What is StoryJello?

There are more than 5 million book clubs in the US. A significant percentage of them follow the structure of a host taking the lead in discussion and organizing the gathering, and members share their thoughts on the questions or ideas posed to them. Being a host means one must come up with discussion prompts to start the conversation, think of a book based on the last discussion and interests of group members, and, sometimes, keep track of what was discussed. Regardless of the way the club is structured, we believe AI can be leveraged to assist the book hosts and strengthen the book club community by overcoming temporal constraints through engagement on a digital platform.

How does AI fit into the book clubs?

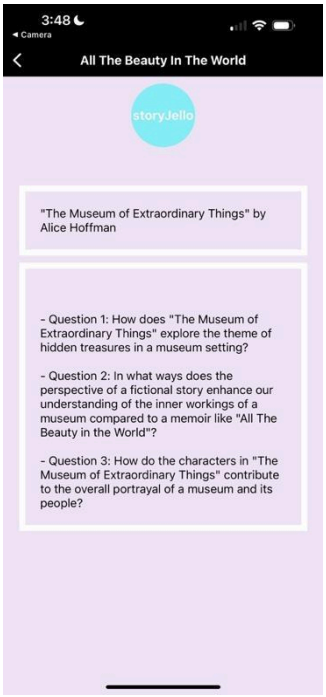
We set two objectives for ourselves to achieve using AI:

1. Improve the quality of discussion in a book club
2. Bring the book club community closer.

Objectives exploration:

We hypothesized that AI could be used to improve the quality of discussion in book clubs by providing more varied and thought-provoking questions. It also decreases the burden on the host to come up with discussion questions. Provided that the AI model is trained, using prompting or finetuning on example questions, we hoped that it would generate good questions. For this project, we passed Chat-GPT-4 a prompt including the summary of the book and asked it to generate the prompts based on its own knowledge of the book. We created an app interface that will only be visible to book club hosts, who can then shortlist questions. All members can vote on the shortlisted questions and the most popular ones are chosen.

Example discussion questions using the book, ‘All the Beauty in the World’:



Through our user feedback, we understood that different book clubs have their preferences for the kind of questions, ranging from casual to more academic. AI model can be used to generate all sorts of questions. The response we received for the discussion questions generated by StoryJello was overwhelmingly positive.

A large portion of book club member's experience is spent individually reading the book. For our both objectives, it was important that we integrated AI during that time as well to achieve our goal. Our solution for the first objective included sending notifications to users during the 'between meetings' period about interesting aspects of the book they were reading. We also think providing reading prompts – ideas to look out for while reading –- generated using AI can also help improve not only individual members' understanding but also the quality of discussion by having each member already thought along similar lines while reading.

The challenge for a book club community is that they meet for significantly less time compared to the hours they spend reading for discussion. While unarguably most members who are part of the book club enjoy spending time reading, we think their experience could be even improved by being more connected with a tight community with similar interests. Examples of this are subreddits with a focus on novel series, Wattpad discussions, and Goodreads, where users go to read what other readers have to say and have casual discussions. The anonymity and open nature of these platforms do not allow tight communities to be fostered or bring all members of a book club in a physical space to a digital platform.

One potential solution, we thought, was that a blog-post style discussion forum could be created for members to read the summary of what they discussed and share more thoughts that they were not able to because of time constraints. This way we keep the community engaged even post-discussion and allow them to continue their conversation with the same readers. For our prototype, we passed in the transcript of a book club discussion and asked Chat-GPT-4 to generate a blog post based on the discussion.

Example blog post:

Further Development:

Given the response we received from the users we talked to, we conclude that AI can be used to achieve the two objectives mentioned earlier. Our product is a demonstration of the idea, and there are more ways it can be improved.

1. Using the RAG technique to improve the accuracy of the discussion questions. Passing in the entire documents and asking GPT to cross-reference with them for accuracy can decrease model hallucination and produce more specific responses.
2. A privacy layer API can be used while recording the book discussions so that personal information is obscured or filtered out. It can address the privacy concerns of the book club members.

Generally, the platform needs to incorporate design elements in a way that the barrier to using the platform and sharing thoughts is very low. The members should not feel that are doing an assigned task as part of their membership and should be interested in engaging, like on Reddit, Wattpad, Goodreads, etc.

Ethical Considerations and Challenges:

1. Copyright: LLMs have been trained on volumes of data from the internet. Some outlets have contested that to be copyright infringement. Since our app relies on available LLMs that might be trained on data from books or outlets without their permission, the ethical aspect of it needs to be considered.

2. Sourcing books: To improve the quality of questions, the actual content of the books is required. It means sourcing all the books by buying/licensing them before making them available to users or relying on LLMs, which is an ethical issue.
3. Privacy: In our user interviews, some participants pointed out that book clubs are also avenues where people talk about their personal lives and are vulnerable. It may make individuals uncomfortable that the conversation is being recorded. Developing a robust privacy layer is imperative to share the app with book clubs.

Overall, the feedback from users confirms our view that AI can indeed be used in book club settings to improve the quality of discussions and strengthen the community. Developing more on the addressed areas can alleviate user concerns and improve the product further.