

Self-Help Literature and Transmedia Storytelling on TikTok and Reddit

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Abstract

*This contribution argues that the self-help phenomenon should be considered in the context of transmedia storytelling because psychological discourse on social media and traditional analogue formats such as self-help literature are increasingly connected via processes of adaptation. The resulting type of transtext incorporates the grassroots nature of fan content while also maintaining continuity with the original text. Content creators relate self-help literature directly to their own and their audience's personal experience(s), either via short, serialized videos that reflect and expand segments of books or forum style-discussions on popular social networking sites. To illustrate the interplay between reception and participation, this article investigates how best-selling self-help books, namely *Why Men Love Bitches* by the American author Sherry Argov and *12 Rules for Life* by Canadian author/psychologist Jordan B. Peterson conform and diverge from Henry Jenkins' typologies of media convergence on the social media platforms Reddit and TikTok and in how far Henry Jenkin's concept of transmedia storytelling is applicable.*

Keywords: transmedia storytelling, self-help literature, non-fiction, psy-culture, social media

BookTok, a highly influential viral subculture on the social media platform TikTok, began gaining traction around 2019, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Birke and Fehrle; Grady). This period also marked a renewed surge in the popularity and cultural relevance of self-help literature (LaRosa). Yet, when considering processes of adaptation, the connection to psy-culture, that is, a culture influenced by the language and knowledge of psychiatry, psychology, and psychotherapy, is not immediately apparent. Nonetheless, psy-culture has become increasingly visible across both traditional media and digital platforms (Nehring et al.). While physical bookstores continue to devote extensive shelf space to self-help titles, users on social media platforms like TikTok and Reddit are just as likely to turn to short-form videos or discussion threads to assess whether they are struggling with unhealthy attachment styles or merely experiencing bad luck in their dating lives.

The idea that therapeutic culture has taken root in America has been around almost as

long as psychology itself, the lines between the popular and the psychological already having begun to blur by the second half of the twentieth century (Madsen). By the 1970s it was feared that mental health had become "the secularised replacement for salvation in a society" (Madsen 17). A fear, which seems to have become at least a partial reality, for as Rami Gabriel defines, "self-help [as] a continuation of and contemporary substitute for wisdom traditions, philosophy, theology, and religion" (90). The predominantly anxious historical attitude towards psychology, however, has recently been replaced by a more positive but nonetheless critical curiosity (Madsen). With leading scholars such as Eva Illouz asserting that important insights regarding the spread of ideas, the creation of meanings and strategies for daily life can be gained from the study of therapeutic culture and its products such as self-help literature.

Nevertheless, one main point of criticism continues to be the fact that today's popular psychological discourse still centers on the dichotomy of normal versus abnormal. Heidi

Rimke and Deborah Brock emphasize that “[o]ur cultural beliefs and practices about what it means to be a human being in the early 21st century hinge on the idea that there is this objective thing called ‘normal’ that we should all strive for” (182). According to Philip Reiff, this sense of objectivity relates back to the therapeutic having a long history of being perceived as “the symbolic truth of the present age” (XII). Ian Parker goes as far as to assert that “[p]sychotherapy is now hegemonic as a form of commonsense about the nature of the self and it operates as a form of ideology—as banalised psychiatry, ‘pop-psychology’” (108). These notions of commonsense are viewed as the catalyst for what Rimke and Brock in turn refer to as the ever decreasing “spectrum of normalcy” (182), which leads to the consumption of self-help products in a bid to (re)gain a sense of happiness and ‘normality’ to remain within the socially accepted end of the spectrum.

One of the spaces where consumers engage in the resulting so-called self-improvement-journeys is the digital sphere. Social media sites in particular have become fluid spaces in which normality is continuously constructed and enacted by its users (Panteli and Marder). Due to this process, self-help books can no longer be considered in isolation, as the lines between the text and the digital sphere are blurring increasingly due to consumer behavior and general processes of media convergence, exemplified by phenomena such as BookTok. Grassroots transmedia storytelling, as a practice that is both born out of media convergence and encourages it, suddenly becomes a practice worth investigating in the context of products related to pop-psychology.

This contribution focuses primarily on the social media sites TikTok and Reddit due to their popularity and the fact that most of their respective active users are based in the United States (Delacorte; Shewale; “Reddit User and Growth Stats”). Although often mistakenly perceived as a small player, Reddit outperforms other seemingly more prominent sites such as X, formerly known as Twitter, in the United States (ibid.). In addition, the very different user experiences and affordances offered by both of these social media sites allow insights

into the role of the medium in the context of fan engagement and transmedia processes.

Reddit is a forum-style social media platform built around user-generated content in the form of text posts, links, and images. It operates through a decentralized system and is organized into user-moderated communities known as subreddits (e.g. r/books, r/self-help) which foster specialized discussions on niche topics. Discovery is therefore rooted in the subreddit structure rather than personalized feeds. Content visibility is determined both by the online community’s engagement and the individual users’ interaction with previous posts. The platform does not offer a formal creator monetization program. Though Reddit’s viral potential is slower compared to platforms like TikTok, it wields considerable cultural and informational influence, especially within grassroots movements and subcultural discourse. Its impact is built on authentic, community-driven conversations and subcultural narratives due to its anonymity or pseudonymity. Reddit is especially popular in the United States and Canada (Delacorte).

TikTok on the other hand is characterized by short-form video content, primarily delivered through an algorithm. Content is loosely organized by hashtags and trends, and user interaction consists of likes, comments, shares, duets, and stitches.[] While the platform is largely centralized and governed by AI-driven content moderation, it maintains a public-facing, profile-centered structure. The platform’s rapid content circulation allows for extremely fast viral potential. It has become the primary driver of internet culture and a dominant force in the digital media landscape, especially in the United States, significantly shaping digital trends, music, and commerce (Delacorte). It strongly incentivizes content creation via monetization opportunities. Additionally, TikTok has emerged as a launchpad for viral subcultures, such as #BookTok, which has been instrumental in turning numerous titles into bestsellers.

The books that form the case studies of this investigation of transmedia processes in the context of American psy-culture are US author Sherry Argov’s self-help book *Why Men Love Bitches* (2000) and Canadian psychologist Jordan B. Peterson’s *12 Rules for Life* (2018)

alongside a few other textual examples which are mentioned briefly to provide a broader picture of related transmedia processes. These two primary examples have been chosen because both purposefully polarize and are therefore known to incite (fan) reaction and engagement. In terms of methodology, to locate relevant user-generated content on both TikTok and Reddit, the book titles and authors' names were entered into the respective search bar alongside search terms such as #whymenlovebeaches, #attractionprinciples, #whymenlovebitchesbook, #12rulesforlife etc. Due to the explicit terminology used in Argov's title, social media users sometimes have had to resort to amended versions of the title to avoid the deletion of their content. However, since not all posts on TikTok use hashtags only a portion of existing posts could be accessed for study.

Argov's globally best-selling book is specifically aimed at female readers looking for relationship advice and has regained immense popularity two decades after first hitting the market due to an ongoing debate across social media platforms. [] It presents itself as a guide for women seeking to assert power and respect in dating and relationships. Central to the book's thesis is the provocative reclamation of the term "bitch," which Argov uses to signify a woman who prioritizes her own needs, boundaries, and emotional independence. She constructs her vision of the ideal woman as an opposite to a type of person she refers to as the "doormat," i.e. a meek woman who does not follow Argov's advice and can subsequently expect to be mistreated. While the book purports to offer a feminist reimagining of relationship dynamics, its framework remains grounded in essentialist assumptions about masculinity and femininity, reinforcing stereotypical representations. Men are depicted as emotionally simplistic and reward-driven, while women are encouraged to seek power through manipulation, strategic withholding of intimacy, and the performance of femininity. Like many other self-help texts, the book relies on anecdotal case studies and generalized advice, often framed in binary, heteronormative terms. It is structured around so called "attraction principles," which are essentially rules the reader should follow to

both become and remain attractive to men. Despite the book's age and its often-problematic messaging, its popular appeal and social media presence, which has neither been cultivated by the author nor the publishing house, has not yet waned.

While Jordan B. Peterson's text is newer, it is both equally as successful and controversial as Argov's, though it in turn is especially popular among adolescent and adult male demographics. Peterson's *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (2018) presents a series of prescriptive life principles grounded in a blend of Jungian psychology, evolutionary theory, Christian moralism, and cultural critique. Positioned as a corrective to what Peterson perceives as the decline of traditional values and the rise of ideological relativism, the book promotes individual discipline, personal responsibility, and hierarchical order as antidotes to societal and existential instability. While it has garnered significant popular attention, its arguments also rely on anecdotal evidence, selective historical interpretation, and essentialist assumptions about gender, hierarchy, and human nature. Critics have noted the book's rhetorical reliance on binary oppositions (e.g., order vs. chaos, masculine vs. feminine) and its tendency to universalize Western, patriarchal, value systems under the guise of psychological insight. Peterson's self-help book reflects broader cultural and political fears rather than offering an inclusive framework for personal development. As such, both chosen literary examples not only reflect different trends and anxieties within American psy-culture but also represent texts which have found their way into the digital sphere due to their controversial nature.

This article argues that, although seemingly distinct, the analogue and digital manifestations of psy-discourse, namely self-help literature and its related social media content, are not only products of the current cultural zeitgeist but can also be understood through processes of transmediality. It explores the applicability of the different criteria which make up Henry Jenkins' concept of transmedia storytelling to self-help literature, using the abovementioned best-selling American self-help books and their online presence as examples. I conclude that the

concept of transmedia storytelling is applicable to self-help literature and related grassroots online activities when slightly modified to make allowances for non-fiction and that it can be a useful tool to reflect on processes related to pop-psychology in the digital sphere. However, which aspects of transmedia storytelling apply and to what degree seems to be partially determined by the nature of the original text which is being extended online.

1. Transmedia Storytelling Literature Review

When initially defining transmedia storytelling in the early 2000s, Henry Jenkins focused on how coherent stories that expanded “across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world” were created, describing it as “a more integrated approach to franchise development than models based on urtexts and ancillary products” (“Quentin Tarantino’s *Star Wars*?” 293). Jenkins’ more recent definitions describe transmedia storytelling as a “logic for thinking about the flow of content across media” (2011). He reiterates that transmedia storytelling includes the systematic dispersion for the creation of a coordinated experience, further stating that it “refers to a set of choices made about the best approach to tell a particular story to a particular audience in a particular context depending on the particular resources available to particular producers” (ibid.). The newer definitions thus continue to contain the original implication that transmediality requires a thought-out, systematic approach which in turn entails a need for official authorial or managerial control.

Despite criticism pertaining to said implication and the resulting limitations of the initial definitions of transmedia storytelling, scholars have used the concept in connection with fan-created works. Among others, Suzanne Scott argues that it is not necessary for a text to be conceived “as a transmedia story [for it] to function as a cultural activator, as fans have been unofficially unfolding narratives across multiple media platforms for generations” (267). She states that the eagerness to “decipher, speculate, and expand has always been affiliated with fans’ textual play and production, filling in narrative

gaps and exploring textual excesses through the creation of fanfiction, fanart, vids, and role-playing games” (ibid. 267). Similarly, Louisa Stein argues that “automatically assigning the commercial ‘source’ central importance” in the transmedia debate is the wrong way to approach the subject matter (73). She states that in some cases the original text is simply “a kernel of inspiration, a jumping off point, so to speak” which can inspire a continuously expanding transtext which only retains a small portion of the ‘original’ work (Stein 73). Thus, far from being coordinated or unified the content resulting from fan participation is often not just immense but also contradictory (Booth; Stein). Despite the lack of coordination, scholars have observed that fan-created transmedia texts such as fan videos can fundamentally impact how narratives are understood to an extent which sometimes surpasses the official source text since the unauthorized, creative additions can become part of the franchise, enlarging the fictional world and its narrative (Booth; Stein).

While the abovementioned transmedia research focusing on fan activities challenges the notion that transmedia storytelling must be centrally organized and unified, research focusing on non-fiction has a different bone to pick with the initial definition. Among others, Susan Kerrigan and J. T. Velikovsky challenge “transmedia’s explicit reference to fictional story universes” (250) via an in-depth analysis of non-fiction. They conclude that the characteristics exhibited by non-fiction transmedia are identical to those of fictional transmedia forms, thus claiming that the same definition can be utilized and that non-fiction transmedia “is an extant and ever-increasing phenomenon” (255). The latter assertion is echoed by Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, who found that the realm of non-fiction has incorporated and adapted the same practices as its fictional counterpart. However, it is important to note that not all types of non-fiction were studied with equal intensity. While the interplay of audiovisual non-fiction and interactive transmedia (Gifreu-Castells et al.) as well as transmedia and journalism (Rampazzo Gambarato) have been explored, non-fiction narratives like self-help literature have so far been absent from the debate.

When investigating transmedia storytelling in the context of non-fiction, Renira Rampazzo Gambarato and Lorena Tárzia defined the phenomenon as follows:

In sum, we consider that transmedia [...] in fictional and nonfictional realms, is characterized by the involvement of (1) multiple media platforms, (2) content expansion, and (3) audience engagement. [...] Content expansion, as opposed to the repetition of the same message across multiple platforms, is the essence of TS [...]. The enrichment of the narrative is facilitated by the extended content. Audience engagement involves mechanisms of interactivity, such as the selection of the elements to be explored, [...] and share information through social networks. (1386)

This definition is of course significantly shorter than Jenkins', narrowing a multitude of criteria down to three central aspects. To comprehensively assess whether transmedia storytelling is applicable in the context of transformative non-fiction such as self-help; the more complex definition is favored in the analysis.

2. Analysis of Self-Help Related Social Media Content Against Jenkins' Criteria of Transmedia Storytelling

Rather than separating the analysis into two case studies, a comparative approach utilizing Jenkins' multifaceted criteria for transmedia storytelling to assess the various forms of (fan) engagement with advice literature on TikTok and Reddit was used. To establish a foundation for comparison, diverse sources have been consulted and synthesized, as Jenkins' framework is dispersed across multiple works including monographs and blog posts, reflecting its development over time. The following discussion elaborates on the key aspects identified within Jenkins' writings, i.e. spreadability and drillability, continuity and multiplicity, immersion and extractability, worldbuilding, seriality, subjectivity, and performance, and considers their relevance

and applicability to the expansion of self-help literature into the digital sphere through unauthorized grassroots content, to determine the extent to which they conform to transmedia characteristics. Viewed as a whole, it becomes apparent that certain characteristics are better suited to understanding Argov's reception, while others more clearly describe the online response to Peterson's text.

Spreadability versus Drillability

Spreadability is described as the ability to "engage actively in the circulation of media content through social networks and in the process expand its economic value and cultural worth" (Jenkins, "Revenge of the Origami Unicorn"). This criterion of transmedia storytelling lends itself seamlessly to the discussion of self-help literature on social media platforms because the resulting content is inevitably viewed by an audience of other potential consumers whereby a text's economic value is certainly expanded.

However, spreadability is also prevalent as an isolated phenomenon when it comes to self-help books on TikTok and Reddit. The majority of the observed video-based content advertises one or more books, not going into much detail beyond naming titles, the table of contents, the books' focus, short quotes or chapter summaries [] In many but not all cases this precludes content expansion whereby the other criteria of transmedia storytelling remain unfulfilled, this described type of content essentially being nothing more than unauthorized advertisement which is limited to superficial engagement with the books' subject matter, if any. When Argov's and Petersons works are considered, both this superficial as well as in-depth user engagement can be found on Reddit and TikTok. Especially in Argov's case the inherent spreadability of the book seems to be a contributing factor to its lasting presence and continued relevance despite its comparatively old age.

The countervailing (but not mutually exclusive) principle, drillability, a term coined by Jason Mittell, describes a process reminiscent of Neil Young's additive comprehension, referring to the extent to which a new part adds to the understanding of the transmedia story in its entirety (Jenkins,

“Revenge of the Origami Unicorn”; Jenkins, “Transmedia 202”). Among other aspects, a drillable text is typically characterized by “narrative complexity”, “playful chronology, and deliberate ambiguity and confusion” (Mittell, “Forensic Fandom and the Drillable Text”). These attributes are said to inspire a “mode of forensic fandom”, meaning that a smaller group of readers/viewers will typically invest more time and energy to investigate and understand the complex story which is being told (ibid.).

Peterson’s *12 Rules for Life* demonstrates how the concepts of spreadability and drillability are not necessarily mutually exclusive. When video-based fan content is considered, the concept of spreadability seems the most applicable of the two as most self-help literature lives from its inherent accessibility, comprehensible language, short thematically structured chapters and clear messaging, with some books even using the aid of graphs, pictures or simplistic lists of instructions (e.g. Argov; Barrett; Eggerue; Manson), all of these attributes translating well to the digital sphere. However, this does not imply that the concept of drillability is null and void in the context of self-help literature’s adaptation. Texts, such as Jordan Peterson’s *12 Rules for Life*, seemingly provoke fans to drill due to the convoluted writing style and sometimes almost incomprehensible message. This, in turn not only sparks different online engagement, both by fans and critics than that provoked by a spreadable text but in most observed cases also the use of a different social medium, in this case Reddit rather than TikTok.

Although the title of Peterson’s book sounds straight forward enough, using the genre’s common trope of numbered rules for success, the content is anything but. While the text proclaims to be “An Antidote to Chaos” (Peterson cover), it features chaotic chapter titles which seem deliberately disconnected from the chapters content and commonsense advice. This sentiment is echoed by readers both on TikTok and Reddit. A user on TikTok states: “I’m trying to read this right now and I’m having such a hard time focusing on it. The lengthy, text-book writing is so rough. [...] Does this get easier to read?” This rough writing itself is sometimes enough to create a need for readers to engage in

online discussions and seek the aid of collective intelligence to decipher the book’s content. []

Consumers turning towards Reddit in this endeavor mirrors previous observations regarding the practices relating to drillable texts. As a primarily writing based platform Reddit shares certain characteristics with a Wiki, a type of medium known to be favored by forensic fandoms (Mittell, “Forensic Fandom and the Drillable Text”; Mittell, “Sites of Participation”). Subreddits in this context can focus on self-help as a genre, particular authors or individual publications and their advice as well as personal reading experiences, questions or criticism. Contrary to this, the observed fan-made videos on TikTok focusing on Peterson’s text do not engage with it meaningfully, only reading out the twelve chapter headings for example, while the situation on Reddit looks entirely different. [] The entries are generally characterized by the original poster (OP) asking a question or providing a prompt which sets in motion lengthy discussions in the comment section which outdo TikTok’s comment sections with regard to detail and argumentative continuity. Here, the OP inhabits a role more compatible with the type of activities associated with drillability as the focus is less on the creator of a video, who seems to function as a secondary authority figure after the author on TikTok, and more on the shared experiences connected to the text. Reddit thus includes the deep dives into *12 Rules for Life* that TikTok seems to lack, with hundreds of readers debating issues such as the accuracy of the text’s German translation (NanashiSC).

However, due to Peterson being such a controversial figure, a distinction must be made between posts focusing on his writing and him as a public figure. For example, content creator and American college professor Neil Shyminsky, who goes by *Professor Neil* on his social media platforms and has accumulated 419K followers and 29.6M likes on TikTok alone at the time of writing, discusses Peterson frequently. While his account does feature a scathing review of *12 Rules for Life* which generated around 42K views, most of the mentioned content primarily focuses on Peterson’s public personae, interviews, and politics. Similarly, there are whole subreddits dedicated to Peterson which

either mock or worship him and his teachings. In this case the author's image as well as his polarizing patriarchal political views become part of the transmedia story, which warrants further investigation but goes beyond the scope of this contribution. []

While proving that drillability is possible when it comes to transformative non-fiction, Reddit also delivers the explanation as to why Peterson's book is one of the few self-help texts which do not seem to gel with formats conducive to the more favored practices related to content expanding spreadability. In the context of a book discussion on Reddit the user *LibertyMaestro* describes *12 Rules for Life* as "neither a scientific paper nor a self-help book" (*LibertyMaestro*). This user's comment mirrors the findings that Peterson's book breaks with most of the tropes and structural characteristics commonly found in self-help literature while nevertheless belonging to the genre since its primary aim is that of giving life advice. Interestingly, the inaccessible language and structure do not seem to hinder its overall popularity as it is often viewed as a natural consequence of the author's status as an academic, which reinforces the perceived validity of his advice. In sum, self-help literature can be both spreadable and/or drillable with the former being the more common mode of engagement of the two. In this context, the book, i.e. the kernel of inspiration which incites fans to participate, not only determines which of the two is enacted but also which medium is utilized to do so.

Continuity and Multiplicity

Jenkins states that transmedia franchises either establish and perpetuate "a very strong sense of 'continuity' which contributes to [the recipients] appreciation of the 'coherence' and 'plausibility' of their fictional worlds" or lean into multiplicity which "allows fans to take pleasure in alternative retellings, seeing the characters and events from fresh perspectives" ("Revenge of the Origami Unicorn"). In the context of advice, the aspects of continuity and multiplicity take on a different role, namely that of truth or falsehood. As already mentioned, therapeutic discourse has a history of being perceived as truth (Rieff),

which leaves little wiggle room for fans. There are no alternative versions or parallel universes when it comes to advice as it is meant to be taken seriously and perceived as worthwhile. While one could say that unfavorable reactions to a text could constitute multiplicity, I would disagree as this type of content is meant to discourage others from either buying the book in the first place or enacting the advice contained therein. Instead of providing an alternate entry point to the text, this type of critical post or video constitutes something more akin to an immediate exit.

Continuity, however, is frequently established by the content creators not just extending but also reinforcing the advice the author provides. TikTok accounts such as *Kyraevanshughes* (117.7K followers, 11M likes), who describes herself as "ur internet big sis 4 the girls" (Evans Hughes "Profile") or *Excelrasanen* (67.4K followers, 3.5M likes) frequently engage in this practice. Both of these TikTok accounts feature multiple videos dealing with Argov's book *Why Men Love Bitches* which were uploaded over the course of several months, the most popular of which have gained around half a million views each. These virtual book clubs deal with Argov's text in instalments and are ongoing, the latest addition on Excelrasanen's account having been posted as recently as the 3rd of June 2025 (ExcelRasanen, "If You Don't Have").

Aside from these similarities, the videos uploaded by these two women also follow a similar pattern. The TikToker will hold a physical copy of the text, a practice noted for being part of the performance of bookishness (Birke and Fehrle), read a passage out loud before proceeding to elaborate how this advice is unquestionably true and how it relates to their own dating lives and experiences. Both accounts also frequently share "embarrassing" stories concerning their dating history to highlight where Argov's advice would have saved the day, or patterns of behavior they no longer engage in due to insights gained through Argov's text (Evans Hughes, "Dating Advice;" ExcelRasanen, "Attraction Principle"). The book's central dichotomy of the "bitch" versus the "doormat" is embraced and reaffirmed by the content creators, lending their endorsement to the text. Inflammatory passages

which could discourage viewers from continuing to show interest in the book and/or videos, such as Argov's claim that "[w]hen a woman chases a man, it has the same effect as if she were to deliver a dead moose to his front door" (27), are never featured in the curated social media content. Excelrasanen's account also prominently features her videos on Argov's book as a playlist at the top of her page, making it a part of her own brand identity and allowing her followers access to these clips without having to scroll through unrelated content.

Other accounts, like *Grant.a.wyatt* (92.4K followers, 1.1M likes), a self-proclaimed HR professional, investor and author, content themselves with reading out the attraction principals contained in Argov's book and looking meaningfully into the camera while suspenseful music plays in the background (Wyatt).¹² While not as successful as the previously mentioned examples in terms of views, these videos nevertheless generate engagement in the comment section where other users detail their personal experiences, and Wyatt distributes comments and likes. While Wyatt's videos on Argov's text do not contribute additional anecdotal evidence they provide an additional layer of male endorsement to the primary text. As the primary source is tailor made for a crowd to which traditional gender ideals remain significant, said endorsement is not inconsequential. It seemingly provides a male perspective on a book by a female author which tells other women how men supposedly think. Although examples of male friends litter the book to pre-empt a need for external male approval, the audio-visual, intimate nature of these TikTok videos nevertheless manages to heighten this effect.

Influencer content thus extends the breadth of a self-help text either through anecdotal evidence which provides a sense of legitimacy to the author's claims or by treating them as truisms through serious delivery and the implication of approval. Although both types of content are unauthorized, the authority and significance of the author is consistently maintained through the recitation of parts of the original text, sometimes even including page numbers, or by using a hardcopy of the text as a prop which symbolizes

familiarity with its content. The comment sections provide an additional opportunity for engagement as well as further anecdotal evidence provided by users.

Performance and Activism

Jenkins borrows and extends Pierre Lévy's terminology in order to discuss how transmedia texts can function both as a 'cultural attractor' and 'cultural activator' by gathering diverse communities, creating commonalities and providing a task for them to complete (*Convergence Culture*; "Revenge of the Origami Unicorn"). This definition works well when it comes to self-help related texts. The attractor in this case is the problem the reader is trying to fix, i.e. the reason why the advice is needed and sought out in the first place. The activator, in turn, is responding to the text's call to action, starting the process of fixing the problem and applying the advice provided by the author and/or influencer. Micro-influencer Kyraevanshughes stating that "we are all working on this together" when she talks about *Why Men Love Bitches* in the context of her own and her followers' dating journeys demonstrates this nicely (Evans Hughes "Brutally Honest"). The aspect of collective intelligence is again relevant here as social media users "tap each other's expertise as they work together to solve problems" (Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101").

While Jenkins initially suggests that transmedia activism can be understood "as a logical extension both of performance and the tension between extractability and immersion" ("Revenge of the Origami Unicorn"), he later describes transmedia activism as its own logic, existing alongside transmedia storytelling instead of being a part thereof. Either way, this overlap of transmediality and activism can be observed when contemporary self-help content is considered. Self-help books often tend to perpetuate an author-activist's agenda and extend their respective brand which in turn influences and shapes the resulting online content. A large spectrum of self-help related author activism is to be found on American best-seller lists, spanning from proudly conservative examples such as the manifesto/self-help

book by senator Josh Hawley, *Manhood: The Masculine Virtues America Needs* (2023), to bell hooks contributions which reflect her anti-capitalist, socialist ideals. In this regard both Argov's and Peterson's books fall into the category of texts which perpetuate conservative ideology to a differing degree, with Argov concealing essentialist gender ideology under the guise of female empowerment. Interestingly, the question whether the canon of American self-help literature primarily features conservative ideology has also generated discussions on Reddit, again reflecting the merging of analogue and digital psy-culture and social medias role as a conduit. [] This intertwining of self-help literature and activism in America warrants further investigation and is beyond the scope at this point in time.

Worldbuilding

When Jenkins talks about worldbuilding, he means the creation of a narrative that extends beyond any single story, medium, or text:

The concept of world building [...] represent[s] ways for consumers to engage more directly with the worlds represented in the narratives, treating them as real spaces which intersect in some way with our own lived realities. [...] fleshing out our understanding of the institutions and practices. (Jenkins, "Revenge of the Origami Unicorn")

Consequently, he stresses that worldbuilding creates a porous boundary between fiction and reality. However, aside from Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* (1988), most advice literature makes a point of asserting its status as non-fiction, thereby staking a claim to reality rather than fictional worlds or universes. Both Argov's and Peterson's books present themselves as such, proclaiming that their book's advice is largely based on scientific knowledge, their own personal experiences or that of family and friends. Nevertheless, consumers of self-help content can and do partake in fleshing out their understanding of our own world's institutions and practices as presented by the author and/

or online community who pick up on the book's ideas.

While self-help books are thus not fictional per se, they do construct an imagined world in the sense that they offer a specific vision of reality that recipients are invited to inhabit and enact. Conservative texts, such as Argov's and Peterson's publications, not only give advice but simultaneously attempt to present a coherent worldview which redefines institutions and self-practices. In their case, this includes a set of assumptions about how the human mind and society as a whole work, as well as a roadmap to success. Both Argov and Peterson encourage their readers to accept their worldview as common sense and to imagine themselves as characters within it, following the narrative arc of self-improvement, often using narrative techniques like recurring archetypes (Argov's "doormat" and "dream girl," or Peterson's use of the dichotomy of "order versus chaos," or "the hero," etc.). Everyday practices and institutions, like the workplace or family, are consequently reconstructed as sites where the self can be optimized, whether the aim is to enthrall and keep a romantic partner or to achieve general familial and professional success.

Online communities and social media "success stories" then extend that world transmedially, further broadening and simultaneously reaffirming the shared symbols, rituals, and language, reinforcing its coherence and helping others enact its values. Thus, while the transmedia texts "world" is ostensibly real, self-help content reshapes it into a narrativized space where certain logics and moral orders prevail. Transmedial self-help thus engages in a kind of ideological or participatory process of didactic worldbuilding, constructing a semi-fictional version of the world where its particular model of self makes sense.

Immersion versus Extractability

The previously discussed aspect of worldbuilding is not only central to the concept of transmedia storytelling but also closely connected to immersion. Immersion, defined as "the ability of consumers to enter into fictional worlds" (Jenkins, "Revenge of the Origami

Unicorn”), may seem deceptively irrelevant in the context of self-help, since the genre’s primary purpose is not escapism but the presentation of a roadmap for self-improvement and positive change within the reader’s lived reality. However, if worldbuilding is reinterpreted as the construction of a worldview rather than a fictional universe, immersion becomes both applicable and significant in the context of transmedial self-help. In this sense, the goal of immersion is not the reader’s or viewer’s pleasure, but rather its function as a tool for personal growth and transformation.

The countervailing principle of extractability which is defined by Jenkins as “the ability of fans to take aspects of the story away with them as resources they deploy in the spaces of their everyday life” (“Revenge of the Origami Unicorn”) accidentally captures a crucial and inherent aspect of the self-help genre, both in its transmedia manifestations and its analogue forms. This connection seems almost self-evident: self-help literature that does not offer extractable advice ultimately fails in its purpose to help. Consequently, it is unsurprising that online discussions of major self-help texts, such as those by Argov and Peterson, focus predominantly on the extractability and applicability of the advice they contain, while immersion is rarely addressed explicitly. Yet, when self-help is considered through a transmedial lens, immersion can be understood as a prerequisite for extractability, since online communities often begin by adopting elements of the author’s worldview before extracting, sharing, and discussing the specific advice and its impact on their lives.

Seriality

Another key feature of transmedia storytelling is seriality. According to Jenkins, the majority of transmedia stories is serial in structure (“Transmedia Logics and Locations”), meaning that “chunks of meaningful and engaging story information have been dispersed [...] across multiple media systems” (“Revenge of the Origami Unicorn”).

Both considered examples of self-help literature began as self-contained, stand-alone

publications. Consequently, neither makes use of cliffhangers nor other techniques typically associated with seriality since the focus lies on solutions to psychological or social problems, rather than on the creation of narrative suspense. However, despite their initial stand-alone character both texts later gained sequels, namely Argov’s *Why Men Marry Bitches: A Woman’s Guide to Winning Her Man’s Heart* (2006) and Peterson’s *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life* (2021). This does not, however, qualify as seriality since the later additions did not make use of multiple media systems.

Although these two self-help books were not originally conceived as part of a series, they facilitate and enable transmedial seriality through their structure since both authors deliver their messages as “chunks” of information. Peterson divides his worldview into 12 rules while Argov lists 100 “attraction principals”, supposed truisms which litter her book. This type of structure is commonplace in self-help literature, as it allows the reader to gain quick access to information perceived as relevant and discard the rest. This genre-specific structural characteristic in turn enables readers and content creators to easily deconstruct and extend the original text online. For example, accounts like Kyraevanshughes and Excelrasanen break up Argov’s book into individual instalments using her “attraction principles” as a guideline which are then extended and elaborated on. The resulting videos can either be self-contained and/or belong to a thematically structured book-club-style series and establish the seriality which the texts previously lacked.

Subjectivity and Intimacy

Subjectivity is said to be given when transmedia texts “focus on unexplored dimensions of the fictional world” (Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling 101”), “broaden the timeline” or “show [...] the experiences and perspectives of secondary characters” (Jenkins, “Revenge of the Origami Unicorn”). Although allegorical figures like Argov’s “doormat”, the epitome of everything her reader should aspire to avoid or Peterson’s “lobster”, an essentialist metaphor for hierarchy, confidence, and order,

litter self-help books, characters in the traditional sense seem to become redundant. The readers are therefore unable to compare and contrast an array of subjective retellings of the same fictional events by various characters.

However, social media enables users to compare aspects of their lived reality, personal experiences, and emotions with the thoughts and encounters shared by the author, OP, other commenters, or influencers. This shift in the understanding of subjectivity parallels the process described by Rampazzo Gambarato and Tárzia in transmedia journalism, where the journalist and the audience assume roles typically occupied by characters in fictional transmedia narratives. A similar dynamic emerges in self-help: the author and online community take on roles akin to characters. This process is particularly evident with micro-influencers, such as the TikTok accounts Kyraevanshughes and Excelrasanen, whose closer, more homogenous relationships with their followers position them as perceived experts in specific fields (Bousquet; Hawley & Ismail), in this case, dating and Sherry Argov's publications.

For example, in her video on Argov's tenth attraction principle, which claims that women who pursue men will alienate them, the content creator Excelrasanen establishes both subjectivity and continuity by detailing how knowledge of this supposed truism would have been helpful in the past and telling the story of a personal dating disaster which seems to prove Argov's point:

I matched with a guy on hinge [...] it was date number three when things went to shit. And I'm gonna tell you exactly how that happened. First of all, there was no actual plan for the third date [...] he randomly messages me, like 'hey what are you up to later? Want to meet up?' and I was just like 'hmm okay, yeah why not?' That was another mistake [...] because I was extremely attracted to him, [...] I started putting a lot of pressure on the situation very quickly. [...] The desperation was wrecking. [...] So here is me running around stressing, getting ready, trying to find some place to go, while he's just literally chilling, moseying around doing God knows what.

(Excel Rasanen "Attraction Principle")

She details how her overly eager attitude shifted "the energy" between them. Ultimately, the connection faded, and the man left the country. Excelrasanen attributes this outcome to her own behavior, asking the viewer, "Why did I not have this book sooner?" (ibid.). She thus frames the entire experience as evidence supporting Argov's principle that a woman who chases a man will inevitably drive him away, subsequently adding another anecdote to the already extensive catalogue of anecdotal evidence. This "native format of short, punchy videos and culture of casual chattiness combine to create an atmosphere of intense intimacy between content creators and their audience," according to Constance Grady, a point echoed in Crystal Abidin's findings on the emotional bonds formed between Instagrammers and their followers. Together, these observations underscore the affective dimension of participatory subjectivity as it operates on social media platforms like TikTok.

In turn, the Reddit thread "12 rules for a life that no longer exists" paints a picture of a community of readers wrestling with the continued applicability of Peterson's text in the current political climate (No-Candy-4554). The posts reflect both continued appreciation as well as some users' growing disillusionment with the book and its philosophy. Several users emphasize that the book's core messages such as taking personal responsibility, surrounding oneself with supportive people, and working on one's own life before criticizing the world have helped them improve their behavior, mindset, and social relationships. Some also comment that consciously practicing the rules changed how they saw themselves and how others treated them. On the other hand, many reflect that the book's ideal of a disciplined, morally anchored, self-governed life proves difficult to realize or sustain for them personally. Overall, the thread captures a nuanced exchange, filled with multiple experiences by readers/users which function as a non-fiction substitute for stories told by secondary characters and offers a wider range of subjective experiences than the previously mentioned example on TikTok, which

mainly focusses on a single perspective. Reddit threads like these have been found to feature affective engagement due to the anonymous nature of the site which fosters honest and intimate exchanges despite Grady's claim that blog posts cannot compare to "the visceral force of [...] a real person's tearstained face as they sob over their favorite books."

Grady's statement regarding the impact of tears also does not hold true here as the videos about self-help literature must in fact remain tear-free in order for the TikToker to be perceived as reliable and stable. Instead, TikTokers dealing with advice literature encourage the perception of intimacy through alternative visual means, e.g. by inviting the viewer into their personal spaces like a bathroom in a GRWM (get ready with me) format or their room while they are sitting on their bed. Eye masks, unmade hair and a hoodie are sometimes utilized to emphasize the casual sense of intimacy in Excelrasanen's content for example. In most videos the camera focusses on the TikTokers face and upper body as well as the book which hardly leaves the frame, the cover being held into the camera to reassert the connection to the original material and further stress important points.

The content creators thus successfully close a gap between reader and author that otherwise remains unbridgeable while remaining true to the source material and performing approachability. Thus, instead of another fictional character's perspective the reader/viewer of self-help book fan content receives an extradiegetic perspective which often continues the argument made in the primary text while simultaneously extending and legitimizing it, a process which is not only a suitable non-fiction equivalent but also characterized by an additional layer of emotional connection due to the perceived intimacy and honesty on platforms such as TikTok or Reddit.

Conclusion

The examples considered here of social media's engagement with two American self-help texts demonstrate that the concept of transmedia storytelling as defined by Henry Jenkins is not just applicable to self-help literature and related online activities but also a

useful tool which helps to reflect on processes related to pop-psychology in the digital sphere. This includes insights pertaining to the spread of specific ideologies as well as strategies for daily life. Social media's engagement with self-help content reflects a form of grassroots transmediality that disseminates and reproduces ideological positions and (pseudo) psychological knowledge. Fan engagement does not merely adapt or reinterpret self-help messages; it can perpetuate decades-old advice and/or problematic identity constructs that are intended to be internalized and performed. Consequently, the ideological function of transmedial self-help content outweighs its narrative dimension.

Examples showed that the criteria of spreadability and drillability are relevant to the genre, with the mode of engagement being dictated by a text's style, complexity, and an online platform's affordances. Fast-paced, visually driven platforms like TikTok seem to be more conducive to spreadable content based on spreadable literature like Argov's, while more complex texts such as *12 Rules for Life* invite more analytical engagement on writing-based forums like Reddit. The genre-specific feature of self-help to deliver advice in bite-size pieces seems to be conducive to transmedia storytelling as it facilitates seriality since online communities can easily break the material into installments, extend it, and create thematic series. The self-help texts functioned as cultural attractors and activators, drawing in audiences through shared struggles and experiences. The fan-created TikTok content analyzed here also showed that continuity with the source text is maintained in spite of its grassroots nature by creators and users treating self-help literature's advice as truth, legitimizing it through personal anecdotes and symbolic performances of credibility. Here, social media can provide a space which blends personal transformation with more or less covert ideological activism, extending authorial influence while sometimes also sparking broader cultural conversations.

However, criteria like worldbuilding have to be approached differently in order to be workable for self-help. In line with Kerrigan and Velikovsky's conclusions on non-fiction transmedia, the idea that transmedia texts need to explicitly reference

fictional story universes must be disregarded in this context. Instead of building a fictional world, Argov's and Peterson's texts construct their own vision of reality, complete with assumptions about human behavior and societal hierarchies. Social media users further extend these worldviews transmedially, reinforcing shared symbols, practices, and moral frameworks. Consumers of both the books and/or online content are invited to inhabit this worldview and to extract its principles. In this way, self-help texts engage in participatory, didactic worldbuilding, shaping a semi-fictionalized version of reality where the author's model of the self is meaningful and actionable.

This slightly modified approach to worldbuilding also impacts aspects like immersion, which serves as a tool for personal growth rather than a process which provides pleasure in this case. The principle of extractability on the other hand is inherently tied to self-help, since advice must be actionable to fulfill the genre's purpose. Subsequently, online discussions emphasize extractable advice over immersion. Nevertheless, in relation to transmedial self-help, immersion can be seen as a prerequisite for extractability, as communities often first adopt the author's worldview before sharing it and its impact on their own lives.

These preliminary findings require further validation through the analysis of additional cases of transmedial self-help to more precisely capture the underlying dynamics, assess their reliability and generalizability, while also considering the genre's focus on real-world interpretation and collective meaning-making within the wider framework of American psy-culture. In addition, commercially produced transmedia self-help remains largely unexplored and warrants closer examination. Simultaneously, further research is needed on the monetization of grassroots transmedia storytelling within psy-culture. Although the analyzed videos showed no direct collaborations and their eligibility under TikTok's originality criteria remains unclear, the inclusion of store links and personal business websites in influencer profiles indicated an intent to monetize. Future studies should examine how creators use self-help content to build personal brands and drive engagement, shedding light on how

unauthorized material generates both economic and cultural value. Finally, it remains to be seen whether the observed phenomenon is specific to American-dominated platforms and texts or indicative of a broader, global transformation in participatory culture, an open question that calls for further inquiry.

Endnotes

[1] A duet is a video which is being displayed simultaneously and side-by-side with another creator's video; a stitch refers to a creator using 5 seconds of someone else's video as an introduction to their own content. Both features are typically used to comment on other people's content/opinion.

[2] The reader is referred to as "she."

[3] See, for example, Kris Selberg's analyses.

[4] For examples of this confusion, see Ruinvests and PlasKi0907.

[5] Giorgio's "1-Minute Books" provides a telling example.

[6] For an examples, see Professor Neil, along with other commentators on the subreddit dedicated to Jordan Peterson (<https://www.tiktok.com/@kyraevanshughes>).

[7] User 601juno provides such an example on the "Critical Theory" subreddit titled "Leftist Self-Help as Popular/Mainstream as Jordan Peterson?" (https://www.reddit.com/r/CriticalTheory/comments/nleb3e/leftist_selfhelp_as_popularmainstream_as_jordan/).

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