglewood, California which carries books by and about Black women, girls, and nonbinary people; and Libros Bookmobile, a Latina-owned mobile book store in Taylor, Texas. [9] Tertulia is similarly looking to tap into a sense of community with the Tertulia Co-op, through which users can earn co-ownership units in the company in proportion to their book purchases. There's a \$25 annual membership fee and members receive unlimited free shipping, a 10% discount on all books, and the ability to weigh in on the company's strategic initiatives.



Social listening and machine learning help Tertulia uncover literary gems for its users

Tertulia | Facebook (2022)

INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

USE TECH TO CONNECT WITH AUDIENCES

Many companies have tried their hand at solving the book discovery problem. [Folio](#) is an online book store for Gen Z readers, [The StoryGraph](#) is for people who don't want to support Amazon, and [Copper](#) is an Instagram-like platform that helps authors connect with fans. Tertulia differentiates itself by relying on machine learning to scan online discussions to see what people are talking about, and by tapping into current cultural conversations through the use of tech, it can engage with audiences on topics they are genuinely interested in. "The way people actually discover books is through this wide variety of sources. You hear about some book from a friend, you see something on Instagram or TikTok, you read about a book award, or you hear a podcast," Cwilich told TechCrunch. "What if you could have all of the world's book conversations in one place?" [6]

MAKE THE OLD NEW AGAIN

What TikTok did that revolutionised book publishing is it became a surprise driver for not just new books that appeal to younger generations but older ones as well. Gen Zers are avid book consumers, with 56% considering themselves to be regular readers and 45% saying they're aware of BookTok. [10] Stephen Lotinga, chief executive of the Publishers Association, told The Guardian that BookTokers were often eschewing the latest releases and instead rediscovering books that were years old. The 2014 book *We Were Liars*, written by E. Lockhart, gained prominence on the social media app in 2021, achieving four or five times the sales it earned in 2020. [11] When a book like this catches social media attention, Tertulia is there to tap into the buzz and let users know about it. This has considerable potential for brands, especially those focused on refreshing and reinvigorating previous releases. With more love and care put towards older titles, businesses are finding that they can become an additional revenue stream for years and decades, even if the launch sales were initially slow.

BUILD FRESH METHODS FOR OUTDATED SYSTEMS

"It used to be that you needed booksellers to recognise your title and start talking about it," says Anderson. "Or you'd need to be in the Library Journal or Publishers Weekly or Kirkus, and that's how you got noticed." That's changed now, she says, partly because access to those pages can be bought and partly because of the proliferation of indie and small-press authors who have a much more level playing field thanks to social media. [7] Old methods for driving book sales are no longer as successful as they once were, and using the cultural clout associated with social media is more helpful for brands that want to convert online discussions and trending topics into actual sales. Tertulia has cleverly overcome this hurdle through its partnership with Ingram Content Group, one of the largest wholesale book distributors in the world. [5] By enabling in-app book purchases, Tertulia has made a user's journey from 'interest piqued' to 'book bought' much shorter. And it is this savvy approach, combined with the ability to tap into what people are looking for, that helps Tertulia stand out from other book recommendation apps.

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