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"Young Adult Books Don't Realize They Have that Power": Reader Response to Ideology in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction

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"Young Adult Books Don't Realize They Have that Power":
Reader Response to Ideology in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to find out how readers interact with novels in the Young Adult dystopian genre. I will examine the ways in which readers resist the dominant patriarchal ideological discourses in the YA dystopian novel and how readers submit to this ideology. Through an interaction with the text, the reader produces oppositional, negotiated, or preferred meanings. I will argue that readers' response to ideology in the YA dystopian novel is affected by their active participation in reader communities such as the Bookish community online.

YA dystopian fiction was highly popular in the early 2010s, but the genre has since experienced a steady decline in popularity. Despite the fact that fans of the genre are now flocking to YA fantasy and YA sci-fi, YA dystopia remains an important genre for them. YA dystopia has often been lauded for addressing serious and difficult topics such as the future of our planet and the fallout of war, disease, and other calamities. YA dystopia has also popularized the "Girl on Fire" trope of a fierce female protagonist, who performs a traditionally masculine gender role. However, YA dystopian novels also operate under tight constraints due to their implied adolescent reader. Although the YA dystopian genre promotes a progressive narrative to its reader that suggests that teenagers can start rebellions and young female characters can fight just as well as their male counterparts, this genre also contains an overwhelmingly heteronormative and conservative message. I conducted interviews with readers of YA dystopia to find out what appeals to them about this genre and what drives them away. The hermeneutical phenomenological research study conducted for this project has unearthed findings that pointed to the way the publishing industry underestimates the YA reader.

DEDICATION

Lapsammai.

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INTRODUCTION

YA dystopia is a genre that at one point captivated the attention of young readers as a cultural phenomenon. Novels such as Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* popularized the "badass female heroine" who leads rebellions and takes down corrupt governments. As such, YA dystopia has been lauded as a genre that examines sophisticated themes and contains social and political critique, allowing young readers to imagine themselves as capable of effecting change in their world as well. However, many YA dystopias, including *The Hunger Games*, contain conservative undertones. Since YA dystopia falls under the larger umbrella of Children's and Young Adult literature, it has certain limitations because the implied reader of this genre is an adolescent. To be sure, each specific text constructs a particular implied reader. However, tracing the common tropes and themes in YA dystopia reveals a common set of assumptions about a more general implied reader of this genre. This implied reader (or, in other words, the target audience) of YA dystopia can be described as an adolescent whose primary interest is in the heteronormative romance between the characters and who is less concerned with social and political commentary in the novel.

The purpose of this study is to explore the oppositional, negotiated, or preferred meanings that readers construct through their interactions with YA dystopian texts. According to John Fiske, oppositional meanings are those that resist the dominant ideological discourses in the novel (64). Negotiated meanings accept some of the ideologies at work in the YA dystopian novel but resist others. Preferred meanings refer to those, which the text would have the reader accept as natural without question thus accepting the ideology operating within the text. Namely, the aim of this project is to answer the following research question: does YA dystopia

successfully interpellate the reader into its patriarchal ideological system or is this ideology met with resistance from the reader? If so, how?

To address this research question, I have conducted a hermeneutical phenomenological study. I interviewed sixteen readers of YA dystopia to find out how they felt about the novels within this genre and how they responded to the patriarchal discourses in YA dystopian texts. The hermeneutical phenomenological approach was chosen because it places importance on the lived experience of the individual, which aligns with the goal of this study to explore the readers' reading experiences with YA dystopian novels.

As this research will show, the participants in this study were actively engaged in reader communities online. Exchanging views on books with other readers shaped the participants' reading experiences. I will therefore examine the Bookish online community on Instagram as one such space where readers share their opinions and provide recommendations and reviews on YA novels. Active engagement with other readers may offer avenues for some readers to develop more nuanced interpretations of texts and wider perspectives with which to approach novels.

Chapter 1 addresses the difference between dystopian literature written for an adult audience versus Young Adult dystopian literature as a sub-genre of Children's and Young Adult fiction. This chapter explains the specific constraints and limitations of YA dystopia considering the implied adolescent reader. By examining the tropes commonly found in YA dystopian novels, I will define the conservative limits of this genre as it reproduces some dominant ideological discourses. To better understand how YA dystopia performs ideological work, I will discuss the concept of ideology. Then, I will specifically address the patriarchy as an ideological system. Finally, this chapter will look at intersectionality as a helpful approach to deconstructing patriarchal discourses in YA dystopia.

Chapter 2 looks at the concept of the implied reader and constructs an image of the intended audience for the YA dystopian genre. This is done through an overview of the common themes and tropes found in YA dystopian novels that suggest what values and subject positions the implied reader is assumed to take in order to connect with the text. I will then juxtapose this image of the implied reader to the actual reader as an active agent in constructing meaning. Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reader response will inform my approach to the active reader. Transactional theory emphasizes the way the reader brings their lived experience to their encounter with a text as an event in their lives. I will then use a cultural studies approach to reader response as exemplified in John Fiske's discussion of active audiences. The concepts of oppositional, negotiated, and preferred readings will offer a useful perspective on how readers produce meaning through a give and take with the text, resisting some ideologies while taking others for granted.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss the ways that reader communities may shape the reading experience through an exchange of ideas between readers online. Specifically, I will look at the online Bookish community on the Instagram social media platform to show examples of reader interaction. I argue that the sharing of reading experiences in such reader communities fosters the development of patterns of responses to YA dystopia. Stanley Fish's concept of the interpretive community will help explain how readers shape each other's' interpretive frameworks and assumptions. I will also show how publishers are using such reader communities for marketing purposes. In this way, I will describe the Bookish community as one that can both provide avenues for reader resistance to conservative discourses in the YA genre, while also functioning as a vehicle for the publishing industry to reach potential consumers.

Chapter 4 describes the methodologies used for the qualitative research study conducted for this project. I will introduce the principles of hermeneutic phenomenology and explain how it informed the design of the study. I will discuss the data collection and analysis methods and go through the various stages of conducting qualitative research.

Chapter 5 will address the patterns of responses of the interview participants. Four themes emerged during the data coding and analysis of the interviews. Participants discussed the Bookish community, the appeal of YA dystopia, the decline of YA dystopia, and the importance of authentic representation of diversity in the YA dystopian genre. Each pattern of responses showed how readers produced oppositional, negotiated, and preferred readings of YA dystopia, which are further addressed in the discussion section of Chapter 5.

1. YA DYSTOPIA'S VISIONS OF A DISTANT FUTURE

The aim of this project is to explore the relationship between the reader and the YA dystopian text as it functions within the ideological framework of the patriarchy. This chapter provides a theoretical frame that allows for the analysis of reader interpretations that I will offer in Chapter 5. This theoretical framework is centered around the concepts of dystopia, ideology, patriarchy, and intersectionality, which are fundamental to the analysis of reader response to YA dystopian fiction that will follow.

This chapter begins with a comparison of dystopia written for an adult audience and Young Adult dystopia aimed at an adolescent audience. It focuses on the constraints imposed on the YA dystopian genre by the larger genre of Children's and Young Adult literature to which it belongs. This discussion leads to the examination of specific tropes common in YA dystopia. After defining YA dystopia through its common elements, this chapter goes on to explore ideology to then explain how patriarchy as an ideological system works through YA dystopia to portray a particular view of the world as natural. I will then define intersectionality and explain how it will serve this project as an analytic lens through which I will approach reader response to YA dystopian texts and the ideologies working through them.

A Future Not So Distant

Young Adult dystopias are tales of human survival predicated on the element of hope that permeates the genre. The adolescent protagonists in this genre learn how to surpass obstacles created by political and social unrest, ecological and economic crises, famine, disease, and other catastrophes. YA dystopias then spring not from the wild imagination of the author; they are instead closely tied to disasters the reader may be experiencing in real time. Much of the landscape of the YA dystopian text is built upon taking real-world problems to the extreme by

picturing the worst-case scenario. As Basu et al. show, "the far-fetched concepts [that YA dystopias] employ may create a buffer between reader and text, perhaps allowing them to be read ultimately as flights of fancy rather than projections of a possible future" (4). But how far-fetched are the scenarios of war, disease, ecological disaster, and poverty in YA dystopias? Recently, YA dystopia's futurism seems to have caught up to the present, now no longer a harbinger of impossible dangers but depicting elements of a world that is very real. The dystopian future of fiction appears in some ways to bear more likeness to the reader's reality than scholars may have anticipated. It is becoming increasingly difficult to approach the genre with the assertion that YA dystopias portray a world that could never exist within the reader's lifetime.

This is not to say that the reader will ever experience a future where their society is split into factions as in Veronica Roth's *Divergent* or they will one day encounter warring traveling cities like those of Phillip Reeves' *Mortal Engines*. Still, in a divided world, fighting for power and resources that are only becoming scarcer is no fiction. Climate change is rapidly moving the world to a point of no return, which humans have anticipated for a while but done little about. Global health crises like the Covid-19 pandemic have rocked the entire planet, increasing economic disparities, and propelling divisive politics into a tailspin. Late capitalism is failing in the face of these and many other disasters, leaving young people in a less-than-desirable position as they look to the future they will inherit. What once drew readers into the fascinating though gruesome worlds of Young Adult dystopias now seems to be one of the chief things pushing them away from this genre.

Even though YA dystopia is currently all but gone from bookshelves, at the height of its popularity, novels like Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* and many others that followed in its

footsteps instilled in their readers a defiant hope that (young) people can survive anything.

Although it has now been more than a decade since *The Hunger Games* was first published, the

impact that this work and others within the YA dystopian genre has had on its readership remains

and it continues to inform their readings of other YA genres, as will be discussed in detail in

Chapter 5. Although YA dystopia has steadily been on the decline, it is still beloved by readers,

though they now approach the genre more critically as evidenced by the interviews with

participants conducted for this study. This genre is still popular with scholars and educators,

which means that it should be considered from the readers' perspective who now evaluate the

genre through a perspective that differs from that with which they initially approached it some

ten years ago when it was highly popular. Discussing the reasons for the decline of YA dystopia

as the readers see it can also illuminate the ways that the YA genre is largely underestimated by

publishers, who underestimate the reader by reproducing the same formula started by *The*

Hunger Games in a bid to replicate its success. As will be seen in Chapter 5, participants pointed

to the ways that YA fantasy and the theme of diversity and inclusion will suffer the same fate as

YA dystopia and gradually fade into obscurity as mere trends. Although this might seem like the

natural course of all such genres, the topic of representation being treated as a fad is particularly

troubling.

 While some features such as elaborate and complex world building of early YA

dystopias like *The Hunger Games* have garnered a passionate fanbase for this genre, other

elements typical of YA dystopian novels have slowly but surely driven readers away. A

breakdown of common tropes in YA dystopias in this chapter will allow for an analysis of these

elements, which will then be discussed as functioning in service of dominant ideological

discourses.

1.1. Defining *Dystopia*

> [D]ystopian literature is not so much a specific genre as a particular kind of
> oppositional and critical energy or spirit. …Virtually any literary work that
> contains an element of social or political criticism offers the possibility of such
> readings. —Keith Booker, *Dystopian Literature.*

What makes a dystopia? It is tempting to set dystopia in linear opposition to utopia and simply

say that it is that which utopia is not—an ideal of society inverted. However, 'dystopia' is a

contested term among literary scholars that does not yield itself to a simple, straightforward

definition. In *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, Keith Booker explains that

while utopia has an important role in literature and culture as the "quest for the ideal"—that is, as

an attempt to describe possible alternatives "to the social and political status quo"—dystopia,

seen as utopia's sister, offers readers the opportunity to "critically examine both existing

conditions and the potential abuses that might result from the institution of supposedly utopian

alternatives" (3). As such, Booker says dystopia "can be seen as the epitome of literature in its

role as social criticism" (3). From this perspective, dystopia does not fit within neat brackets of a

genre; it is rather a way of seeing literature that makes social and political critique its primary

concern. Moreover, Booker considers any literary work as potentially dystopic if it interrogates

the social and political landscape of the world. Dystopian literature would thus "... include those

works that rely on a dialogue with utopian idealism as an important element of their social

criticism," such that dystopia encompasses those works of literature that achieve this social

critique primarily through defamiliarization (3-4). Defamiliarization allows dystopian works to

focus their critiques "on imaginatively distant settings" while providing "fresh perspectives on

problematic social and political practices that might otherwise be taken for granted or considered

natural and inevitable" (3-4). In this way, Booker connects dystopia to impulses of cultural

critique that question the place of ideology in society. With this important assertion in mind, this

project aims to take a cultural studies and intersectional feminist approach to question the ideologies working through the dystopia written specifically for an audience of adolescents.

Though the idea that dystopia is open and boundless suggests that almost anything could be read as a dystopia as long as it contains social and political critique, that view does the important work of emphasizing what is at the core of the genre. Dystopia can sometimes be intertwined with other closely related genres such as post-apocalyptic and science fiction, but what sets dystopian fiction apart from other genres is precisely "the specificity of its attention to social and political critique" (Booker 4).

I take this kernel of social and political critique as an essential aspect also of the genre of Young Adult dystopia. This project interrogates the ways that YA dystopian fiction resembles the broader dystopian genre in its foregrounding of social and political criticism. At the same time, this research investigates how YA dystopia is constrained as a sub-genre under the umbrella of Children's and YA literature, which may undermine the project of social and political criticism by shifting YA dystopia's focus to emphasize such elements as the romance plot. I argue that YA dystopia's potential for social and political critique is also reduced through simplified worldbuilding and the repetition of conservative tropes that cement the privileged hierarchical position of whiteness, heteronormativity, and ableism. The privileging of these subject positions over others through erasure or silencing in YA dystopia serves dominant patriarchal discourses operating in the texts of this genre. This project explores the ways in which the ideological framework of the patriarchy constricts YA dystopia through its unwillingness to engage with such complex topics as race, gender, sexuality, and others in sufficient depth. There can be no doubt that YA dystopia engages with social and political

critique to a degree, but as will be discussed in this and subsequent chapters, its full potential is often left untapped, and its approach to these critiques may be half-hearted.

The case could be made that speculative fiction like dystopia and YA dystopia portrays fantasy worlds that bear little resemblance to the world we live in and as such they cannot be critiqued as representations of the author's or reader's world. However, although dystopian and YA dystopian fiction both show the reader imaginings of "non-existent societies," (Basu et al. 2), the world within the text is always based on the author's reality in some shape or form. Dystopian fiction depends on the historical context of the reader's present, which is needed for dystopia to be understood, given that dystopias are "usually located in a negatively deformed future of our own world" (Baccolini in James 157). Dystopian fiction can then be understood as a distorted mirror of the author's (and reader's) present—a critique or a forewarning, but not necessarily a roadmap, of how to avoid the future it warns the reader about. As Basu et al. point out, dystopian fiction "tells us not how to build a better world, but how to perhaps avoid continuing to mess up the one we've got" (3).

Young Adult dystopian fiction shares several similarities with the dystopian genre aimed at an adult audience, but unlike its counterpart, YA dystopian fiction has rather fixed constraints. Young adult dystopian fiction falls under the larger umbrella of Children's and Young Adult literature, which is aimed at a perceived audience of developing minds. As such, it is understood that Children's and Young Adult literature must contain some educational value. It is because of this that scholarship focused on YA literature often examines its function as a "purposeful rather than enjoyable" genre (Doughty 2). That said, a text in the Young Adult genre must strike a careful balance between its inherent didacticism and its function as "a pleasurable retreat" from the adolescent reader's "quotidian experience" (Basu et al. 5). This is particularly the case in the

Children's and YA literature's sub-genre of YA dystopia, which aims to teach the reader difficult lessons about the world while simultaneously providing them with a thrilling adventure story. The excitement of the plot is amplified by the narrative techniques often employed by the genre, like first-person narration or diary entries, which give the reader a direct line to the thoughts of the narrator. The reader is able to live through the trials and adventures of the protagonist as they fight for survival in their dystopian world. It is thus that, according to Basu et al., such narrative techniques make the YA dystopian text more "accessible" to the reader and therefore "may have the potential to motivate a generation on the cusp of adulthood" (1).

As a result, in contrast to dystopian fiction aimed at an adult audience, Young Adult dystopian literature must contain some element of hope that would help reduce the bleak outlook on the future always looming over any text within the dystopian genre. Young Adult dystopias must signal to the intended adolescent reader that a better world is possible—whatever that world may be—and that the possibility of shaping the future is ultimately within their grasp. In this way, Basu et al. suggest, the bleakness of the YA dystopian novel is meant to serve as a sharp contrast to the idea of "the possibility of utopian change even in the darkest of circumstances" (3). If the YA dystopian text conceives of its reader as one who can be "motivated" to find avenues of resistance against dominant power structures in their real life similarly to the protagonists of YA dystopian novels, then they are also implicitly signaling to the reader that a better world is always possible—no matter how dire the circumstances. That being said, this research study focuses on the ideological makeup of the YA dystopian text, which is largely conservative and patriarchal in nature. Many popular YA dystopian novels end with the fall or reconfiguration of the oppressive dystopian regime, which is meant to signal a hopeful resolution—i.e., that a better world is just within reach. Nevertheless, even this better, utopian

world suggested as a possibility at the end of the YA dystopia still appears to be white, ableist, and heteronormative. The resolution of the YA dystopian text then paradoxically signals to the reader that they can find hope in the future of their real world, even though the patriarchal framework of the YA dystopian novel itself ultimately remains intact. This points to the way that hope is available to certain readers who can comfortably fit the patriarchal ideological framework.

1.2. Typical Elements of YA Dystopias

There are elements that the YA dystopian genre shares with dystopian novels aimed at an audience of adult readers. However, as established earlier, the YA dystopian genre also operates under fixed constraints due to the genre's implied reader—the adolescent. To understand how YA dystopia conceives of its implied reader, we must examine the elements and tropes typical of the genre to then be able to unearth the ideologies operating underneath the text.

The setting of the dystopian novel—a crumbling world that's either suffered devastating wars, ecological disasters, or both—is central to the YA dystopian novel. Typically, the reader finds themself immediately transported to the dystopian world within the first few pages of a YA dystopian novel. Curtis explains that "[the] reader's work is to learn about that world and slowly come to understand its dystopian status" (Curtis 86). Though this world is usually one set far in the future, there are some novels in this genre that are set closer to the reader's present. In those cases the world has been changed by a sudden cataclysmic event like an alien invasion, as in Rick Yancey's *Fifth Wave* series.

The dystopian setting of the novel may at first seem normal as the reader follows the narrative through the eyes of the protagonist. Yet, as Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan point out, "a counter-narrative develops as the dystopian citizen moves from apparent contentment into

an experience of alienation and resistance" (in Curtis 86). Whether set in the near-present or distant future, YA dystopias envision a world ruled by oppressive regimes and authoritarian governments, which underscores the element of political conflict at the heart of the larger dystopian genre. The oppressive dominant power structures that operate within YA dystopias are typically described in the novels as results of military conflicts, disease, and other calamities of the recent or distant past. The regimes in YA dystopian novels are desperate to keep a tight grip on society to ensure stability and order in a world ravaged by past disasters. As Kathryn James posits, the larger genre of dystopian fiction serves as "a critique of history" (157), which can perpetuate either a critical or a nostalgic view of the past. However, when it comes to dystopian fiction written for an adolescent audience, the text is rather centered around "the resultant broken societies" of the dystopian world and forgoes an explicit discussion of the circumstances in the past that led to the dystopian society (L. James 152). By thus focusing on the dystopian world of the novel without paying much attention to the question of "How did we get here?", YA dystopias may dilute and obscure the connections between the reader's world and that of the novel.

Another typical aspect of YA dystopias is the sameness of society. Conformity in the dystopian society of the novel is often imposed by governments to ensure control over people with the aim of securing a future for humanity. Conformist societies in YA dystopias may be shown as "embrac[ing] their uniformity out of a fear that diversity breeds conflict" (Basu et al. 3). The protagonist of the YA dystopia may sometimes be marked as special or different, which poses a danger to themself and their loved ones. Nonetheless, the protagonist's difference from the rest of society is what ultimately helps them survive and ignite rebellion over the course of the novel.

What's more, the protagonist of the YA dystopia is often a girl who becomes the center of the rebellion. The most typical example of this is, of course, Katniss Everdeen in Susanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* trilogy—the original "Girl on Fire," though there are countless others modeled after her. This trope of a strong, independent female protagonist who performs at times a traditionally masculine gender role has become synonymous with the YA dystopian genre. As Broad suggests, through Katniss, Collins' novel established that "girls can do anything boys can do, including strategize, make demands, and even hunt and kill" (117). YA dystopia is rife with girls who follow in Katniss' footsteps—Tris in *Divergent* (Roth), Juliette in *Shatter Me* (Mafi), June in *Legend* (Lu), to name but a few. The depiction of female protagonists in YA dystopias oscillates between a more traditional feminine gender performance and the bar that's set by Katniss—arguably, the most complicated of the lot in terms of gender performance. By participating in the spheres of combat, rebellion, and politics, the YA dystopia's female protagonist enters domains traditionally coded as masculine. The female protagonists establish themselves as capable and formidable rivals to their male counterparts in the novels of this genre.

Still, their agency may be stifled by the general patriarchal framework that envelops the YA dystopian texts in which they operate. Female characters in YA dystopias can break outside of the confines of the stereotypical female gender role, but the gender boundaries they may transgress are carefully measured. Ultimately, the YA dystopian novels often find ways of subduing the "Girl on Fire," most often through either the female protagonist's death or by imposing a heterosexual union between her and one of her male suitors.

Nevertheless, the Girl on Fire trope has been lauded as a powerful cultural phenomenon that has allowed readers to imagine other ways of being female—and, in a few instances, of being male as well. Hentges describes this female prototype in YA dystopia as "complex,

intelligent, brave, and a triumphant survivor of impossible situations" (5), underscoring that the female protagonists in these novels experience and overcome serious challenges and "most tell their own story" (5). From this perspective, such female heroines are "rarely perfect" but rather complex and relatable, the Girl on Fire being "most often a real girl struggling to find herself and [to] keep her friends or family safe against impossible odds": namely,

> fighting to "discover the truth that has been kept from her, and from the populace more generally. She wants to cut ties that bind and bring freedom to oppressed peoples. She is an outcast, a rebel" (6).

Furthermore, the adolescent protagonists in this genre are often disappointed in the failure of adults, who are the ones that led to the destruction of their world and the birth of its dystopian outcomes. Adults play a liminal role in the YA dystopian text, sometimes that of parents or mentors, but the agency to correct the course of the world lies with the protagonist and other adolescents, which connects to the didactical component of this genre. The protagonist of the YA dystopia is often thrust into the center of conflict not by choice but by circumstances beyond their control. The dystopian ruse begins to unravel usually once the protagonist learns a truth that was previously hidden to them about their world, which leads to the protagonist's rebellion against the powers that be. Basu et al. argue that in this way the protagonists' developing understanding about their dystopian reality leads to "a standoff between adolescents and adults," in the text, which is also meant to empower readers as "young people to turn against the system" and to work towards changing their world "in ways adults cannot" (7). This awakening of the protagonist in the YA dystopia to the political and social realities of their world is often directly linked to a romantic awakening as well—the protagonist meets a potential love interest who opens avenues for the protagonist's eventual rebellion.

Romance is an important element of Young Adult literature, and it is also inescapable in YA dystopia. A reader would be hard pressed to find a YA dystopian novel without a heteronormative romance that often takes central stage. The larger genre of Young Adult fiction requires an element of romance because it is seen as integral to the coming-of-age narrative for the adolescent audience. Although romance is an element also common in dystopia at large, "the connection seems especially pronounced in YA dystopias, which may capitalize on teenagers' preoccupations with courtship to compel their interest in the dystopian world" (Basu et al. 8). Developing romantic feelings for another is linked to growing out of childhood in the Young Adult genre. Still, sex is always handled carefully so as not to depict explicit sexual acts between teenagers—the line between depicting burgeoning sexual desires that the implied adolescent reader could relate to and explicitly acing on said desires must be trod carefully in Children's and YA fiction, which once again underscores the constraints that this genre imposes on sub-genres like YA dystopia. Romance is used as a tool to propel the YA dystopian protagonist into action. Encountering the love interest in the YA dystopia is linked not only to the protagonist's sexual awakening, but also their developing understanding of the political mechanisms operating behind their dystopian world.

It is crucial to note that the romance trope in YA dystopia more often than not evokes another—that of the love triangle. Thinking of *The Hunger Games* as one of the most popular examples, Broad argues that, when faced with the love triangle of Katniss, Peeta and Gale, "[r]eaders are as much on the edge of their seats asking 'Peeta or Gale?' as they are wondering how the trio will outrun, outsmart, and outlast the enemy at their heels" (118). The love triangle is taken to be an exciting element that will resonate with readers and keep them engaged. The YA dystopian novel conceives of its implied reader as one that is invested in the idea of two boys

chasing after a girl as a sign of her desirability, which is made even more thrilling by the girl's not realizing or accepting her own sexual appeal. The female protagonist in YA dystopia is often unaware of her power to attract male attention—she often sees herself as ordinary or even undesirable, but her desirability is affirmed through the interest of her male suitors. The novel then assumes on some level that the reader also wishes to be the heterosexual object of male desire—the male competition for the female protagonist serves as a vehicle for the reader to imagine themselves at the center of the heterosexual love triangle. Overall, then, romance serves as hook and bait for the adolescent reader, meant to entice them with a love story that keeps them guessing while leading them towards a more complex political dilemma. That said, it will be seen later how, by privileging the love triangle, such stories can actually be interpreted as romance in YA dystopia's clothing. A repackaged romance novel simply thrown into a dystopian setting for added thrills may lack the deeper political core that would allow this genre to challenge the reader to interrogate the social and political makeup of their own world.

Reading between the lines of the YA dystopian novel, it becomes clear that there is a prevalent patriarchal agenda or framework that constricts the text through its reproduction of characters who are overwhelmingly white, able-bodied, conventionally attractive, and heteronormative. For instance, romance in YA dystopia is overwhelmingly heterosexual. Though sometimes the sexual preference of the female protagonist in this genre is not explicitly stated as heterosexual, more often than not the Girl on Fire finds a happily-ever-after ending by choosing one of two male love interests and settling down with him. Moreover, some narrative arcs also work to limit the protagonists' agency and chip away at the subversive gender performance so often attributed to the Girl on Fire and other character tropes in YA dystopia. The next section examines the common elements of dominant discourses in YA dystopia through an intersectional

feminist perspective, which will aid the detailed analysis of reader response to YA dystopian

texts in Chapter 5.

1.3. YA Dystopia as a Genre Anchored in an Ideology of a Patriarchal Present

YA dystopias allow readers to follow adolescent protagonists on their quests for better lives for

themselves and those they care about as they perform heroic feats against oppressive regimes.

Undeniably, the YA dystopian genre has had a great cultural impact on millions of adolescents

and adults. Katniss and the many "Girls on Fire" that followed in her footsteps created new

standards for the female heroine in YA dystopia—a girl with agency, determination, and the

power to effect change. But for all its positive impact, YA dystopia is not free from the shackles

of the dominant ideological system in which it operates. Although YA dystopias offer readers

many ways of interrogating their own world alongside that of the novel, they also, inadvertently,

perpetuate conservative views through subtly—or perhaps not so subtly—weaving conservative

elements and themes into texts that the reader is meant to accept as natural. For the purposes of

this study, it is then useful to interrogate the way the YA dystopian text is stifled by the

discourses of patriarchy and white supremacy. This examination will be carried out by analyzing

the YA dystopian text through an intersectional feminist perspective. To start, I will discuss the

way ideologies compete for dominance through language in use (i.e. discourse); then I will

introduce the notion of patriarchy as an ideological system to better describe the structure of

gender hierarchy in a patriarchal society. Subsequently, I will describe the poststructuralist

understanding of gender as a performance to contrast it with the essentialist concept of gender as

binary and rooted in biological sex. Lastly, I use the concept of intersectionality as an analytic

lens through which one can illuminate the threads of patriarchal ideology found in YA dystopia.

Ideologies and The Struggle for Meaning

To understand how the patriarchy functions as an ideological system that employs tools such as literature to maintain its position of power in society, it is necessary to first examine ideology as a concept. Ideology has an important role to play in society, and, according to Stuart Hall, there is no escaping it—there is no recognizable world that exists for human beings outside of the bounds of ideology. As Anna Makus puts it, "ideology is not like a building which one can exit; we are necessarily in the building, and all we can do is choose how to decorate or remodel it" (Makus 499-500). What's more, ideology is impossible to escape because it is, by necessity, invisible to us in everyday life. Ideology never overtly points to itself, nor does it reveal itself to be there. It must remain hidden under the guise of 'natural' processes of our day-to-day to be able to function. By remaining invisible, ideology does not call attention to its own constructedness, but rather tells the person as its subject that "this is the way things are" and that, thereby, "this is the way you are/should be" as a constituent of the version of the world it presents as true. Although ideological constructions "are socially formed," this point slips past our consciousness (Makus, 1990, 498). Instead of perceiving ideological constructions for what they are, people see them as truths "which can function in a variety of contemporary contexts to legitimate current practices and interpretations of events" (Makus 498). Ideological constructions form 'logics' that masquerade as "the common sense of a culture" (498).

Besides these characteristics of ideology that make it difficult to recognize, Althusser conceived of the human being as "an ideological animal by nature" (309), which means that people are already naturally predisposed to subscribe to an ideology. In addition to this, people are "always-already subjects" of an ideology (310) since each person is born into an existing dominant ideological system that places them into already-existing categories of gender, class,

race and so on. Ideology structures human existence—it acts as a roadmap of how to interpret

reality. In the same vein, Althusser saw ideology as "lived experience" (Purvis and Hunt 482) in

that "[it] represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of

existence" (Althusser 304) and, as such, it presents the world to us not as it truly is. Instead,

ideology "constitute[s] an illusion" which "need[s] to be interpreted" (304). Ideology is thus a

complex system:

> the mental frameworks-the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of
> thought, and the systems of representation, which different classes and social
> groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible
> the way society works. (Hall in Makus 499)

In this way, as Anna Makus points out, ideology mediates people's "relation between themselves

and the conditions of existence" (Makus 499).

Since ideology is inescapable, we can only interrogate how "consciousness is produced

and reproduced" as a function of it (Makus 499-500). This allows us to question the validity of

claims that ideology would present as 'the Truth.' It is important to remark here that there is also

never one single ideology at work; there are many competing ideologies at play at any given

time, all struggling for dominance. Ideology strives to win "universal validity and legitimacy"

for particular "accounts of the world" in order to cement their "taken-for-grantedness" as the

real, the natural, the transparent (Hall in Makus 498). Various groups in society engage in a

"struggle over meaning" through the "ideologically produced consensus" to establish their

version of what is seen as 'the Truth' as the only legitimate one (Makus 502). As Makus

explains, "the legitimacy of an ideological claim depends on that part of the truth which it takes

for the whole truth" (498). Other interpretations of events outside of the specific ideology in

question are therefore rendered invalid or nonsensical; other points of view are not permittable if

the ideology is to achieve dominance. Alternative perspectives may thus be seen as "violating the common sense of a culture" (500) through the perspective of a specific ideology. Still, even as ideologies are resistant to other perspectives and therefore resistant to change, "they are not impregnable" and can be contested (501).

The notion that there are several competing ideologies that try to present one version of reality as the "true one" leaves us with the crucial notion that "reality" is not made up of a shared, universal understanding of phenomena. Rather, how we interpret reality depends on the ideologies under which we operate. People's understanding of reality then depends on how they construct meaning. In turn, meanings are created socially via the use of specific codes; through the use of these codes, ideology becomes embedded within culture. People encode and decode meaning via language—more specifically, language in use, i.e., discourse. Discourse can be understood as "the individual social networks of communication through the medium of language or non-verbal sign-systems," which create a "system of linked signs" (Purvis and Hunt 485). Through this system, discourses "impose frameworks which limit what can be experienced or the meaning that experience can encompass, and thereby influence what can be said and done" (Purvis and Hunt 485). This means that discourse allows "certain things to be said and impedes or prevents other things from being said" (485). In this way, ideology works with and through discourse in the struggle over meanings that it would have people accept as the real, the legitimate.

Looking at language through the perspective of semiotics illuminates the way ideologies use discourse to create a specific view of reality that is meant to be taken as *true*. At the same time, this perspective is helpful in destabilizing the notion of one single reality altogether. In this sense, language is to be understood semiotically through the elements of signifier and signified.

The signifier—i.e., "a sound or visible image such as a spoken or written word or phrase"—and the signified—i.e., "the thought or mental image"—constitute the sign (Purvis and Hunt 485). Since the connection between these two elements is never fixed or stable, it produces an openness in language, wherefore meaning "is never fully referential and is always contestable" (Purvis and Hunt 485). The openness and instability of language thus help lay the groundwork for understanding how discourse functions in the process of embedding ideology into culture via the use of language as codes. These processes are important for elaborating the Althusserian concept of interpellation.

Interpellation is the mechanism "through which ideology constitutes people as subjects" (Purvis and Hunt 482). The key feature of interpellation is "the 'hailing'" of people "by the powerful 'other'" alongside "the process of recognition by the interpellated subject" (482). Through this process, ideology calls out to the person, or hails them, addressing the subject and compelling it to respond, so to speak. Althusser argues that people interpret their roles in society and their lives through interpellation (310). Furthermore, there is no sequence to the process of interpellation because "the existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing" (311). Hailing also "situates or places subjects within specific discursive contexts," and it must be understood "as involving more than the mere mutual recognition of 'hailing'; beyond that are more complex processes whereby subjects and subject positions are both constituted and changed" (Purvis and Hunt 483).

Literature can serve as a useful tool for ideology in interpellating the reader as a subject. It does this by reproducing discourse that hails the reader and naturalizes specific points of view—i.e., by presenting them as the common sense of the culture. However, this does not mean that the author/rhetor or other stakeholders involved in the production of the text are consciously

promoting a specific ideology because, as explained earlier, "[i]deological formulations remain largely unconscious to both their speaker and their receivers" (Makus 500). Everyone, including the rhetor, is embedded as a subject within the ideological system. As Hall maintains, ideologies displace "the authorial 'I' of a discourse" in that "we are hailed or summoned by the ideologies which recruit us as their 'authors,' their essential subjects" (Hall in Makus 500). Nonetheless, it is important to render visible the ideologies operating within a text because only by shedding light onto claims that the ideology presents as natural can their validity be questioned. Otherwise, texts such as those within the YA dystopian genre may continuously reproduce patriarchal values and present them to the reader as universal, thus privileging certain identities while erasing others.

The Patriarchy as an Ideological System

In *The Gender Knot: Unraveling our Patriarchal Legacy*, Allan Johnson characterizes the patriarchy as a social system— "an arrangement of shared understandings and relationships that connect people to one another" (33). The patriarchy is "a kind of society," which involves not only men but individuals of all genders as active participants (5). It is "an age-old structure that has been near universal" (Gilligan and Snider 6) and continues to envelop nearly every aspect of human life, including the production of texts. I argue that the patriarchy as an ideological system permeates YA dystopia through the texts' continuous reproduction of conservative viewpoints that privilege traditional gender roles, heteronormativity, and whiteness and present these as natural to the reader.

As an ideology, the patriarchy can be difficult to pin down precisely because it is hidden in plain sight, as is characteristic of any ideology. The patriarchy works constantly through people in the ways that they relate to one another, what they expect to be the norm, and what

they are led to see as abnormal. The patriarchy "as a culture based on a gender binary and hierarchy" has the following properties: first, it leads us "... to see human capacities as either 'masculine' or 'feminine' and to privilege the masculine"; secondly, it elevates "some men over other men and all men over women;" lastly, it "[f]orces a split between the self and relationships so that in effect men have selves, whereas women ideally are selfless, and women have relationships, which surreptitiously serve men's needs" (Gilligan and Snider 6). Other identities that cannot be defined by the male/female binary but rather fall somewhere on the broader spectrum of gender identity are thus effectively erased the further they are from the ideal subject of the patriarchal ideological system.

This ideal subject of the patriarchy can be summed up in the concept of hegemonic masculinity—the dominant form of masculinity in society at a specific point in time and space. 'Hegemony' is a Gramscian term that signifies the process of "the winning and holding of power and the formation (and destruction) of social groups in that process" by dominant groups in society (Donaldson 645). Though it is an unattainable and elusive ideal, hegemonic masculinity privileges the figure of a cis-male, heterosexual, able bodied, middle to upper class individual against which all other identities and subject positions are measured. The closer the subject is to this ideal subject position, the more privileged they are in the patriarchal society. The further an individual is from this ideal patriarchal subject, the more marginalized they find themselves.

The Male/Female Binary

The patriarchy as an ideological system depends on a simplistic reduction of the world into binaries. To a considerable extent, this simplistic categorization affords the patriarchy the ability to maintain its position of power. This binary way of thinking inherent to the patriarchy is incredibly difficult to escape because people are born into a patriarchal society that has already

shaped the way they will encounter the world, others, and themselves. To think and see the world beyond the gender binary of 'male/female' is uncomfortable (and even threatening to some) since it destabilizes categories people have been conditioned to accept as natural. Gilligan and Snider describe the patriarchy as a zero-sum game—a culture that "exists as a set of rules and values, codes and scripts that specify how men and women should act and be in the world" (Gilligan and Snider 6). To add to this point, Kimmel points out that it is not just that the patriarchy constrains our social lives; it also shapes our individual psyches: "More insidiously, patriarchy also exists internally, shaping how we think and feel, how we perceive and judge ourselves, our desires, our relationships and the world we live in" (6). Our identity is thus constrained externally and internally by what the patriarchy allows, limiting the many possible ways we could be to a few sanctioned identities following the binary way of thinking that underscores its main tenets. Breaking out of the binary of the patriarchy "can have real consequences" (Gilligan and Snider 6) in both a social and individual sense because it both undermines the patriarchal order and destabilizes identity.

In addition, the patriarchy is "organized around an obsession with control" such that one of its main characteristics is "the oppression of women" (Johnson 6). The shortcoming of this description of the patriarchy is that it focuses on 'female' as the main gender identity positioned as the Other. As such, this definition obscures other gender identities that are arguably more severely marginalized by the patriarchy. This form of binary thinking about gender as split into the categories of 'man' and 'woman' is normalized by the patriarchy, working through us to make us think about certain issues as if these were the most natural or normal or even the only way of seeing them. The hierarchy promoted by the patriarchy leads individuals to sort people into binary categories where one is dominant over another, such as "masculine over feminine,

straight over gay, man over woman" (Gilligan and Snider 7). The male/female binary requires

masculinity to be compared to its antithesis in femininity. If masculinity is coded as rational, for

example, women are seen as irrational in turn. The gender binary also works to erase all other

gender identities by rendering them invisible, nonsensical, and invalid. This approach to thinking

about gender as strictly split into two categories is rooted in biological essentialism, which would

have people conceive of gender as equal to biological sex assigned at birth. However, this

essentialist view of gender is complicated by the poststructuralist approach that conceives of

gender identities as fluid. From a poststructuralist perspective, the distinct categories of male and

female are concepts entirely of our own making.

The Performativity of Gender

Expanding the concept of gender outside of the bounds of biological essentialism starts with

breaking down the view of gender as something that we *are* and instead exploring the post-

structuralist concept of gender as something that we *do*. How we express our gender identity is

contingent upon who is there, watching us do it, judging us, and reacting to how we perform. In

this way, musician and performer Sam Smith, who came out as non-binary in 2019, discussed

embracing a broader view of their gender identity instead of relegating it to the male/female

binary, saying:

> I am not male or female. I think I float somewhere in between … Non-
> binary/genderqueer is that you do not identify in a gender. You are a mixture of
> all different things. You are your own special creation. (Vanity Fair)

This notion that you can be "a mixture of all different things" is as revolutionary and liberating

as it is fraught and contested. Clearly, the essentialist view of gender as biologically determined

would have us believe that there is no "floating in between"—either you are a man, or you are

not. From early childhood onwards, children receive implicit and explicit messages from adults,

their peer group, institutions, pop culture and media about the "right" kind of male or female they must be in order to fit into patriarchal society. YA dystopian literature, just like any other ideological tool, sends implicit signals about proper gender expression to readers by reproducing stereotypical portrayals of gender.

To be sure, modern scholarship on gender of the late 20th and 21st centuries is definitively marked by a retreat from essentialism and a move toward poststructuralist perspectives. Poststructuralists have questioned whether our identity in any form can be seen as a single, static thing, or should it be seen instead as an ever-changing, effervescent performance that people give to an audience, depending on where they are and who is watching. One of the most notable moves toward perceiving sex and gender as fluid categories can be found in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*. There, Butler proposes that gender is not bound up in one's biological makeup, but rather that it is performative as "a set of mandatory practices imposed from birth and repeated again and again in a doomed effort to get it right" (Adams and Savran 4). This approach to gender allows for an interrogation of what constitutes successful gender performance in Western patriarchal society and how such performances are perpetuated via ideological tools like literature.

As discussed earlier, our understanding of the world, of ourselves, and of each other is tangled up in language. Language is at the helm of how we interact with our reality and ascribe meaning to all concepts. Our understanding of gender as a category is dependent on language. Poststructuralism posits that the nature of language is arbitrary, which in turn means that categories such as gender are unstable and indeterminable. Signifiers like 'male' and 'female' have no innate meaning that holds any stable essence of either sex or gender. Rather, they are concepts that can feature any set of attributes at any given time. Binary oppositions in gender are

related to "our tendency to think of language in general as oppositional" (Reeser 30). This opposition of the terms 'man' and 'woman' and all the related signifiers ascribed to either category would depend on linguistic stability, but language does not function in this way (30). Traditionally, "male" will signify many different things, but they will always be in direct opposition to what it means to be "female," since neither category can exist without the other. Moreover, without the "female" category to compare themselves against and subjugate, men cannot assume their place at the top of the hierarchy (Reeser). These binary gendered categories "as ideologies describe interlocking sets of practices, norms, beliefs, and mandates that work in tandem to organize and regulate gender-appropriate emotional expressions, behaviors, bodies, and sexuality that are anchored in a politics of gender and thus possible to change" (Tolman et al. 5).

One dominant version of a traditionally masculine man could be characterized as "aggressive, daring, rational, emotionally inexpressive, strong, coolheaded, in control of themselves, independent, active, objective, dominant, decisive, self-confident, and unnurturing" (Johnson 80). Traditionally, female characteristics would be conceived as the opposite, creating complementary (and binary) pairs. A common patriarchal concept of a man in the 21st century could then broadly be described as a physically and mentally able and dominant provider, the head of his heterosexual marriage and household, and a woman would be a foil to these characteristics—someone that needs to be taken care of, physically less strong, mentally less capable. Still, this image of a possible masculine ideal does not fit reality by any means since plenty of men would fall short of this ideal in one way or another. If a man is not physically or mentally able, would that make him a non-man—i.e., a woman, since that is the binary opposite of a man? What's more, if the man is jobless, does this mean he is no longer a man? What if the

man is not the heterosexual head of the household? The impossibility of attaining this ideal version of a man in a patriarchal society underlines the performativity of gender. In order to be recognized as a man, a person would have to perform all of these different functions and many more depending on the time and space in which one considers what it means to be a man in a patriarchal society. Men may achieve some elements of this patriarchal ideal, but they will never achieve the full scope because the ideal changes without warning—the ideal of masculinity dissipates for any man, even if he attains it momentarily. The same can be said about the category of 'female,' which is constrained in the same way. If to be a woman means to be nurturing, passive, dependent, and emotional, then performing gender in any way that differs from these conditions would render the person a non-woman. Individuals are set up to police each other's gender performance to make sure that it fits within the narrow constraints of what is accepted as the correct version of a 'male' or 'female,' which in turn allows the patriarchy to maintain its control.

All gendered individuals are expected to attempt the Sisyphean task of contorting themselves to fit into the illusory and ill-defined boxes of 'man' and 'woman' in a patriarchal society. The binary division of men and women into clear-cut categories of appropriate sex-role behavior serves the patriarchy in several ways. For one thing, it creates the illusion of fixedness and stability of these categories—each person has their rightful place depending on whether they are male or female. In turn, this also perpetuates the belief in other distinctions that separate people through other categories such as race and class. This divide between men and women is meant to allow for a "clear and stable sense of who they are and what is what," which presumably would give one a sense of comfort in knowing that they are the 'correct' version of

themselves in a hierarchical order—i.e., one that places white, heterosexual, cis-men at the top (Johnson 80).

The complex and nuanced understanding of gender as a performance reveals that there are layers of femininities and masculinities that all people assume in different contexts and perform constantly in their daily lives. The boundaries of what separates one gender from the other are not as steadfast as some would like to think. In such a complex world, it is easy to see the appeal that essentialism holds for the patriarchy—it uncomplicates what is inherently complicated. If the world were neatly divided into men and women, boys and girls, who each performed the specific set of behaviors and exhibited the coherent set of characteristics they are supposed to, everything would be under control—or at least the illusion of control, which, as established earlier, is essential for the patriarchal ideological system to function.

In sum, it is a natural human desire to possess control, agency, and access to 'the Truth.' Gender as fluid and gender as performative are concepts that complicate this desire and make the world messy. Conceiving of gender as fluid and performative has the potential to disrupt the patriarchal order by revealing the unjust ways that one gender is privileged above all others in a patriarchal system: men are privileged above women, and some men privileged even above other men; non-conformist expressions of gender such as those of transgender persons, genderqueer, and non-binary people are often made to seem invalid, or they are made invisible. Again, there are other hierarchies always at play: race, class, sexual preference, and (dis)ability bring other dimensions of privilege into question. Thereby, if the hegemonic masculine ideal is indeed at the top of the patriarchal hierarchy, then the more removed an individual is from this ideal, the more they may potentially experience marginalization and subjugation. People are never just one

thing—each individual is made up of a variety of identities that may allow them to experience privilege in some respects in a patriarchal society while marginalizing them in others.

Intersectionality

This project takes an intersectional feminist approach to understanding the reader's interaction and relationship with the YA dystopian text as a repository of competing ideologies. Approaching the YA dystopian text and the reader through an intersectional lens aims to move away from the reductive, binary way of thinking imposed and naturalized by the patriarchal ideological system. Acknowledging the intersections of individuals' identities offers the opportunity to form a more accurate and rich understanding of how people experience the world beyond the limits of the male/female binary. Moreover, intersectionality not only examines identities in isolation but also interrogates their relationship to power. Complicating the view of the world the reader encounters as one in which gender is an unstable category and where people contain multiple, complex, intersecting identities opens new possibilities to see how readers (as complex individuals) interact with texts that reflect the world back to them. Moreover, YA dystopia not only presents a particular idea of the world to the reader but also opens up spaces for utopian possibilities as determined in the beginning of this chapter. It is important, then, to understand what ideological messaging lies within both the image of the dystopian world the text projects and the spaces for utopia contained therein—more specifically, to consider the question "Whose utopia is it?" Reflecting on the ideological implications of these and other questions brings this project to the concept of intersectionality, which will be used to better understand YA dystopia and the multiple ways it privileges a simplistic, patriarchal view of identity as confined to binaries versus the ways in which the genre may be subverting patriarchal stereotypes.

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework rooted in Black feminist studies and knowledge projects that circulated around the idea that race, class, and gender were mutually constitutive. Yet, until the late 1980s, intersectionality was effectively nameless (see Hill Collins). The term 'intersectionality' was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, and this concept was discussed in specific relation to the multiple ways the U.S. judicial system has historically marginalized women of color and ignored their multi-faceted identities, pushing Black women further towards the margins of society. Although Crenshaw is often touted as the founder of the very idea of intersectionality, Patricia Hill Collins maintains that this is an oversimplification of the long and complex processes of its emergence (9). Hill Collins points to the centrality of women of color (and, particularly, Black women) to the development of intersectionality through "raising claims about the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, and sexuality in their everyday lived experiences" during the 1960s and 1970s (9), which was a catalyst for the further adoption of intersectionality in spheres such as academia.

Intersectionality points to "the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions" of marginalized groups such as Black women (Crenshaw 1244). To put it simply, the way each individual encounters the world is impacted by the different identities they embody. People's identities are formed by a complex web of intersecting aspects that constitute the self. Among these are race, class, gender, sexual preference, and (dis)ability. These often intersecting and interconnected identities impact the way people experience reality and perceive one another. In the U.S., intersectionality refers to the idea that "we are all integrally formed and multiply impacted by the different ways that systems of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy affect our lives" (Cooper 99-100). The concept of intersectionality has

since been applied to a multitude of disciplines to explain the nuances of political, social, and cultural processes and to impact the outcomes of these processes.

Although this approach can be fruitful as a theoretical framework, a methodology, and a lens, intersectionality has also drawn criticism as it is difficult to pinpoint. Due to the openness and wide applicability of intersectionality, it is also at times challenging to define. As Hill Collins explains, intersectionality's "definitional dilemma" lies in the fact that "it participates in the very power relations that it examines," and because of this, it must acknowledge "the conditions that make its knowledge claims comprehensible" (3). Besides this, because intersectionality has historically revolved around the marginalized identities specific to Black women, it has been plagued with questions regarding its applicability to other marginalized identities (Cho et al. 788). Intersectionality has also been faulted as an approach without a stable object of inquiry—there appear to be an ever-growing number of dimensions that can be added to the examination of the intersections of the subject's identities.

However, as Cho et al. contend, intersectionality is more than "superficially preoccupied with 'difference'" (788). It emerged primarily as "a nodal point" rather than "as a closed system," and as such, it offers the most benefits when it is understood as "a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities" (788). Intersectionality does not aim to be taken as "a full-fledged grand theory or a standardized methodology" (789), but is rather an "an analytic disposition" (795). No matter the discipline to which an intersectional lens is applied, ultimately "what makes an analysis intersectional… is its adoption of an intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power" (795). Moreover, intersectionality has the capacity to adapt "to the different discursive and research protocols" in

various disciplines (792). This has the potential to modify "how race, gender, and other social dynamics are conceptualized and intertwined or, alternatively, how the central subjects and social categories of intersectionality are identified" (792) across fields such as the social sciences, psychology, philosophy, and literary criticism, to name only a few. At the same time, it is imperative to be vigilant about the "range of assumptions and truth claims" entangled in the conventions of various disciplines, which could "contribute to the very erasures to which intersectionality draws attention" (793).

For the purposes of this project, intersectionality is particularly useful as an analytic approach to the examination of reader response to YA dystopian texts. As established earlier in this chapter, the YA dystopian text is taken to reproduce patriarchal ideological assumptions about identities, conceiving them through binary oppositions. As already established, YA dystopia also inherently contains a didactical dimension because it falls under the larger genre of Children's and Young Adult literature. To the extent that intersectionality directly addresses the dynamics between identity and power, it can be a helpful tool with which to approach the ideological potential of YA dystopia as a sub-genre of Children's and YA literature. By positioning certain identities hierarchically above others in the YA dystopian novel, the ideology of the text asks the reader to take this hierarchy for a natural, accurate representation of real subject relations in the reader's world. This becomes clearer if the text is examined through what is omitted just as much as through what is present. For instance, the erasure of people of color and queer identities reveals an idea of the (dystopian) world predicated on patriarchal ideology, which positions whiteness and heteronormativity above other identities and thus establishes? these as the norm. Again, even the spaces for utopian change present in the hopeful endings

typical of this genre leave more questions than answers about the type of world the reader is

asked to imagine.

2. THE IMPLIED AND ACTUAL READERS OF YA DYSTOPIA

Chapter 1 introduced the idea that Young Adult dystopian fiction has the potential to offer the implied adolescent reader the opportunity to encounter a social and political critique in the text; however, the subversive potential of YA dystopia is often undermined by the simplified worldbuilding and frequently recycled tropes characteristic of the genre. This chapter examines the ideological project of YA dystopia by attempting to uncover its implied reader. As this chapter suggests, it is folly to assume that any genre has one implied reader in mind—each text works with its own conception of an implied reader. That being said, the recurrent plotlines, character types, and tropes reveal similarities in what assumptions YA dystopia as a genre makes about its implied reader overall. Contrasting the implied reader with the actual reader of the text as an active reader shows how the meaning of the text is not preestablished but rather contested. I will consider the active reader from the perspective of transactional theory of reader response in combination with a cultural studies approach, which underlines the complex relationship between reader and text. The reader constructs meaning through a negotiation with the text, invoking a network of previously acquired background knowledge, experience, and other readings.

To begin, this chapter will discuss the concept of the implied reader as developed by Wolfgang Iser. Then, I will turn to the idea of the child reader as an unstable figure constructed by the adult imagination. This implied child reader constrains the Young Adult genre by imposing conservative limits to what the texts in the genre may safely communicate to readers. Meaning, some topics such as sex, race, and queerness are largely off limits in Young Adult sub-genres such as YA dystopia. Moreover, examining the implied reader of YA dystopia

specifically will help lay the foundation for understanding the disconnect between this figure and the actual readers who encounter YA dystopian texts.

Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory will foreground the discussion of the reader as one who actively participates in the construction of meaning from text. The transactional theory is used as a jumping off point to delve into the cultural studies approach to considering active readers, which is central to this project. The transactional theory proposes that the reader constructs meaning from text based on a variety of preconditions. This notion is further elaborated on by John Fiske, who elaborates on Stuart Hall's concepts of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional readings. Fiske's discussion focuses on readers constructing meaning on a spectrum between oppositional and preferred, most often resulting in a negotiation of meaning. Fiske's discussion of negotiated meanings that readers construct through their interaction with texts is fundamental for the analysis of patterned reader responses to YA dystopian texts in Chapter 5.

Lastly, I will examine Janice Radway's ethnographic study of reader response to romance novels as an example of a cultural studies and feminist approach to an analysis of the interaction between the reader and text. Radway discusses a group of women as an interpretive community that produces patterns of reader responses to romance novels. The readers find romance novels that suit their needs through the recommendations of an insider—a bookstore employee who guides them to works that she believes will suit the readers' needs. Similarly, in the study conducted for this project, the readers consult the book reviews by other readers on various social media platforms to find works that they will enjoy.

In Chapter 1, it was established that Young Adult dystopian fiction works under a specific set of constraints imposed on it by the conventions of the Children's and Young Adult

fiction to which YA dystopia belongs. I argue that some of the constraints that YA dystopia

operates under due to its implied reader may limit the genre's potential for political and social

critique, which is central to the larger genre of dystopia (see Booker). Moreover, as the empirical

research data analysis will show in Chapter 5, many of the assumptions that YA dystopia makes

about the reader (via the implied reader) form a disconnect between the actual reader and YA

dystopian texts to the genre's detriment. Chapter 2 serves as bridge between the concept of the

implied reader as constructed by the text as an ideological project and the active reader as part of

an interpretive community.

2.1. The Implied Reader of the YA Dystopian Text

Before I address the implied reader of YA dystopia specifically, it is necessary to first discuss the

concept of the implied reader as such and how it relates to assumptions about "the child" as a

stable subject position in the genre of Children's and Young Adult fiction. The implied reader is

a concept developed by Wolfgang Iser in the 1970s, and it is linked to Wayne Booth's (1961)

concept of the implied author. Booth's concept of the implied author suggests that there is a

difference between the actual author of the work and the persona of the author that the reader

encounters through the text. The implied author is a figure that is born of a specific text. Even if

an author has created many works, each individual work constructs its own implied author. The

implied author is also not to be confused with the narrator of the text. The implied author is that

force, which is understood to be behind the narrator, making decisions about who the narrator is.

The implied author is not central to this project because this research examines the ideologies at

work underneath the text and how they interact with the reader. However, it is a good starting

point for the larger discussion at hand since it underlines how every aspect of the text shapes the

reading experience. As ideologies work through all rhetors (authors, editors, publishers, and

other stakeholders) involved in the production of the YA dystopian text as subjects of ideologies, the authorial "I," whether actual or implied, is an instrument of ideology.

The implied reader, like the implied author, is constructed through the text. The concept of the implied reader is embedded in the structure of a text as "a pre-structured role or position from which the text is most obviously intelligible, and which actual readers are invited to take up" (Reimer 4). This reader is understood to make meaning from the text through these "response inviting structures" (Iser in Williams 156). The text constructs an implied reader that is in conversation with the implied author mediated through the narrator of the text. The gaps in the text that the narrative contains allow readers to exercise their creativity and imagination by constructing a unique reading. This is not to say that any interpretation goes—there are still ways that the text tries to ensure some stability of meaning produced by the readers, as will be discussed later with regard to polysemy from a cultural studies perspective. Still, the process of meaning-making from text is not linear or chronological, and it also changes upon each revisitation of the text. This idea will be especially pertinent for the discussion of the interview participants' readings and re-readings of YA dystopias in Chapter 5, which will focus on how revisiting popular YA dystopian texts changes the meaning readers construct over time.

The implied reader can also be understood in terms of the activities that readers "are asked to undertake" by the text—what the text expects the reader to know and do—"to know, in terms of experience of both life and literature; to do, in terms of producing a meaning for this particular text, in time, from start to finish" (Whalen-Levitt in Reimer 4). Mavis Reimer posits that the concept of implied reader can also extend to include that which the text expects the reader to "enjoy or to value, or not to know, or not to do" (4). Observing the implied reader in

this way reveals the particular subject position that the text is attempting to call upon the reader to assume.

The Implied Reader in Children's and YA Fiction

Examining the genre conventions and the narrative of a text allows us reconstruct the image of who the implied reader is taken to be. The implied reader in Children's and YA literature takes shape in the elusive figure of the child reader. However, not only is the notion of one, unified child reader problematic, but it is also inaccurate if we consider who the actual readers of texts in this genre are. Although Young Adult texts are aimed at a readership in the age range of twelve to eighteen (Young Adult Library Services Association), works within the genre are incredibly popular with adult readers. An often-cited study that appeared in *Publishers Weekly* in 2012 stated that fifty five percent of Young Adult fiction readers were adults, "with the largest segment aged 30 to 44" (*Publishers Weekly*). What this means is that the implied reader constructed by the Young Adult text may not at all match the actual reader who encounters it. This is not so much an issue (although some might present it as such) as much as it is an interesting implication that points to several shortcomings in the way the Young Adult text conceives of the wants, needs, and limitations of its implied reader—namely, "the child."

Kathryn Bond Stockton claims that "[w]hat a child 'is' is a darkening question" (3). This assertion comes from the acknowledgement that children are unknown to us as adults. Just as gender is taken to be a construct through a poststructuralist perspective, "a child" is a construct as well. In cultural studies, instead of assuming the child to be a fixed, "natural category of human being," it is rather understood to be a construct with no intrinsic meaning used by cultures "for specific, interested purposes," these purposes often being political (Reaves 3). Bond Stockton describes the creation of the construct of the child as an "act of adults looking back,"

which is what distorts the image of the child in our minds and makes it "a ghostly, unreachable fancy" (5). Created by the adult imagination, the child is a figure that serves particular purposes in society as a locus of a presumed, inherent purity, innocence, and freedom from the burdens of the real (adult) world. The "myth of childhood innocence" (Newkirk 116) is meant to empty the child "of its own political agency, so that it may more perfectly fulfill the symbolic needs we make upon it" (Jenkins in Newkirk 116). In this way, the child becomes "a repository for cultural anxiety and fears" (116). This need to see the child as pure is closely tied to social and cultural ideas about who and what boys and girls should be—and that there should be only the binary of boys and girls. All other gender identities are effectively erased when adults and the systems and institutions they represent conceive of children.

Boys and girls are simultaneously conceived of as sexless beings and gendered subjects that are assumed to just know how to *do* the "correct" gender. Adults desire to see children as uncomplicated beings, but all children "are active agents who position themselves … and are positioned by others through social interaction … as gendered (and indeed classed, racialized and sexualized) beings" (Renold 249). Perhaps gender is never as essentialized as it is during childhood. Boys and girls must learn early on that there are certain gendered behaviors they are encouraged to display and others that are forbidden to them. The patriarchal ideological system enforces a gender hierarchy that sets boundaries for children's expression of identity. The child's behavior is regulated through the frequent intervention of parents and institutions such as schools that police children's gender performance.

However, children are not blank slates waiting to be inscribed upon. As Bond Stockton argues, "[i]n spite of Anglo-American cultures, over several centuries, thinking that the child can be a carefully controlled embodiment of noncomplication (increasingly protected from labor,

sex, and painful understanding), the child has gotten thick with complication" (5). Children are born into a complex ideological system of the patriarchy that raises them to adapt to specific norms in order to fit in, so children are immediately positioned as subjects in a system that they must make sense of. Besides the binary of gender, children are also born into a framework of class, race, sexuality, and ability. The scripts children learn to follow to fit the expectations of society aim to pin down a fixed, already-prepared identity for children to eventually assume. It is important to recognize these ideas when considering the types of texts that children encounter or are drawn to because who the child reader is assumed to be (via the implied reader of a Children's and YA text) and who the child actually is are often entirely different concepts.

Searching for the implied reader in the genre of Children's and Young Adult fiction reveals that there cannot be one single type of the implied child reader in the genre as a whole. Instead of a unified figure with a set of fixed characteristics, the implied child reader can be thought of "as a set of knowledges and skills," which helps to see a "range of reading positions from which the text is legible" to the reader (Reaves 5). Each subgenre of Children's and YA literature—and indeed each text therein—constructs its own version of the implied child reader. YA dystopian novels construct an implied adolescent reader that is assumed to possess certain knowledge, interests, and attitudes. How this implied adolescent reader differs from an implied child reader particularly in the context of YA dystopia is addressed in the following section.

The Implied Reader of YA Dystopia

Deconstructing YA dystopian texts reveals common features that allow us to trace the outlines of the implied reader in this genre. Common tropes in YA dystopia in particular are useful for considering what subject positions the text expects the implied reader to assume. As discussed by Basu et al., the YA dystopia conceives of its reader as an "idealist" who cares about fighting the

"good fight" against oppressive regimes much like the protagonists of YA dystopian texts. According to Basu et al., this assumption about the readers as "budding political activists" is meant to "flatte[r] adolescents and reassur[e] adults that they are more than apathetic youth" (Basu et al. 5). However, the "easily digestible prescriptions" offered by YA dystopias may at the same time "allow young readers to avoid probing the nuances, ambiguities, and complexities of social ills and concerns too deeply" (Basu et al. 5).

What does this contradiction mean for the implied reader? On the one hand, the reader is assumed to care about rebellion against oppressive power structures, but on the other, the reader is taken to be more invested in other issues that take precedence over the social and political dilemmas of the text. Namely, the centrality of the romance plot in many a YA dystopia points to the position that sexual and romantic relationships are assumed to occupy in the life of the reader. Instead of remaining focused on the political struggle of the rebel protagonist, the focus in the YA dystopia shifts towards the relationship between the protagonist and one or two persistent suitors.

As discussed previously, the protagonist in YA dystopia is often a girl caught up not only in a rebellion but also in a love triangle. The love triangle functions as a way of enticing the implied reader through a fantasy of seeing the protagonist as an object of male desire. Male attention and the pursuit of the female protagonist is meant to be accepted by the implied reader as something to be desired. The implied reader is then one who values the heterosexual relationship above the other plotlines in the text. Adolescents are generally thought of as hyper-concerned with romantic love, so it is no surprise that the implied reader in the YA dystopian novel (as in most any Young Adult novel) reflects this assumption. Paradoxically, romance is central in the Young Adult genre, but sex is generally off limits. Although real adolescents explore their sexuality, the

text never reflects this through the narrative—there is no explicit sex act to be found in YA dystopia, nor is there ever an indication of the characters questioning their sexual preference. Queerness is effectively erased from YA dystopia with the protagonist understood in no uncertain terms as heterosexual. In this way, the implied adolescent reader reverts to the position of the implied child reader; there are certain boundaries the text dare not cross. The implied reader is too innocent to encounter outright sex in the text. To be sure, the sex act is sometimes hinted at, but it would be rare to find it described in any way that might seem authentic to the actual reader. Sexual tension between the characters is paramount, and physical expressions of love such as kissing are surely a part of the text, but that is often all that the text is ready to divulge. The implicit heterosexuality of the characters indicates that the text expects the implied reader to accept it as natural.

It is important to mention that there are some YA dystopias that push these boundaries. Sherri L. Smith's *Orleans* (2013) is one such example because it notably does not contain any plotlines concerned with romantic love. Moreover, the protagonist of the novel, Fen, is a young girl who has experienced sexual violence—a topic rarely addressed in YA dystopia. Additionally, *The Summer Prince* (2013) by Alaya Dawn Johnson depicts a queer relationship between the protagonist, her best friend, and their love interest. What's more, this three-way relationship is not depicted as a love triangle but rather as a complex, nuanced romance between all three characters. In an unprecedented turn, Johnson also explicitly includes a passage where the female protagonist masturbates. The assumptions about the implied reader differ in such texts. In the case of *Orleans*, the text presumes that there might be an adolescent reader who is not obsessed with romantic love as it is not central to the narrative. Noticeably, the text shows that the dystopian world contains issues such as sexual violence, which the reader may encounter

in their real world either through personal experience or otherwise. The sexual violence Fen experiences in *Orleans* does not define her in the text, and it does not consume the entire novel, but it is a relevant aspect of the character's experience, and it certainly has bearing on her motivations, decisions, and actions in the novel.

Most of the time, the YA dystopian genre assumes that the implied reader is not ready for conversations about sexual violence because they are simply omitted from most texts in the genre. By obscuring these topics, the genre positions the implied reader as one who will be ready for the explicit gore and violence, which are always present in a YA dystopian text, but sexual violence is off limits—the implied reader is not ready for those conversations. Similarly, the ground-breaking depiction of a queer three-way relationship in *The Summer Prince* assumes that the implied reader is one who understands that such relationships are possible and that romantic and sexual love is complicated. The implied reader is also taken to understand that masturbation is a natural and normal act. This, perhaps, is the most revolutionary assertion about the implied reader in this novel. The adolescent reader is surely no stranger to masturbation, but it is a taboo subject—an act that is often tangled up in shame and secrecy. To see this depicted explicitly and without reservations about the implied reader is truly unprecedented in a YA dystopia. That said, these examples are outliers in the otherwise conservative YA dystopia. Notably, neither one of the two examples of novels discussed here were mentioned by any of the sixteen interview participants in this study. The discrepancy between the assumptions YA dystopia makes about the implied reader as one who is perfectly capable of dealing with the graphic depictions of the brutal murder of children as in *The Hunger Games*, for example, but at the same time cannot know about sexual violence, explicit and nuanced sexual relationships, or masturbation creates an image of an implied reader far removed from an actual adolescent.

Similarly to the obsession with romantic love, which is assumed to be the focus of the implied reader in most YA dystopias, conformity is also positioned as a central concern in the text. The implied reader is assumed to be one who questions their place in society just as the protagonist of many a YA dystopia searches for belonging. As mentioned earlier, the child is assumed to have no fixed position in society as an empty vessel that will eventually grow into a stable identity—that is, the identity they will assume as an adult). Similarly, the adolescent is seen as being at the cusp of reaching this stable adult identity. The YA dystopia contains elements of the coming-of-age story wherein the adolescent protagonist often experiences a transformation and crosses the bridge from childhood into the adult world. The protagonist struggles to find their place in the narrative and the implied reader is expected to relate to this experience since they do not have a fixed social identity (yet), either. The need to fit in yet to be different (or special) is a big part of the Young Adult genre, and this is clear in YA dystopia that often works on the premise of the "specialness" of the protagonist. At the end of the YA dystopia, often the protagonist finds "not an individual identity but a collective one, defined mainly by membership in a particular group" (Basu 19). Moreover, becoming an adult in the YA dystopia is not seen as "forging a unique, never-before-seen, and thus ultimately unclassifiable self," but instead, the protagonist must fit in "with an already extant type of self" (Basu 19). The implied adolescent reader is therefore also primed for the task of finding a pre-designated identity as an adult. In this way, YA dystopian novels suggest to the reader that "understanding oneself means discovering how to describe one's identity within the context of pre-existing categories" (Basu 22).

The implied reader is understood to be white in most YA dystopian novels or at the very least positioned as an individual that must accept whiteness as the norm. YA dystopias are often

ambiguous about their description of characters' ethnicities or racial identities—the sameness of

these dystopian societies is unified in its implicit whiteness. Though social and class disparities

are often at the core of many YA dystopias, race as a factor in these disparities is effectively

erased. This obscures the racial politics of the actual reader's present, signaling to the implied

reader that race has nothing to do with how the dystopian world and resulting society of the

novel came to be. Such YA dystopian texts which erase race "imply that other ethnicities do not

survive in the future or that their participation in the future is not important," (Couzelis 131). As

pointed out by Hentges, YA dystopian authors are "often unaware of racial ideology in their own

texts," (232) and thus, they may unconsciously and inadvertently perpetuate racial stereotypes.

In YA literature as a whole "white often serves as a default for race" and the reader

immediately assumes that they are encountering a white character unless it is explicitly specified

otherwise (Younger 47). An example of this phenomenon can be clearly seen in Lois Lowry's

The Giver (1993), where the complete elimination of all color in this text creates "sameness" of

the dystopian society. By extension, the text's premise indicates that everyone is united in their

implied whiteness. The "Anglo race (…) is the race *selected*" (original emphasis) in Lowry's

novel for the purpose of creating a harmonious, unified society (Couzelis 132). As Hentges has

suggested, "[t]exts that perpetuate mainstream ideologies can simultaneously challenge these

ideologies," (234) and YA dystopian novels such as *The Giver* are trying to indicate the

problems with such a sameness of society. However, the text does not reflect upon why

whiteness has been selected as the default race for its dystopian society in the first place and

therefore it is an example of how the habits of white privilege "actively thwart the process of

conscious reflection on them, which allows them to seem nonexistent even as they continue to

function" (Couzelis 133). The "colorblind" YA dystopian text then effectively asks its implied

reader not to burden themself with issues such as racial hierarchies through their reading experience. The reader is just not ready for certain discussions, the YA dystopia assumes, and so certain topics are left unexplored in the genre.

As I have discussed, Young Adult dystopian texts conceive of the implied reader as one who will readily accept the intended meaning communicated by the text, but the actual reader cannot perfectly match the expectations set for the implied reader. The actual reader of the text may very well construct their own meaning, which can differ from that intended by the text. The reading process requires an interaction between the reader and text through which the reader actively participates in constructing their own meaning from the textual cues offered. The semiotic excess within a text creates a vast polysemy of meanings. The notion of semiotic excess proposes that "dominant ideological values are structured into the text by the use of dominant codes and thus of dominant encodings of social experience"; however, "the dominant reading does not exhaust the semiotic potential of the text" (Fiske "Television" 403). Once the text has completed the "the ideological, hegemonic work," there remains "excess meaning that escapes the control of the dominant" and can be used by "the culturally subordinate … for their own cultural-political interests" (404). Given this, what exactly does it mean for a reader to be active and be able to construct their own meaning from the text beyond what the hegemonic semiotic resources comprised in a text allow for?

To tackle this issue, I will now examine the concept of active readers through complementary approaches to reader response. Starting with a discussion of the reading process as outlined in Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory, I will describe the meaning-making process as a negotiation between reader and text from a pedagogical point of view. Rosenblatt's transactional theory is important for foregrounding the active involvement in the meaning-

making in the unique reading experience of each reader, and it is widely used in the field of education and literacy studies to understand how young readers in particular construct meaning. Furthermore, the transactional theory of reader response will be used as a complementary approach to the cultural studies perspective on reader response, which is central to this project. In Chapter 1, I discussed Stuart Hall's work on ideology, which set the foundation for John Fiske's work on active audiences that is considered here, which will be seminal for understanding the interaction between reader and text as one that produces oppositional, negotiated, or preferred readings of a text understood as an ideological tool. Lastly, Janice Radway's influential case study on the reading experiences of a community of housewives reading romance novels in the 1980s will be used as an example of a cultural studies and feminist approach to reader response.

2.2. Active Readers: The Transactional Theory of Reader Response

Traditionally, the reader was assumed to be a passive recipient of meaning embedded in a text. Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reader response was developed in opposition to this assumption that the reader is inactive. The reader has historically been relegated to the periphery and rendered invisible by a focus on the author and text, understanding the latter as "...a self-contained pattern of words, an autonomous structure of literary devices" (Rosenblatt 3). Through this view, the process of the reader's meaning-making was taken for granted, obscuring their active role in the reading process. Moreover, the reader can also be mistakenly seen as a collective identity as in, for example, the case of the "child reader" in Children's and YA literature. This collective understanding of the reader obscures any individual quality of the reading experience. Rosenblatt's analysis of readers' responses to texts in *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* addresses the ways in which readers actively make sense of literary texts through forming immediate responses that later develop into more defined attitudes toward texts.

The transactional theory makes the reader visible by foregrounding the complex dynamics between the reader and text in the reading process. Rosenblatt posits that reading is an active process where meanings are negotiated between reader and text. She underlines that the reader should not be seen as a tabula rasa or their individual reading experiences taken to mean that the meaning constructed from the text is wholly subjective (4). The reader approaches any given text with a set of assumptions and predispositions and their reading process is shaped by the reader's background knowledge, socio-cultural background, and many other facets of their individual experience. Additionally, the reading process is always socially, culturally, and historically situated, and it always involves a particular person at a particular time and place.

The text as situated in a particular context in space and time has implications for the way a reader interacts with it as a socially, historically, and culturally situated subject. The reader produces meaning from the text by weaving it together with their attitudes, assumptions, and expectations and these are all contingent on the particular context of the reader. Reading is active because it entails "... a subtle adjustment and readjustment of meaning and tone, an effort to achieve a unified and coherent synthesis" (11). The reader thus negotiates with the text during the reading process to arrive at some meaning that makes sense. To be sure, this is not to say that anything goes nor that the meaning of the text constructed depends entirely on the reader. If this were the case, it would be impossible to discuss any sort of common ground for establishing meaning. In reciprocity with the text, the reader rather utilizes meanings related to other works of art, bringing as much to the text as they are taking away from it: "... both text and reader are essential aspects or components …of that which is manifested in each reading …" (14). The text, therefore, does not exist in itself as a literary work until the moment that the reader encounters it,

constituting "an event in the life of a reader" (19). The reader is thus a necessary condition for a text to come to life.

The reader does not only interact with the text when interpreting it nor does the text affect the reader only in the moment of reading. The relationship between reader and text is not linear—it is "a situation, an event at a particular time and place in which each element conditions the other" (16). Each time a reader revisits a text, it constitutes a different event in the life of the reader. According to Rosenblatt, the reader and text influence each other in the sense that the reader participates actively in the formation of meaning with their "... activity in relationship to a text," which, organized "as a set of verbal symbols," forms or establishes a relationship with the reader (18). Generating readings or interpretations of a text can only take place if the meaning is arranged and organized based on the reader's past experiences and expectations as well as their present state, interests, and preoccupations. These are all combined to produce a perception of the text at a particular time in the life of the reader, which also means that readings can be revised—the reader may very well change their perception of the text as they draw on new experiences and ideas that are incorporated into the reader's existing schemata of background knowledge. From this holistic perspective, then, the reading act is embedded in a particular situation, arousing "special overtones" for each reader based on their unique perspective and environment shaping their reading situation (20). Because of this, the text cannot be thought of "as an object, an entity," given that it functions rather as "an active process lived through during the relationship between a reader and a text" (21).

Robert E. Probst, whose applications of Rosenblatt's work on reader response has influenced literature pedagogy, explains that the transactional theory "respects" the basic fact of the reading experience whereby

meaning resides in the person rather than the dictionary. A word comes to mean something to us through our repeated experiences with it in various circumstances; it is the sum, or the residue, or the abstraction of those experiences that constitutes the meaning of the word. When we read, then, we bring those meanings with us to the text. (68)

As a result, it is clear that "whatever meaning there is in literature resides not on the page, but in the transaction between reader and text" (69). In this sense, Rosenblatt led the way for English teachers "who empowered students to become active creators of meaning" (Rejan 10), allowing for readers' active negotiations with the text to take the forefront in how educators consider their reading experiences. Rejecting formalist analyses "that devolve into a lifeless labeling of literary elements," Rosenblatt embraces "readings that display sensitivity to the formal features of a text" (22). This is a way of making space for the active reading habits of students whose loose associations evoked by a text are not exhausted in its informative or "efferent" formal features. A reading experience is the result of a reader interacting with a text, taking in its textual devices but going beyond them into "aesthetic" readings that are not confined to a text's semiotic devices.

From the perspective of this model of the reading experience, it makes no sense to sharply separate subjective and objective readings of the text, because demarcating between these obscures the fact that "they are… aspects of the same transaction—the reader looks to the text, and the text is activated by the reader" (Rosenblatt 18). Moreover, as the text "leads us into a new world" as readers, the "boundary between inner and outer world breaks down … It becomes part of the experience which we bring to our future encounters in literature and in life" (21). In this sense, each text encountered informs the next reading experience, which enriches and complicates the reader's relationship with the novel. As the reader begins the decoding process of the text, they begin to "develop a tentative sense of a framework within which to place what will follow" (54), because it is assumed that the words on the page can potentially form a

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coherent whole. Accordingly, each text "will signal certain possibilities and exclude others, thus limiting the arc of expectations" for the reader (54). The meaning that the reader generates through their interaction with the text stems from the reader's "receptivity to certain kinds of ideas, overtones, or attitudes" (54). The reader reacts to the work through "approval, disapproval, pleasure, shock; acceptance or rejection of the world that is being imaged" (69).

I first explained how the text constructs an implied reader and that each genre and each work of literature has a specific implied reader in mind; we can trace the outlines of this implied reader through analyzing textual cues and elements. However, Rosenblatt's transactional theory introduces the notion that the actual reader is different from the implied reader of a text because, in order to be the implied reader, the actual reader would have to not only accept the meaning the text intends for the reader to take away from the reading, but they would also have to know the author's intentions behind the text—an impossible task given the narrative gaps in the text. As mentioned earlier, Rosenblatt suggests that there is not only no generic reader that we can conceive of but that each actual reader produces a wholly unique reading of a text at a given point in time. This reading becomes an event in the reader's life. Nevertheless, the reading is not entirely subjective—it is rather the product of a dynamic back-and-forth between the reader and text. The text thus leads the reader toward the production of a specific meaning, but the reader's complex network of experiences, background knowledge, and attitudes impact what meaning the reader will ultimately construct at a given point in time.

To sum up, Rosenblatt's transactional theory establishes that the process of meaning making is a negotiation between the reader and text—this is the same assertion made by cultural theorists like Stuart Hall, whose focus is on the ideological potential of the text. Rosenblatt states that readers come to a text not as blank slates, but as subjects of cultural, social, and historical

contexts. This complex subject position impacts the reading process and the meaning that will be constructed from the reader's interaction with a text. This leads us to the discussion of the text's ideological purpose versus the reader as an active participant who negotiates meaning.

2.3. Active Audiences, Active Readers: A Cultural Studies Approach to Reader Response

From a cultural studies standpoint, the text as a repository of ideological structures constructs an implied reader as an ideological subject. As such, the reader is expected to accept the dominant ideological discourses present in the text. However, through the active process of meaning-making, the reader accepts or rejects the various discourses in the text. Cultural theorist John Fiske's ("Active Audiences," "Television") work on the concept of active audiences helps illuminate the processes through which readers construct meaning. Although Fiske's work is centered on audience response to television, it is relevant to any discussion of texts as products (and participants) of an ideological system. Fiske discusses reader response with this television audience in mind, though it applies to a wider range of ideological subjects as creators of meaning. I will be referring to these subjects as "readers" because any text—be it television, music, visual art, or literary work—is ultimately "read" in that the meaning of the work is constructed by the individual.

Much like Rosenblatt's transactional theory was a response to a lack of attention paid to the reader as an integral, active component in the production of meaning from texts, Fiske's consideration of active audiences in his work *Television Culture* was formed in opposition to the view that people were passive, "powerless and inactive" recipients of information as "textual subjects" (62). This view of the person as a textual subject suggested a narrow scope of possible readings of a text that ultimately leads the reader to that meaning of the text which the author intended. On the other hand, the reader understood as a socially produced subject:

has a history, lives in a particular social formation (a mix of class, gender, age, region, etc.), and is constituted by a complex cultural history that is both social and textual. The subjectivity results from "real" social experience and from mediated or textual experience. (Fiske "Active Audiences" 62)

The main difference between the audience conceived of as textual or social subjects is that "social subjectivity" is more influential "in the construction of meanings than the textually produced subjectivity" (62). Fiske's point is that the subjectivity of the textual subject is not robust enough to account for the full reading experience of a social subject. The reader, conceived of as a social subject, encompasses the reader as textual subject in that the social subject represents a more whole and nuanced identity shaped by the reader's actual life. In contrast to textually formed subjects, "[r]eal readers are subjects in history, living in social formations, rather than mere subjects of a single text" (Morley in Fiske "Active Audiences" 62). This connects to Rosenblatt's assertion that any individual as a reader brings their lived experience to their interpretation of each text they encounter. Social and cultural factors play a role in mediating the subject's interpretation of the text, and contextual features can be said to have as much relevance as textual features when it comes to constructing the meaning of a text. Assuming texts to be any articulation of meanings regardless of the mode and medium in which they are produced, Fiske can be interpreted as offering the foundation for a conception of readers in context, socially constructed, actively forming several readings of texts that yield multiple levels of interpretation.

Furthermore, in addition to Rosenblatt's research on readers and their interaction with texts, TV viewers have long been studied ethnographically to understand how "actual people in actual situations watch and enjoy actual television programs" (Fiske "Active Audiences" 63). This shift away from the emphasis on "textual and ideological construction of the subject" has allowed for an exploration of audiences as "socially and historically situated people" (63). This

approach to audience as context-bound "acknowledges the differences between people despite their social construction" while at the same time revealing the plurality of "the meanings and pleasures that [people] find in television" (63). Television shows and programs, like any text, thus produce a multitude of possible readings. Given this, it is possible to consider what types of meanings the readers construct in the reading experience as one that carries ideological weight. As has been established, both Rosenblatt and Fiske outline that the reader is not a passive receptacle of any meaning that is intended by the text—that is, the meaning that is preferred by the text, to put it in Stuart Hall's terms. The question then arises: what other types of meanings does the reader construct from the text by bringing in their social experience into the act of interpretation?

Negotiating Meaning

As discussed in Chapter 1, Stuart Hall theorizes that texts contain encoded preferred meanings that readers are meant to accept and internalize. Hall's theory was tested empirically by David Morley's study of television audiences in his work *The Nationwide Audience: Structure and Decoding* (1980). Morley's study made it clear that audiences could construct a variety of readings of the text that did not correspond with the preferred meaning. The TV audience in Morley's study exhibited agency as active participants in the meaning-making process, constructing the type of meaning that best suited them. With this in mind, Fiske makes the case that treating television as a "closed text," where "the dominant ideology exerts considerable, if not total, influence over its ideological structure and therefore over its reader," is not fruitful as it obscures the "gaps and spaces" that open it up "to meanings not preferred by the textual structure, but that result from the social experience of the reader" (Fiske "Active Audiences" 64). Meaning is to be understood as "a site of struggle" (Fiske, "Television" 394) that is always

contested. By placing the audience or reader in the center of inquiry, it is then possible to explore

the ways in which the semiotic excess or gaps in the text allow for the production of meaning

resistant to that of the dominant ideological discourses. Similar to this approach, this dissertation

seeks to interrogate the actual reader's experience with YA dystopian texts and the readings that

they produce through interaction with the text. The YA dystopian text is not treated here as a

closed text but as one open for negotiation and resistance by the reader. This project treats the

readings produced by the readers as falling on a spectrum of preferred (or dominant), negotiated,

or oppositional readings. I will now turn to the differences between these three types of readings

to show how the reader navigates the ideologies operating within the text.

Earlier, in Chapter 1, the text was described as an ideological tool. Considering the text's

ideological function, Hall distinguishes between individual subject positions wherein the subject

produces a reading of the text that aligns with the dominant ideology operating underneath it and

the kind of subject positions that assume an oppositional stance toward the dominant discourses

in the text, as well as a third option in which the audience negotiates with the text to arrive at

meaning. Hall essentially proposed that "viewers whose social situation, particularly their class,

aligned them comfortably with the dominant ideology" would produce "dominant readings of a

text," while those viewers "whose social situation placed them in opposition to the dominant

ideology, would oppose its meanings in the text and produce oppositional readings" (Fiske

"Active Audiences" 64). Preferred readings thus conform to the dominant ideology that is

encoded in the text, and Hall maintained that the text "always prefers a meaning that generally

promotes the dominant ideology" (65). On the other hand, oppositional readings would reject the

preferred or dominant meanings that the text imposes on the reader. Hall's approach to reader

response posits that "the three types of reading," namely, oppositional, negotiated and preferred,

"are roughly equal" (64). However, Fiske does not see "perfectly dominant" or "purely oppositional" readings as likely to be produced by "socially situated" readers, who must always negotiate with the text to some extent to arrive at meaning (64). Fiske thus argues that the majority of readers "are probably situated not in positions of conformity or opposition to the dominant ideology, but in ones that conform to it in some way, but not others" (64), which means that people may accept "the dominant ideology in general, but modify or inflect it to meet the needs of their specific situation" (64). This situation produces the third type of reading designated by Hall—the negotiated reading of a text. This type of reading is the most pertinent for this research project because, as will be discussed further, the reader's interaction with the text is most likely to result in constructing a negotiated meaning.

The "social differences" between those who encode and decode the text will always create a situation wherein the encoder is operating under a different set of codes than the decoder and "the resulting meanings will thus be determined more by the social situation of the decoder than by that of the encoder" (Eco in Fiske "Active Audiences" 65). This brings us back to the idea discussed earlier, that children are unknowable to adults. The implied child reader constructed by texts will never correspond to the actual reader who encounters the text. The child reader is constructed by adults who are themselves subjects of the dominant ideological power structures of the patriarchy. YA dystopian texts are encoded by adults who position the implied child (or adolescent) reader as one that is meant to accept the features of the text as natural. And yet, because the actual reader of the YA dystopian text is using their own set of complex codes to approach the text, they will not match the image of the implied reader of the text. As Fiske suggests, there is a spectrum of meanings that can be constructed through the reader's interaction with the text—with preferred or dominant meanings at one end and oppositional at the other. As

Chapter 5 will demonstrate, the YA dystopian readers interviewed for this project constructed

readings that at times leaned toward one end of the spectrum or the other, but, for the most part,

readers produced negotiated meanings from the texts they had encountered.

For example, the YA dystopian text may present to the reader a world where there is no

mention of queer identities—the protagonist is heterosexual, and this is signified through the

emphasis on the romantic and sexual feelings that she has for a male counterpart (or two) in the

text. Heterosexuality is a compulsory component of the patriarchy. Taken as the preferred or

dominant reading, the erasure of queer experiences from the text coupled with the centrality of

the heterosexual romance would suggest that the implied reader is one who will readily accept

heterosexuality as natural and the invisibility of queerness from the text will go unquestioned. A

reading that leans toward the oppositional end of the spectrum, however, may be one where the

erasure of queerness is painfully obvious to the reader, and it becomes a source of frustration.

Moreover, the reader may argue for queer readings of the text that become possible through gaps

in the text or semiotic excess. At the end of *The Hunger Games* series, for instance, Katniss ends

up forming a nuclear family unit with Peeta; still, fans of the novels, including some readers who

participated in this study, insist that Katniss is asexual or aromantic. Some readers even feel

betrayed by the ending of the series because they consistently perceived Katniss to be queer, so

to see her relegated to a position of heterosexual partner and mother at the end of the final novel

appears as a disconnect from how some readers have come to see the character. Negotiated

readings are much more complex because they are far more nuanced and each one differs from

the other at least in the terms of degrees of where these readings fall on the spectrum between

preferred and oppositional. One example of a negotiated reading could be an instance where the

reader realizes that queerness is absent in the text and sees this as problematic, but, at the same

time, the reader may be glad Katniss ends up with Peeta and starts a family at the end of *The Hunger Games* trilogy. The reader may interpret the family Katniss builds with Peeta as the "happy ending" she deserves after having lost so much during the series.

As Fiske explains, the relationship between the text and the reader is thus much more complex than one where the reader as subject is already positioned in favor of the text's dominant ideology. Instead, reading the text "is a process of negotiation between this existing subject position and the one proposed by the text" (Fiske "Active Audiences" 66). This subject position mentioned above aligns with the concept of the implied reader discussed earlier in that the implied reader is expected to accept the preferred meaning offered by the text. As the reader negotiates meaning with the text, "the balance of power lies within the reader," given that the "meanings found in the text shift towards the subject position of the reader more than the reader's subjectivity is subjected to the ideological power of the text" (66).

What's more, polysemy as a structural element of texts pervades the reading experience, particularly as this relates to the diversity of readers belonging to a variety of social groups. The reading experience constitutes a "dialogue" (Volosinov 1973) between the textually and socially situated reader (Fiske "Active Audiences" 66). In the context of this dialogical model, the active reader is one that capitalizes on multiple possible readings of a text. The active reader constructs meaning "...according to the discourses (knowledges, prejudices, resistances, etc.)" that they bring to the encounter with the text, and the most "crucial factor" in it will be "the range of discourses at the disposal of the audience" (Morley 18). There is thus a dialogical relationship between the discourses a text offers and those at the disposal of the reader. In this way, a text's dominant discourses do not exhaust its possible interpretations. A text's dominant discursive structure would only be internalized because of how it interacts with the reader's discursive

practices as embedded in their particular form of life outside of which there would be no meanings to be negotiated and developed as part of the reader's experience. The dominant readings as conforming to the ideological framework established by the text are thus not the starting point for the reader in terms of how they are positioned vis-a-vis the text. Instead, the reader comes to the text with an array of positions contingent upon their particular background, preconceived notions, attitudes, and assumptions, all of which, articulated in the form of discursive practices, stand in contrast to those dominant discourses endorsed by the text. It is because of this dialogue between the text and the subject position assumed by the reader that the actual reader can be considered as inherently active, given that it is through this interaction that the reader produces the meaning from the text.

The reader's subjectivity "is composed of the variety of discourses that we use to make sense of the social domains that constitute our social experience" (Fiske "Active Audiences" 66). This investigation of the preferred, oppositional, and negotiated readings of YA dystopia takes into account the social and cultural dimension of the reader as crucial for the process of their construction of the text's meanings as opposed to merely garnering these meanings within the framework of the dominant readings sanctioned by the text's ideology. This means that our subjectivity is necessarily fluid in its interpretation of texts since our subjectivity is "likely to be composed of a number of different, possibly contradictory discourses, each bearing traces of a different specific ideology" (66). The implications of this ever-changing subjectivity of the reader are equivalent to those suggested by Rosenblatt when she discusses the effects of a reader revisiting a text. That is, reading a text more than once will mean that it is being encountered by a "different" reader each time, as the reader's subjectivity is constantly in flux. The reader brings a set of different interpretations to each reading of the text based on the various social

experiences that have shaped their subjectivity. Moreover, as the reader's subjectivity can inhabit a large number of contradictory or inconsistent discourses at any point, it makes no sense to think of the reader as merely developing readings in accordance with the discourses bearing the text's ideology. On the contrary, if the reader has a subjectivity that remains in spite of the tensions created by these contradictory and inconsistent discourses, it has to be "disunited" as in a divided mind—"a site of struggle," not "as a unified site of ideological reconciliation" (66). In this vein, Fiske explains Gramsci's idea of our personalities being "not at all what we imagine them, as sort of unified boxes," but they are rather "full of very contradictory elements— progressive elements and stone-age elements" (67). By virtue of inhabiting such contradictory and inconsistent discourses, the reader's subjectivity is therefore not confined by the ideology operating underneath the text. Rather, depending on the reader's background and social circumstances, a text's meanings are always negotiated to the extent that the reader is not required to read it "in the way preferred by the text" (67). The multiplicity of possible readings constructed by an individual exist in tension with one another. Ultimately, the reader may decode a text in multiple ways all at once.

From an intersectional perspective, because individuals do not occupy just one single subject position but instead inhabit multiple identities simultaneously, the reader can bring any one of these identities and experiences to their interpretation of the text. Depending on the point of view that frames the reader's encounter with the text, a different reading will emerge, and it will be in tension with other discourses pertaining to a different facet of the reader's identity. What's important to note here is just how complex the reading experience is for the socially situated individual, who despite their investment in a particular ideology, such as a socially progressive attitude toward gender, still has to argue against contradictory and inconsistent

voices internally. These tensions will be apparent in Chapter 5, where readers discuss sometimes competing, sometimes contradictory readings of YA dystopia, at times voicing concern, confusion, or even anger at some features of the YA dystopian text while accepting other features as completely natural and unproblematic.

This interpretative gap in the text is unavoidable due to the fact that the set of preferred readings that the text creates and promotes will always encounter a different set of discourses pre-existing in the active reader. It is at different levels of consciousness and intentionality that an individual's readings are formulated, which explains why they are not necessarily thought of as "contradictory" by the reader themself, at least not while these views are not articulated explicitly. To be sure, there are competing discourses also present in the text—it is not just a repository of the dominant discourse alone. However, it is by virtue of the tension between these competing discourses in the text vis-a-vis the conflicting discourses that make up the reader's subjectivity that "the polysemy of the text and the multiplicity of readings arise" (67). Because television audiences are composed of people from a variety of social backgrounds and belonging to different subcultures, a television show as a text must appeal to a number of these various groups. This means that television shows must be polysemic as open texts to achieve this goal of appealing to a variety of people. The same can be said about the YA dystopian novel—although it has an implied reader in mind, the text must be open enough to appeal to a vast range of readers, who will be invested in different aspects of the text. As discussed earlier, in the case of the multitude of possible reader responses to literary texts such as poems, the inherent polysemy of any text does not mean that it contains an infinite number of readings where any interpretation will be legitimate and "any meaning can be derived from it" (Fiske "Television" 391-392). Because the audience (or readers) as consisting of various subcultures in society is defined by

their relations "to the centers of domination," the "multiple meanings of a text that is popular in that society can be defined only by their relationships (possibly oppositional) to the dominant ideology as it is structured into that text" (391-392). The "unresolved contradictions" within a text make it available to the kind of interpretation that best suits the reader as one that bears the most "structural similarities to his or her own social relations and identity" (393).

Assuming, then, that being an active reader is not a matter of flicking a switch but rather involves degrees of activity, we can expect that any one reader can produce a range of preferred meanings of the text. Nevertheless, the reading experience is an active process of meaning-making as a negotiation between reader and text, so there is ultimately no purely textual reader (or, as discussed earlier in this chapter, what would be an implied reader) who solely internalizes the dominant discourses of a text. As we have seen, it is rather the other way around: there is a set of competing discourses that the socially situated reader brings to their encounter with a text. Because of the interplay between "the polysemy of the text and the multiplicity of readings…" (Fiske "Active Audiences" 67), it makes sense to speak of the reading experience in terms of the degrees of the reader's activity, given the level of intentionality and consciousness with which the relevant readings are constructed. It is important to underline here that, although dominant power structures try to impose certain readings of texts, ultimately they cannot control what meaning will finally be produced by readers:

> The cultural industries do have the power constantly to rework and reshape what they represent; and by repetition and selection, to impose and implant such definitions of ourselves as fit more easily into the descriptions of the dominant or preferred culture. That is what the concentration of cultural power—the means of culture-making in the hands of the few—actually means. These definitions don't have the power to occupy our minds; they don't function on us as if we are blank screens. But they do occupy and rework the interior contradictions of feeling and perception in the dominated classes. (Fiske, "Television" 400)

Fiske poses that the reader, statistically speaking, "almost certain to be one of the culturally subordinate," is engaged in the reading process and the decoding of the text and if they do so "according to codes that fit easily with those of the dominant ideology," they are "rewarded with pleasure … of recognition, of privileged knowledge and of dominant specularity" (403-404). This means that it is important to consider what sort of subject positions make this invitation more appealing to the reader and what contexts allow the reader to challenge the dominant ideology of the text.

2.3. A Cultural Studies Approach to Reader Interaction with the Text

Janice Radway's ethnographic study of readers in *Reading the Romance* (1987) explored the interaction between reader and text, paying particular attention to the way that not only the text but the act of reading itself mediated the readers' actual conditions of existence. Radway's study examined the way a group of women in a small midwestern town interacted with popular romance novels. Her study is an account of "the way romance reading as a form of behavior operated as a complex intervention in the ongoing social life of actual social subjects, women who saw themselves first as wives and mothers" (Radway 7) The women in Radway's study found escape from their domestic lives in romance novels, which offered them a respite from the constant demands they faced as nurturers. Moreover, the act of reading itself functioned as an act of rebellion as the woman immersed in the act of reading was in a space of her own. Reading the romance novel was one of the few times the women did not attend to the needs of others—"their reading was a way of temporarily refusing the demands associated with their social role as wives and mothers" (11). The romance novel offered the women a fantasy wherein a triumphant heroine perseveres through various obstacles to find happiness with a male character capable of giving her the type of romantic love that she (and the implied reader) desires.

Radway, just like Rosenblatt in the articulation of the transactional theory of reader response and Fiske in his discussion of active audiences, works with the assertion that "there is no overall intrinsic message or meaning in the work" that "comes alive" when readers interpret it based on their own social experiences (8). Just as the pedagogical approach to reading and the cultural studies approach have established, Radway foregrounds that although this opens up the possibility of stating that there can be an "infinite number of readings" of a single text, "there are patterns or regularities to what viewers and readers bring to texts in large part because they acquire specific cultural competencies as a consequence of their particular social location" (8). Radway argues that this produces similar readings since "similarly located readers learn a similar set of reading strategies and interpretive codes that they bring to bear upon the texts they encounter" (Radway 8). In the case of Radway's ethnographic study, this assumption is connected to the physical location of the women readers who all frequented the same bookstore to receive romance novel recommendations. Importantly, none of the women in Radway's study knew each other prior to the interviews that she conducted with them. The physical proximity of the women in this study and the similar conditions of domestic life that framed their reading experience arguably produced similar codes in their interpretations of the romance novel. I work with an assumption akin to Radway's in that the readers interviewed for this project worked with similar codes, but these were not codes developed due to the readers' physical proximity to one another. Similarly to Radway's study, the readers interviewed for this project did not know one another (except in two cases). But in contrast to Radway's ethnography, the readers I interviewed were all members of the same discourse community—the online bookish community. As will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3, the readers in this study engaged in the same type of activities that framed their shared reading experience; the readers produced reviews of the books

that they read, which were posted online on social media platforms such as Instagram, and they also read other readers' reviews, which both impacted their decisions as to whether or not to read a given work and informed their reading experience of that work. Through active engagement in the online bookish community, the readers who participated in this study also had access to a variety of interpretive lenses and meta-commentary that framed their reading experiences. I argue that, although these readers are not "similarly located" in the sense that Radway's were, they are similarly located in a vast online network of like-minded readers, which allows them to operate under similar codes with which to approach the text.

Moreover, Radway employs Stanley Fish's (1980) concept of interpretive communities to approach the "regularities" that she discovers in her readers' responses to the romance novels. This way, she "attempts to determine whether the Smithton women operate on romances as an interpretive community in some way different from the community of trained literary scholars" (8). (We will come back to Fish's concept of interpretive communities in chapter 3.) Radway maintains that the use of Fish's concept is complicated for the purposes of her research due to the notion's original purpose, namely, that of accounting only "… for varying modes of literary criticism within the academy, that is, interpretations produced by Freudian, Jungian, mythic, or Marxist critics" (8). Nonetheless, this concept can also be fruitful when used to discuss patterned responses to texts outside of the context of academia. Taken as an interpretive community, the women in Radway's study gave "remarkably similar answers" to questions regarding the romance novel, pointing to common structured responses that they could develop in the context of their day-to-day interactions with the text. In effect, they "referred constantly and voluntarily to the connection between their reading and their daily social situation as wives and mothers" (9).

And similarly to how the readers who participated in the study conducted for this project found book recommendations based on the opinions of others in the know, the women in Radway's study based their selection of romance novels on the recommendations of Dorothy (Dot) Evans—a local bookstore worker. With Dot's help, the women were able to bypass the publishing industry's limited "understanding of what women want from romance fiction" (Radway 46). Dot's advice on books enabled the readers "to take back some measure of control from the publishers by selectively choosing only those books they had reason to suspect would satisfy their desires and needs" (49). Radway's research uncovered that romance publishers did not "adequately addres[s]" the readers' particular tastes and interests, but because the romance novels were designed "to appeal to a huge audience by meeting the few preferences that all individuals within the group have in common," they managed to create texts that were at least "minimally acceptable to Dot and her readers" (49). Dot's role as a mediator between the reader and text was important to the women because they could not depend on the publishers' understanding of their needs as romance readers. This same assertion can be made about the group of readers who were interviewed for this dissertation—the readers' interpretations of YA dystopian texts showed a deep love for the genre, but they were also able to pinpoint points of contention where the genre failed to meet their expectations. As will be discussed in chapter 5, the dichotomy between the implied and actual readers of YA dystopian novels creates friction between reader and text.

Lastly, Radway also points to the notion that the group of women who participated in her study can resist the patriarchal ideology operating in the romance novel, but that such readers must mobilize to turn their dissatisfaction with the patriarchy into social action. I argue that the vast interactive online bookish community of readers and their ability to share their readings of

YA novels open possibilities for these readers to question the preferred readings of YA dystopia

that it would have them accept as natural. The interaction between readers is what helps expose

them to alternative readings that inform their own perspective. Having conducted this study in

the eighties, Radway found that although reading the romance connected readers in "a kind of

female community," it was "nonetheless mediated by the distances that characterize mass

production and the capitalist organization of storytelling," given that the act of reading is

characterized as "fundamentally private" and "isolating" (Radway 213). The women in

Radway's study never got together either to "share…the experience of imaginative opposition"

or to reflect on what circumstances of their actual life "gave rise to their need for the romance in

the first place" (213). In contrast to this, the ability of readers to share their opinions online with

others creates spaces for collective reflection and debate about texts. Although meaning is

established seemingly in the private and isolating act of reading, for readers who participate in

online reader communities meaning is also contested in the various online spaces where readers

gather to discuss books. The following chapter discusses the ways in which the online bookish

community functions as a discourse community and an interpretive community and how these

processes impact the individual reading experience to expand on relevant features of the shared

context of the participants in this study—the Bookish community

3. THE BOOKISH COMMUNITY

Reading does not occur in isolation. It is an activity distinctly shaped by the reader's context. As discussed in Chapter 2, the relationship between the reader and the text is always interactive as the reader makes intertextual connections and creates a complex dialogue with the text through the active meaning-making process. Still, reading individually is a different experience from reading within a community. It is true that reading is never a completely isolated activity given that it always takes place in context, which shapes the reader's relationship with the text. Nevertheless, reading becomes even more communal and interactive when the reader is a part of a reading community such as the Bookish community online.

The Bookish community, as Birke describes it, encompasses "a growing number of readers who take to social media to celebrate what they often refer to as bookishness: being a person who regards reading, not only but often particularly reading printed books, as an integral part of life" (150). The Bookish community is a group of people not limited to any one physical location—its members converge online to actively share their opinions, impressions, and reviews of books; curate reading lists around specific themes; recommend authors and books; and employ a multitude of mechanisms to share their reading experiences online with likeminded individuals. The vast majority of this exchange of information and reading experience takes place online on social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter, as well as video sharing platforms like YouTube, and websites such as Tumblr and Goodreads. Moreover, one could argue that there are many Bookish communities depending on the particular online platform of choice. However, I believe that there are fundamental characteristics that all readers who participate in such online communities share. In this chapter, I will specifically examine how readers interact on the Instagram platform.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide context for how the reading experience of those who participate in the Bookish community, such as the sixteen participants in the interviews conducted for this research study, is shaped by the discourse produced by this community of readers online. I aim to provide insight into the complex relationship between the Bookish community in their different roles, be it as content creators, content consumers, or participants in the discourse surrounding works of YA dystopian fiction. As mentioned earlier, there are many social media platforms and websites used by the Bookish community. However, since the majority of the readers who participated in the interviews in the context of this project were active on Instagram in particular, I will limit my discussion to this platform. I will begin the chapter by situating the online Bookish community by approaching it through a variety of complimentary theoretical perspectives. Each definition supplements the other by allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the Bookish community in how it facilitates interaction between readers. First, I will examine this online community as a participatory culture. Next, I will approach the elements of the Bookish community as an affinity space. Finally, I will outline the Bookish community as a discourse community. All of the aforementioned perspectives will form a more complete image of how the Bookish community on Instagram functions as an interpretive community. Stanley Fish's concept of the interpretive community is central to understanding the way readers impact each other's reading experiences. The interaction between readers in the Bookish community has implications for the meanings that readers construct from texts.

Specifically, in this chapter I will describe the role of social media platforms like Instagram (or "Bookstagram" as it is referred to by the Bookish community) as a space in which the readers form friendships with one another and gain a sense of belonging. Readers use

Bookstagram as a source for discovering new books. The opportunity to see reviews of other readers gives Bookish community members access to different points of view. Yet, Bookish community members as content creators on social media platforms like Instagram also produce reviews of promotional copies supplied to them directly by publishers. Besides this, Bookish content creators also produce social media posts that promote paraphernalia such as thematic bookmarks, candles, and illustration artwork associated with particular novels. This means that although Bookstagram can offer readers the opportunity to explore a variety of viewpoints from which to approach novels thus enriching and complicating their reading experience, Bookstagram is also a useful marketing tool for publishers. Thus, I argue that Bookstagram holds subversive potential for readers to develop more nuanced readings of novels that may allow them to recognize and interrogate the ideologies at work in YA novels. At the same time, Bookstagram's subversive potential may be undermined by the publishing industry, which uses the reader community for its own ends.

Even so, the Bookish community uses social media platforms such as Instagram to engage in social and political discussions. Readers on Bookstagram participate in campaigns to center the voices of diverse authors and works like in the case of the popular #OwnVoices movement and the hashtag #DiversifyYourBookshelf, which will be discussed in more detail. As will be seen, the relationship between the Bookish community may impact their reading experiences and how they approach YA texts, including those within the YA dystopian genre.

3. 1. Situating the Bookish Community

The Bookish community is not a monolith—the way readers within this community engage with one another across different social media platforms and websites depends on each individual reader and the level of their active engagement with others varies. For example, a member of the

Bookish community might post lengthy, detailed reviews of books on Goodreads, but they may not create YouTube videos about them. However, they might consume the YouTube reviews of books created by others and participate in a discussion about a book in the comments section of a YouTube video. They might create or repost memes inspired by books and share these via Instagram posts. Most social media platforms intersect and allow for the redistribution of content from one to another, so it is not uncommon to see "BookTube channels share links to other social media sites" like Instagram and Tumblr, such that each is utilized "to highlight various aspects of the online book community" (Perkins 354). In this way, the boundaries of one platform "bleed over into other online platforms." The Bookish community can thus easily share a YouTube video in a Facebook group or a TikTok video in their Instagram "Stories." Although the Bookish community may participate in a complex web of complementary social media platforms and websites to discuss works of fiction, their goals of sharing knowledge and information about books and exchanging views while making interpersonal connections with others remain the central focus no matter what platform the community members utilize at any given time. It should be noted that Instagram refers to the specific social media platform that the Bookish community utilizes while Bookstagram refers to the Bookish community on Instragram in particular.

The Bookish community impact each other's readings of texts in that meanings are negotiated and co-created through readers' interaction online. The interaction within the online Bookish community on Bookstagram impacts the way readers discover, approach, and interact with works of YA fiction, including YA dystopia. Readers influence each other in terms of the type of texts they choose to consume—the more Instagram followers a Bookstagram user (or Bookstagrammer) has, the further their social media influence stretches. The Bookish

community is able to have a very real effect on book sales as Bookstagrammers bring back old titles and promote new or yet-to-be-released titles to one another. The exchange of reviews and recommendations shapes the reading experience of Bookish community members online as they are exposed to other readers' perspectives, including those of people whose identities and lived experiences the reader does not share. As a result, the reader encounters various lenses through which they may approach a text—which can happen prior to, during, and after the reading experience.

The Bookish Community as a Participatory Culture

"Participatory culture" is a term coined by communication and media scholar Henry Jenkins, and it refers to "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices" (Jenkins, et al. 3). Importantly, members of this culture see themselves as active participants whose "contributions matter": they feel connected to one another or, at the very least, they "care about others' opinions of what they have created" (Jenkins, et al. 3).

The online Bookish community functions as one such culture because its members are actively engaged in the processes of generating and sharing book reviews, memes, skits, fan art, and other content connected to books, especially works of Young Adult fiction. Experienced members of the culture, such as content creators on platforms like Instagram and YouTube, will give advice to less experienced members on how to successfully engage with other book lovers on these platforms and grow their own audience. Perhaps the most important feature of an online Bookish community, the desire to feel connected to other members and to make friends with people who understand the reader's love of books, is what inspires many to join the online

Bookish community and keeps them coming back to the online platform consistently. Figure 1

below demonstrates one such example of the types of exchanges common in the Bookish

community on Instagram:

Figure 1. Instagram post depicting a photo of the *Catching Fire* novel and the post creator's caption
discussing the relationship between Peeta and Katniss.

In the example of the Instagram post in Figure 1, the Bookstagrammer @stellae.in.libri

begins their post with an unattributed quote from *The Hunger Games*. The reader of this

Instagram post is meant to know that the quote belongs to Peeta. @stellae.in.libri then gushes

about their love for the pairing of Katniss and Peeta in *The Hunger Games trilogy*. Notably,

besides discussing *The Hunger Games*, @stellae.in.libri's Instagram post also states, "i've [*sic*]

spent all day trying to plan out my university classes and ohhh boy it's so frustrating ... hopefully

it all goes well when i [*sic*] actually register tomorrow!!" (Instagram). The post ends with

@stellae.in.libri posing a question to their Instagram followers: "who's your favorite book

couple?" and a mandatory array of related hashtags such as "#bookstagram #bookish … #katniss

… #yadystopia" (Instagram). This Bookstagrammer's statement about trying to plan for the

registration of university classes may seem out of place in a post, which otherwise creates

cohesive discourse concerning romantic pairings in works of fiction. However, considering the

purpose of @stellae.in.libri's statement as one that expresses frustration and, perhaps, anxiety or

excitement about an ordinary aspect of their life outside of reading shows that they are

attempting to connect with other Instagram users by sharing an aspect of their "real" (or offline)

life. The fact that @stellae.in.libri shares their feelings of frustration with registering for

university classes appears to intertwine their personas as a reader, a Bookstagrammer, and a

student with a life outside of Bookstagram. Additionally, the question posed toward the end of

@stellae.in.libri's post that invites others to share their favorite fictional couples is an attempt to

directly engage their audience situating them as readers.

Regarding the romance between Katniss and Peeta, @stellae.in.libri says in their post

"…i [*sic*] ADORE katniss [*sic*] and peeta's [*sic*] relationship … they're so perfect for each other

(unlike gale [*sic*] …)" (Instagram). @stellae.in.libri's dislike of Gale is underscored by their

choice of emojis (cartoon depictions of human emotion) that accompany Gale's name—three

emojis depicting the act of throwing up in disgust. In the comments section of this post,

Bookstagrammer @mares_the_poet states, "I'm embarrassed to say that I used to ship Katniss

and Gale … HG was the pioneer for 'teens fight the evil dystopian government' and everything

that came after never stood a chance" (Instagram). The "HG" in this post refers to *The Hunger*

Games series and the verb "to ship" used here expresses @mares_the_poet's desire to see

Katniss and Gale involved in a romantic relationship with one another. @stellae.in.libri responds

in the comment section, "@mares_the_poet don't worry, i [*sic*] shipped them too ... and exactly!!

it [*sic*] was the blueprint and i [*sic*] don't think any dystopian series since has been able to top it"

(Instagram). This interaction exemplifies the type of brief, friendly exchange of opinion common

on Bookstagram and points to the way readers communicate with one another in comment

sections. Important to note here that the Bookish content creator responses to comments on posts are not always guaranteed.

The online Bookish community is a group of ardent fans of books who have channeled their passion for literature into a culture of sharing meanings surrounding the texts they love. This ability to "transform personal reaction into social interaction, spectatorial culture into participatory culture, is one of the central characteristics of fandom" (Jenkins 41). At the same time, this ability is what distinguishes a reader who engages with texts offline from the online Bookish community member, who rather seeks out other community members with whom to share reading experiences while actively participating in the Bookish participatory culture online. Jenkins explains the difference between "fans" and regular consumers of texts in terms of the former's need to translate their interpretation "into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the [...] content with friends, by joining a 'community' of other fans who share common interests" (Jenkins 41). While a casual reader may not jump on Instagram to create or share a reel about their favorite character from a series, for fans "consumption naturally sparks production, reading generates writing, until the terms seem logically inseparable" (Jenkins 41). This means that the reading experience of an online Bookish community member is embedded within the larger social context of other members' readings of the same text. These readers generate reviews and other commentary on the text, which other readers consume and embed into a paradigm of collective readings. For the online Bookish community members, meaning is thus negotiated via social media.

The Bookish Community as an Affinity Space

While this exchange of reader perspectives within the Bookish community online is a crucial feature of a participatory culture in how it affects the reader's meaning-making process, it is also

helpful to analyze the Bookish community as an "affinity space." From this perspective, members of the community exchange knowledge via various social media platforms, which serve as "home bases" for readers. Affinity spaces are both physical and digital, "loosely organized social and cultural settings in which the work of teaching tends to be shared by many people, in many locations, who are connected by a shared interest or passion" such as the gamer community or the beauty community online (Gee 8). These spaces serve as a meeting place "where people often come together to engage in the activities that keep them linked to each other" (Gee 9). For the Bookish community, these "home bases" are digital platforms such as Instagram (Bookstagram), TikTok (BookTok), YouTube (BookTube), Facebook, and others. Their primary function is to create opportunities for the exchange of information and knowledge between Bookish community members. The book reviews, memes, skits, and other content generated within the community engages community members in discussion and debate on various topics connected to texts.

"Home bases," such as Bookstagram serve as digital meeting points where you can find the experts in the affinity space, that is, "the most passionate members of the group—the key organizers, motivators, teachers, and standard bearers" (Gee 9). An example of experts in the affinity space of Bookstagram directly engaging with others is shown in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2. Instagram post with a carousel of images that discusses tips for new Bookstagrammers placing importance on engagement between community members. Caption by the post creator outlining the Bookstagram advice presented in the image.

In the example of Figure 2 above, Bookstagrammers behind the account @two_lil_bookworms are providing advice for starting a Bookstagram account. Among their tips to new Bookstagram accounts @two_lil_bookworms list engaging with your audience; having a unified visual theme, that is—a consistent use of a certain filter on Instagram posts; and creating posts that reflect your interests. Importantly, @two_lil_bookworms also advise new Bookstagrammers to practice inclusivity— "Make your account more accessible for people. Create a welcoming space for everyone to enjoy," (Instagram).

It is worth noting that although this project focuses on Bookish community members on Instagram, readers do not necessarily limit themselves to one particular online platform as an affinity space. Though it is possible to discuss the Bookish community in terms of its active involvement on one specific platform like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube as some scholars have, this community can easily shift between these online platforms and others while retaining its common goals. Gee uses the example of gamers to show how they "often come and go among a whole range of physical and virtual places that are part of a larger affinity space" (10), which is

also true about Bookish community members. In effect, these readers will jump from one online platform to another to interact with other community members and to consume and produce knowledge. It is likely that Bookish community members will prefer one social media platform over another, but they are not limited to one single digital space. Each online platform offers something different that cannot quite be replicated within another, even as the differences in the exchange of information between them are very subtle. The members of Bookish community online are able to actively participate in the production and distribution of knowledge and information across a variety of online platforms thanks to the many tools for sharing information at their disposal (Delwiche and Jacobs Henderson, 3, 2012). Each social media platform offers a different way of communicating meanings; each one creates the opportunity for a rich intertextual experience that envelops the reader's interaction with a text. Reading a review on Goodreads will be a wholly different experience from responding to a specific question about the novel posted in a Bookish Facebook group, and it will be different still from watching a skit about the novel on TikTok. Readers even curate and share music playlists inspired by novels via the online music streaming service Spotify.

The online Bookish community is varied in terms of the genres its members consume and discuss. For instance, it is possible to find Bookstagrammers who specifically focus their attention on discussing only contemporary YA fiction. There are also Bookstagram fan accounts devoted to a single YA series like *The Hunger Games*, for example, as well as fan accounts of specific characters or pairings. For instance, @ maxericastory is a Bookstagram fan account that posts content devoted to Maxon and America—characters from the Kiera Cass *Selection* series. Even though there are myriad Bookstagram accounts with a specific focus such as the examples listed above, most Bookish community members read and discuss a variety of works and do not

limit themselves to one specific genre. For the purposes of my research study, the members of the online Bookish community I interviewed were specifically fans of YA dystopia though they were also ardent fans of YA fantasy, high fantasy, contemporary YA fiction, and other genres.

Finally, the affinity space "permits various forms of member participation (peripheral or central)," which means that not only content creators are active participants in the Bookish community but also those members who can be considered peripheral: they may not post photos or video reviews on Instagram or participate in TikTok reading challenges, but nonetheless they consume and share the content created by others in the affinity space. Apart from these modes of sharing content created by others, these peripheral Bookish community members engage with others via comments and direct messages.

The Online Bookish Community as a Discourse Community

Reading is often perceived as an individual, isolated experience, but as established earlier in Chapter 2, readers construct meaning not in a vacuum, but in a particular socially, cultural, and historical context as members of society. The relationship between the novel and the reader is further complicated when it is considered as intertwined with other readers' reviews, content produced by both Bookish content creators on social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube, and the promotional content produced by publishers, authors, and third-party companies.

Just as the Bookish community has been described as a participatory culture and an affinity space for the purposes of contextualizing the sort of activities that frame the reading experience, it is also helpful to outline this group's features as that of a discourse community. According to John Swales, a discourse community is a group of individuals who share public common goals (471). Among other characteristics, the Bookish community, like any other

discourse community, has certain mechanisms of intercommunication (471), in this case on the various online social media platforms that they use. Examples of such mechanisms of intercommunication would be direct messages that are used to send private communications via Instagram, comments posted publicly on content created by other Bookish community members, and content generated by publishers, authors, or third-party companies. Instagram stories and posts, as well as replies to them, also function as tools for the members of this community to communicate with one another, as can be seen in the Figure 3 below:
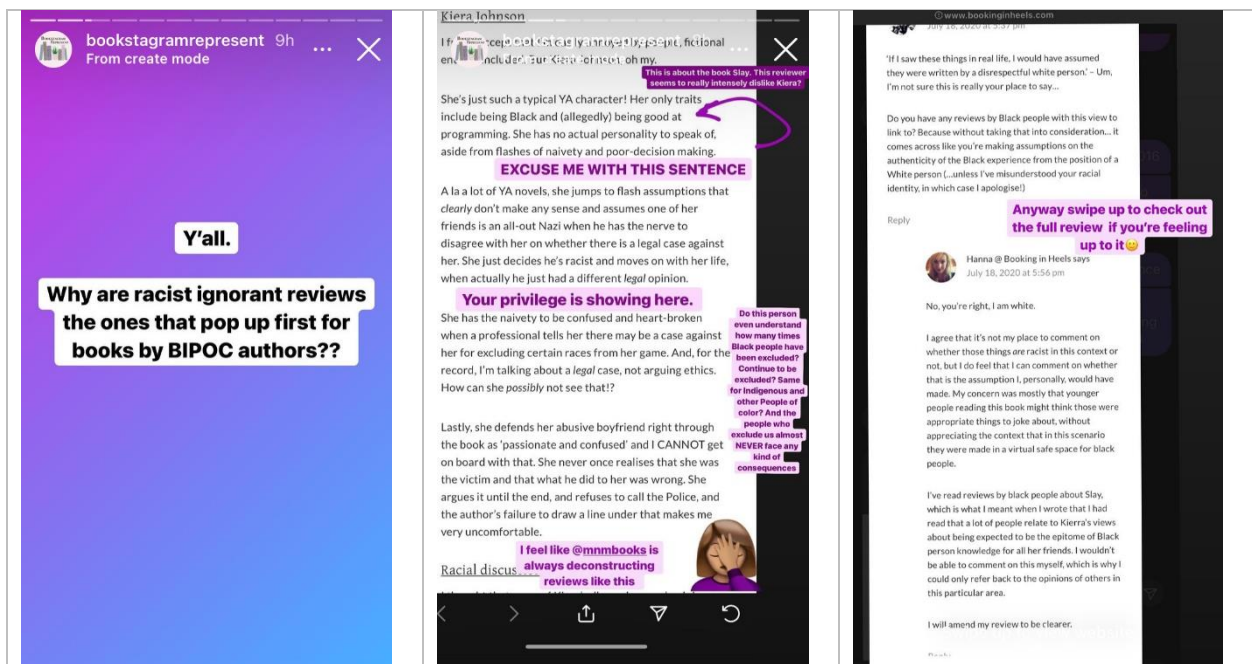
Figure 3. An image that combines three screenshots of Bookstagrammer @bookstagramrepresent's Instagram Stories posts that critique another reader's review of the novel *Slay* by Brittney Morris.

Moreover, the Bookish community uses participatory mechanisms to provide feedback to each other (472). Readers provide reviews of books, input on authors, input on other content creators' posts, and even input on other reviewers. For instance, Bookish content creators will often call out bad representation in new releases and in other content creators' reviews if they are found to be problematic in some relevant way, as can be seen in Figure 3 above, where the

Instagram Bookish content creator @bookstagramrepresent is critiquing another Bookish

community member, Hannah @ Booking in Heels, and her review of the contemporary YA

novel *Slay* (2019) by Brittney Morris.

Furthermore, the Bookish community consistently uses a particular vocabulary across a

variety of online platforms. Instances of such vocabulary are terms like "ARC" or an Advanced

Reader Copy of a novel, "ship" (or "to ship") as in the reader's desired romantic pairing of

characters, an "OTP" or One True Pairing, which is similar to "a ship" but the pairing of

characters is tied to much more intense feelings by the reader towards the characters' romantic

compatibility or chemistry. The vocabulary used by the Bookish community gives its members a

sense of shared identity as readers. This shared identity as active readers, bibliophiles, and fans

helps create a cohesive experience for the reader across a variety of online platforms. Given this

robust sense of a unified identity that the readers share as the members of a discourse

community, they are able to oscillate between online platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and

Goodreads and still retain the same sense of their identity as Bookish community members.

The Bookish Community as a Convergence Culture

Lastly, it is useful to consider the concept of "paratexts" attributable to the Bookish community

as a convergence culture. Jenkins defines "convergence culture" as "a moment when fans are

central to how culture operates" (1). The online Bookish community members generate

"paratexts" or "independent cultural works that exist in relation to other texts" (Mittell 39). In the

case of the Bookish community, these paratexts are surrounding, interconnected texts and

artifacts such as bookmarks, T-shirts, candles, tea, bath bombs, and other thematic paraphernalia

that revolves around themes of literary works. More examples of such paratexts are discussed

later with regard to third-party companies such as book subscription services like OwlCrate and

Fairyloot. However, it is worth noting the many paratexts that are created by Bookish community members themselves: "[f]ans create their own unlicensed paratexts inspired by popular culture as well, including fan fiction, remix videos, artworks, songs, and a wide array of websites" (Mittell 39). For the online Bookish community, these paratexts are reviews distributed across a wide array of channels with specific genre conventions such as the YouTube video review, the Goodreads written review, the Instagram cosplay post, or the TikTok video skit. Though the Bookish community member will participate and interact with other members on each of the aforementioned online platforms differently based on the specific genre conventions of each platform, the subject matter will remain the same, as will the goals of this community as a whole. What's more, the creation of paratexts gives the reader agency—their interaction with the text is not limited to an individual interpretation but is rather the catalyst for sharing and negotiating meanings with others online. Engaging with the text outside of the borders of the novel and establishing meanings interactively with other community members readers underline the ways community members are able to "archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content" online through social media (Jenkins 1).

Though the Bookish community as discussed here is a rather broad group of individuals, their shared goals and common endeavors unite them into a distinct whole. What's more, the Bookish community's shared features in its function as an affinity space, a participatory culture, and a discourse community consistently point to its unified character. The various perspectives taken on the Bookish Community thus far as a participatory culture, an affinity space, and a convergence culture create a fuller picture of this community of active readers. I shall now address the Bookish community as an interpretive community—a concept that combines the

aspects discussed above to show how meanings are negotiated between groups of people

depending on the contexts in which they are situated.

The Bookish Community as an Interpretive Community

Stanley Fish introduced the concept of the interpretive community as a way of explaining how

readers in particular contexts construct meaning cooperatively. Fish contended that what text

"means" depends on the particular "critical perspective" or "interpretive strategy" that the reader

uses or the "interpretive community" they belong to (Juhl 1). Fish proposed that there is no

stable text at all in the sense that it would be identical for all interpreters. Any two readers of a

text such as a poem will come away with vastly different interpretations of it. To Fish, the

meaning that a reader produced through their interaction with the text depends entirely on the

reader's experiences that they bring to a text. As discussed in Chapter 2, Rosenblatt offers a

similar view through the transactional theory of reader response. However, Fish also proposed

that if the readers belong to the same interpretive community, the meanings they construct

through their interaction with a text will depend on the interpretive strategies that they have in

common. Fish's theory of the interpretive community places the most importance on the

particular strategies the reader uses to effectively "write" the text—that is, to produce the

meaning of a text that in and of itself means nothing until it is interpreted in a given way.

Interpretive communities are then groups of individuals that place particular significance on

some elements in the text above others and who agree on a hierarchy of meaning. For example,

feminist critics would approach a given text with interpretive strategies that would differ from

those of Marxist critics. The common interpretive strategies of interpretive communities allow

for some agreement on meaning in a text:

> ...if the understanding of the people in question are informed by the same notions
> of what counts as a fact, of what is central, peripheral, and worthy of being

noticed—in short, by the same interpretive principles—the agreement between them will be assured, and its source will not be a text that enforces its own perception but a way of perceiving that results on the emergence to those who share it. (Juhl 337)

The concept of the interpretive community has been met with criticism because it is considered as too open and at times contradictory. Roberts explains that Fish never settles on a definition of the interpretive community and, thus, it is "a community that is constantly in flux," with no stable boundaries (34). Moreover, although Fish proposed that the reader constructs their own meaning based on subjective experiences, thereby setting out to "defend and empower the reader," at the same time he "puts the power to create meaning into the hands of the interpretive community" (Roberts 34).

However, I believe that the interpretive community is a useful concept for considering how reader communities become a part of the context that shapes how individual readers approach texts. The Bookish community—whether it be on Instagram, Goodreads, or YouTube—engages in an exchange of reading experiences through detailed reviews that readers both produce and seek out from others. By producing such reviews, readers share their specific interpretive lenses, which are directly affected by their lived experiences. Through accessing other viewpoints via the reviews produced by others, readers may incorporate these into their own interpretive framework with which they approach a text. This is not to say that all such readers will be impacted by the opinions of others. But the interview data in this research study indicated that some readers were affected by the discourses produced by the Bookish community on platforms like Instagram because they offered a variety of perspectives that the reader themselves may not have had access to otherwise. To give an example, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, some readers talked about how the critiques of others allowed them to think more critically about certain literary works. While an initial reading of a text may have

produced meanings for some readers that they took to be natural, encountering another reader's interpretation of the same text could reveal some aspects of it as problematic. A relationship between two characters where one is possessive and controlling could initially appear as passionate and romantic to a reader, but another perspective could complicate this reading as perpetuating toxic relationships.

One might pose the question, what then exactly are the boundaries of the Bookish community as an interpretive community? Particularly considering that I have pointed to the open nature of this community in that it uses a variety of online platforms and tools for communication. I take the Bookish community to be individuals who are passionate about reading and who wish to share that passion with other readers. I also assume that seeking out literary works through the recommendations of other readers is a necessary condition for membership in this community. The reader's production of their own reviews as well as communication with other readers via comments, direct messages, and other channels is also important to the active or central membership in the community, to use Gee's terms. Nevertheless, I take it that a peripheral member who merely reads the reviews and opinions of others will still be affected by the Bookish community as an interpretive community.

Radway uses Fish's concept of interpretive communities to approach the regularities that she discovered in reader responses to romance novels. Similarly, I approach the patterns of reader responses in the present research study to see how the engagement in reader communities online may affect reader responses to YA dystopia. As Rosenblatt argues, the reading experience constitutes an event in the reader's life. This event is impactful and significant enough to some readers to create in them the desire to share this reading with others. Therefore, some readers seek out others who share the same passion to discuss texts and to discover new perspectives.

The openness of the concept of the interpretive community offers opportunities to view not only

literary critics as interpretive communities as capable of furthering particular interpretive

strategies, but also points to the ways that readers naturally come together to exchange reading

experiences. Moreover, note that the Bookish community as an interpretive community is

affected by social, political, and cultural moments in time, which affects the interpretive

strategies and frameworks popular in the community. For example, the Black Lives Matter

protests against police brutality in the spring and summer of 2020 spurred on a call for readers to

examine whether they are reading primarily white authors. It created an urgency for readers to

center BIPOC authors—an endeavor meant to disrupt the publishing industry and to call

attention to underrepresented authors. This will be seen as an important aspect of the

participants' reading experiences as discussed in Chapter 5.

3.2. Bookstagram

The photo-sharing mobile app Instagram was launched in 2010 and was acquired by Facebook in

2014, which has further expanded its user base (*Investopedia*). Instagram is no longer just a

photo sharing app; it has evolved into a more complex social media landscape that now allows

users to share short video clips or "reels," livestreams (including multi-user livestreams), and

integrated cross-platform direct messaging with Facebook. Instagram also has additional features

for business accounts that allow businesses to market and sell their products directly to

consumers via the app. The Instagram algorithm tracks user engagement with content and

suggests related businesses and products via the "Shop" section on the app. What was initially a

social media platform filled with "selfies" and photos of beautifully plated food has thus evolved

into a complex marketing interface. The "swipe up" option on Instagram "Stories" offered to

user accounts with ten thousand or more followers allows content creators to share content more

rapidly and with greater ease. To content consumers this means faster access to links outside the Instagram platform. The "swipe up" option enables Instagram users to access links to external content through Instagram "Stories."

Bookstagram is the specific name adopted by the online Bookish community sub-culture that readers utilize in hashtags to help others find their content on the platform. Though publishers and the media have highlighted the pivotal role of TikTok in driving book sales (Harris), Instagram has also been a fundamental online platform alongside YouTube and Goodreads for the Bookish community, according to the sample of readers who participated in my research study. While the call for participants for this research study was disseminated across Facebook, Goodreads, and Instagram, the majority of the readers who participated in the study were recruited on Instagram while a few were recruited via Goodreads. Several readers mentioned also being a part of the Booktok community on TikTok, though it was described by participants as fun but decidedly less interactive than Bookstagram. Many readers who participated in this study watched BookTube community videos on the video sharing platform YouTube; however, none of these readers were content creators on that platform.

It is easy to see the appeal of Instagram as a "home base" for many Bookish community members due to its many mechanisms of intercommunication and links to other social media platforms, which allow cross-promoting content via Facebook and TikTok. Instagram is driven by constant interaction between content creators— i.e., central community members —and peripheral community members. The Bookish content creator is central within this affinity space because they continuously generate content to engage and grow their audience while the peripheral Bookish community member may be far more passive—they may engage with the content created by others while generating very little to no publicly available content themselves.

This means that not every bookish community member will post photos of books, promote third-party products, or produce video skits based on books. Some users will keep their account set to "private," thus limiting the number of people who are able to access the content produced and shared by their Instagram account. Nonetheless, these community members will still engage with Bookish content creator posts by commenting on, "liking," or sharing their content. In this way, though the peripheral, passive community member may not be directly participating in the promotion of books or bookish products to others, they are still participating within the affinity space of the Bookish community. They are active participants in a dialogue around all things bookish produced by content creators as well as other peripheral members.

Diversity-Centered Hashtags on Bookstagram and their Implications

The "Own Voices" hashtag is one example of the conversation around inclusivity in the Bookish community that impacted the reading experiences for some of the participants in this research study. #OwnVoices was started on Twitter by author Corrine Duyvis in 2015, and it quickly gained traction not just on Twitter but also on other social media platforms like Instagram, where it is sometimes used in the form of #OwnVoicesBooks. The #OwnVoices hashtag began as a response to growing dissent among authors and readers who were dissatisfied with the lack of authentic representation of diverse experiences in Children's literature. Although it began as a hashtag intended to promote works by authors of color, it quickly grew to encompass a wide range of diverse experiences. The use of the hashtag also moved beyond the limits of discussing Children's literature to address literature aimed at an adult audience as well. The #OwnVoices hashtag was created as a tool to help foster recommendations of books where "the protagonist and the author share a marginalized identity" (Duyvis). Duyvis has insisted that she did not

intend to moderate the hashtag on Twitter nor any other social media platform, but she did provide guidance to its usage.

Understanding this hashtag will reveal its inevitable shortcomings and the current climate of representation in Young Adult fiction and in the Bookish community. According to Duyvis, the most important aspect of the #OwnVoices hashtag is that it is attributed to a work in which the marginalized identity depicted also belongs to the author—"not their spouse, child, sibling, parent, student, neighbor, friend, etc." (Duyvis). Moreover, the identity shared by the author and character must be "somewhat specific," and marginalized identities are not interchangeable. An author who is blind, for example, cannot claim the #OwnVoices hashtag for a work in which a character is autistic, as this author would not be writing from the vantage point of that particular experience. Additionally, a character may have several intersecting marginalized identities of which the author has perhaps only one. In this case, Duyvis suggests being explicit with the #OwnVoices hashtag by describing what identity depicted in the work it applies to exactly. Still, Duyvis concedes that it can be very difficult to separate intersecting identities as they shape and inform one another. What's key here is that attributing the #OwnVoices hashtag to a work "does not place it or its author above criticism. It's not an automatic seal of approval, authenticity, or quality" (Duyvis). Duyvis argues that the #OwnVoices hashtag does not aim to police who writes about which experiences. Nor does the discussion surrounding authentic representation imply that "marginalized authors have a responsibility to write about characters like themselves," or authors who don't share marginalized identities with the characters they are writing about are banned from doing so (Duyvis). Considering whether anyone should or should not write about marginalized identities that are not part of their own lived experience is separate from the #OwnVoices hashtag that aims to "center the voices that matter most" (Duyvis).

The interview participants for this research project discussed the #OwnVoices hashtag as useful and important for discussions surrounding authentic representation in the Young Adult genre. That being said, the use of #OwnVoices has become fraught in recent years. A fall 2021 article in the Canadian book trade magazine *Quill & Quire* outlines the issues that arose with #OwnVoices and why some have chosen to distance themselves from the hashtag. Namely, although the hashtag garnered attention and popularity, it has effectively become a trend rather than a movement with a lasting impact on the publishing industry and reader preferences (Raughley). Author Sarah Raughley explains that, instead of centering marginalized authors as Duyvis had originally intended, #OwnVoices was co-opted by publishers and "the marginalized authors and readers who empowered that term were no longer dictating its parameters" (*Quill & Quire*). Publishers could appropriate the hashtag and use it for marketing purposes:

> If you were a "diverse" author (what does that even mean?), you had to write books that ticked off a certain set of boxes so the industry could push your work as an #OwnVoices book, which would then be sold to certain people in certain ways. (Raughley)

In this way publishers have effectively undermined the original purpose of the Own Voices movement, treating it as a trend that can propel the sales of "diverse" books. As will be seen in Chapter 5, the participants were divided on their stance of #OwnVoices and related hashtags that promoted diversity on Bookstagram. On the one hand, some participants saw this hashtag as a way of calling attention to underrepresented authors. On the other, such hashtags were also seen as disingenuous instances of performative activism. Moreover, such hashtags could put marginalized authors in a difficult position where they could only hope to get published if their stories centered on the experiences of marginalized identities. The vast majority of interview participants agreed that they expected to find diversity and authentic representation in literature; however, many were concerned that diversity was treated as a trend that will fade into obscurity.

Promoting Diversity and Policing Other Readers

Figure 4. Bookstagrammer @annas_sweets_and_stories (out of frame) is holding up a decorated cookie that says "Reading is a political act." A bookshelf in the background of the image.

As evidenced by the interviews with participants conducted for this study, many readers saw Bookstagram's potential for offering readers ways of critically examining novels. Bookstagram creators could often be found creating posts that called attention to the community's reading practices, asking readers to consider what books they were selecting. As shown in Figure 4, Bookstagrammer @annas_sweets_and_stories post makes the statement that "reading is a political act." The Bookstagrammer further explained in the caption of the post how they viewed the act of reading as inherently political and challenged others to seek out works which examined perspectives that differed from their own:

> So many of us live online in echo chambers. Our social media accounts reflect our views back to us. We follow people who agree with us and who have similar values. The wonderful thing about books is that they can help break those chambers. Books provide is with mirrors and windows. Mirrors as stories that show us pieces of ourselves and windows that show us new perspectives. Books are inherently political and the act of reading is a political act. Reading, in and of

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itself, is a way to experience things outside of ourselves. The act of reading defies the status quo. It allows us to learn and grow and form our own opinions. Seeing both my own and other marginalized experiences in books is POLITICAL. It's revolutionary to read stories about queer people and fat people and bipoc [*sic*] and disabled people. It's revolutionary to have the stories that go beyond the privileged. It's up to us, as readers, to take that information and learn from it. Grow and change as a human. Expand your paradigm. That is political. (@annas_sweets_and_stories)

In response to this post, another Bookstagrammer, @thebooklovingpanda agreed with this point, saying "Bookstagram absolutely is political, everything is tbh [to be honest] whether or not we're explicit about it. I've definitely learned so much more about politics, other people and social issues since joining the booksta [*sic*] community and that's one of the reasons I love it so much" (Instagram). This comment by @thebooklovingpanda shows that the user places value in the way Bookstagram has expanded their perspective. Another Bookstagrammer, @librarymagick, added, "...As a teacher, I have to say this post is so very true. I have felt this way for a while but I haven't been able to explain my feelings the way you did" (Instagram). In the same vein, in Figure 5 below, Bookstagram content creator @thenextgenerasian shared a post pointing out the way novels often misrepresent Asian characters. This Bookstagrammer stated that it is difficult for persons of color to find representation in "relation to what often is side characters," but when such characters are present, the representation in the novel is botched and "it perpetuates harmful ideas like the longstanding fetishization and exoticization of Asians" (Instagram). @thenextgenerasian stated that authors who are not a part of the community which they are writing about must take care to do extensive research as "[s]imple google [*sic*] searches will not do." In response to this post, Bookstagram user @a_weird_person_fufu said, "Honestly I'm grateful for ownvoices [*sic*]. I've read so many books with BIPOC, lgbt+ and disability rep" (Instagram). They went on to give recommendations of novels, which they deemed examples of good representation such as Marie Lu's YA sci-fi and dystopian fusion novel *Warcross* (2017).

Another Bookstagram user responded to this comment thanking them for the recommendations. This interaction is an example of the way the Boookish community can help other readers find book recommendations to suit particular needs, such as novels with well-executed representation.
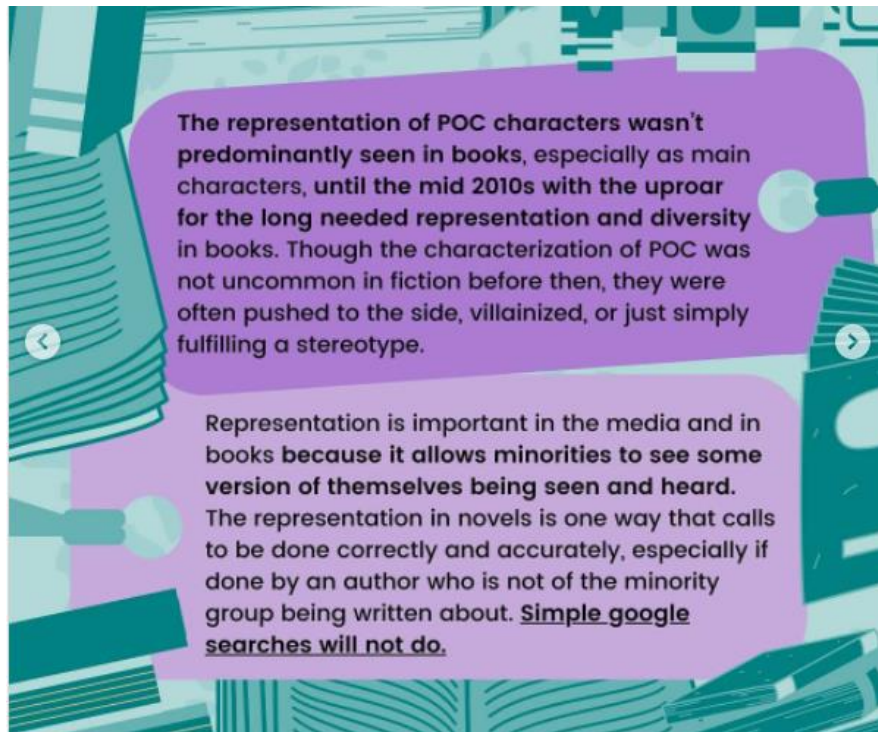
Figure 5. An Instagram post by Bookstagrammer @thenextgenerasian, which outlines the issues of POC representation in fiction and calls for more thorough research by authors who include POC characters in their works so as to avoid misrepresentation.

In their post on "Bookstagram red flags" seen in Figure 6 below, Bookstagrammer @camryndaytonas calls out Bookish community members' problematic behavior witnessed on the platform. One of the images posted by @camryndaytonas calls out readers who "[c]an relate to elves, wizards, Fae etc." but for whom "books by POC are 'too different'." This is another example of the Bookish community criticizing the response of other readers to representation in novels. Notably, the Bookstagrammer states in the caption of the post, "I am calling myself out with some of these tbh [to be honest]." What's more, the Bookstagrammer notes that one of the

issues they see in their behavior is connected with the overconsumption of books. This connects with the way publishers may exploit Bookstagram as a marketing resource. As @camryndaytonas states in their post, "[w]hen I see a pretty book, I ask myself if I'll actually read it or if I just want it for the 'gram [Instagram]."

Figure 6. Instagram post by @camryndaytonas calling out fellow Bookstagrammers for bad practices such as the inability of some readers to relate to POC characters in novels while being able to relate to magical creatures. Caption by @camryndaytonas stating that the content creator recognizes their own participation in some of the problematic behavior they outline in the post.

Bookstagram has also seen the vehement outcry of many readers against the *Harry Potter* series author J.K. Rowling after her long history of perpetuating harmful anti-trans narratives online (K. Rosenblatt). The Bookish community has been divided on its stance on J.K. Rowling since a significant number of its members grew up with *Harry Potter* and are loyal fans of the series. As such, many have either struggled with "canceling" the series along with Rowling or decided to champion the books in an impassioned reaction to those Bookish community members publicly calling for an end to all promotion and support of Rowling's books, including the *Harry Potter* series. There are dedicated Instagram accounts like jkrowling_isaterf whose account description states, "STOP SUPPORTING JK ROWLING" (Instagram). In this way,

Bookish community members engage each other in debate surrounding transphobia perpetuated by authors like Rowling, which impacts readers' relationships with texts produced by the author, including her recent novel, *Troubled Blood* (2020)*,* which she published under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith. This novel features a cross-dressing male murderer and has been critiqued by some as perpetuating negative stereotypes about trans individuals (K. Rosenblatt). Whether a Bookish community member is a fan of Rowling's or not, the criticism of Rowling's transphobic stance has been widely discussed across various "home bases" of the Bookish community, including Bookstagram. The exchange of reader views as well as the increased visibility of trans issues triggered by Rowling's anti-trans sentiments functions as an intertext that frames reader experiences. This intertext is then exchanged between Bookish community members, who in turn create and consume media in reader-shared online spaces.

The examples of Bookstagram calling for more attentive and thoughtful reading choices by other readers discussed here can also be interpreted as readers policing the choices of others. Many interview participants for this study were concerned with the effects of policing reading choices as a pathway toward cancel culture. Although participants believed serious shortcomings in representation should be discussed, many felt that the Bookish community rushed to cancel authors who had either made mistakes in their representation of marginalized communities or if their works contained little to no representation.

The Heteronormative Love Triangle

As interviews with participants in this study showed, one of the most-discussed tropes in the YA dystopian genre was the heteronormative love triangle. This trope was viewed in highly negative terms by the vast majority of participants, as will be seen in Chapter 5. The readers' distaste for the love triangle could also be found on Bookstagram. In a response to a meme posted by the

user @reasontowrite, which makes fun of love triangles and how unnecessary they are to the plot

of a novel, Bookstagrammer @loliiconnoisseur wrote "[y]ou can't have a proper triangle without

at least one lgbt person, otherwise it's just an angle" (Instagram). To this point, another user,

@mothmangoth added "ACTUAL love triangles are acceptable. generic-white-fem-protag-cant-

pick-between-two-generic-white-boys [*sic*] is NOT." This point is exemplified in Figure 7 below

that depicts these "two generic white boys" as described by @mothmangoth that the protagonist

in YA fiction typically must choose form. The image caption reads "YA books: There are 2

boys, the protagonist girl HAS to date one, but how can she choose? They are so incredibly

different in every way!" The sarcasm in this post indicates how tiresome the heteronormative

love triangle has become in the YA genre. It seems that even when readers acquiesce that a love

triangle between a female protagonist and two male characters could potentially work, publishers

cannot offer readers two compelling male love interests that would make this trope worthwhile.

Figure 7. Instagram post by Bookstagrammer @phemiec shows two similar white male protagonists depicted side by side. The content creator jokingly asks the audience how will the female protagonist ever choose between the two male love interests when they are so different.

It should be noted that Figure 7 also underscores other typical features of the love triangle trope such as the implicit whiteness of the characters, and the typical roles that the two male love interests fulfill, which the user @phemiec jokingly characterizes as "chungus the bad boy" and "spungus the childhood friend" (Instagram). As Chapter 5 will demonstrate, the interviews with participants showed that they recognized the same features of this trope, and many described the unoriginality of YA novels that used the love triangle as one of the reasons they did not care for such novels. Several participants noted feeling annoyed with this trope and the obvious choice in the love triangle that rendered it unnecessary. Notably, YA dystopia was one such genre that often includes the trope of the heteronormative love triangle and thus irritates its readers.

3.3. Commodification of Reader Engagement

As demonstrated earlier, Bookstagram can further conversations around topics such as diversity and inclusion that aim to impact how critically or thoughtfully readers approach popular texts. But Bookstragram is also a marketing resource for publishers. Particularly, since Bookstagram relies on visual media, this presents advantages for publishers to engage readers through the use of particularly appealing book covers and related paraphernalia. This section of the chapter will discuss the various way that publishers tap into the potential of reader engagement as a pathway toward reaching consumers. I will also outline how Bookstagram users fulfill the dual role of readers who aim to produce content for the sake of sharing reading experiences and that of bookish product marketers.

E-books have been seemingly looming over the print publishing industry for several decades, spelling out doom and gloom for the printed book since the late 1990s, particularly with

the emergence of advanced e-readers such as the Amazon Kindle that came on the scene in 2007. However, they have been vastly unsuccessful in this endeavor. Though more convenient in terms of size, storage, and added features such as the option to enlarge typeface and look up meanings of words, the E-reader has proven to have drawbacks significant enough to not pose a real challenge to printed books. For one, most E-books cost about the same as their print counterparts (Vox). Most importantly, no matter how much more convenient it is in terms of size, weight, and storage space, an E-book does not hold the same appeal as a printed book with an elaborate and visually appealing cover. To a large extent, that is why physical copies still reign supreme "with print making up $22.6 billion and e-books taking $2.04 billion" in 2019 (CNBC). In effect, readers are drawn to impactful cover and page design, which adds to the reading experience. And to be certain, impactful printed book cover design is of no small importance to the Bookish community, which shares reviews via visual media such as photos and videos on social media platforms. On social media platforms driven by visual media such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, aesthetics is crucial. The Young Adult fantasy genre has been capitalizing on eye-catching designs meant to draw the reader in and set the tone for the novel, as can be seen in the following cover designs in Figure 8:

Figure 8. Three book covers side by side. The cover of Young's *Fable* depicts half of the face of a young woman with red hair. The cover of Mahurin's *Blood and Honey* depicts an elaborate snake design. Forna's *The Guilded Ones* depicts a young woman with golden markings on her face, looking away from the reader.

Meryl Halls, managing director of the Booksellers' Association in the UK, told CNBC: "I think the physical object is very appealing. Publishers are producing incredibly gorgeous books, so the cover designs are often gorgeous, they're beautiful objects … People love to display what they've read" (Handley). Publishers are intensely aware of the importance of book covers to consumers. This is especially true in the YA genre since its many sub-genres are meant to appeal to an audience that uses social media to show the "beautiful objects" they've added to their collection via an Instagram post or a Tweet that may reach an unpredictable number of other potential consumers. Not every reader will post about the books they have read or acquired, but the Bookish community that lives on social media most likely will.

Notably, Gen Z and Millenials are the ones consuming the most print with "[s]ixty-three percent of physical book sales in the U.K. [attributed] to people under the age of 44 … in the U.S. … 75% of people aged 18 to 29 claimed to have read a physical book in 2017" (Handley).

These are the same demographics that you will most likely find either browsing or posting on social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter. As part of a 2017 panel hosted by the Publishers Advertising and Marketing Association, Bookish community members who create content on Instagram acknowledged that "an aesthetically pleasing book cover compels them to find out more about the book and potentially feature them on their accounts," (Yizhen Lo 614) as is evident in Figure 9 below.

@**heyhelene14**

@**readingwithines**

@**the_abundant_word**

Figure 9. Instagram posts by @heyhelene14, @readingwithines, and @the_abundant_word shown side by side. The post by @heyhelene14 is a photo of a physical copy of the novel Fable on a white background of a table with dried fruit and yarn strewn about; a cup of coffee and a pair of glasses next to the book. The post by @readingwithines is a photo of a physical copy of the novel Blood and Honey next to a pot of honey, a pair of glasses, a pair of candles, and a cinnamon roll—all placed on top of a wooden surface. The image by @the_abundant_word shows a photo of a physical copy of the novel The Gilded Ones placed on top of a white surface with a crown placed on top of the book; pearls, flowers, and crystals surround the novel.

Both publishers and authors are keenly aware of this point. Publishers work hard to cultivate relationships with influencers and to establish "touch points" with Bookish content creators that can help social media marketing efforts in the future (*Publishers Weekly*). Still, the process of getting a Bookstagrammer or a Booktuber to review an Advanced Reader Copy or a

newly-published work is not as straightforward as it might seem at first glance—publishers do not simply cold call any and all Bookish content creators with requests to promote books. Rather, they take great care to find the right people for the job. In order for a social media influencer campaign to translate to direct sales, publishers would have to find Bookish content creators with 10,000 or more followers (Hennessy).

Marketing books via influencer campaigns is not simply "free marketing" because it demands "a huge investment of an even more valuable resource"—namely, time (Publishers Weekly). It takes a significant amount of time for publishers to research Bookish content creators that could be a valuable resource and then form a bond of trust. However, this forming of a relationship is crucial for the publisher to be able to "deliver an effective pitch that will motivate [an influencer] to go out there and spread good words about your book" (*Publishers Weekly*). Publishers are interested in creating lasting relationships "for the long haul" with Bookish content creators on platforms like Goodreads, so they will invest a significant amount of time scouring reader reviews and profiles to have a basis on which to cultivate a relationship. Such a meticulous approach allows publishers to reach readers on Goodreads in "a very personalized" fashion (Skyvara). This wooing of Bookish content creators and reviewers is integral for the success of the marketing campaign.

The emphasis on cultivating relationships built on trust between the publisher and the Bookish content creator makes perfect sense considering the intricacies of content creation on social media. The Bookish content creator must not be made to feel like a pawn in a marketing scheme—they must feel that they are bringing something of value to the table as a literary reviewer and a tastemaker for an audience of their peers. The publisher may be interested in the ripple effect that a positive book review or mention on social media can have in terms of sales

and brand awareness, but the reviewer may not hand out a positive review just because they have received an Advanced Reader Copy for free. Authenticity (or the appearance of it) is the currency of social media platforms like Instagram, where users want to feel like the content creator is a friend, a "real" person that they can relate to and trust. Moreover, with niche communities such as the Bookish community, creating friendships is the point—readers within this community wish to exchange opinions on literary works with others. Suffice it to say, a promotional review that seems authentic is paramount for any successful influencer marketing campaign—the Bookish content creator must reflect genuine enthusiasm about a text, or they run the risk of alienating and angering their audience.

Therefore, the publisher will not necessarily try to persuade a Bookish content creator of what they want the review to say; in fact, influencers can have a significant impact on the way a book is marketed. At times, publishers will "want to let the readers lead the message about how the book might be promoted" (Prives), which underlines the unique savvy and insider knowledge of the readership that Bookish content creators possess as a result of their constant interaction with their audience on social media. This insider understanding of their audience allows Bookish content creators to generate content that resonates with their followers and organically enters the Discourse of the Bookish social media space. Additionally, if the content creator allows the publisher to use the images or reviews generated for a marketing campaign, they can be used by the publisher however they see fit, capitalizing on the voice and style of the content creator that is familiar to their followers and likely the Bookish community at large. As influencer marketing specialist Brittany Henessy points out, "influencer-created content works better than brand-created content, always, always, always" (*Publishers Weekly*), so the real power of Bookish content creator posts lies not simply in their reach in terms of the scope of their direct followers

but also in the possibilities that open for publishers to capture an insider perspective in a marketing campaign that will appeal to a far wider range of readers.

Some authors and readers have lamented the rise of social media platforms like Instagram in their power to promote books, as they view it, primarily via the book cover's aesthetic appeal (cf. Kelly 2018). For example, Australian author Sarah Ayoub (2016) describes her experience in allowing her publisher to set up an Instagram poll for users to choose the cover for her next book:

> The significant rise in book accounts on Instagram, some with tens of thousands of followers, has made choosing the right cover more important than ever. On this medium, books are promoted in stylised fashions that will encourage likes. They're shot in flat lays of desks, in stacks of coloured spines or in thematic photographs that fit popular hashtags. Unlike book blogs, the medium that came before it, Instagram leaves little room for detailed reviews. Everything comes at face value. (Ayoub 36)

Though the author's description of Bookstagram here is rather simplistic, as not "everything comes at face value," on the platform there is certainly a lot to be said about the visual appeal of book covers and their ability to drive sales, as mentioned earlier. It is important to note, however, that no matter the social media platform, a content creator's post about a book will likely contain more than just the pretty cover—the reader's thoughts and impressions, or at least a synopsis of the work may be featured in the post as well. Though worries about the aesthetics overshadowing the actual content of the book or rendering it secondary in Instagram posts are understandable from an outsider perspective, it is undeniable that the Bookish community on social media platforms can and does push book sales. Therefore, this way they also get people to read. As one Bookstagrammer has put it: "Bookstagram encourages people to read. Maybe when someone sees a beautifully designed photo of a mountain of adorned book spines, they'll think reading can be glamorous, too. I know it worked for me" (@Tyolmsted *Vulture*).

Within the Bookish community, content creators depend on delivering posts that attract other users' attention and beautiful book covers play a large role in this process. Showcasing a visually appealing physical copy has the potential to inspire other Bookish community members to covet the book and, from the publishers' perspective, drives sales: "BookTubers like to showcase their physical books in videos, as YouTube is a visual medium, and this further drives the desire for some BookTubers to buy and own physical books" (Gold, 120). Social media spaces like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are a marketing no-brainer for publishers, who can tap into the power of content creators to "market directly to an enthusiastic group of customers" (120). The power of peer-to-peer advertising is compelling not only to publishers but also to third-party companies who recognize "the value of partnering with YouTubers for product placements, sponsorship, and endorsements" (122). This includes BookTubers and creators in other social media spaces. It is thus that content creators can generate revenue or receive free product "from blurring the lines between content and advertising" in their posts (122).

Besides books, there is an abundance of other bookish paraphernalia that content creators promote on social media platforms. Bookish subscription boxes such as OwlCrate, Illumicrate, FairyLoot, and The Bookish Box are widely promoted on social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, among others, and content creators regularly include unboxing videos, reels, or posts on these in their content repertoire. The emergence of even more niche book subscription box services such as The Feminist Book Club and Decentered Lit show that there is a demand for curated literary subscription services that revolve around a particular theme or concept, even ones connected to social justice issues. While the latter examples have a clear social and political focus, they still typically center around a particular work of literature per box similarly to The Bookish Box, for example, as can be seen below in Figure 10.

Figure 10. An Instagram post by the company @thebookishbox that depicts a photo of a physical copy of the novel Blood and Honey atop a stack of books; torn out pages of books in the background. Caption by @thebookishbox with a call to action to readers to purchase the latest bookish box that is almost sold out.

Bookish subscription boxes are like an extension of the beautiful covers that aim to draw readers in by setting the tone for the novel and the reading experience—they contain various artifacts related to the themes of the novel or elements of the plot such as candles named after characters or places, maps of the world inside the novel, calendars, book sleeves, bookmarks, T-shirts, necklaces, illustrations, and more. Receiving these items builds "the hype" for the novel and frames the reading experience in a particular way because, just as much as the blurb on the back of the dust jacket, each item communicates something about the novel to the reader before they even turn the first page. The items within a bookish box are connected to the featured novel of the month within the box—the central artifact. All of the other artifacts reinforce the novel and create a web of associations for the reader. The items and the novel featured in the bookish subscription box are interconnected and inform the reader of what to expect from the reading experience. The reader is primed by the bookish subscription box to perceive the novel in a

certain way—the artifacts within the box send messages to the reader about the world, the

setting, the themes, and the characters within the novel. The bookish subscription box thus helps

immerse the reader in the reading experience that extends beyond the book.

It is worth nothing that it is not just the reader's impression of the text that stays with

them after they have finished the novel, but the artifacts from the bookish subscription box

connected to the novel remain as physical reminders to the reader of their reading experience

thereafter. Admittedly, it can certainly also be the case that some readers may have already read

the novel prior to receiving their subscription box. Nonetheless, the items contained within often

aim to create a preface to the reading experience, and they work to reinforce certain elements of

the novel featured in the box. For example, Instagram user @literaryxqueen describes her

January 2021 Fairyloot box featuring the following items:

> Book of the month was Lore by Alexandra Bracken with an exclusive cover,
> sprayed and stenciled edges, artwork on the reverse of the dust jacket, foil
> embossing on front and back of the case, custom endpapers, quote on the spine,
> and a printed signature! It also came with an author letter with character art by
> @lizzart_zardonicz Circe inspired book sleeve featuring a design by @chattynora
> ! ...Trinket dish featuring Eros and Psyche- art by @taratjah Enamel bookmark of
> Athena - art by @monolimeart Tarot Cards are inspired by The Wrath and the
> Dawn and designed by @arz28 Wooden spatula designed by @kdpletters Medusa
> iron on patch illustrated by @alyesasworld Percy Jackson art print by @arz28 !
> (@literaryxqueen)

Since Bracken's *Lore* (2020) is a YA fantasy novel inspired by Greek mythology, this was the

central focus of the subscription box based on the items included therein. Bookish subscription

boxes feature a collection of items from other small businesses found on Instagram: as

mentioned in @literaryxqueen's post quoted above, the January 2021 Fairyloot box contains

items like artwork by digital artist @lizzart_zardonicz and a book sleeve from the Etsy shop

@chattynora among others. In this way, bookish subscription boxes impact a range of other

businesses and boost their visibility within the Bookish community.

Moreover, by including a Percy Jackson themed art print based on the wildly popular Young Adult fantasy series *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2010) by Rick Riordan, the January 2021 Fairyloot box is indicating the connection between Bracken's *Lore* (2020) and the *Percy Jackson* novels. Both *Lore* and *Percy Jackson* are inspired by Greek mythology, so Fairyloot is indicating that the two are comparable. It is not just a variety of artifacts that the reader may receive in the book subscription box—often subscription boxes will include exclusive editions of highly anticipated works, which add to the buzz and ups the "FOMO" (Fear of Missing Out) factor for the reader, urging them to place their order for the box as soon as possible. Sometimes, boxes will even contain copies signed by the author, which highlights the relationship between publishers, authors, and subscription services.

Often book subscription boxes work closely with Bookish content creators as representatives of their business on social media. For example, Illumicrate will choose anywhere between twelve to fifteen representatives on Instagram, Youtube, and TikTok to receive and promote their subscription boxes for four-month periods. Illumicrate announces a competition wherein Bookish content creators pitch themselves as potential representatives via Instagram posts, explaining why they would make a good business partner. This includes creating a visual pitch, showing some of the Bookish content creator's most successful bookish posts, and an accompanying written pitch in the description, as in the example of Figure 11 below.

Figure 11. Instagram post by @be.betweenbooks showing a collage of photos depicting two young women—one of them is pointing to an image of the Illumicrate bookish box, the other is holding up a novel. Two novels surrounded by objects such as cards and pocket watches. Caption by @be.betweenbooks that contains her bid for being chosen as a new Illumicrate representative.

The number of followers the content creator has and the number of likes their Instagram pitch gets play a role in the selection process. Bookish subscription box representatives receive subscription boxes for free on the condition that they promote the boxes to their followers. It is easy to see how this would be a tempting perk for Bookish community members, given that an Illumicrate bookish box can cost anywhere from $24-$38 (USD) per box (Illumicrate) while The Bookish Box retails around $25-$52 (USD) per box (The Bookish Box), and FairyLoot comes in at $33.90 per box (FairyLoot). Bookish content creators help grow and expand businesses on social media by promoting their products as representatives. To subscription box services, representatives are an investment as they open up the possibility to reach new audiences and customers. The interaction between Bookish boxes and Bookish content creators highlights the power of influencer marketing in niche communities on social media.

The Bookish community might be comparatively small, but it is certainly not to be underestimated when it comes to purchasing power since the thematic items found in bookish subscription boxes also exist in myriad Instagram and Etsy shops online, selling candles, bookmarks, book sleeves, tarot cards, and more. Take the candle company Flickerwix, for example, which produces bookish-inspired candles that are meant to evoke a particular mood of a genre, ranging from the romance novel to a specific character to setting-themed candles. The bookish candle is its own genre—it typically comes in an appealing, cozy-looking jar with a label that clearly reflects the theme (either through a quote from the novel or evoking imagery similar to that of the cover of the novel). Often bookish candles come in a variety of bright and eye-catching colors. Some candles contain glitter, and all candles are thematically scented. For instance, Flickerwix' *The Hunger Games* collection features candles like "The Girl on Fire," with notes of "spiced cinnamon and sugared berries," while "Peeta Mellark" smells like "fresh spice bread, vanilla, butter cream" (*Flickerwix*). Even *The Hunger Games* (2009) antagonist President Snow has his own candle that smells like "fresh cut roses and poison" (*Flixkerwix*), befitting his character who has a proclivity for white roses and poisoning his political rivals in Suzanne Collins' popular YA dystopian series.

It is not just the subscription box services that recruit Bookish content creators as representatives. Companies such as Flickerwix are also capitalizing on the bookish community's ability to sell to its members.

Figure 11. Instagram post by @timeladyreads that shows a photo of Lu's novel *Warcross* atop a stack of books. Two candles, "Emiko" and "War Cross" next to the novel. Caption by @timeladyreads that asks the readers "What is your most used emoji?" and then describes how the user has been chosen to be a representative for the company Flickerwix.

In Figure 11 above, the Bookish content creator @timeladyreads begins her post like many of her peers on the Instagram platform—namely, asking her audience a direct question ("Q: What's your most used emoji?") to engage them in a conversation in the comments section. It is worth emphasizing that, as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Bookish content creators primarily run their Bookish social media accounts to make friends in an online community that shares a passion for literature. Nevertheless, it is also true that most content creators who reach a certain number of followers will seize or seek out opportunities to partner with third-party bookish product companies to promote products, particularly if the content creator is already a fan of the products the company sells. It seems only natural then for the content creator to endorse and share the bookish themed products they enjoy as an affiliate because it is *almost* an extension of their regular content, most of which consists of reviews and opinions on books. The difference that I would point out here is that unless the book promoted by the content creator is a

push from a publisher, most of the time content creators will promote works they have purchased themselves. Having said that, when it comes to third-party products like Flickerwix candles, the line between a genuine recommendation and an advertisement can get blurry. In the instance of Figure 11 the question posed to the audience by the content creator about their most used "emoji" has little to do with the rest of the post, barring the fact that this content creator's most used "emoji" appears to be a stack of books. The true essence of the post lies in announcing the content creator's recent affiliate status with Flickerwix, and, most importantly, in promoting the two candles ("Emiko" and "War Cross"). This is just one of countless examples of the way Bookish community members become marketers for bookish-themed companies on social media platforms like Instagram.

Audience engagement is key to maintain a sense of interconnectedness—the content creator must feel like they are a friend who cares about the responses that their followers will leave on the post. This is not to say that the Bookstagrammer in the example above or any other content creator does not care what the audience responses are in the comments section. All of the Instagram Bookish content creators who participated in the interviews for this research study expressed the sentiment that they feel a connection to their followers and the bookish community at large: the participants felt that they had formed significant friendships and found like-minded individuals with whom they could share their passion for literature often in ways they could not share with people around them in real life. However, the feelings of the content creator are not the focus in the example of Figure 3.6. Rather, what is relevant in this particular example is the intent behind the communicative act of engaging the audience via an innocuous question in a post, given that the goal of the particular social media post displayed in Figure3.6 is in the end to sell a product. Regardless of whether any content creator feels connected to their audience on

social media, one might say that you would not typically expect friends to advertise products to each other in real life interactions. Consequently, the relationship between the content creator as a de facto salesperson and their followers as potential customers of a business that the content creator represents is quite intricate. Bookstagrammers oscillate between their roles of book reviewer, fan, friend, and marketer, sometimes assuming a combination of several (or all) of these roles in a single Instagram post.

Though Bookish content creators are required by social media platform engagement guidelines to acknowledge that they are promoting a book or a product that has been sent to them for review or that they have been compensated for their post by a third party, sponsored content done well will weave its way into a creator's feed quite seamlessly. It can often be difficult to tell, at least at first glance, which reviews and recommendations are genuine and which ought to be taken with a grain of salt. Creators in any space choosing to promote sponsored products can very well find themselves in hot water with their followers, and in this regard the Bookish community is no exception. Albeit a small community in comparison to the make-up and beauty space on Instagram or the gamer community on YouTube, the Bookish community has the potential and the ability to successfully promote products to its niche user base. Bookish community creators on spaces like YouTube and Instagram at times draw criticism from their audience "for making sponsored—therefore, ostensibly dishonest—content and promoting the consumerism culture of books" (Yizhen Lo 615). What Yizhen Lo means by "consumerism culture of books" refers to the sheer volume of literary works that people are encouraged to purchase via social media platforms. One might argue that there are worse things to spend money on than books and this is certainly true. However, it is important to acknowledge that certainly not everyone is able to purchase the volumes of books at the speed with which some Bookish

community members are able to produce content. That being said, there is no stopping the social media marketing machine, as it is "undeniable that [Bookish content creators] still hold immense power to sway sales" (Yizhen Lo 615).

Still, it is important to acknowledge the implications of Bookish content creators functioning as marketers for books and third-party companies like bookish subscription boxes and other literature-inspired products. To be able to produce regular and consistent content on social media platforms like Instagram, Bookish content creators must keep accumulating books and other products to feature in their posts. Though it is possible for content creators to borrow books from libraries or buy used copies (and some certainly do), Bookish content creators often buy brand new hardcover copies of novels. This outlines the privileged nature of being able to create content on platforms like Instagram and YouTube and grow one's audience. A Bookish content creator must constantly buy new books, subscribe to bookish boxes, and purchase other related artifacts to engage their audience, given that "[t]here is an expectation that BookTubers do monthly book hauls, purchase new releases, keep their bookshelves well-stocked, etc." (Perkins 2017). Many bookish community members do not have the financial means to participate in this type of constant consumerism, so the bookish social media landscape of platforms like Instagram and YouTube is shaped by some community members' privileged economic status and access to brand new books and other related artifacts. Previous research on Bookish communities on YouTube (cf. Perkins 2017) underlines how the world of BookTube is "not only shaped by the real world, but in turn has an effect on real world practices," as many bookish community members on this platform have "felt ostracized from the community because they cannot keep up financially" (354).

This section illustrated the duality of the Bookish community content creators on social media platforms like Instagram who are on the one hand self-commodified because many of them will promote products for sale to their audience, and some content creators on platforms like TikTok receive payment for their reviews or other promotional content from publishers or third-party companies. Others receive perks such as free merchandise like Bookish subscription boxes or candles for generating promotional content of these items. On the other hand, Bookish content creators are also used as marketing tools of publishing companies and third-party bookish paraphernalia companies, who generally compensate most content creators inadequately or do not compensate them at all for their labor. Undoubtedly, Bookish content creators push books and bookish paraphernalia that they often genuinely enjoy; they may solely wish to share the pleasure of consuming bookish paraphernalia such as bookmarks and candles with their audience. However, this still functions as free labor. For example, a publisher may portray receiving an Advanced Reader Copy for review as an honor and a privilege for the Bookish content creator, even if they are not offered compensation for this. Bookish content creators on social media platforms like Instagram may thus unwittingly become vulnerable to exploitation by publishers who recognize the Bookish community's value in terms of word-of-mouth marketing but deny the need to compensate content creators for their work. Moreover, as mentioned earlier in this section, Bookish content creator work is often appropriated and redistributed by the publisher for marketing purposes, so, in effect, the Bookish content creator may play a significant role in how well a book does in sales, but they will not see any share of this revenue. Denying Bookish content creators' payment for their work invalidates and erases the time, effort, and craftsmanship required for generating both appealing visual content that promotes a book or bookish paraphernalia, and meticulously crafted book reviews.

4. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research project is to develop a deepened understanding of the participants'

reading experiences. Specifically, I set out to examine how participants interacted with the YA

dystopian novel and constructed meaning from it. I aimed to explore the oppositional, negotiated,

and preferred meanings that readers produced (Hall, Fiske). To this point, the YA dystopian text

was taken to be one that contains the dominant discourse of the patriarchal ideological system.

YA dystopian novels were at one point immensely popular with young readers, which also made

them a popular subject of discussion for scholars. Particularly, the focus on YA dystopian novels

has often centered on the powerful female protagonist typical of the genre. This female

protagonist in YA dystopia has been written about at length as an example of subversive gender

performance. I initially approached this research study with an interest in reader response to

gender performance of characters in YA dystopia, which is reflected in the interviews that were

conducted as part of the research project. However, because the interviews were constructed with

a hermeneutical phenomenological attitude in mind, the interview questions were open enough to

produce participant responses that guided the research beyond the scope of gender as one axis of

identity. As a consequence, I expanded the research locus from gender performance to include

other aspects of identity. Moreover, the interviews with participants revealed the importance of

the communication between readers, particularly on online platforms like Goodreads, Instagram,

and Facebook, which became a key aspect in considering reader response to YA dystopia.

4.1. Design

Because I wanted to examine YA dystopian readers' firsthand experiences with novels in this

genre, I decided to conduct interviews with such readers. The hermeneutical phenomenological

approach was chosen for this study because the interviews attempt to establish an understanding

of common experiences that readers have with YA dystopian novels. As explained by van Manen, "[h]ermeneutic phenomenology is a human science which studies persons" (5). In phenomenological studies, the phenomenon in question is explored within "a heterogeneous group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon" (Creswell 78). The aim of the phenomenological research is to explore the lived experiences of individuals who not only share in the phenomenon and are willing to discuss it but who are also "diverse enough from one another to enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience" (Laverty 29). Phenomenology rests on the principle of intentionality of consciousness whereby human consciousness "is always transitive. To be conscious is to be aware, in some sense, of some aspect of the world. And thus phenomenology is keenly interested in the significant world of the human being" (van Manen 9). Therefore, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach seemed to suit best this study given its goal of explaining "... *phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness"* (van Manen 9). Additionally, phenomenology operates with the "refusal of the subject-object dichotomy" in that "[t]he reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of the individual" (Creswell 78). The hermeneutical phenomenological approach also assumes that the structures of meaning communicating the lived experiences of human beings can be distilled into an essence of the phenomenon. As van Manen states,

> [t]he essence of a phenomenon is a universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instances or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon … universal or essence may only be intuited or grasped through a study of the particulars or instances as they are encountered in lived experience. (10)

This research study assumes the aforementioned philosophical tenets as part of its theoretical foundation.

Importantly, this study will employ the hermeneutical phenomenological approach, which differs from transcendental phenomenology—another popular approach to this type of research. Though both assume common phenomenological tenets and ways of looking at phenomena, the two differ in their approach to the role of the researcher and the structure of the research study. For one, hermeneutic phenomenology adopts the notion that the researcher is an indissoluble part of the world in which the phenomenon they are describing resides. In transcendental phenomenology, the researcher must attempt to remove themselves from their inquiry into the phenomenon by "bracketing" out their views "before proceeding with the experiences of others" (Creswell 80). In contrast to the transcendental approach of bracketing, Laverty explains, "a hermeneutical approach asks the researcher to engage in a process of self-reflection … Specifically, the biases and assumptions of the researcher are not bracketed or set aside, but rather are embedded and essential to interpretive process" (Laverty 28).

As a researcher who approaches the experience of YA dystopian readers through the particular lenses of cultural studies and gender studies, my interpretation rests on the understanding of the YA dystopian novel outlined in chapter I. Moreover, my interpretation of the data rests on the theories of the implied reader (see Iser) and active audience (see Fiske "Active Audiences") discussed in chapter 2. I also approach the interview data with the understanding that reading is a transactional activity (see Rosenblatt) in which the reader negotiates meaning with the text. Therefore, these theories are interlinked with the subject of inquiry—the reader response to YA dystopian novels—and they informed my interpretation of the participants' accounts of their lived experiences.

With the phenomenological approach, the data from interviews is analyzed using particular codes, or "narrow units of analysis," such as significant statements that emerge in the

participants' speech (Creswell 79). These codes are then arranged into broader units of categories or themes. The phenomenological approach also necessitates an explanation that contains "the *essence* of the experience for individuals incorporating 'what' they have experienced and 'how' they experienced it" (Creswell 79). I conducted a series of two interviews separated by a week (on average) with fifteen participants.

Besides the interviews conducted with participants, I triangulated the data through textual analysis of Instagram posts discussed in chapter III. I chose Instagram in particular as a site of inquiry because, among all of the interview participants, this was the social media platform that appeared to currently be the most significant for the Bookish community online. The patterns of themes that emerged during the interviews with participants were supported by examples found on Instagram (or Bookstagram, as it is referred to by participants). Patterns such as the importance of sharing readings within the Bookish community were exemplified in instances of Instagram posts and comments. The Instagram posts discussed in chapter III also showed the nostalgia and love for the YA dystopian genre within the Bookish community. What's more, the participants' frustration with the love triangle, toxic masculinity, and lack of worldbuilding in this genre also emerged in the analysis of Instagram posts. Notably, the analysis of Instagram posts also revealed the prominence of YA dystopian novels such as Kiera Cass' *The Selection*, which emerged as controversial for the participants of the interviews. The triangulation of data adds to the reliability of the interview data in that it shows the ways in which the Bookish community co-create the meaning of YA dystopian novels.

Challenges of the Hermeneutical Phenomenological Approach

The hermeneutical phenomenological approach, like any other qualitative research methodology, poses particular challenges. Because hermeneutic phenomenology addresses phenomena "as they

appear in everyday life *before* they have been theorized, interpreted, explained, and otherwise abstracted," the researcher must be aware that "any attempt to do this is always tentative, contingent, and never complete" (Goble and Yin). This means that although the hermeneutical phenomenological approach aims to arrive at essences of the common phenomena experienced by participants, a wealth of data will likely remain unexplored. Moreover, Goble and Yin describe the impossible task for a researcher to approach the object of interest "before it is put into language," though it is only through the description of the phenomenon that it can be assessed any meaningful way. In this way, the researcher accesses a recollection of the lived experience, not the lived experience itself. The participants in this research study spoke about YA dystopian novels they had read and described their reading experiences and encounters with the texts. They did not read the text and speak about this encounter out loud as they were performing the activity. Even this would not give the researcher full access to the lived experience of reading a YA dystopia and constructing meaning through a transaction between the reader and text. That said, as van Manen explains, the recollection of the lived experience is an experience in itself:

> A person cannot reflect on lived experience while living through the experience. For example, if one tries to reflect on one's anger while being angry, one finds that the anger has already changed or dissipated. Thus, phenomenological reflection is not introspective but retrospective. Reflection on Jived experience is always recollective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through. (10)

The inability of the researcher to have access to the lived experience as it is being produced is an issue for all phenomenological studies. This project mitigated these challenges by asking participants open-ended questions that allowed them to reflect on their emotions, attitudes, and thoughts about YA dystopian novels that they had particularly liked or disliked. What's more, the participants often focused on particular scenes and characters, piecing together in their

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narrative the different ways they interacted with the text throughout time. Many participants had reread their favorite YA dystopian novels, so they reflected on several encounters with a single text.

Another challenge that hermeneutic phenomenology presents is that each experiential situation researched can be "drastically different" (van Manen 166). This means that it can be difficult to model one research study after another "for application in another research environment" (van Manen 166). For each hermeneutical phenomenological study, "[t]he "how" must be found anew" (Goble and Yin). This was certainly a challenge for the present research study as there were no closely comparable studies in the field of cultural studies that I could locate. The hermeneutical phenomenological approach is popular in the field of education and psychology; however, such studies differ from this research project in their goals, which also affect the structure of such studies.

4.2. Participants

Because phenomenological studies typically involve a small research sample, this project set out to interview between fifteen and twenty participants with the expectation that such a sample would yield rich and reliable data. Sixteen participants were recruited in total. A table of participants is available in Appendix I. As mentioned earlier, a phenomenological study addresses a phenomenon that is shared by individuals. To ensure that all project participants shared the phenomenon—a reading experience of YA dystopian novels—I conducted purposeful sampling of readers who were identified as fans of the YA dystopian genre. Having read several (more than three) YA dystopian novels was one of the criteria used to determine whether participants qualified for the research study. Having read only three novels in the same series was not taken to be sufficient. The participants were also asked whether they could speak to YA

dystopian novels they particularly liked, disliked, and had read most recently. These criteria were important for the purposes of the research to examine the reader's interaction with the text as part of a larger genre—YA dystopia. The participants had to be familiar enough with the genre to recognize common themes, tropes, and features of YA dystopia to offer a thorough understanding of the possible oppositional, negotiated, and preferred meanings readers constructed. Additionally, I sought to find participants in the age range between twelve and thirty. The reason behind this was that I wanted to include the age range of the implied reader of the YA genre—twelve to eighteen—while also recognizing that there are many readers who read YA dystopia well into their twenties. Further, I assumed that several readers would have encountered YA dystopia when it was at its peak about a decade ago, so they would now be in their early or late twenties. Ideally, I wanted my research sample to be equally represented on this age spectrum. As shown in Table 1, the youngest participant was fourteen and the oldest was thirty.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity
I	F	20	White
II	F	26	White
III	F	24	Mixed-race
IV	F	20	Asian
V	F	14	Person of Color
VI	F	27	White
VII	F	30	Mixed-race
VIII	F	16	Asian
IX	F	30	White
X	F	18	Person of Color
XI	M	18	South Asian

Participant	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity
XII	F	19	Mixed-race

Table 1. (cont.)

Participant	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity
XIII	M	24	White
XIV	M	23	South Asian
XV	M	30	White
XVI	M	21	White

In keeping with the aim of a phenomenological study that examines a phenomenon commonly experienced by a diverse group of individuals, I wished to recruit a racially and ethnically diverse group of participants. I asked the participants at the beginning of the study to self-identify in terms of their racial identity. I formulated this question as "what is your racial identity?" to leave it up to the participants to find the terms they were most comfortable with. Moreover, I hoped that I would be able to recruit participants on a spectrum of gender identities. These hopes were partially fulfilled. As shown above, nine out of sixteen participants self-identified as persons of color. Eleven of the participants self-identified as female, while five self-identified as male, so no other gender identities are represented in this study. I formulated the question regarding gender as "what is your gender identity?" to ensure that the participants could use their own terms to describe their gender identity.

Because participants were recruited online, they were not bound to any one specific location. Seven participants were located in Europe, four in Asia, and five in North America. It is important to note that this characteristic of the participants points to the fact that their social and cultural contexts were at times completely different, which undoubtedly impacted their reading experience. However, as the findings and discussion of this chapter will show below, the major

patterns of themes that surfaced were repeated throughout the research sample. Nonetheless, there were nuances in the participants' accounts of their reading experiences that warrant a separate research study in and of itself, but this goes beyond the scope of this project.

It is also worth noting that there were many individuals in their late twenties and early thirties who reached out to me via direct message on Instagram with an interest in participating in the study after participant recruitment had concluded. This is to say that, though it took a considerable effort to reach potential participants that fit the parameters of the study, readers on Instagram in particular were eager to participate in this type of research. There were several readers who showed interest but did not meet the research criteria. Of these readers, most were fans of the YA fantasy genre or dystopia written for an adult audience. Since neither of these matched this study's object of inquiry and none of the readers could name enough examples of YA dystopias they had read, they were not able to participate. Still, a future study that addresses these genres, particularly the reader's interaction with YA fantasy (given its current popularity), could be a fruitful avenue of research.

It should be mentioned that two participants knew each other in real life, and two participants knew each other through the Bookish community online. It is important to note that the participants knowing each other could have impacts on the study in that participants could possibly be in communication with one another and discuss the interviews. This could potentially have an impact on participant responses in a study. Participant responses did not indicate that they had discussed the interviews with the other participant they knew. The participants who knew each other gave no indication that they had discussed the interview questions with anyone else prior to each interview.

Site

As the aim of this research project was to examine how readers interact with the YA dystopian text to understand what oppositional, negotiated, or preferred meanings they generate from the reading and which of these are shared among readers, a hermeneutical phenomenological approach to the research was adopted to place emphasis on the readers' lived experiences. Based on this approach, interviews were determined as the most appropriate method for data collection for the purpose of this study. Due to the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was not feasible to recruit readers in person or schedule in-person interviews for the phenomenological study. It was decided early on that the phenomenological study would be carried out online. Interviews conducted online present an important set of differences and challenges versus in-person interviews. Online interviews "add an important dimension—the technology" (Salmons 2). As Janet Salmons points out, the role of technology during online interviews is more than "a simple transactional medium" because it impacts the "direct interaction between researcher and participant," which is facilitated through "computer-mediated communications (CMCs)" (Salmons 2). Both the interviewer and the participant experience the interview differently when it is conducted online.

I chose to use Zoom as the videoconferencing software to conduct interviews with participants. Zoom was selected as the CMC of choice because of its reliability and functional capabilities. That is, the University of Arkansas provided an educational user license to Zoom to all staff and employees. Thus, I was able to record the interviews with participant permission. Zoom provided an automatic interview transcript, which was a useful feature, though the transcripts required heavy editing post-interviews to ensure their accuracy. Zoom was also chosen because it provided a safe virtual environment for conducting interviews—all meetings were password protected, and only the interview participant and researcher had access to each

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individual meeting. Also, as an added consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, nearly all interview participants were comfortable and proficient at using Zoom, so the software posed no issues.

One interesting challenge that I had not foreseen prior to conducting the interviews was the time zone difference between the location of the participants and my location in the US. Since some of the participants were located in Europe and Asia, this meant that to find a suitable time for the interviews that both worked for the participants' schedules and that was reasonable for me as the interviewer was sometimes times difficult. Some of the interviews had to be conducted early in the morning or late in the evening in Central Time, but this did not pose a significant issue. That being said, future researchers should keep in mind that scheduling online interviews too early in the morning or late at night could potentially impact the attentiveness and alertness of the interviewer.

Online interviews, though, offer some advantages over in-person interviews. Salmons claims that CMCs such as videoconferencing allow for "an interview that closely resembles the natural back-and-forth of face-to-face communication, including verbal and nonverbal signals" (2). For most of the interviews, this was the case as I used both video and audio to communicate with the participants. However, in some cases when the internet connection of the participant was unstable, the video function had to be turned off to preserve the quality of the audio. This meant that I was unable to observe nonverbal signals in some few instances. As mentioned earlier, the participant recruitment took place online on the social media platforms Instagram, Facebook, and the website Goodreads, which meant that the participants were "geographically dispersed" (Salmons 12). Using a CMC to conduct the interviews online allowed for the inclusion of a diverse participant sample, which offered an interesting perspective on the

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common lived experiences of the phenomenon. Though the participants were separated by continents, they produced some meanings that closely resembled those of other participants. The common codes that participants used, for example, pointed to the impact of discussing literature with other readers online, which later became one of the main tenets of this research project.

Moreover, the online interviews allowed for the participants to be located in their homes. This meant that the participants could potentially feel more comfortable and at ease during the interview. Some participants were in their bedrooms surrounded by the books they were discussing, and could easily refer to the works being discussed. At times, being in close proximity to their bookshelves helped in that it jogged the readers' memory of some detail that was helpful in elaborating their reading experience.

4.3. Procedures

I requested approval from the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (IRB) to begin the research study. Once the approval (Appendix D) was granted, a poster (Appendix A) promoting my research and inviting participants to apply was disseminated on the social media platforms Instagram, Facebook, and the website Goodreads. The call for participants included an incentive of a $5 and a $10 gift card—awarded to the participant at the completion of interview I and II, respectively.

Participant recruitment was conducted across three online platforms: Instagram, Goodreads, and Facebook. On Instagram, I identified user accounts that posted content related to Young Adult fiction and YA dystopia in particular. I browsed several hashtags on Instagram such as #YAdystopia, #HungerGames, #MazeRunner, #Divergent, and #Scythe to find related posts by users. Finding fans of YA dystopia was not easily accomplished in this way since the genre is not as popular as it was a decade ago. Some of the content that the hashtags yielded on

Instagram had aged a few years by the time of writing, so it was not a clear indicator whether the participant was still (or ever had been) a fan of the genre. If a user had posted an image of a YA dystopian novel and included a review or a description that indicated that they had read the novel pictured, I approached them as a potential reader of YA dystopia. I "cold called" these Instagram users via private direct message. I sent the users the promotional poster (Appendix A) and general information about the research study. Often Instagram users who did not qualify for the study still elected to share my poster and call for participants through their Instagram "Stories." This yielded many applicants who had seen my call promoted on other Instagram user accounts via their Instagram "Stories." These applicants reached out to me via private direct message, and it was then determined whether they qualified for the study. I reached out to 76 Bookstagram content creators in total who had posted about a work of YA dystopian fiction on their Instagram accounts. In total, Instagram yielded thirteen participants.

Similarly, I reached out to Goodreads users via private direct message by browsing reviews of popular YA dystopian novels and determining who had relatively recently read the genre. I sought out users who had read and reviewed the following works: *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), *Divergent* (Roth, 2011), *Maze Runner* (Dashner, 2009), *The Selection* (Cass, 2012), *Delirium* (Oliver, 2011), and *Legend* (Lu, 2011), as well as more recent works of YA dystopian fiction such as *Scythe* (Schusterman, 2016) and *The Hunger Games* prequel *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* (Collins, 2020). Direct messaging the users was challenging on Goodreads for multiple reasons. For one, often Goodreads user profiles are set up to exclude unwanted messages, which includes messages from anyone the user had not connected with. I had to first send users a friend request after which I was able to reach out to them via direct message. Secondly, many Goodreads users were not actively checking their messages. There

were multiple instances when one of my messages was answered by a Goodreads user several months later when the data collection had concluded. In total, I messaged 78 Goodreads users. For the number of messages sent, Goodreads yielded the fewest responses from interested readers. Besides "cold calling" potential participants, I also posted my call for participants on several Goodreads forums. To do this, I first gained approval from the forum moderators. The forums where I sought out participants were "Addicted to YA," "Dragons & Jetpacks," and "SciFi and Fantasy Book Club." None of the forum posts yielded applicants. However, the direct messaging method resulted in three participants that qualified for the study.

Lastly, I reached out to a small number of potential participants on Facebook groups related to YA fiction such as "Bewitched by Books" and "YA Fantasy Addicts+." I could not locate any Facebook groups dedicated to YA dystopia that still had an active userbase (meaning, users that posted content and commented on posts in the group). I first requested to be accepted as a member to the groups mentioned above and then gained permission from the group moderators to post my call for participants. Only three readers responded to my call for participants via Facebook comments and then communicated with me further through private direct messages but, ultimately, they did not meet the criteria for the research study.

Once I had made contact with an interested reader on one of the online platforms, I provided them with information about the topic of the research, describing its focus as reader experiences with YA dystopia. I explained the procedure of the research study, and if the reader confirmed their interest to participate this point, I asked them a few screening questions to determine whether they met the criteria for participation. As mentioned earlier, it was determined whether the reader is a fan of the genre and could speak to several YA dystopias they have read; namely, novels in the genre they liked, disliked, and had read most recently. Once their

eligibility was confirmed, the participant was sent the informed consent form (Appendix B). If the participant was underage, they received an informed consent form that had to be signed by a parent or guardian (Appendix C). I scheduled the first of two interviews with each reader.

I aimed to schedule interviews with at least a week in between, but this was often contingent upon participant availability. The time in between the interviews was meant to give both the participants and distance from the data. The interviews began at the end of December 2020 and finished at the end of January 2021. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. Each participant was informed about the purpose of the research and how the data generated by the interviews will be used at the beginning of each of the two interviews. During the interviews, I took detailed notes of the participant answers to questions, underlining significant statements and keywords. At the end of each interview, the participants were informed on how to receive the gift card incentive of $5 for completing interview I and $10 for completing interview II.

At the end of the first interview, I asked the participants if they could refer me to any other reader of YA dystopian fiction that they might know. This was done for the purpose of locating other potential participants. If the reader confirmed that they knew other YA dystopia readers, I requested that, if they felt comfortable, they share with them the poster with the call for participants for my research study. In this way, two participants referred me to one other reader of YA dystopia each. One of the participants knew another YA dystopia reader in real life; the other participant knew of a YA dystopia reader online through Instagram.

After each interview, I reviewed my notes and jotted down first impressions of the interview. The Zoom videoconferencing software generated an automatic transcript of the interviews, which was compared with the video recording and revised and edited for accuracy.

The interview data (that is, the video and audio recording, transcript, and chat log if applicable) were securely stored on an external hard drive to which only I had access.

4.4. Interviews

Hermeneutic phenomenology that employs interviews requires open-ended questions. I decided to create a semi-structured interview with series of questions that were open but pointedly addressed various aspects of the project's research question. Though the interview contained questions that were asked to each participant in a particular sequence, the follow-up questions were flexible and added on an as-needed basis to help participants expand on their experiences. I wanted the interviews to follow a structure, but to remain fluid and allow the participants to delve deeply into accounts of their encounters with YA dystopia. The interview questions revolved around the shared phenomenon—the reading experience of YA dystopian novels. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. Each of the two interviews was divided into two thematic sections.

The first interview was designed with the aim of gaining an understanding about the participant's biography as a reader and, more specifically, as a fan of YA dystopia. The first section of the interview asked questions about the participant's history and relationship with reading. Each question contained prompts that were used if necessary, and follow-up questions were often asked to clarify meaning or to encourage the participant to elaborate on their experience. The full Interview I protocol is available in Appendix E. The questions that were asked in this section of the interview are as follows:

- Tell me a little bit about yourself!

- Tell me about yourself as a reader!

- What is it about YA dystopias in particular that you enjoy?

- What are some of your favorite YA dystopian novels?

- What is your favorite YA dystopian novel?

- What is your least favorite YA dystopian novel?

- What is the last YA dystopian novel you read?

The purpose of these questions was to situate the participant as a reader and to find out what value they ascribed to the reading experience. Furthermore, the questions aimed to prime the participant for a deeper inquiry into their favorite, least favorite, and most recent read dystopian novels. During this portion of the interview, the participants described how they started reading, what genres they enjoyed when they first began reading, and when they discovered YA dystopia. The participants discussed what drew them into YA dystopia and what sets it apart from other genres.

The next section of the interview focused specifically on the participant's favorite YA dystopian novel. It aimed to explore the value that the participants ascribed to the YA dystopian novel they had enjoyed the most and what features of this novel made it stand out to the reader. This section also delved into specific textual features of the novel. The questions asked here probed into the characters of the novel the participant particularly enjoyed. I chose to form the questions in a way that divided characters into the gender binary of men and women to be able to explore the participants' perception of gender performance as it is depicted in YA dystopian novels. To mitigate the potential of the erasure of gender identities outside the male/female binary, the readers were asked a follow-up question about any non-cisgender characters they might have encountered in YA dystopia. Each of the questions below contained a set of prompts that were used as needed to assist readers in elaborating their experiences (Appendix E):

- Why is _____ your favorite YA dystopian novel?

- Who is your favorite female character in the novel?

- Who is your favorite male character in the novel?

- Which character is your overall favorite in this novel?

- Who is your least favorite character?

As mentioned earlier, the first interview included a supplemental question that asked the participants whether they could share the call for participants for this research study with other readers of YA dystopia that they knew of. This question was added to the interview as an additional recruitment strategy.

The interview II protocol (Appendix F) was designed to focus on the participants' least favorite and most recently read YA dystopian novels. This interview was to give insight into the various features of YA dystopian novels that readers did not enjoy. It was also expected that the interview would establish how readers currently see the development of the YA dystopian genre. At the beginning of each interview, I consulted my notes from the previous interview to check with the participant whether the information gathered earlier was accurate. The first section of the interview focused on the least liked and most recently read YA dystopian novels:

- During our last interview, you mentioned that your least favorite YA dystopian novel was _____. Talk to me about this novel!

- What was the last YA dystopian novel you read?

In addition to these two questions, probes were added to assist the participants with elaborating their reading experiences (Appendix F). For example, the participants were asked to discuss the plot and setting of the novels, the characters they liked and did not like. Participants were also asked to consider how the YA dystopian novel they most recently read compared to their favorite and least favorite novels in the genre.

The next section of the interview was constructed to explore how the reader perceived their favorite characters' gender performance in a dystopian setting of the YA novel versus the real-life context of the reader's world:

- Think about your favorite character, _____, being transported to a story written about the world that you and I live in right now. Would _____ still be your favorite character if they acted like they do in the YA dystopian novel?

This question distilled the characteristics that participants thought were fundamental for their favorite characters in YA dystopias. This question required some creative thinking on the participants' part as they had to imagine the character as a real person and consider how they would fit into the participants' world.

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, this research study began with a focus on the participants' understanding of gender performance in YA dystopia; however, during the course of the two interviews, the data from participant responses revealed that gender was just one piece of a larger picture. The focus of this study was readjusted to encompass a larger, intersectional focus. The third section of the interview focused on the participants' conception of gender in their real life. The aim of these questions was to juxtapose the gender performance of characters in YA dystopian novels to how the reader perceives hegemonic and marginalized or subversive gender performance in their current context. However, since the focus of the research study pivoted to data that became more pertinent, the interview questions from this section were regarded as peripheral to this research project. These questions provided the background for situating the reader and their understanding of gender identity. The list of these interview questions can be found in Appendix F.

Both interview I and II transcripts were automatically generated by the Zoom

videoconferencing software. However, the transcripts generated contained many errors and

required meticulous editing. The transcripts were compared to the video and audio of the

interview to ensure that the transcript was faithful to the participants' accounts of their lived

experiences. Once transcripts were edited, I highlighted significant statements that would later

advance larger categories of patterns.

Role Of the Researcher

As Steinar Kvale states, during an interview "the importance of the researcher as a person is

magnified because the interviewer … is the main instrument for obtaining knowledge" (117).

Kvale's assertion applies to me as the sole collector and interpreter of the data for this research

study. Since the aim of my research was to explore the participants' lived experiences with the

goal of understanding how they interact with YA dystopian literature to form oppositional,

negotiated, or preferred meanings, I decided to take the approach of the researcher "as gardener"

(Salmons 19). This means that I "planted seeds" during the interviews in the forms of pre-

established questions in addition to prompts and follow-up questions. Each participant was asked

the same series of questions in the same sequence, but additional prompts and follow-up

questions were added as needed based on participant answers. The semi-structured interviews

remained open enough to allow the participants to fully expand on their reading experiences.

Each interview was 90 minutes long to allow participants ample time to describe their

reading experiences. Taking the researcher as gardener approach meant that I entered the study

with a specific purpose, but the interview data guided me toward specific findings that adjusted

my research focus. Kvale emphasizes the scientific responsibility of the research project to "yield

knowledge worth knowing and [to be] as controlled and verified as possible" (118). I aimed to

achieve this goal of producing "knowledge worth knowing" by not constraining the interviews to be fully structured as there were many themes that emerged during data collection that I did not predict I would find. Moreover, a structured interview system would not fit the hermeneutical phenomenological approach with which I wanted to approach the research.

My position as researcher was also one that oscillated between insider and outsider. The researcher as outsider is a "detached, impartial onlooker who gathers data"; in contrast to this, the researcher as an insider is a "participant immersed in the actions and experiences within the system being studied" (VanDeVen in Salmons 16). I was an outsider in the sense that I was not a part of any reader communities online, which all of the readers were a part of in one way or another. However, I was an insider as a reader of YA dystopia. My position as an insider allowed me to create better rapport with the participants as I understood the characters, plotlines, and tropes they discussed. I felt that the participants could be open and honest about their opinions when they responded to questions because I had positioned myself as an insider in that I too love the YA dystopian genre. I strived to develop rapport with the participants through chit chat about the novels they spoke of. It should be noted that this line of sharing one's own opinions with participants must be treaded carefully otherwise the researcher runs the risk of influencing the participants' responses. As Salmons states, "the researcher must balance the value of inserting his or her own insights about the phenomenon with the risk of biasing the study" (Salmons 16). I had to remain distant enough to the interview data not to bring my own biases into the interview, but I took my experience with YA dystopia to be an asset that allowed me to ask relevant follow-up questions and connect with the participants.

At the same time, it was important to maintain the "independence of research," as the role of the researcher as insider puts the study at risk of being "co-opted" by participants (Kvale 118).

As a result, the researcher can "ignore some findings and emphasize others to the detriment of as full and unbiased an investigation of the phenomena as possible" (Kvale 118). I avoided this by formulating questions based on what participants had expressed and limiting my interjections of my own opinion as much as possible, though not removing them completely, in order to build trust with participants. I took care not to insert my own opinion wherever it could possibly skew the participants' answers. Moreover, it was important to take some distance from the research data and spread out the activities of transcript editing, pre-coding, and the second cycle of coding in order to attend to the interview data with a fresh eye and a critical mindset.

It should be noted that it is always possible that the participants' responses were impacted by their knowledge that I am conducting a study for a large research university. This is to say that participants may have responded to my questions trying to provide responses that they believed I was looking for. That being said, I believe that the way participants spoke at length and with passion about specific aspects of YA dystopian novels that I had not specifically asked about indicates that they did not sense what I hoped to uncover with this research. My initial goal for this research differed from the focus that it ultimately took, which is why the interview questions were open enough not to lead the participants in any specific direction, but rather allowed the participant responses to guide the course of the research. For example, I adjusted the focus of the research to include the role of reader communities in constructing shared readings based on this theme that emerged during the interviews. In accordance with the hermeneutical phenomenological approach, the researcher is meant to explore the responses of participants who all share a lived experience with the same phenomenon. In this case, the shared phenomenon was the YA dystopian genre. I explored the participants' accounts of their experiences largely through follow-up questions based on statements they made about YA dystopian novels to

ensure that the participants were elaborating on their experiences in a way that was authentic rather than tailored to any specific research goals or assumptions that I brought to the interview. As the interview questions demonstrate, I focused on broad categories of favorite, least favorite, and most recently read examples of YA dystopian fiction, and characters. Patterns of themes such as the love triangle, for example, emerged through the participants' own elaborate accounts of what they liked and disliked in the YA dystopian genre. Still, despite my confidence in the truthfulness of the participants' responses, it is entirely within the realm of possibility that my position as a researcher may have affected the responses to some degree. All qualitative research of this kind runs the risk of the participants sensing what the researcher desires to hear and this skewing their responses. Further studies with other randomized groups of participants could strengthen the findings of this study or bring new dimensions that have not been considered in this research.

4.5. Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection from the interviews began with locating the research sample. As discussed earlier, to make sure that the participants had shared experiences of the phenomenon—YA dystopian fiction—I chose to conduct purposeful sampling. This resulted in a diverse set of participants who self-identified as fans of YA dystopia. As Creswell explains, in phenomenological research, the sample is usually between "5 to 25 people" (Creswell 149), which is why I aimed to recruit up to twenty participants. Ultimately, I ended up with sixteen interview participants. I decided to conduct multiple interviews with participants. I developed two interview protocols, which were submitted to the University of Arkansas IRB for approval along with the research proposal and supporting documents. After the purposeful sampling was completed and participants were recruited, I scheduled two interviews with each participant.

Data was collected via recorded online video interviews that were then automatically transcribed by the Zoom videoconferencing software.

I carefully edited the transcripts of the interviews by comparing them to the video recordings. During this process, I highlighted keywords in the interviews and added notes in the transcript margins. The keywords highlighted in the transcripts were the initial codes that would be revised during the second cycle of coding. According to Creswell, the development of codes begins the process of interpretation of the data (187). During the second cycle of coding for patterns of themes, I utilized in vivo coding, meaning that codes were developed from "names that are the exact words used by participants" (Creswell 187). I looked for emergent codes in the form of significant statements in the transcripts. Through an examination of codes, I combined them into themes— "broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (Creswell 187). Van Manen describes phenomenological themes as "the structures of experience. So when we analyze a phenomenon, we are trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience" (79). However, Polkinghorne cautions that "qualitative data, whether in oral or in written discourse, are not identical to the experience they are describing. Also, qualitative data in their oral form are a product of the interaction between participant and researcher" (138). Therefore, it must be kept in mind that the codes developed by the researcher are reflective of their interpretation of the participant experiences.

As will be seen in the discussion of the themes that emerged during the research, I sometimes refer to the number of times a code surfaced in the data; however, Creswell states that "counting conveys a quantitative orientation of magnitude and frequency contrary to qualitative research" (185), so the number of times a code was repeated was referred to only where it was

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deemed relevant to show the frequency of common experiences. I leaned on the quotes of the participants to show examples of their lived experiences. The quotes from participants chosen were considered representative or particularly vivid examples.

Reliability

To ensure reliability of the data, the transcription was carefully checked against the video recording and edited accordingly. There were two cycles of coding—an initial cycle during which keywords and phrases were highlighted and a second cycle during which the initial codes were refined and adjusted. During the interviews, I took detailed notes and recorded my initial thoughts about any significant statements. I wrote a memo of initial impressions after each interview.

Triangulation was also used in the form of textual analysis of Instagram posts generated by the Bookish community online. The textual analysis discussed in Chapter III supported or complicated the themes that emerged during the coding of interviews with participants, allowing for a deeper understanding of how reader interaction online may affect the construction of meaning.

Ethical Considerations

All participant data was kept anonymous during the research study. Each participant was assigned a unique number, which was used to refer to the participant in the study to ensure that their identity was kept confidential. In addition to this, none of the examples of reader interaction in the Bookish community on Instagram used for the textual analysis in Chapter III included the participants who gave interviews. A random assortment of other Instagram user posts within the Bookish community were chosen as representative of the patterns of themes that emerged in the

analysis of the interview data with participants. The decision to exclude the participant Instagram posts was made to help ensure participant confidentiality.

The participants were provided adult informed consent forms (Appendix B) that explained the purpose of the research study and the way the data collected from interviews would be used. Any underage participants were sent a separate informed consent form (Appendix B), which had to be reviewed and signed by a parent or guardian. The purpose of the study and how the participant data would be used was reiterated to the participants at the beginning of each of the two interviews. The participants were informed that they could elect to withdraw their consent to participate in the interviews at any time.

Limitations

One of the main limitations of any qualitative research study is the issue of objectivity. In contrast to quantitative studies, objectivity is not the aim of qualitative research. What's more, qualitative research presupposes that objectivity is largely impossible to achieve. As this study was conducted by only one researcher, my interpretation of the data impacts the results of the research to some degree. Nevertheless, the triangulation of the interview data through the examination of the Bookish community online as reflected in chapter 3 provides an insight into the correlation between the readings produced by readers outside of interviews and those of the interview participants. More reader response studies of this kind are necessary to see if patterns of themes such as those discussed in chapter 5 appear in other contexts and with other groups of readers. Moreover, phenomenological interviews are ideally split into three segments. Due to time constraints and limited resources, this study could only recruit participants for a set of two interviews, which may have impacted the quality of the data collected.

During the course of this research, the interview data showed that sharing readings was important to the majority of participants, and that all participants were a part of a reader community online to some degree. Based on the interview data collected, my assertion was that participation in reader communities online impacted the way readers interact with novels in the YA dystopian genre and other genres. Reader communities such as the Bookish community on Instagram have the potential to provide readers with a variety of perspectives that can (re)shape their readings of texts. As such, the Bookish community functions as an interpretive community. However, due to the broad nature of the concept of the interpretive community, it is impossible to say with complete certainty that the participants in this study produced similar oppositional, negotiated, and preferred readings of texts because they belong to this specific interpretive community. The participants in this study belong to a vast number of other interpretive communities, which undoubtedly impact the readings they produce. I took the patterns of themes that emerged from the interviews as pointing to the influence of the interaction between readers who are all lovers of the same genres online. However, there is no way of knowing for certain that it is due to the readers' sharing of readings with one another online that produced the specific patterns that I discuss in chapter 5. The participants' readings are influenced by myriad other factors that could yield similar responses. That said, the participants spoke about the readings of others without being prompted enough times that it seemed to be linked to the specific influence of reader communities.

Undoubtedly, one of the limitations of this study is that the participants who elected to take part in this research were readers who reflected deeply on their reading experiences. Meaning, a casual reader would have likely produced very different readings. The particular group of participants for this research emphasized how important reading is in their lives.

Readers who simply enjoy the YA dystopian genre but who do not engage in any shared reading experiences online or otherwise would probably interpret the genre differently.

Importantly, many of the readers who participated in this research also had access to higher education. Out of the sixteen participants, eleven were pursuing a college education at the time of the interviews while two were recent college graduates. Of those pursuing a college education or having recently graduated, six were enrolled or had been enrolled in programs in the humanities or social sciences. Two participants were high school students. One of the participants was an educator. The education level of the participants, particularly those in the humanities or social sciences, could impact their approach to YA dystopian fiction and the readings that they produced. Moreover, of all the participants, five spoke about having wanted to be a writer in the past or aspiring to be a writer in the future. This also impacts the level of thoughtfulness and reflection with which the readers approach texts.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I will address the themes that emerged through interviews with the participants for this research project. The patterns of reader responses (see Fish) described here pertain to different aspects of the reader's experience interacting with YA dystopian novels. I will focus on four distinct, but complementary themes that will each address the overarching research question of this project: namely, does the YA dystopia successfully interpellate the reader into its patriarchal ideological system or is this ideology met with resistance from the reader? If so, how?

Specifically, the research questions that this project asks are as follows:

- How do readers construct meaning from texts?

- How does the participation in a reader community impact the reading experience?

- In what ways do readers resist the dominant discourse of the patriarchal ideology in YA dystopian novels?

- In what ways are readers interpellated into the dominant discourse of the patriarchal ideology in YA dystopian novels?

- What kind of oppositional, negotiated, or preferred meanings do readers construct from YA dystopian novels?

5.1. Emerging Themes

There were four themes that directly pertained to the research questions posed by this study: the Bookish community, the appeal of YA dystopia, the decline of YA dystopia, and the importance of authentic representation of diverse identities in the YA genre. Though there were other themes that emerged which are worthy of examination, this study will focus on these four to narrow the scope of the applicability of the assertions that will be formulated in the discussion section of this chapter.

Theme 1: The Bookish Community

As discussed in Chapter 3, the Bookish community is a group of readers who share book reviews, seek out the reviews of others and engage in discussions about books with one another. All of the participants for this research project talked about sharing their reading experience online with other readers in some form. "The Bookish Community" thus emerged as a theme in the data coding process. All sixteen participants for this research project were active on some form of social media. The participants used social media and websites to read book reviews by others, share their own book reviews, and communicate with other readers about literature through private direct messaging, public comments, and public forums. Fourteen of these participants were Instagram users. Eleven participants spoke about the Bookish community on Instagram or "Bookstagram," as it is referred to within the community of readers online. Other significant platforms for the participants as Bookish community members were TikTok, Goodreads, Facebook (in particular, Facebook groups dedicated to a specific genre like Young Adult or Fantasy fiction), YouTube, Twitter, and Tumblr. A few participants mentioned either having managed a book review blog in the past or still actively writing for a book blog. Similarly, a couple of the participants said that they had once written fan fiction.

The Bookish Community in Person

Besides finding and discussing books online, five of the participants talked about participating in book clubs in person currently or at some point in the past. To the participants, reading is an activity imbued with intense emotion and excitement—readers form close relationships with the works that they read. Most participants described wanting to share their reading experiences with others. For some of the participants, in-person book clubs were a thing of the past—something that they had been involved with when they were younger. For example, Participant II was a

member of a library book club in middle school, while Participant XVII organized a YA

Dystopia-focused book club in his teen years. For others, in-person book clubs and activities

were still a part of their lives today, such as Participant IX, who was actively involved in a book

club organized at her place of work. However, Participant IX noted that her colleagues does not

read the fantasy genre in the work book club, which was a drawback for her since this is the

genre she was currently interested in.

Meanwhile, Participant XI described his involvement in several in-person book clubs

including his university book club and a local town reading group. He described the excitement

of reading a book and wanting to share it with others: "[Y]ou want to discuss something so bad.

And it feels good when you have people to do that [with]. Right? It's like, 'Oh, did you see that

scene? Like, yeah! I love that scene!' It's—it's a good feeling." The joy and excitement of shared

reading experiences were not the only reasons why participants wanted to discuss books.

Participant XI stated that it is important to discuss books with others to understand other

viewpoints:

> [Y]ou gain different perspectives. I mean, when I'm reading a novel, I'm pretty
> sure I—The things I would see would be totally different from how somebody
> else would perceive it. And gaining that, you know, angle is really important to
> [*sic*] appreciating literature, to be honest.

Participant XVII echoed this idea when he discussed the in-person YA Dystopian book club he

ran as a teenager:

> I think, because you might read a book with your own perception—obviously you
> can't read a book from someone else's viewpoint… But then, when you talk to
> somebody else and they're like, "Oh, did you notice this about the book? Did you
> notice this?" And you're like—"you didn't notice these things." And then, when
> someone points [it] out—you can go back, look, and be like, "Oh, okay, maybe
> this isn't quite as wonderful as I thought it was." You know? Like, sometimes you
> do need people to be like, pointing these things out to you. Or maybe sometimes
> you don't like a book, and someone will be like, "Oh, but they do this and this in

> this book, which is really cool." And so, I think it's really good to have
> discussions around what we're reading. For sure.

Participant XVII's description of the process of sharing readings points to the communal aspect

of negotiating meaning in text when it is discussed with others (see Fiske "Active Audiences").

By thus obtaining a different perspective, a reader's understanding of the text can change. As

Participant XVII explains in the interview excerpt above, even an understanding of a text that the

reader deems "wonderful" can be challenged through encountering other readers' perspectives.

Other readers with different identities and lived experiences are able to "point … out," as

Participant XVII says, when there is some feature of the text they have noticed that other readers

without those identities or lived experiences may have missed.

Besides book clubs, there are several in-person events and activities that can draw the

Bookish community together. Participant XV discussed attending book signings and events like

BookCon in the recent past as a way of connecting with other readers. BookCon was an annual

gathering of book lovers similar to the highly popular Comic-Con. BookCon combines elements

of pop culture with literature. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, BookCon was cancelled

in 2020.Organizers of the event announced BookCon's retirement shortly thereafter (*Publishers*

Weekly). By way of justification, the organizers of BookCon claimed that they would "explore

new ways to meet the community's needs through a fusion of in-person and virtual events" in the

future after having shifted several events to the 2020 BookCon online (*Publishers Weekly*). The

difficulties connecting with others in-person posed by the Covid-19 pandemic paired with the

global isolation in quarantine undoubtedly affected readers' habits. While the pandemic that

started in 2019 significantly limited in-person events and activities for readers, it propelled many

to seek out a community of readers online. Interestingly, many participants in this study

described the Covid-19 pandemic as the catalyst for starting Bookish social media accounts or

shifting from a peripheral to central role as members of the Bookish community (see Gee).

The Bookish Community Online

All the participants in this research project talked about their active involvement as readers on

two or more online platforms. The most popular among all the social media platforms was

Instagram, followed by the website Goodreads, and then the social media platform TikTok.

Other platforms or websites that were mentioned by readers were YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr,

and Facebook groups dedicated to specific genres or books. A couple of participants mentioned

running a dedicated blog for book reviews.

Whatever the online platform readers chose to use, the unifying aspect of all of these was

that they served as "home bases" for the Bookish community (see Gee 9), where participants

could connect with other readers. For example, Participant III described the Bookstagram

community on YouTube (or BookTube, as it is referred to by community members) as providing

her with "the only outlet" to talk about the books she was interested in. Participant III was elated

when she discovered BookTube: "[I was] like, 'Whoa—there's other people who love reading as

much as I do! I'm not a weirdo. That's awesome!' … I saw people that were as enthusiastic about

like, reading and talking about books." Similarly, Participant VIII stated that the Bookish

community on platforms like Bookstagram gives readers a "sense of belonging," which is what

keeps them coming back. Participant V talked about the Bookish community on Bookstagram as

a place where she has formed multiple important relationships through connecting with others

over reading experiences:

> With books you have, like, such an emotional connection to it that when you find
> other people that like the same books, then—oh, you're almost automatically
> friends, and you're able to, like, bond over a shared reading experience. Um, I
> have a lot of best friends that I've met through Bookstagram.

Readers connecting over a "shared reading experience" and gaining access to other perspectives were two central themes that emerged in the participant interviews. Participant II said that it has been "really cool to meet a community of people who read" on platforms like Bookstagram, given that she has almost no one to discuss books with in her day-to-day life offline. Moreover, unlike physical, in-person book clubs, the Bookish community online connects people from around the globe. As Participant II described,

> It doesn't have to be someone who lives on my block or that I went to school with anymore. I have people worldwide who can give me book recommendations. And some books that aren't popular in the US I'm getting recommendations for. And I'm like, "I've never heard of this." Or the opposite—I'll recommend a book that's really big here, and they'll be like, "I don't know if we have access to that." So, it's cool.

Similarly, Participant XVII described getting recommendations for queer books from a trusted friend on Goodreads:

> I've got a couple of international friends who live all around the world … my friend is from Germany and he reads quite a lot of books as well. So, like, [if he reviews something and says] "Oh, look out for this," and then that's when I go to the bookstore and see what's available.

Recommendations and book reviews produced by other readers are the pillars of the Bookish community on any of the online platforms. Participant II said she uses Bookstagram as a source for comparing reading experiences:

> [I]t's cool. A lot of people, they'll post their reviews, and then I can read their reviews and then see if I like it or not. And then if I have questions or opinions, or if I've read it, I'll message them and I'll be like, 'Hey, I just finished this book. Can we talk about it?' And it's nice to hear other people's opinions, especially on book series that I love or [that] they really didn't like, or they love.

Overall, most of the participants saw Bookstagram as a positive platform with a lot to offer. Participants used descriptors such as "supportive," "passionate," "welcoming," and "very wholesome" among others to describe the Bookish community on Bookstagram, though there are

downsides to Bookstagram that several participants pointed out, which will be discussed later. Many participants had created a Bookstagram account for the purpose of finding and discussing books with others fairly recently. Several participants had created Bookstagram accounts in between the end of 2019 and the end of 2020.

The relatively sudden boom in the popularity of Bookstagram for the participants in this study was sometimes directly associated with the Covid-19 quarantines implemented all over the globe. Participant III stated that she had created her Bookstagram account about six months ago at the time of the interview (summer of 2020). In comparison, she had been an active Goodreads user for about six years now. Goodreads has been a popular platform for the Bookish community for quite some time. It is a website that offers users the ability to track their reading progress and share it with others. Goodreads users can rate books that they have read, post reviews, and participate in various activities such as reading marathons, forums, and even Q&As with authors. Six of the participants discussed actively using Goodreads to read and post reviews. Goodreads was described by most as a good place to find new books.

Participant VIII described Goodreads as a progress log for reading that gives "a sense of fulfillment," as you can track how much you have read. You can also see other users' reading progress and track what books they are currently reading or interested in if they choose to make this information public. Notably, Goodreads is less interactive than other platforms since it relies primarily on an exchange of written book reviews. Participant VIII stated that she likes reading the best and worst reviews on Goodreads to get a sense for whether a book is worth reading. That said, she also mentioned that pretty covers or promotional images on Instagram can ultimately sway her decision to pick up a book regardless of reviews:

> I'll go into Bookstagram, like, search for the hashtag, and usually I'll see all these
> pretty pictures of the books, and people talking about how amazing it is. And then

I'll just have to buy it. I think really [that], after I started Bookstagram, most of my books have been from the constant array of pictures that have been on my feed. If I look at something for enough times, then I'll think, "Oh, maybe that is really good." I'll buy it.

The visual appeal of book covers in beautifully coordinated photos is part of the power of Bookstagram. Some readers may also feel more at ease posting on platforms like Instagram where they do not physically have to be in the center of attention. On other platforms like TikTok—or, as members of the Bookish community would call it, BookTok—the reader usually has to be physically present in the content they post. Several participants discussed watching BookTok videos but pointed out that they did not feel comfortable getting in front of the camera. On Bookstagram, the books take center stage, and the appearance of the reader in photos is not necessary. It is worth mentioning here that some of the participants did create content on Bookstagram where they appeared in front of the camera; however, most of the participants who used Bookstagram created posts that focused primarily on the books themselves.

Besides this, according to some participants, Instagram's intuitive direct messaging function fosters communication between readers better than other platforms like Goodreads and the highly popular TikTok platform. Instagram's direct messaging function mimics Facebook Messenger (both Instagram and Facebook Messenger are owned by Meta, formerly known as Facebook). Participant V described Goodreads as "outdated" in comparison with other platforms like Instagram or TikTok. It is not difficult to see why. Goodreads does not have all the bells and whistles of the aforementioned social media platforms. Participant VIII concurred that it is harder to build community on Goodreads but that it is a much more predictable platform for sharing opinions on books: "you're not really putting anything out other than reviews and your views—your reviews only get seen by the people you're already friends with," which means that "there's no judgment between the people that you're friends with on Goodreads."

Bookstagram is less predictable when it comes to interaction between readers. Specifically, although Bookstagram was generally described in positive terms by participants, some of them also pointed out an important flaw. Several participants mentioned the toxic behavior of Bookstagram fan accounts. Usually, these Bookstagram fan accounts are dedicated to a specific book series, author, or characters. As Participant V described it, the issue stems from the fact that readers are very passionate, and the anonymity of the internet allows them to lash out at those who do not share their opinions on books. Participant V explained that readers behind fan accounts can feel an "ownership" of their favorite books and become "super defensive" if someone offers a critique of these works, taking it as "a personal attack." One such instance can be seen in an example provided by this participant. She described the extensive harassment faced by her friend who runs a Bookstagram account promoting books that do not receive enough attention while critiquing those books that are very popular on the platform. According to Participant V, as a consequence of critiquing popular books, her friend "has gotten death threats" on Bookstagram from readers behind fan accounts who are emboldened by the platform's anonymity. As she explains, these types of readers make it difficult for others in the Bookish community to offer any criticism on popular novels, particularly if readers wish to point out problematic representation:

> I think people can be a little bit aggressive about it. Um, I do know, like—I've gotten a couple comments whenever I mentioned that I don't like [author Sarah J Maas]. And people get, like, super—almost angry and don't necessarily respect my opinion or even try to listen. And [they] get super defensive.

To this point, Participant VIII noticed that fan accounts dedicated to specific characters can get particularly toxic in comment sections of Bookstagram posts. Participant XI explained that some level of negativity among users is unavoidable on social media platforms like Instagram, and though the Bookish community is overall a positive space, a toxic response to criticism from fan

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accounts is not unusual. Nonetheless, Participant V believes that "it's getting better" as people learn to have more respectful discussions. Particularly when it comes to critiques of representation, Participant V hopes that "more diverse readers are speaking up and having the courage to talk about how some books may not have the best representation." According to the participants who spoke about the dark side of Bookstagram, these types of incidents were described as fairly rare on the platform.

To sum up, many participants expressed that they seek out other readers to share reading experiences, which suggests that their reading experience is considerably formed and informed by the reading experiences of others in the Bookish community. These participants do not only wish to discuss their opinion of a book (the meaning they have created through an interaction with the text) but also to compare it to other readings and thus negotiate meaning (Fiske "Active Audiences"). The interviews of several participants indicated that they look for other perspectives to test competing interpretations of other readers against their own. What's more, some participants talked about remaining open to challenging their original reading of a text as being an important part of their reading experience. Because the Bookish community is not bound by any physical location or even a particular online platform, it has a diverse membership across the world. This means that communicating with others in this community can offer readers a rich array of perspectives on texts. Furthermore, participants desire to feel part of a community of readers, and they may not have the opportunity to find others to share readings with in "real life"—offline and in person. Communicating with other readers and exchanging ideas was important to the interview participants. Online platforms like Instagram allow the Bookish community to connect easily through the direct messaging function. Although websites like Goodreads are still important for the participants, these do not foster community in the way

that Bookstagram does. That being said, Goodreads was discussed by some as a good source of trusted book reviews by other readers. Lastly, the reader community on Bookstagram was mostly referred to in a positive way—many participants described it as a welcoming and supportive space. But there were some who pointed out that Bookstagram has a toxic side. Fan accounts of specific books, authors, or characters can attack those readers who critique the works that the fan accounts love. This backlash against criticism can discourage readers from sharing their opinions on popular books online.

Theme 2: The Appeal of YA Dystopia

Although YA dystopia has fallen in popularity since its peak about a decade ago, it remains an important genre for readers such as the participants in this study. Most participants described their first encounter with YA dystopia occurring in their teens. The earliest that a participant recalled reading YA dystopia was Participant I at the age of ten. There were some participants who had become interested in YA dystopia more recently—in their twenties. For the vast majority, *The Hunger Games* was their first introduction to the genre followed closely by *Divergent* and *The Maze Runner*. These three series of novels were also some of the most popular among the participants. As Participant VII stated, these novels were among the "Big Three." Indeed, nearly every participant (fourteen out of sixteen) mentioned having read *The Hunger Games*. Eleven participants spoke about having read *Divergent* and six participants spoke about *The Maze Runner*. Other popular novels for this group included *The Selection*, *Scythe*, and *Uglies*.

YA dystopia appeals to most of the participants because it depicts a world that has parallels to the reader's own. As the participants explained, the dystopian scenarios depicted in novels of this genre have some tinge of realism. The stories told in YA dystopias reflect what

could happen in the worst-case scenario of a distant future. The dystopian setting in YA fiction has grown from seeds planted in reality, such as the threat of atomic wars, ecological disasters, and deadly widespread disease. For the participants, this makes dystopia more believable and thus also scarier than other genres such as sci-fi or fantasy. It is also darker than other YA genres, and readers spoke of it as having higher stakes; while YA fantasy novels might focus on an adventure of a character, in YA dystopia, the whole world is often in danger, and the teen protagonists must fight to save what is left of it.

The teen protagonists were also a great part of the appeal of YA dystopia. Some participants described seeing teens having an impact on society as empowering and inspirational. Although several participants also described the teenage savior trope as unrealistic, it was still appealing to them to see young people being able to have a powerful impact on society. As Participant III stated, people sometimes "denigrate" the Young Adult genre and "they kind of laugh at it and scoff at it. But they do that because they're afraid of it." Participant III said that YA dystopia is powerful and "it should be taken seriously." As she described the genre's essence, Participant III explained:

> …it's always teenagers, like, you know, figuring out how to save the world as cliché as that sounds. And I think that it shows that we shouldn't underestimate young people, because people constantly underestimate the genre itself like, "Oh, that's for teenagers" … But I think that it is very empowering and like, you know, it's kind of addictive because most people who read YA—surveys have shown— are actually adults. Like, I have heard, you know, as much as 55% of the audience reading YA are actually adults. And so, that shows something about the genre.

The quote above illustrates that participants appeared to continue to see the value in YA dystopia as adults, and some participants wished for the genre to be more respected in the literary world. Participant II said she saw YA dystopia as having an effect on its readers because it inspired them to see how they can rebel against injustice in their own lives. Although Participant II did

not enjoy *The Hunger Games* herself, she saw the novels as important for young people because

they show that resistance is possible:

> A lot of Gen-Zs that I either know or have seen on TikTok … A lot of them
> actually credit *The Hunger Games* for giving them—because they were raised on
> movies like *The Hunger Games*, which are about these children protesting their
> governments. So, to see the Black Lives Matter protest … that happened for, like,
> what—two, three months straight almost every day across the world (not even in
> just the US—these protests were happening in other countries as well) and
> knowing that a lot of these kids who grew up with these types of books credit
> those books as giving them the courage to be like, "We can make change if we
> speak up against our government." Again, I did not relate to the books, but I love
> the fact that so many people did that it helped them grow as humans to make these
> decisions now that they're young adults. That they're out there fighting for what
> they believe in because they read a book where they related to the character. And
> now that they're seeing that stuff happen in our real life, they're not just sitting
> back and letting it happen. They're going out and they're doing what they read and
> what they relate it to.

What's more, several participants noted that they enjoyed the coming-of-age aspect of YA

dystopia. Although the protagonists of the novels dealt with extremely high stakes scenarios, the

participants described the novels as relatable. Participant XIII noted that YA dystopian novels

are easy to relate to because teens have to make important decisions at a young age:

> I remember when *Divergent* had come out … that series for me, in particular, was
> so different, because, you know—it brought a different type of theme to the table.
> Like, "we're taking these young kids and they have to make a life choice so
> young," which is so relatable. You know, when you're 18 and you graduate high
> school, you pretty much have to make a decision right then and there of what
> you're going to do and stuff like that. … there's something about how the plot of
> those books and those series also is so much more engaging and interactive than
> most books I've read.

As Participant XIII points out above he, like other participants, could connect to the themes often

used in YA dystopia such as having to make important decisions when you are very young

because it has a universal appeal. Importantly, several participants valued how YA dystopia

centered the human experience, as they saw it. Most participants described YA dystopia as a

genre that addresses contemporary issues like the growing role of technology in our lives, and

the dilemma of "man versus nature," as Participant XI put it. At the same time, participants also

noted that they found the futuristic setting of YA dystopias intriguing—it is interesting for

participants to see how authors imagine technological advancements in the distant future.

Many participants emphasized the appeal of the fast-paced nature of the YA dystopian

genre—it was described as exciting, engaging, and addicting. YA dystopia immediately places

the reader in the center of the action by "getting to the point" as Participant XV put it. In addition

to this, the writing and style of YA dystopia was seen as accessible and easy to understand. The

first-person narration common in YA dystopian novels helped some participants connect better

to the characters. As Participant XIII described:

> I feel like when I read YA fiction, I feel really like I'm … getting to know the
> mind and the feelings of the character, especially when it's in that role [first
> person narration]. I think when it's in third person, it's harder … So, I think that's
> what immediately kind of helped me connect and bridge the gap from middle
> grade [books] to YA when I was growing up. [It] was, you know, feeling the
> emotions … all the stuff that the character's feeling. I don't think a lot of YA
> books realize that they have that power.

Although YA dystopia was described as approachable, it was also characterized as more

complex than other genres like the massively popular YA fantasy. Participants saw YA dystopia

as addressing more serious issues through its reflections on society. For example, Participant

XVI said he particularly appreciates the way YA dystopias introduce social commentary for

readers at a young age. Participant V pointed out that she valued the "philosophical aspect" of

YA dystopias similarly to other participants who expressed that it is a genre that "makes you

think." The focus on politics in this genre was particularly important to many participants.

Participant XVI said the political aspect of the novels became much more important to him as he

got older whereas before he did not think that deeply about the issues discussed in YA dystopias.

The teen protagonist's fight against an oppressive government was essential to YA dystopia in

the participants' eyes. Some participants mentioned that the political struggles in the novel being

central to the plot was refreshing to see in the YA dystopias they had encountered because other

genres focused more heavily on themes such as romance.

In sum, YA dystopia appeals to the participants because of its intriguing setting of a

crumbling world that still resembles the real world of the reader. Participants appreciated how

YA dystopian novels addressed complex and serious themes. Particularly, participants enjoyed

the political and social critique in the novels. The participants also appreciated the agency of teen

protagonists who were seen as inspiring. Besides being fast-paced and thrilling, the novels also

often used the first-person narrative to help readers gain a better understanding of the

protagonist's feelings. Overall, in the participants' eyes, the YA dystopian novel often

successfully intertwined the coming-of-age story with a dark and complex view of a future world

in peril.

Subversive Female Gender Performance in YA Dystopia

A core feature of YA dystopia for the participants was the genre's focus on female protagonists.

As Participant II described her, the "badass female character who can handle crap on her own"

was at the heart of the YA dystopia. In contrast to this, Participant V described the way female

characters are usually written in other genres of YA fiction in a way which allows the reader to

project themselves onto the character:

> …if you compare it to like, most of the other young adult dystopian characters,
> it's almost—it's not that they don't have personality, but it's like the author wants
> you to feel like you can be them, so you can project yourself onto the pages and
> pretend that you're actually in the story. I'm not a really huge fan of that.

Participant V stated that she preferred characters like Katniss in *The Hunger Games* who been

written with depth and complexity. The female protagonist in YA dystopia was typically

described as strong, brave, and smart. Besides this, participants valued characters who they

deemed to be self-reliant, confident, and imperfect—the character needed to have some flaws, so that the participants could see them develop by learning through their failures like regular human beings. Characters who displayed familial love and attachment were especially important to many participants. Several participants discussed how family relationships and friendships were essential to a good story, and that they wanted to see more of these types of relationships represented in YA novels instead of the incessant focus on the romance plot.

Unsurprisingly, nine participants spoke about Katniss as one of their favorite female characters in YA dystopia; several participants saw her as "original," "headstrong," "stoic," and "complex." To Participant III, Katniss embodies what people generally see as "the ideal strong female character." To this point, Participant XIII described the experience of reading about Katniss in *The Hunger Games* as impactful:

> I remember growing up and reading [*The Hunger Games*] and it was like a breath of fresh air, because there are so many strong dynamic female characters that haven't had that representation. At the moment, I remember reading that and Suzanne Collins really did Katniss wonders. I'm reading about Katniss and I just got this initial feeling that she was strong, that she was level, that, you know, she wasn't your normal YA character who's kind of like wishy washy or makes bad decisions.

Several participants described Katniss as realistic and relatable, often connecting these characteristics to her having visible flaws. Participants also appreciated that Katniss was depicted as cunning and strategic, which are characteristics usually attributed to masculinity. Additionally, Katniss' role as a provider for her family was important to many participants as it set her apart from other characters they had encountered. Some participants talked about the way Katniss had to assume the role of a parent and take on mature responsibilities, so her priorities were different from what one would expect from a teen character. Participant VII, for example, particularly enjoyed that Katniss is "very family oriented and that she's not overtly sexual." Participant VII

described Katniss as having "principles that were just different from the mainstream," because her preoccupation was taking care of her family.

Participant VI said that she appreciated Katniss' ability to get through stressful situations and could relate to Katniss' way of handling crises, "I know a lot of people might say she's not as emotional as all the [other] characters, but I think that's why I like her, because she's very levelheaded … I guess I really saw myself in her." Katniss' lack of emotion was mentioned by several participants who saw this as a positive aspect of the character—this made Katniss stand out among other female characters in the YA genre. Participant III stated that Katniss was an unusual character because she subverted the expectations usually placed on female characters: "people expect women to be, you know, more emotional or whatever it is. And she wasn't." Moreover, Katniss' behavior was seen as a product of her dystopian environment. As Participant VI put it, "I really appreciated that she'd been through a lot, and so, it made a lot of sense how she acted. There was like, very consistent themes, very consistent characterization." Some participants felt that Katniss had been the target of sexist criticism because she is depicted as less emotional than what one might expect of a traditional female character. Participant VII felt strongly about Katniss' subversive gender performance in terms of emotionality typically expected of women in real life and, subsequently, in literature:

> …she has to experience a lot of trauma. And so, I feel that Collins wrote her very well as somebody who is outwardly unfeeling and I didn't like the criticism that her character gets for being like… you know, "why don't you smile more?" that kind of weird attitude or like sexism that, I guess, women in real life [experience]. And then … by extension women in books get. Because it's like—no! No, she's been through a lot! She doesn't owe you being happy and chirpy. Like, she has a lot of her mind, and she has a lot to go through, and she has to basically like, rally all of Panem to her cause. She doesn't have time to be, you know, bubbly and all those things.

It is interesting that there were two participants that discussed that they distinctly disliked

Katniss as a character. Participant XII said, "… maybe it's just me, but I found the character of

Katniss rather obnoxious, and this is one of the reasons for which I did not like *The Hunger*

Games very much." Similarly, Participant II said: "her [Katniss'] character just annoys me … I

just don't like how she's written." Participant II also stated that it was very unrealistic that

Katniss had survived everything she went through in *The Hunger Games* trilogy to find a happy

ending: "No offense to Katniss [but] she should not have survived two Hunger Games and then a

war. … Nothing about her character screamed, 'I should have won!' It screamed—'I'm winning

because I'm the main character.'" For both participants, Katniss' lack of emotion was an issue.

Participant XII described Katniss' lack of emotion as a drawback because it made her distinctly

unlikable. To this end, Participant XII said:

> I really don't like her. I just—I find her very churlish and unapproachable. And I
> know it's important for women who are "unlikable" to have representation, but I
> find that her character is explicitly made of her being unlikable. And she just
> doesn't really have very many admirable personality traits.

It was particularly interesting how Participant XII questioned herself for a moment, wondering if

she would have the same response to a male character written in the same way:

> I mean, I don't know if I'd have the same criticism from [*sic*] a male character.
> And that's something I need to look at for myself. But I find that she is really just
> an unapproachable person in her characterization, and I'm not a fan of it. Whether
> it was male or female—I just wouldn't appreciate it.

Both participants found it difficult to relate to Katniss because of how unfeeling she appeared.

For example, Participant II said that she found Katniss to be "very manipulative" particularly

with regard to her romance with Peeta:

> Katniss was very manipulative with her relationship with Peeta to the point where
> at the very end of book they get together and it's happily ever after. … It's been
> years since I read that book and I don't know if she actually has feelings for him

when he very genuinely liked her. And I do not know, years after reading the last book, if that was genuine on her part or if it was just a game the whole time.

Even so, most participants saw Katniss as behaving in a way that was consistent with the dystopian setting of her world and the traumatic experiences she had gone through. The two participants' dislike of Katniss described here seemed to be centered around an inability to connect with her as a character.

Lastly, it is important to mention that many participants voiced disappointment over how the "Girl on Fire" trope that started with Katniss in *The Hunger Games* had deteriorated in subsequent YA dystopian novels that tried to emulate the success of Suzanne Collins' novel. Participant III described the characters that she is drawn to in novels as "both vulnerable and strong"—something that was not a given in all YA dystopias where some participants said female characters were not allowed to be vulnerable. Participants described this lack of vulnerability as a detraction from the character, whom they wished to see as a human being. Participant XIV described the typical female protagonist in YA dystopias as follows:

> In Young Adult dystopian novels, it's always the simple girl who doesn't think she's pretty though every single other male character in the novel is in love with her. Like, there will always be a love triangle, or two boys who are in love with her though she doesn't think that she's pretty and thinks she seems average in every single way. There's always like, the badass, like—"I'm not like other girls" thing in dystopian fiction. There's a lot of that. … even though she doesn't think she's pretty, she will always be desirable to everybody else around her, but it's only her that doesn't see her own value.

He continued, explaining that authors of YA dystopias were "writing female characters and always putting them in one cookie cutter role that seems to just be regurgitated again and again," which is the trope of "the girl who doesn't think she's pretty, but is beautiful and everybody is in love with her." Participant XIV was frustrated by this as he saw it as problematic: "Why are we

projecting that women shouldn't be aware of their own beauty, or like, shouldn't have confidence to admit that they're beautiful, and stuff like that?"

That being said, many participants noted that Neil Shusterman's novel *Scythe* (2016) was a step in a positive direction for YA dystopia. Besides the original concept and intriguing plot, Participant V described enjoying the female character Citra because she saw her as a progressive depiction of a female character who does not have to suppress her femininity:

> I think she was definitely a super empowering character to read about just because I know that she's POC [a Person of Color] … the part that I really enjoyed about her was … she wasn't like afraid to like, really step into like the female stereotypes of like, talking a lot... I know that that's a really popular stereotype. And … just expressing her femininity. … I know a lot of authors put characters into like … in order to be considered a strong female character, then you have to have more masculine characteristics. But the situation with Citra was she wasn't presented in that way, which I super—I appreciate it so much. Especially because it's a male author. And the fact that he was able to like, have that balance of her still being a strong female character because she isn't afraid to express how feminine she is … her more feminine side was so nice to see and like, super refreshing … Citra has so much emotional intelligence. … I think [it] was great seeing [that] instead of like, more physical aspects…

Some participants expressed this same idea that female characters should not have to perform their gender as masculine to be a compelling female character or to have agency.

To conclude, the "badass female protagonist," as many participants referred to her, was of utmost importance to the readers of YA dystopia. Participants wanted to see strong, brave, and smart characters who cared about their family and friends depicted in this genre. What's more, participants wanted to see the characters display regular human flaws. Katniss was the most popular example of this type of character, and many participants spoke about her as original, complex, and different from typical female characters found in other YA sub-genres. Katniss' lack of emotion was seen by most as compelling or even revolutionary for a female character, but there were two participants who saw her as distinctly unlikable. Several participants spoke of the watered-down versions of Katniss that they had found in other YA dystopian novels and felt

that the genre was replicating a formula without any nuance. Some participants mentioned the troublesome trope of female protagonist who does not know that she is beautiful or considers herself plain and ordinary only to have several boys pining for her attention. There were several participants who spoke about the need to see female characters who are not afraid of their femininity and do not see it as a weakness.

Theme 3: The Decline of YA Dystopia

As much as the participants loved YA dystopia, they also talked at length about the many ways the genre had disappointed them. The participants discussed the overly simplistic worldbuilding in YA dystopian novels as one of the main reasons that the genre is not as popular as it was a decade ago. The plot and setting, and even the character tropes in YA dystopia were described by several participants as a "copy and paste" endeavor by authors and publishers. YA dystopia was characterized by many participants as repetitive and formulaic. YA dystopias like *Matched* (Condie 2010), *Delirium* (Oliver 2011), and *Shatter Me* (Mafi 2011) were described as not well researched and dependent on overused tropes. Several participants described the YA dystopian genre as simply oversaturated—there were too many novels in the genre trying to either copy dystopian novels written for an adult audience like *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood 1985) or they too-closely emulated the massively successful *The Hunger Games*. Participants who loved YA dystopia are now gravitating toward the YA fantasy genre. As Participant XIV described it:

> I think YA fantasy has replaced dystopia as the staple of the Young Adult genre ...
> If you ask somebody for a recommendation in YA, you'll almost always get
> fantasy recommendations. While I do think it [YA fantasy] has taken over, I also
> do think it will have its own decline, because you're already starting to see
> patterns in like, similar titles and similar concepts. Because when something is
> popular, all anybody wants to do is replicate it … And that's what happened to
> dystopian fiction. It was replicated, replicated until people were over it.

As a result, many participants found the barrage of YA dystopias of the early 2010s stale, unimaginative, and lacking the traits that appealed to them most when they first stumbled upon the genre. Namely, the political and social critique was replaced by a focus on romance, and the powerful and unconventional female protagonists they had come to expect in a YA dystopia were becoming less complex. Moreover, the girl fighting an oppressive government trope soon lost its luster and participants discussed wanting more original plots in the novels they read. Many participants described YA fantasy as more appealing because of its ability to imagine a vast range of possibilities in terms of the worlds this genre can create whereas YA dystopia was seen as stringent and limited as noted by Participant IV:

> …fantasy has taken over because there's a lot of things you can do with it. A lot of things. … You can make any story about it … You don't have the strictness of the plot that dystopia has. Dystopia needs you to have a tyrannical government and a band of people fighting against it. So, I think the fact that it constricts the plot has led to the fall of dystopia as a genre. However, I still think that, you know, it could be saved if it had a little bit more creativity.

YA fantasy was also described as more naturally encompassing dystopian elements, whereas YA dystopias are more heavy-handed with their delivery of the dystopian plot. Participant XII described fantasy as more subtle in this respect:

> Like, if you look at *The Hunger Games*, it's basically, "We are doomed to serve the government! Oh—nope! There's rebellion. We're going to take the government down." Or you look at *Divergent*— "We are doomed to fall into a faction. Faction before blood. Oh no, I'm a divergent! Time to switch." Whereas in a fantasy novel, the dystopian compartments of it are more of a natural progression of the plot rather than something that I feel is forced. With the whole rebellion thing—in fantasy novels, a lot of the rebellions are made by people for political reasons. But there's also a lot of personal growth and there's a focus on that, but I don't quite see that as much in the novels that are explicitly focused as dystopias.

Besides the lack of new and interesting plotlines, several participants talked about the need to escape into a world far removed from their own. The YA dystopian genre had become too real in

light of the global Covid-19 pandemic, growing ecological anxieties, and social and political issues. Participant VI noted, "I think at the moment, people probably don't want to read it because they feel like they're in a dystopia as well." However, as an interesting outlier, Participant VI also stated that she found herself going back to YA dystopia recently and finding parallels with what she had lived through. She found that it was not the desolation and destruction of the world that had appealed to her in YA dystopia, but rather its hopefulness that drew her in: "What I always enjoyed about them [YA dystopian novels] wasn't the fact that it was necessarily a dystopia. But it was like, the positive outlook and like the forward thinking rather than the negative aspects that interested me."

Nonetheless, as noted by Participant VI and others, fantasy has become more appealing than the constant desolation of the world found in YA dystopia. As Participant XII put it, "fantasy novels are typically less doom and gloom than the fully focused dystopian novels." Participant VI described the themes and tone of YA fantasy as more popular with authors and publishers: "there were a lot of similar dystopian books for a while, and then at some point, everyone went, 'Yeah, we're bored of that now, because Sarah J. Maas is writing hot, sexy scenes with fairies. So, we're going to write that too.'" A few participants also referred to YA dystopia as too violent and brutal, and therefore a genre that can only be enjoyed in small doses.

To reiterate the main points, YA dystopia is less appealing to the participants because the genre is oversaturated. YA dystopian novels overuse tropes and copy successful novels like *The Hunger Games* without the same social and political critique or nuanced worldbuilding. YA fantasy is taking over in popularity as it's able to more naturally incorporate dystopian themes while offering the reader an escape into a different world. This is particularly important during times when the participants described feeling like they are living in a dystopian world as is.

Some participants still felt drawn to YA dystopia as a genre that offers narratives of hope and triumph over evil. Notably, participants disliked how the central focus of many YA dystopias had shifted from social and political critique to the romance plot.

The Centrality of the Romance Plot

Many participants spoke about the issue of YA dystopia veering too far into the terrain of YA romance. Often participants talked about picking up a YA dystopia that turned out to be a romance novel, like in the case of *The Selection*. Participants pointed out that romance should not be the focal point in a YA dystopia, and a few participants noted that romance is not necessary in a YA dystopia at all. If it is present in the novel, participants thought romance should not distract from the main plot, which should be more concerned with social and political critique. What's more, Participant VI pointed to the way the YA dystopian novel underestimates the reader by believing that the reader will value the romance plot above the struggle for survival and the upheaval in the novel. For example, when talking about *The Selection*, the participant described how absurd the romance plot can appear in YA dystopias:

> …rebellion is happening—there are evil people doing bad things, you know? That kind of stuff. I feel like that's more important. …You know, "Someone's just bombing some innocent people, but it's time for you guys to make out now!" Like, it seems like you need some priorities. And that's kind of why it annoyed me.

In the same vein, Participant IV said, "I don't think anyone in that situation would be considering romance as much as, you know, sometimes they show in the books. I think it would be the least of someone's concern" in a dystopian environment. Participant XIV discussed the same idea, saying that characters in YA dystopias rush into relationships while going through traumatic experiences, which he saw as unrealistic: "…you do need time to heal. And it's not all sunshine and rainbows after the government has been taken down. Because you've been through so much

trauma, and you've seen so many people die, and you've almost died." Participant VI contrasted

this to instances where YA dystopias depict romance well:

> …there are quite a few books that have romance. Like *The Fifth Wave*—it has romance in it, but what I really like about that relationship between Evan and Cassie is that when she finds out … that he's an alien, she's like, "Oh, hell no!" and like, "Fuck off!" … Although she's, you know, got feelings for him. And as the feelings start to develop, she's still suspicious of him. She's like, "Hey, there's this random guy who helped me out … I don't know why he's helping me. Like, he's hot though, but…" And she kind of wars with that, which I thought was really realistic, because, obviously, she's a teenage girl. There's a cute guy. He's like, "I want to look after you." And she's like, "Oh, okay… Wait—no! This is—I'm not sure." So, I like that that happens. And that there's realistic reactions. Yes—maybe some people are stupid, but I don't want to read about them.

In this instance, Participant VI underlines the fact that romance has its place in YA dystopia if it

is peripheral and if the characters act how she believes real teenagers would in these types of

situations. Meaning, attraction between two people is entirely possible, but Participant VI saw

the female protagonist Cassie's suspicions of the male love interest Evan as realistic and well-

founded for the type of dystopian world the characters find themselves in.

Moreover, many participants spoke about the way romances are executed badly in YA

dystopias because they perpetuate toxic relationships. Participants talked about jealousy,

possessiveness, and dependency as common characteristics of a romantic relationship in YA

dystopian novels—these types of romantic relationships were not problematized, but rather

appeared as normal or natural. It was interesting that some of the participants juxtaposed

themselves to other readers in terms of their view of romantic relationships in YA dystopias.

Participant X, for example, said that she wanted to see more realistic romantic relationships

depicted in YA dystopia; at the same time, she said that toxic romantic relationships that

involved jealousy and possessiveness were popular with readers because "…this is how

mainstream people view the relationships as. So, maybe that's what appeals to the readers. Like, the majority of the readers."

Participant VI discussed why authors choose to depict toxic relationships in YA dystopian novels and suggested that it might be the influence of the media.

> I guess part of it could be… that's what they [authors] think people want, or their editor thinks that's what people want. Um, I guess, parts of it could be – they [authors] have unhealthy relationships themselves. And I suppose you could go deeper into it and say, it's kind of a trope that's existed for quite a long time in the media and stuff, but I mean, I've heard that argument, but I don't really see it. Like, if people kind of go, "oh, what about Disney movies?" I'm like—I haven't really seen any Disney movies or anything particularly where guys treat people like shit and then get the girl.

Participant VI added jokingly, "Maybe *Fifty Shades of Grey* has influenced way too many YA authors and they think that we secretly like people to bully us? I really don't know." The participant was referring to the E. L. James' erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012), which is inspired by the popular YA paranormal romance novel *Twilight* (Meyer 2005). *Fifty Shades of Grey* focuses on the relationship between a high-power businessman and a young woman, and the novel has been criticized for its promotion of unhealthy relationships. Participant IX spoke about authors writing love interests that fit either a "Prince Charming" or a "bad boy" trope and neither one has much substance; however, she thought these types of characters still appeal to most readers:

> I know it's a trope. It's kind of a characteristic that does really well. Also, if you're thinking kind of back to like Disney and Prince Charming and girls wanting to be saved... It's something that people use a lot in the [YA] genre and that obviously works well. Like, I can't say I don't enjoy, you know, the female heroine gets swept off her feet and finds love and stuff. I just, I think maybe as I'm getting older, it becomes a little bit repetitive and tiresome. And it doesn't always have the best like, connotations and, you know, real life application.

Several participants talked about how the romance plot often overshadows that rebellion against oppressive regimes in YA dystopia. Participant VIII noted that in novels like Scot Westerfeld's

The Uglies (2005) "overthrowing the government" becomes a "side plot," and most of the novel focuses on the main character's "problems with her romantic life." Participant VIII stated, "he [the author] could've focused more on the overthrowing the government than the badly done romance to make the book better because by having such shallow problems it negatively affected how the characters were portrayed and how the readers can relate to the characters."

The most frequently talked about examples of YA dystopias with bad romance plots were Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011), Ally Condie's *Matched* (2010), and Kiera Cass' *The Selection* (2012). In the case of *Divergent*, participants described the plot as too fixated on the romance and therefore containing much less social critique than readers expected. The plot was described as obsessed with relationships and "teen drama" as Participant IV put it. Participant VII described the main character—Tris, as "a discount version of Katniss" in *The Hunger Games* with "pick me energy." However, it is important to note that there were several participants who talked about enjoying *Divergent* and Tris as a female protagonist. Some participants even listed Tris as one of their favorite characters because of her depiction as vulnerable and selfless.

Participants were also divided on *The Selection*—some were fans of the first novel and the rest of the series while others cited it as one of the worst examples of a YA dystopia. Those who enjoyed the novel were united in their appreciation for the main love interest of the female protagonist America,—Prince Maxon. Prince Maxon was described as gentle, kind, respectful, and "a total sweetheart" as Participant I put it. Prince Maxon in *The Selection* and Peeta in *The Hunger Games* were the most popular examples of positive male character depictions in YA dystopia mentioned by nearly all participants. It is important to note that some of the participants who enjoyed *The Selection* first felt the need to establish that they saw the novel primarily as a romance rather than a YA dystopia. I took this to mean that they judged *The Selection* differently

if they accepted that it is not primarily meant to focus on the more serious and heavy themes of

YA dystopias such as *The Hunger Games*. As Participant II described:

> I think the love triangle that was in [*The Hunger Games*] was very unnecessary …
> while [in *The Selection*] the love triangle is actually the point of the story. So, I'm
> okay with that. … it is pretty much a dystopian *Bachelor*. Which is—it seems
> more of a guilty pleasure for me than an actual, "Oh, I really love this book!" Um,
> but I don't hate it [*The Selection*].

But therein lies the issue for other participants who criticized that they picked up novels like *The

Selection* thinking that it would focus on the dystopian world, but instead found a romance novel

disguised as a YA dystopia. As Participant VI put it, "if I go into a book, knowing that the main

thing is the relationship, that's fine. But if I go into it thinking it's something else—I don't like

that." There were some participants among those who talked about enjoying Prince Maxon but

stated that they disliked *The Selection* overall. The participants who did not enjoy the novel took

issue with its plot and reliance on the love triangle trope. It was interesting that several

participants compared *The Selection* to *The Bachelor* reality TV series. Participant I described

the lack of the attention on the dystopian setting in *The Selection* as irritating:

> It was supposed to be a dystopia, but it actually wasn't. It was all about romance,
> and we didn't really get to see much of a struggle with the rebels and the political
> issues because we were too busy watching the characters swooning over one
> another. So that really bothered me. Why build a dystopian world if you're not
> going to talk about it?

In the same way, Participant V talked about *The Selection* as a novel with "a toxic relationship"

that was the focus instead of the dystopian world. She stated that she thought "it was a really

interesting idea. Like, the dystopian aspect was," but that the author could have "built up the world

a bit more and develop that." Instead, as Participant V described, the author focused on the love

triangle as "a source of conflict," leaving the rebellion happening in the novel to the background.

Similarly, Participant XVI described *The Selection* as depicting a "hetero world," which he could not relate to, but he had picked the novel up because "all of [his] best friends had read it and loved it." Participant XVI also mentioned that he knew that it was going to be focused on the romance from the get-go, but that he did not foresee that it would be an issue, because, generally, he "can enjoy heteronormative romance." However, Participant XVI was let down by the "2D" characters of the novel and the "cliché" plot, as he described it.

Importantly, Participant XVI noted that he wanted to see more of the dystopian world outside of the castle that readers are confined to for most of the action in *The Selection*. Participant XVI said he missed the political critique in the novel and found it boring without this feature: "there was no politics to it, basically. And I quite like for there to be politics involved so that you can understand what's going on." It was particularly interesting how Participant XVI connected his critique of *The Selection's* lack of a discussion of politics to the real world. He mentioned reading an article somewhere about how much money billionaires like Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, make in comparison to the wages of workers in Amazon supply centers and Amazon delivery drivers. He described how this information "gets you riled up because that's not right." Participant XVI said that this kind of critique of economic disparity was absent from *The Selection* even though it was stated in the novel that there were significant economic issues, and he framed this as disappointing.

Finally, none of the interview participants spoke positively about *Matched*. Participants who spoke about this novel were united in their disdain for it. It was described as a novel with bland and unoriginal characters and one that promotes toxic relationships. Participant V described the female protagonist of *Matched* as a "blank slate" that falls into the "not like other girls" trope. Meanwhile, Participant VIII characterized the setting of the novel as a "copy &

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paste from *The Giver*" underlining the unoriginality of the plot. Overthrowing the government

was described as a side plot with the main focus being on the love triangle. Participant V had

particularly strong feelings about the way *Matched* depicted unhealthy romantic relationships

because she saw the harmful potential of such novels on young readers. Participants V talked

about how a reader who does not recognize the toxic nature of the romantic relationship in

Matched could internalize it as natural and normal:

> …it [*Matched*] promoted toxic relationships, which I'm completely against. Um,
> especially like, when it's a younger audience, when you're teaching them that
> toxic relationships, like— that's okay. That's not good at all for their future. And it
> can impact you because I know that books have a really big impact on me. And if
> I had read that and not realized that it was wrong and [I had] enjoyed it, then I
> would have thought that all the things that happened in that relationship were
> okay. And I probably wouldn't have acted properly if I was in a relationship. …
> it's like a super popular book. I see it everywhere.

What's more, Participant V talked about how *Matched* was chosen for "book discussion" by her

English teacher in school, saying "I was really upset by the fact that it's being promoted in such a

way." Participant V was angered by the fact that through this novel other young readers in her

class could get the wrong impression about romantic relationships "when that shouldn't be the

case at all." Participant XIV had similar fears about the impact that novels which depict toxic

relationships could have on younger readers:

> …if you're writing books like that, then you are teaching impressionable young
> people that somebody treating you this way is okay because it means that they
> like you. So, someone treating you badly is okay because they're in love with
> you. … But a lot of the time, you see controlling male characters and then it's
> portrayed like—it's never challenged in the text [or] by any of the characters. … I
> can't think of anything worse than an impressionable young person looking at that
> and thinking that that's how a relationship is or should be.

In the same way, Participant V was frustrated, as she explained that many readers may not

recognize the problematic aspects of novels like *Matched*:

I don't like how people don't really talk about that aspect [of *Matched*]. Like I do know a lot of my friends who have read it, they said that they didn't really enjoy it. But I don't think they realize how toxic it was, which is like, the part that I'm the most upset by and why I didn't like that one [*Matched*] in particular.

Participant VIII disliked the female protagonist in *Matched* and described her as "just pushed by the people around her," while she struggles through the entire length of the novel to choose between two stereotypical male love interests. Participant VIII said of the two male choices, "one is that childhood best friend, the other is the new bad boy." She explained that such novels "have to have conflict somewhere" so they find it in the trope of the love triangle, which drives readers away: "I think that's where repetition comes in … the love triangles always end up the same, which really irks me."

To conclude, many readers felt strongly that the romance plot should not be the focal point of a YA dystopian novel. The romantic relationship between the characters was seen largely as reductive, and sometimes entirely unnecessary as it often eclipsed the dystopian plot of the novel. Several readers expressed similar ideas about authors and publishers assuming that the romance plot is what readers want. The focus on the romance was sometimes described as absurd by some participants who found it to be far-fetched—surely the protagonists would have more pressing issues when the world is falling apart. Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the romance plot in YA dystopia was the genre's tendency to perpetuate toxic relationships. These types of relationships were characterized by jealousy and possessiveness, and several readers expressed alarm at how this might impact younger readers. They worried that younger readers would accept toxic relationships as normal and natural since they were never directly criticized as problematic in the novels. That said, some participants thought that such relationships simply appealed to most readers. Readers were also disappointed if they picked up a YA dystopian novel to then discover that it was actually more of a romance novel. Those participants who

knew what they were getting into when they read novels like *The Selection* where the romantic relationship was the point of the story were less critical of such novels. Even so, most participants who spoke about romance plots underlined that they missed the social and political critique as well as rich and complex worldbuilding they expect of a YA dystopia.

The Love Triangle

No trope was more universally disliked by the participants than the love triangle. Nearly every participant (eleven out of sixteen) spoke about the love triangle in YA dystopia (and other YA genres) negatively. As Participant XIV described, "[e]specially in dystopian fiction, you always, always, without a shadow of a doubt … have the girl decide who she wants out of the love triangle." The love triangle seemed to be tiresome and unoriginal to the participants. Participant II stated that the love triangle was simply an unrealistic concept: "…nobody has love triangles in real life. That's not a real thing. You can have feelings for two people—be in relationship and start to feel something for someone else. Those things are more common."

There were a couple of participants who said they saw no clear love triangles in YA dystopia at all because the choice between the two love interests was obvious. Several participants described the love triangle as a mind-numbingly predictable trope in this way. To this extent, Participant VI stated that she is never surprised by the protagonist's choice of love interest because the novel sets it up in a way that makes the choice obvious, which renders the entire need for a love triangle unnecessary:

> I feel like 99.9% of books with love triangles don't have a love triangle because it's usually whichever person the main character meets first is going to be the person they get together with. Like, the first one they show romantic interest in, that's going to be the person. … I know who they're going to end up with, so I don't need to worry about all this. So, it just feels like unnecessary padding. Because most books don't surprise me by going, "You know what? Actually, it's the second guy!" It's never the second guy. It never, ever, ever is the second guy.

Participant II described love triangles as "lazy writing" on the author's part: "Because if you're going to do a love triangle, make them both worth it. Instead, they make it very obvious to the audience by this person [one of the love interests] being very toxic." Participant II had complicated feelings about love triangles in YA novels that she connected with being an older reader and having a better understanding of relationships than the younger readers she imagines encountering harmful tropes:

> …as a 27-year-old, I can read these types of books and 90% of the time the girl doesn't choose the toxic guy [in the love triangle]. So, it's cool to see her get away from a toxic relationship and get into a healthy one. But 90% of the time they [the author] start that toxic relationship out romanticizing it within the first book and knowing that there are younger kids reading stuff like this. I get really upset because they're not going to understand that it is toxic. So, they're going to look for guys with those traits and end up in toxic relationships because these authors are writing them in a romanticized way at first. At first, it's making it look like this is the type of relationship you want, and it concerns me now that I'm an adult.

Participant II continued elaborating her concern for younger readers, saying that the authors "don't really explain" that one of the love interests is "being mentally abusive." Instead, authors brush past this and make it seem like the female protagonist chooses the other love interest because he's "the hot guy." In this way, the authors obscure the fact that one of the love interests was "toxic" and the reason the protagonist chose "the hot guy" was because he was "actually nicer." This aligns with the concerns for young readers expressed by Participant V discussed earlier. Notably, Participant V shared the same concerns while she was only fourteen years old. Similarly, Participant VIII (age sixteen) noticed these two distinct types of love interests in YA dystopia as well. One of the love interests is always a "mysterious stranger" while the other is usually "the best friend." Participant VIII described the love interest as "somebody who is like, really smart internally and has deep thoughts or writes poetry, and [is] just everything that the main character doesn't see in her best friend." According to Participant VIII, this gives the

protagonist "a sense of adventure and choice. She's like, choosing the different world instead of the safe zone." However, she also described this primary love interest as someone who's always "sarcastic and not very kind at first"—it is usually a character with a "hard exterior" who gradually opens up to the protagonist and reveals his "softer side." Participant VIII described the appeal of this trope:

> I think that really works on the audience because we want to read the books to have a new perspective and to escape from typical everyday life. But also, some [books] do it better than others. Because if you can portray the other love interest going from a very socially distant person to somebody who really opens up, then that would be a really good character arc, but sometimes all the characters just stay the same from the beginning to end and just, there's no sense of fulfillment that you understand the character now.

The passage above indicates that both love interests are typically lacking in personality and character development—something that was mentioned by several other participants as well.

Perhaps, most importantly, for it to be a love *triangle*, there needs to be a connection between all three parties involved. That is, there has to be a queer element to the love triangle instead of one girl deciding between two boys who are pining after her. As Participant XVI put it, "sometimes they [love triangles] can be fun if they're like, a proper triangle and not more like a 'V' shape… but stereotypical 'love triangles' are overdone at this point, I think." Participant XVI could not think of any "proper" (meaning, queer) love triangles in YA dystopia, but he did talk about an example of a true love triangle in a contemporary YA novel—*The Ace of Spades* (2021) by Faridah Àbíké-Íyímídé. Participant XVI stated that he thought that the overused love triangle trope was ending in Young Adult fiction. Participant V echoed this hope, stating that she and her friends believe that the love triangle needs to be retired:

> …the one thing that all of us share is that we're done with the love triangle. We don't need any more love triangles! It's okay. Like, we just want good, nice relationships that aren't toxic where like, people respect each other. And that was the one thing that I think all of us agree on.

To sum up, besides being uninventive, repetitive, and sometimes distracting, the love triangle was seen by participants as problematic because of the way it promotes toxic masculinity and toxic relationships. The love triangle was also described as unrealistic by a couple of participants. In addition to this, one of the boys in the love triangle was always an obvious choice, according to the participants. Both boys were usually fairly bland characters, but one was typically the "mysterious bad boy" while the other fulfilled the role of the dutiful "nice guy" best friend. Several participants worried about the negative effect that the trope of the love triangle may have on young readers, whom they saw as impressionable. It was interesting that not only the older participants expressed this worry, but also one of the younger participants did so as well, indicating that the participants see themselves as different from other readers in that the younger readers in their imagination are quite vulnerable.

<p align="center">Toxic Masculinity</p>

One of the biggest pitfalls of YA dystopia as the participants described it was the genre's portrayal of toxic masculinity. It was not only that YA dystopias contained problematic male characters, but as discussed earlier, these novels failed to offer a critique of toxic masculinity as an issue. Gale from *The Hunger Games* was mentioned as an example of toxic masculinity in the YA dystopian genre. Perhaps, Participant XIV put it best, when he said:— "No matter how many times I read the books and [no matter] how many times I watch the [*Hunger Games*] films—Gale is just a trash character."

Gale was described as "possessive" and "jealous," which were characteristics that participants attributed to male love interests in YA love triangles overall. Participants specifically took issue with the way male characters like Gale were depicted as ignoring the consent of the female protagonist. It is interesting that Participant VI said that Gale was

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appealing to her when she first read *The Hunger Games*: "14-year-old me thought he was kind of hot, but, ultimately, I always liked Peeta as a character a lot more." As Participant VI put it, Gale is the only male character in *The Hunger Games* "who doesn't really respect boundaries," which is why Katniss does not end up with him at the end of the series. Participant VI stated that she thought this decision was "very deliberate on Suzanne Collins' part, as to why she doesn't end up with him" because Gale's "interest in her [Katniss] is very possessive and aggressive, and [he] ignores like, what her boundaries are and how she feels." That being said, it should be noted that *The Hunger Games* never critiques the way Gale ignores consent. Katniss grows to understand that Gale is changed by the war, but her decision to end their relationship completely arrives only after he is unintentionally complicit in the tragic killing of Katniss' younger sister.

Several participants gave the specific example of Gale kissing Katniss without her consent and while she is in a vulnerable state. Participant VI stated that to her the relationship between Katniss, Gale and Peeta was not a love triangle because she knew Katniss would not end up with someone as "pushy" as Gale: "…at every single point that Gale kind of comes on to Katniss, she pretty much says 'No.' Including the time that he ignores her and then makes out with her." Participant I described Gale as "manipulative" in how he attempts to gain Katniss' affection by guilt tripping her for her staged romance with Peeta. Participant V explained her dislike for Gale as rooted in his "disrespectful" attitude toward Katniss. Participant V said that though she understood that Gale had a purpose to serve in the larger plot of the novel, she found the romance plot between him and Katniss "unnecessary."

Moreover, Participant V lamented the fact that a relationship between male and female characters is never allowed to be friendly—it must always turn into a romance in YA dystopia:

> I don't like him. I don't like anything about him. I thought … the romantic aspect
> of it—I didn't enjoy. I thought that it almost like, pained me to see how such a

good friendship [between Katniss and Gale] couldn't just stay a friendship and that a girl and boy [*sic*] relationship has to always be romantic. Um, I didn't think Katniss needed that. I don't think he knew that Katniss didn't need that. And he knew that she didn't return his feelings, but like, he was—it wasn't that he was forcing himself onto her, but he was adding unnecessary complications that he could have discussed with her earlier when she wasn't trying to save the world.

Participant V, like others in the interviews, critiqued the characters in YA dystopian novels based on real life experiences. She talked about how Gale did not understand the PTSD that Katniss suffered after competing in the Hunger Games in the first novel— "I don't think he realized how much that impacted her and how much of a transformed person she was when she returned … that really bothered me." Participant XIV shared the same feelings toward Gale and his inability to relate to Katniss' traumatic experience, instead centering his own romantic feelings for her. He explained:

When she [Katniss] comes back from having killed so many people and is clearly suffering from some sort of PTSD from the Hunger Games, he [Gale] gives her the cold shoulder because of her romance with Peeta, which I just thought is so toxic. Like, you are judging her for something that she did in order to survive! Like, she wouldn't be in front of you if she didn't do that. And then, she's suffering from PTSD and she's going into the Quarter Quell while all Gale cares about is, "do you love me?" and he's jealous of Peeta, and kind of judging her; everything that she's doing to survive. And although she's going through PTSD, there's never any sort of like, comfort from him, even though they're supposed to be best friends.

Additionally, Participant V described how Gale "didn't really listen to her [Katniss] sometimes" because of his need to be "the protective guy in their relationship." This underlines the way Participant V, like others, saw Gale as underestimating the female protagonist as he "didn't really understand that Katniss is capable of protecting herself." The male love interest's overprotectiveness of the female protagonist was touched on by several participants.

Participant XV liked Gale but still described him as "very macho." Participant XV thought that usually male characters are written either as aggressive macho men or as passive

love interests because of the YA dystopia's focus on the powerful, dominant female character. Similarly, Participant VI theorized that perhaps male characters are written as "obnoxiously talented at everything" to serve as a counterpart to the female protagonist: "I feel like maybe sometimes to make up for the fact that the girls are super badass in some of these novels … they [the author and/or publisher] feel like they need to make the guys even more obnoxious… they have to make the male characters like, just as badass, if not more badass." Like these participants, others also talked about the fact that some male characters in YA dystopia are written as more dominant and aggressive if the female character is the central focus of the novel. Participant X noted that no matter how powerful the female heroine, she will still need to be "saved" in some way by the male characters in the novel:

> Even in *The Hunger Games* … the female characters portrayed—even though they are the ones who, you know … are the "saviors," still—there's the idea that they are vulnerable and the male [characters] are the ones who are saving them. Even if they are not saving them physically from the system there somewhere, they are saving them mentally—from the mental trauma or something.

Participant XIV noted that there are a lot of similar male characters in YA dystopia. He said, "there's so many Gales… There's a Gale in *The Darkest Mind*s - His name is Clancy, I think. He was just an awful character. And there are Gales… I think there's so many Gales in all of dystopian fiction … I don't know what it is, because I always wonder if authors know that they're writing these sorts of characters." It is curious that Participant XIV mentions here how he wonders if authors are aware of these types of characters being depicted in their novels. Other participants had such moments as well when discussing other topics like the lack of representation in YA dystopia and the depiction of toxic relationships. It seemed as though participants wondered if authors were repeating tropes subliminally, unaware of their effect on readers.

It was particularly interesting how Participant II questioned whether she was maybe misinterpreting Gale as a toxic love interest: "He reminded me of those… and this—this, I will be a hundred percent [honest]—could just be me projecting feelings onto him. He felt like one of those males that have the mindset that women are property. Because he was very adamant that like, him and Katniss needed to be together." To my mind, Participant II hesitated to describe Gale in this way because her interpretation of him as a character was misaligned with the implied reader of the novel. The implied reader is meant to perceive Gale's possessiveness of Katniss as "hot" like Participant VI was cited stating earlier when she described reading *The Hunger Games* as a teenager.

To conclude, toxic masculinity was an important drawback to YA dystopia for the participants, especially since there was never any critique offered of characters who displayed toxic masculine traits in the novels the participants talked about. Several participants discussed Gale in *The Hunger Games* as a vivid example of toxic masculinity in YA dystopia. Gale was described as jealous, possessive, and disrespectful of consent. Some participants were disappointed that there was a lack of friendships between male and female characters in YA dystopias—if a friendship was present, it often turned into a romantic relationship. Some participants talked about how they saw male characters sometimes written as more aggressive and more "macho" if the novel centered on a strong female protagonist.

Two-Dimensional Male Characters in YA Dystopia

Several participants talked about the way male characters are often relegated to the role of a love interest in YA dystopia, which they saw as a consequence of the spotlight being placed on strong female protagonists. However, the participants also pointed out that the underdeveloped male characters were a shortcoming of the genre. The need for rich and complex characters in YA

dystopia was reiterated by the majority of participants. Participant X said that the reader does not

really get to know Gale, for example, and therefore it is difficult to understand him: "I would

have liked it if there was more introduction and more plot driven towards him in order to

understand the guy. It was like, you know, the whole point of Gale being introduced as a

character was just for Katniss' love interest. Aa a second love interest, I believe." Similarly, even

the male characters that participants deemed positive were described as boring. An example of

this is how Participant II talked about Peeta, who is a baker in *The Hunger Games*: "When I was

younger, I remember cracking a joke that he was as boring as the bread that he made."

Additionally, Participant III discussed how, although she liked Peeta as a male character, she

noted that it was strange how he developed romantic feelings toward Katniss without really

knowing her at all:

> I think you have to question the source of his [Peeta's] love. Because like, you
> know, he's in love with this girl that he's known since he was like five or six but
> then that's just one little moment in her [Katniss'] life. That's like one drop in the
> bucket. So, like, you know, what is the source of this love? … it needs to be more
> substantial and maybe … for him—you know, maybe it grows over time in the
> second book and stuff. But it's almost like, misplaced if you … really think about
> it. Why is he so in love with this girl? What is so special to him about her? … he
> didn't really have any meaningful encounters with her [besides giving Katniss the
> bread] … I think that if we just accepted [it] without questioning … that almost
> seems to be the premise of romance. Like, the kind of romantic stories where you
> have like these outrageous things that characters do—especially in movies. We
> accept them because we're supposed to suspend our disbelief. But if you take it
> out of the context of the genre almost, then it's not even romantic. Sometimes it's
> creepy.

Participant III characterized the relationship between Peeta and Katniss as too unbelievable,

stating that Peeta is "in love with this vision [of Katniss], but … is it really love or is it

obsession?" This phenomenon of a male character falling head over heels in love with the female

protagonist was referred to by participants as "insta-love" (or "instant love"). Insta-love was a

trope characterized negatively by all participants who spoke about it. Participant XIV said he

does not "like when it's instilled in books, when characters meet and they're instantly in love"—others expressed similar ideas citing the unrealistic and unbelievable nature of the instantaneous romantic relationship between the characters. Participant III spoke about the insta-love in Kim Liggert's *The Grace Year* (2019) as shifting the focus of the novel towards a badly-done plotline where the characters "barely know each other." She described this insta-love romance plotline as "a little sloppy." Participant XIII provided a contrast to this when he spoke about enjoying Patrick Ness' *The Knife of Never Letting Go* (2008). He said "in a lot of YA dystopian [novels], especially … the "love spark" kind of drives the story … it's automatic and everything." However, Participant XIII said that *The Knife of Never Letting Go* was different in that it depicted a relationship between the male protagonist Todd and the female character Viola as developing in a way that seemed natural to him:

> …that love spark or like, caring spark wasn't there, but it's also like— at the end, when, after everything they've been through and he's all that she has left and vice versa, it makes sense. It makes sense why there's that connection [between Todd and Viola]. It's not very forced; it's not artificial. And I really appreciate that I would be able to put myself in those shoes and be like—you know, if I just lost... you know, two people that were parents of me, and this is the one person I have left… yeah, I'd feel the same. I'd feel like, you know, "this is my family now" or, "this is the person I need to care about, and who has my back." So, I found Todd to be very relatable.

Participant XIII's description points to the way participants find characters more relatable if they are written in a way that feels authentic to the readers. In other words, if the participants were able to imagine acting similarly to the characters, they felt like the novel "made sense."

Typically, male characters serve a limited purpose in YA dystopia and their existence revolves around the female protagonist. As Participant VI states, "in YA dystopia, there's like, the mysterious guy who's going to help her [the protagonist] for no reason. And he has no past but he's super hot, which is why we trust him—because he's super hot. Like that's it. 'He's a

super hot guy' seems like a bad credential for trusting someone." In this fragment of the interview, Participant VI is frustrated that there is no substance to male love interests in YA dystopia, which also impacts the female protagonist. The female protagonist's decision to trust the "tall, dark stranger," as Participant VI describes him, based solely on the male character's good looks and sexual appeal makes the female protagonist seem unreasonable. Participant VI went on to note about mysterious male love interests that "[t]hey're always tall. Uh, and I don't know if it's just a reflection on how short the main [female] characters are," adding jokingly, "Or maybe making someone tall makes it harder to read their thoughts." This description points to the patriarchal depiction of male characters' appearance as representative of the hegemonic masculine ideal—a tall, agile, physically attractive male. Moreover, as several participants noted, this male character is also usually emotionally distant and closed off when the protagonist first meets him. Additionally, the male character is sarcastic and cold towards the female protagonist. This depiction of the male love interest aligns with a traditional, patriarchal view of masculinity.

YA dystopia is not the only genre that promotes this type of male character. As Participant XIV noted, YA fantasy is "full of Gales." Participant VI described these types of characters in YA fantasy as annoying. She said that it does not make sense for the female protagonist to fall in love with such a character: "why would you date him? I would just punch him." However, she added, "I guess maybe people are used to guys being like, the people who get stuff done." This quote illustrates that participants seem to believe these types of masculine tropes appeal to readers because they seem natural. Participant III believed that toxic depiction of males persists in the YA dystopian genre because society fears "men who are vulnerable."

Participant XIV described actively "weeding out" such characters who promote toxic masculinity by reading the synopsis of novels he chooses: "I used to read all the dystopian

books, and now it's kind of like, if … like in the synopsis, I can feel the author already

characterizing the male as a Gale—I am most likely not going to read it."

Finally, the participants talked about the need for richer and more complex male characters in

YA dystopia. Often male characters were described as flat and boring, even if they were

generally deemed to be positive characters. Several participants said that they wanted to know

more about the male characters in YA dystopias. To this point, male characters in YA dystopias

were often just there to love the female protagonist. This often resulted in the insta-love trope

whereby one or both characters fall in love immediately even though they do not know each

other, which some participants described as unrealistic.

"Softer Boys"

Even though participants talked about most male characters in YA dystopia often being written

as two-dimensional and uninteresting, there were several male characters that still appealed to

the participants. Some of these characters were Peeta and Finnick in *The Hunger Games*, Prince

Maxon in *The Selection* and Alex in *Delirium*. Participants described these characters as

respectful, emotionally intelligent, caring, understanding, and nurturing. These male characters'

respect for female characters' consent and boundaries were particularly highlighted by some

participants as characteristics that were important to them. Participant XIV referred to these

characters as "softer boys" that he "always, always look[s] for" in novels. Participant XIV

described male characters like Peeta as positive examples of "such a healthy depiction of

masculinity without being toxic." He posited that he found Gale so unappealing because of the

contrast that Peeta served to his toxic masculinity in *The Hunger Games*:

> …he [Gale] contrasts Peeta so much. Peeta apologizes to Katniss, because he's
> like, "I am so sorry that I'm hating on you because our romance was fake when all
> you were doing was trying to help us survive. And I'm sorry about that." And that
> is just so—he apologized, because he was in the wrong. But with Gale, it's like,

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all he does is judge her [Katniss]… You can trust Peeta so much, and Katniss even says at the end of the epilogue—she says something like, "I don't need Gale's fire because I have a fire of my own" or, "I need like, Peeta—I need somebody caring, nurturing." So, I think in the end, even Katniss knew that Gale was trash.

Curiously, none of the participants who spoke about Peeta voiced concerns about his insta-love with Katniss as Participant III did. Peeta particularly appealed to several participants, like Participant X, because he was shown to be "vulnerable."

Participant VI spoke the same way about Finnick in *The Hunger Games*. She described how Collins' subversive and unusual depiction of this male character as having suffered from sexual abuse was impactful: "My favorite male character in The Hunger Games is Finnick Odair. Because he's perfect. R.I.P, Finnick. … It's really obvious that like, he's essentially being pimped out and abused the entire time, like—not like necessarily physically… but like, you know— sexually abused." Participant VI explained that she thought that this depiction of more vulnerable male characters like Peeta and Finnick is why she liked *The Hunger Games* "so much," since the novels portrayed "the male and female characters …. in a variety of ways. Like, it's not just, oh— girls are perfect and cute, and pretty. And, you know, boys are like mature, mysterious men." She added— "I am so fed up with mature, mysterious men in YA dystopia. Like, just stop."

In conclusion, participants enjoyed subversive depictions of masculinity in YA dystopia through male characters who were nurturing, caring, respectful, and emotionally intelligent. However, participants expressed that more characters like this were needed. Participants felt that authors should spend more time on such characters, letting the reader get to know them. The most important feature of positive male characters was their respect of the female protagonist's boundaries.

Theme 4: Authenticity, Diversity, And Representation in YA Dystopia

Diversity and inclusion were topics that many participants wrestled with during the interviews.

Some participants seemed uncomfortable talking about diversity in the Young Adult genre and

many became more agitated when discussing this topic. Some of this discomfort stemmed from

the effects of cancel culture that participants often encountered in the online Bookish community

on various social media platforms and websites, while other participants spoke passionately

about the need for more diversity in fiction. Several participants spoke about the lack of diversity

and representation in the YA dystopian genre in particular. Participant V stated that YA

dystopias of the early 2000s contained hardly any diversity. At the same time, several

participants also pointed out that the early YA dystopias were a product of their time and

diversity and inclusion had become a hot button topic only relatively recently. Participant XIV

said that although representation has been scarce in the Young Adult genre in the past, it is

pointless to measure it by today's standards:

> It's very, very hard to look back and be like, "people should have done this." Like
> JK Rowling—who is trash, anyway—should have had more representation in her
> books. Or like something that was written in 2001 should have. And it's true—
> they should have, but it's so hard to look back and comment on a culture that no
> longer exists. … we've come so far as a genre. Young Adult, like—10 years ago,
> you wouldn't have seen something like *The Hate You Give* with a black female
> lead in it.

In this fragment, Participant XIV implicitly juxtaposes the reading culture of today with the

reading culture of the early 2000s by positioning the latter as "a culture that no longer exists."

His small aside about JK Rowling, the now infamous author of the *Harry Potter* series, is linked

to the author's controversial comments about trans individuals, which has reverberated through

the Bookish community online with many readers calling for the author to be boycotted (or

"cancelled"). That is—asking readers to stop buying and promoting works by JK Rowling.

There were several reasons that participants gave for why YA dystopia lacks diversity. Participant IX suggested that YA dystopia lacks representation because of authors as it is their choice not to include diversity in their novels— "you know, whether or not it wasn't intentional or, you know, unconscious bias… um, institutionalized racism—all of the above." It was interesting that some participants noted that the reason for why the authors write novels without much diversity in them was that authors "tend to mostly write what they know," as Participant IV explained. Participant IV stated that it is difficult to find novels that feature people of color because "if the author has grown up in America, they will write about the American experience and people don't tend to stray from, you know, their comfort zone." Participant IV was not alone in this idea. Similarly to this, other participants described the lack of diversity in YA dystopia as a result of the particular constraints of this genre because it must be linked to the real world. Participant I described YA fantasy as a genre where the author is free to imagine characters with diverse identities while in YA dystopia, the author has to base the setting, plot, and characters on the world that they actually live in:

> …if you're creating your own world, you can make it however you want [like in YA fantasy]. In dystopias, if you are talking about something that—take *Maze Runner*, for example. That [the events of the novel] happens in what is currently the United States. So, obviously, you can't just make everyone belong in [*sic*] a certain ethnicity, because the current demographics do not allow you to do that. You have certain percentages, for example, of African American people, Asian American people. white people, then Latin American people, etc. And if you want to keep it coherent, you can't just suddenly make every white or make everyone, you know, Latin American, or everyone black, etc. So, you still have to start from what you have currently. And that does pose some kind of limits.

Participant XII also described the conservative nature of YA dystopian novels as directly linked to their setting which is often an image of the United States in a distant future:

> I mean, I hate to say this, but a lot of these YA dystopian novels take place in what was the United States, apparently, and it is a reflection of popular American culture – to have white hegemony over everything. White, straight—typically,

either Christian or atheist. And nothing in between. … if you think of your standard American couple, you're going to think of like, what— "John and Jane Smith." Like, that's the image that comes up. And these novels reflect that—the generic, bland white person. Because the generic, bland white person is who you see in the media all the time.

In the instances shown above, the participants talk about YA dystopia as rigid in terms of the kinds of worlds that authors writing in this genre are able to build. Because the authors are American, they must write about a world based on the United States, which the participants in question see as predominantly white and heteronormative. Curiously, (or rather tellingly) none of these participants were from the United States.

<div align="center">Other Genres Do It Better</div>

Other Young Adult sub-genres fared better in terms of representation, according to the participants. Some participants mentioned contemporary YA fiction as a no-brainer for representation. As Participant III pointed out, contemporary YA fiction is more popular than niche genres like YA dystopia. Particularly, many participants talked about YA fantasy as a genre that included many racially diverse and queer characters in its novels. Even so, some participants were more generous in describing YA fantasy's potential for representation than others. It was especially interesting how participants viewed YA fantasy in comparison to YA dystopia. The former was generally described as a genre without limits, while the latter had strict parameters as to what sort of world it could build. Participant I felt strongly about the type of worlds that were possible in YA fantasy:

You can build different societies and worlds altogether … you can build anything from scratch. You can make it however you like. So, there's more diversity … because you're not having to start from our current society and how it might have been impacted, but rather, you can create one from scratch … the world building allows for more freedom.

She compared this to the rigid constraints of YA dystopia where "there can be diversity," but the novels will still contain "remnants of your current stereotypes and your current ideas." Participant I said that it makes sense that the dystopian world would be void of diverse identities that might threaten the hegemonic power structures:

> People tend to get more conservative when they sense that they're in danger or that their status quo is in danger. So, dystopias are definitely, um—situations in which people will tend to be more conservative because there will definitely be in danger or feel like they're in danger.

In contrast to this, Participant IX described YA fantasy as a genre with "more space" for diverse characters. Several other participants seemed to agree that YA fantasy opened up more possibilities for representation because, as Participant XIV explained, YA fantasy novels depict a world that is entirely of the author's making, which means that the author can imagine any kind of characters they want. Participant V talked about how YA fantasy "pulls from other cultures," and so it could offer readers more complex characters, so in this way, though YA fantasy was described by participants as a genre of infinite possibilities, it did have some ties to reality.

When it came down to it, some of the participants were divided on how well YA fantasy really did with creating space for diversity. Participant VI noted that the YA fantasy genre struggled with queer representation and LGBTQ characters had little agency in the YA fantasy novel and were "kind of just there." In addition to this, Participant III stated that it was difficult to find trans and nonbinary characters in YA fantasy. Similarly, Participant VIII talked about how YA fantasy included "more queer representation," but this was done "to an extent" and, in terms of diversity, the genre offered "literally nothing else." Besides this, Participant VIII had noticed more racial diversity representation in the YA fantasy genre more recently, but she added "it's not doing so well." Often YA fantasy's attempts at representation ended up generating controversy in the Bookish community. Participant VII also pointed to a complete lack of

disability representation in the YA fantasy genre. Additionally, Participant V was concerned

about the popularity of YA fantasy novels like *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas

because this novel "kept killing off people of color," which she described as "super hurtful" to

her "especially as a person of color" herself.

<p align="center">*Whitewashing in YA Dystopia*</p>

Several participants pointed to the lack of racially diverse characters in YA dystopia as

problematic. Some participants mentioned the disappointment they felt at seeing how YA

dystopian novels like *The Hunger Games* were adapted to film. Specifically, they referred to the

"whitewashing" of Katniss in the film adaptation, which "bothered" some readers like

Participant VII. Participant V talked about being affected by the depiction of Katniss as white,

but even more so to the backlash that she saw against the casting of Rue who is a person of color

in *The Hunger Games* novels:

> I do know that Katniss was described [in the novel] as having darker skin ...
> compared to everyone else, which was like, racial commentary. But then the
> movies happened, and Hollywood decided to whitewash Katniss, which, um, I
> was really upset when I found that out ... and then ... when they actually, you
> know, cast Rue and it was a person of color as she should have been [as she is]
> also in the books... like the one person—there's almost no people of color in those
> [movies] ... and then everybody was so up in arms about it! When it's like, did
> you read the book?! Like, this is the only one that they got. Right?

Participant XIV said that it was rare to find BIPOC authors and characters in this genre. But, in

his view, authors had "absolutely no excuse" for not including racially diverse characters in their

works:

> ... I remember reading ... I think it was an explanation by a white author, who was
> asked why there wasn't a single character of color in her book, and she was like,
> "Oh, because it's set in a small town, and the small town that it was based on
> didn't have any non-white people." But I think it's just excuses at this point.
> Because when you walk down the street, not every single person that you see on
> your way to wherever you're going is going to be white. ... But I do feel like it's

like an excuse thing, because, right now, it's like— it's really just not hard to include diversity in books. There's no such thing as "can't."

It was interesting how a few participants differed in their views on how race should be represented in YA dystopia. Participant XI thought that racial identity should lose meaning in a dystopian world because people would be preoccupied with survival:

I think that when we're talking about YA dystopia [in] particular that there is a world that is shattered by something that is so [much] bigger than yourself that race itself should technically lose identity. Right? Suppose you're in a nuclear apocalypse—you don't have food; you don't know how long you're gonna live. And in that setting, if the author still happens to bring out race as a dominant factor, I think it speaks more about the person who is writing the novel rather than novel itself ... Because all in all, race or religion are just—they're human institutions, right?

From another perspective, Participant IX said that even newer YA dystopian novels like *Scythe* had issues with racial representation. *Scythe* was very popular with the participants in this study, and Participant V lauded it as one of the more impactful YA dystopias she had read because it featured a female character of color. It was interesting that Participant IX was the only one among the other participants who pointed to this perceived erasure of race in *Scythe*:

... as much as I liked *Scythe*, something I saw ... is that they built into the world [of the novel] that race wasn't really a thing. Where they had their measurements for each type of race, and they're supposed to be kind of equal ... So, it's technically a sort of, an erasure of race. It's like, that's actually quite damaging to have that kind of erasure. That's not... you're building the world, so you can choose what you do with it, and erasing those kinds of things might seem to be like a good plot point at the time, but what is it telling people who are reading it? Like you, you have to like, acknowledge that aspect and, you know, if your utopia is—because they tend to think, that's also a utopia—Isn't it a little bit... To erase your race, like—what is that saying to your readers?

To Participant XIV, racial representation in novels was deeply important because it allowed him see himself in the text, which is an experience that he wanted other readers to have as well. Moreover, he felt that race was not important for those who have historically always been able to see themselves reflected in literature:

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I find that when people say, "not everything is about race" that's because not everything is about race for *you*. ... I feel like just being able to say that statement is evident enough that that person comes from a place of privilege ... maybe not everything is about race for you because you've seen yourself represented in media and literature from the day you were born. The only representation I saw growing up was maybe the two Indian twins in *Harry Potter*. And so, it's easy to say that, like, not everything is about race, when not everything has been about race for you. But when you come from a marginalized community, race is important. Like, I do want to see myself represented in stories, because white is not the default and PoC have voices and stories, and they deserve to be the heroes of their own stories as well, and they deserve for their voices to be heard.

Disability Representation in YA Dystopia

Although disability was described as lacking "nuance" as Participant IX put it, there were some participants who recognized attempts at disability representation in this genre. Many participants spoke highly of the representation of mental health in YA dystopia, particularly with regard to Katniss in *The Hunger Games*, who suffers from PTSD. As Participant VII describes Katniss, "she's a good rep for what mental health can look like, even though I think she maybe would have benefited from therapy." Similarly, Participant II talked about how she appreciated how America, the female protagonist in *The Selection*, had a panic attack early in the novel, she added "I don't know how rare or how common it was especially when those books were first published to acknowledge panic attacks." In the same way, Participant VI liked the "realistic" depiction of Cassie in *The Fifth Wave* because she reacted to her dystopian environment like "a real teenager" would in that she experienced anxiety. Participant VI found this to be relatable. She also spoke about Spensa, the female protagonist of the novel *Skyward* (Sanderson 2018) as another realistic example of a teenager who struggles with mental health as social anxiety is an important aspect of this character. In the same vein, Participant I talked at length about Newt—one of the characters in *The Maze Runner* as an important representation of depression. Participant I talked about Newt as a character who has suffered a suicide attempt and deals with depressive

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episodes—these features were significant aspects of the character, but they did not subsume everything about him.

However, when it comes to other types of disability, participants rarely spoke about prominent examples of representation. Participant VI said that *The Hunger Games* was one of the better examples of disability representation because of its depiction of PTSD, Peeta losing his leg, and another character suffering an injury that creates the need for him to use a wheelchair. Participant VI described reading about Peeta's injury as one of the first instances where she had encountered "any kind of disability" in YA dystopia. She went on to describe the novel *The Call* by Peadar Ó Guilín as only a partial success in depicting disability realistically because although it features a female character who has a disability, the author spends some time describing this character's "breasts a lot," even though the character is seventeen in the novel, which Participant VI found disturbing. According to Participant VI, this female character is described in the novel as conventionally attractive and desirable to a male counterpart, who at the same time is repulsed by her disability:

> I did read one dystopia where the main female character is on crutches … basically, she can't walk properly. And like, it's mentioned a lot throughout the book. And she definitely subverted it in some ways, but in others—[she] fell into this trope anyway. Because there's this one character, and he keeps mentioning how she's amazingly beautiful but he's bothered by the fact that she can't walk. So, he like, both is really into her and hates her because [in] his words like, she's a cripple. And he's like, "If only you had working legs!" And she's like, "I don't need working legs. Leave me alone."

Participant VI wondered why such characters could not be depicted as "average looking" and still have others show romantic interest in them: "Why does she have to be like ... super gorgeous? ... Like, you don't have to be beautiful for people to be obsessed with [you]." Participant VI said that the lack of disability representation in this genre was unrealistic, but posited that perhaps the scientific advancements of the dystopian society could be used to

explain the absence of disability in YA dystopia, because everyone who had a disability would

either be dead or had been cured:

> I actually think that it's more realistic that, you know, if you're in a war, not everyone will just die immediately. ... people go to war, and they end up disabled or they lose a limb. So, I think it makes more sense that way, because ... I guess like, if you live in a dystopia, maybe in that dystopia they're assuming that like, people who are disabled in other ways might have died already. Um, I think some dystopias, especially like, the science fiction leaning [dystopias]—they kind of often have advanced technology or medicine in that world even if like, people are poor and treated badly. So, I guess they kind of go down that route.

Participant IX described the need for more nuanced and varied depiction of disability in Young

Adult fiction, which would allow more people to see themselves represented:

> ...the nuances of some of the more serious illnesses or visible disabilities don't really get that representation. I'm also like, dyslexic and dyspraxic, and apart from *Percy Jackson*, I'm not sure I've ever read a character or something ... that has dyslexia. And it's those small things that like, lots of people have. It would be nice to see like, more nuanced characters who aren't ... reflected. Lots of people are lots of things. Almost everyone ... is [in] some kind of marginalized group ... So, it would be nice to see that reflected. … Like, when I was reading them when I was younger, I didn't notice as much. I was just enjoying the story. But now, I'm just like—I don't see why it isn't possible to have complex characters. Like, you've created a complex world—world building, and it doesn't make sense to me to not have these nuanced characters. It's only going to add to it and going to make people connect to the characters more.

Notably, in this fragment Participant IX mentions how this type of representation was not

important to her when she was a younger reader—something that many participants have

mentioned with regard to all types of diversity and representation as will be seen later on.

However, even the youngest among the participants spoke at length about their need to see

representation in genres such as YA dystopia. Participant XV identified as having a learning

disability, but unlike Participant IX, he said that he did not think people wanted to read about

disabilities, which is why they are not represented: "I don't think as many people want to read

that, because they don't think it would be [enjoyable] because it might come off as too confusing or conflicting, kind of."

<p style="text-align:center">Queer Representation in YA Dystopia</p>

YA dystopia was largely talked about as a highly heteronormative genre. As discussed earlier in this chapter, participants took issue with the way YA dystopia perpetuates toxic masculinity and problematic relationships between men and women. Although some YA dystopias show female characters performing subversive gender roles, Participant XVI noted, "[YA] dystopia doesn't really push gender boundaries." The compulsory heterosexuality that fuels the romance driven YA dystopias was an issue for several participants. Participant XVI stated that it was harder for him to relate to many of the male characters in YA dystopia because of how heteronormative they were. Participant VI posited that an absence of queer characters in YA dystopia could be explained by repopulation as a key theme in this genre, which would also explain its focus on the heterosexual romance. Participant VI identified as demisexual and did not see herself represented in YA dystopia; however, she said did not feel impacted by this absence. On the other hand, Participant XIV argued that centering white, cis-gender, heterosexual experiences was no longer acceptable, and the YA dystopian genre needed to change to reflect diverse experiences. He wondered, "why is it that ... white and straight [are] the default?"

Participant XI explained that he believed authors were not ready to depict characters who fall outside of patriarchal norms. He thought that authors are afraid to make mistakes in representation, so they choose to forgo including any diverse characters in their works or they fall into the trap of perpetuating stereotypes:

> I don't think mainstream media in any way—be it books or movies or television shows—they're not really ready for controversial or non-compliant characters as the [lead]. It's a little tough for them … I think it's more of the relatability factor and the need to be, you know, in the right. So what happens is when you're talking about, say,

racism or when you're talking about people being homophobes or addressing the whole LGBTQ+ idea, what generally happens is people are so scared to be socially incorrect, that they don't address the concept at all, right? Or it so happens that they so want to relate to the concept that they somehow stick to the stereotypes again.

Participant XI also stated that he thought perhaps diverse gender identities were too novel a concept for genres like YA dystopia to tackle. He talked about the way authors often mismanage the depiction of LGBTQ characters by making this facet of their identity the sole focus:

> ... you see various Netflix adaptations. They're like, "Oh, we have a [secondary] character who does not have a lot of attributes. What should we do? Make him gay? Okay." No—that's not it. You cannot just stop there, right? ... if you watch *Brooklyn 99* ... it's a feel-good, lighthearted show, which is [lead] by a gay [police] captain. But then, when you imagine Captain Raymond Holt—he is gay. Uh huh. Sure—definitely! But that's not all he is, right? It just does not stop there. So, when you think of a character in a novel. It's like, "Oh, he's gay." Okay—he is. What next? Right? So, as long as you value the sexuality or gender or race of the person, but then you still are, you know, venturing [far] enough to give out secondary or noticeable attributes of the person—I think you would be ... good.

Participant XVI said that he believed perhaps authors and publishers were afraid of being "cancelled" for writing about characters with identities that they themselves did not possess.

Representing Diverse Characters: A Slippery Slope

Most participants agreed that it was important to see diverse identities represented in YA dystopia and that representation was lacking in this genre, and most recognized that this lack could potentially be harmful for readers. As Participant V put it, "I feel like young adult authors almost ... don't really think about the impact that it can have." Nevertheless, there did not seem to be a straightforward solution to this issue. Many participants were conflicted about whether any author could simply choose to write diverse characters if the author themselves did not share the same lived experience with the characters. For example, Participant X said that readers could not blame YA novels for no representation because there were no diverse authors to write such stories. Many participants believed that authors should be cautious about representation if they

wrote from a position of privilege. Furthermore, these participants felt that if the author was careless about representing marginalized groups, they would do more harm than good. For example, Participant III thought that white authors writing characters of color was a "murky area," because though representation in the YA genre was necessary, such an author could inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes. Participant IV also expressed the same idea, adding that it takes a lot of effort to write characters of color and other marginalized groups such as queer characters, which is why authors often get it wrong. Participant V expressed concern that, in her view, many authors who did not successfully represent diverse characters in their works were nonetheless very popular with white audiences. This means that the readers of these types of novels may encounter harmful stereotypes about marginalized identities that they might take to be normal and natural. Participant V felt that most often authors did not do thorough enough research to be able to represent diverse identities accurately. Participant III stressed that authors should write "with empathy" to avoid tokenizing characters. Participant XIV stated that he had seen a lot of tokenizing in YA literature and wanted authors to "do it right" if they wrote about diverse identities. What's more, he stressed that the author should not be including diverse identities only "for brownie points."

Participant XI thought that authors try to represent diverse identities, but that they cannot do it successfully, because they want to play both sides in that authors want to be "non-controversial" and appeal to both marginalized groups and hegemonic groups at the same time. Therefore, Participant XI thought that authors lean on stereotypes to make the novels palatable to white, straight, cis-gender, able-bodied audiences. As he described, it was important that authors did not construct characters whose most memorable feature was the marginalized aspect of their identity. He said, if you say a character's name, the first "image that it strikes" in the reader

should not be "the fact that it is the Asian guy," in a novel, for example. Participant XVI agreed, stating that straight authors, for example, could write queer characters as long as the queer storyline was not central to the plot. If the author was queer themselves, then Participant XVI believed they could write a story that centered around sexuality. Overall, he believed it was important to normalize the depiction of characters with such identities. Similarly to this, Participant VI talked about how often Young Adult novels that feature marginalized identities will center on narratives of adversity that the characters must face because of these identities. Participant VI said that she felt that focusing on "the adversity of these things" only further marginalizes individuals instead of making their identities "the norm." She explained:

> ...I would rather that there was just a character that's just gay. And then I'm like, "Cool. I want to read about them being happy and gay. Cool!" I don't want it to be like this depressing… Like how many coming out stories that are going to be? Like, can't I just read about someone who's like, gay living their romantic life? … But all gay romance is always like, "Oh, well, it's a coming out story." Then I'm like, is anyone gonna stay out? I want the rest of the story. Does that make sense?

She elaborated further that she wanted to read novels about diverse characters that "aren't only focused on issues"—Participant VI said, "I want it to just be characters." Participant VI stressed that diverse characters should be written in a "respectful" way—not as plot devices. In a poignant example of this, Participant VI explained that she had spoken to a friend who felt the same way about stories that they usually encountered featuring Black characters:

> Like I remember my friend saying like, "I don't want a story that's just about me being Black. I want it to be a story where the main character happens to be Black." … And I'm like—Yeah, I don't want to just read a book that's like, "Wow—look at all these really horrible things that happen because I'm Black." Like, I want to read a story that's just about someone who happens to be Black living that life and having an adventure and having the same stories … I think a lot of people read to escape. And there should be an option to read a story about someone like you, that isn't like a traumatic heavy read that makes you really depressed by the end."

Some participants believed that as long as the author does thorough research, they are able to write about diverse identities that they do not share with the characters. Participant XII stated that such authors could write diverse characters if they based the characters on real people they knew who had the same lived experience. However, Participant XII said that an author's ability to write about diverse identities they did not share with the characters could "only go so far" and they risked receiving backlash from readers if anything was depicted incorrectly. Therefore, Participant XII felt strongly that authors should simply describe characters however they wanted.

Many participants discussed how difficult it was for authors to include representation in novels in a way that was not reductive or damaging to minority groups. Participants felt strongly that authors were afraid of being "cancelled" by readers. Participant III said that when it came to including racially diverse characters, authors in YA fiction often went the route of writing "biracial characters" because it was "safer." It was interesting how a couple participants used the expression "Damned if you do—damned if you don't" when talking about the authors' predicament. Many readers believed that authors were backed into a corner by both having to respond to the demand for diverse representation in their works while at the same time being under the constant threat of backlash from readers if they got it wrong. As Participant VI said, it was "easy to mess up" representation. Participant XIV was concerned that the demand for representation lead to "nitpicking" and "gatekeeping" in the Bookish community—diversity often becomes "a checklist" that the authors must fulfill in order to get published or escape backlash. He believed that it was important to challenge authors on how they write diverse characters, but it was not alright to cancel them if they made a mistake. Participant XII believed authors should not be pigeonholed into writing diverse characters as it was wrong to insist that

they do so. She felt that authors got "a lot of hate" on social media for not having enough

representation in their works. She added that readers held characters up "to an impossible ideal"

and often called characters "problematic" and cancelled those who were not "ideal."

However, Participant XVI stated that although authors in YA dystopias might be afraid of

cancel culture, ultimately, "the backlash isn't there because of who you are [as an author] but

because of what you've written." Authors could avoid misrepresenting diverse characters if they

took care to do research, write respectfully, and hire sensitivity readers. As Participant IX stated,

disregarding and erasing diverse identities "generally" had "no excuse."

To avoid issues with representing characters inaccurately, Participant VI went as far as to say

that it was perhaps best for authors not to give detailed character descriptions at all and instead

leave it to the reader's imagination to ascribe diverse identities to the character if they so pleased

as they read the novel:

> I just kind of imagine them [the characters] however I want to if they're not described.
> … So, I was very shocked ... like in *Skyward*, only in the second book does Brandon
> Sanderson mention that one of the characters is not white. ... It [had] never really
> come up before and then [he] mentioned ... that he's black. And I was like, "Oh, I
> never... yeah—it's never been mentioned before. Okay." And then I just adjusted my
> mental picture of him [the character]. But like, up until then, any reader could have
> imagined them however they wanted. They could have been Asian in their head, or
> white or Black—and it wasn't confirmed or denied, which I kind of prefer. Because I
> feel like you don't have to tell people—Well, I suppose people get annoyed because
> people will assume that that they're white ... but if you don't say it in a book at any
> point, then the reader is able to decide for themselves what they [the characters] look
> like and I kind of like that."

It is interesting that in the instance described above, Participant VI immediately assumed that the

character was white—this identity was implicit; yet, she assumed that anyone could imagine the

character in any way they wanted. That is to say, a person of color could have imagined the

character as Asian, for example, if that suited them best. Still, Participant VI acquiesced that

"people get annoyed" because "white" will be an implicit, unmarked category that the character

will likely assume in any reader's imagination. It is important that this was exactly the case that

Participant V described as her experience as a young reader and a person of color. She said that

the lack of diversity in the YA genre "really impacted" her "as a person of color" as she

described seeing "just white people everywhere" in the novels she read. The lack of diversity

also concerned Participant V because both she and her younger sister were writers, and she

wanted her sister to have the opportunity to see diverse characters participate in the types of

stories they were reading:

> I think, like, especially as a young reader—and I was also writer... like, I am a
> writer, too. Um, all the stories that I would write were with white characters.
> Because ... I couldn't see people of color as main characters. And it's only recently
> that I like, realized that I can write people that have similar skin tones as me, or
> like even darker. Um, I think that it really impacted me because it took me so long
> to realize that it's not always about white people. Like, you can also be ... the main
> character of your own story. Right? Um, so ... at the beginning of the year, I
> definitely didn't think of diversity as a big part in books. I was just like, "Oh, if it's
> a good book, then it's a good book. Doesn't matter what the diversity [sic] but ...
> especially ... because I have a younger sister ... seeing her read books that have
> like, people of color as main characters is so inspiring. Because I can tell there's
> definitely a different shift in her overall perspective. Like, she's already writing
> characters that have super diverse, um, backgrounds. And I wasn't doing that until
> recently. So, I'm glad that ... I'm happy that we're evolving as a society and that
> it's getting better, but like seeing all the books that I used to read and still kind of
> read now, it's sad that there's that lack of diversity.

This fragment illustrates how Participant V kept encountering characters who were either

described as white or she assumed that they were white, although she herself is a person of color.

Participant V's inability to conceive of characters who were not white in stories that she herself

wrote points to the fact that it may not be so easy for marginalized or minority readers to picture

characters however they please.

<p align="center">*"Own Voices" in YA Fiction*</p>

The "Own Voices" movement that was described in Chapter 3 appeared to be important to the

participants. Participant spoke of Own Voices as both a positive force in the Bookish

community, and a controversial topic. Many of the participants talked about the #OwnVoices hashtag and related hashtags promoting diversity as helping them discover works with representation. As Participant IX described:

> When you know Black Lives Matter and, you know, all of the protests and everything that was happening—there was lots on ... Instagram and stuff about just thinking about ... what you're reading and what you're not reading, and about the fact that—I mean, a lot of the books I read from outside of this genre [YA] are [written by] male white authors. And it's not the most inclusive, diverse—you know, portrayal of the actual world within the books. And I guess I've never really thought about it before. I'd kind of just gone for best sellers or what interested me, and now I kind of think about it more, and I go—actually, you know? That's right. I should be thinking more about the kind of things I read.

Participant III talked about readers using Own Voices to demand authentic representation by diverse authors as positive—this movement helped readers think critically about the books they were selecting. Participant XVI believed that the publishing industry was spurred on to search for diverse authors because of the Own Voices movement. According to him, through the #OwnVoices hashtag in the social media, young readers were able to show publishers that they wanted to see representation in Young Adult novels. However, he also stated that he did not believe there were enough Own Voices authors being published.

Participant VI was of the opinion that the focus on diversity in Young Adult fiction was taking away from the story as the focus should not be on issues but rather on the plot. Another negative aspect of Own Voices was the gatekeeping that it fostered in YA fiction. Participant XIV talked about the way policing authors about how much representation is or is not included in their works was not helpful as it perpetuated cancel culture and diversity for the sake of simply fulfilling a "checklist":

> ... if we get into this habit of gatekeeping—this habit of like, nitpicking everything, like, "Oh, my god! It's not enough representation! There's no Black people!"—I do think that it is good to challenge authors, and also for people to be held accountable, but I don't believe in cancel culture. And I also think that we

need to be careful with where we draw the line, and when we're making and crossing these lines. Because we don't want to get to a point where we're putting so much pressure [on authors], that we start to see novels where the diversity is only for the author to fill in a quota or a checklist

To this point, Participant V added that many readers were only searching for diverse books because it was trendy. Participant XII expressed the same idea, saying that the related "Diversify Your Bookshelf" movement and hashtag was "virtue signaling." Moreover, Participant XII felt that people should read books because they are good, not because they are written by or featured people with diverse identities. She said that the demands for diversity in YA literature were "reaching the realm of absurdity." Participant XII also understood such movements as "implicitly racist" because the only value that they placed in books was related to representation instead of literary merit. Participant XIV described this as "performative activism" particularly on platforms such as Instagram.

That said, ultimately, most participants still maintained how important accurate and respectful representation in YA fiction was to them. Many participants seemed to believe that "things are getting better," like Participant IX (who then added "but they're also getting worse"). Things seemed to be getting better because participants believed there was potential for diversity in genres like YA dystopia; however, as Participant IX explained, things were getting worse due to the rampant tendency of readers to cancel authors on platforms like Instagram when they have misrepresented marginalized groups. Participant VII was convinced that authors had to embrace representation in their works because "Gen Z is very woke" and young readers want to see themselves reflected in the novels they choose. Participant XVI voiced a similar opinion, stating that the "norm" has always been to place white, male, cisgender characters in the center, but this had to change and "the younger generation" should encounter diverse characters in YA genres such as YA dystopia. Participant VII believed that the lack of all types of representation was the

reason why YA dystopia was on the decline because readers recognize that their identities are being erased in this genre.

5.2. Discussion: Reflection

During the interviews conducted with the participants, it became apparent very quickly that their reading experiences were impacted by the way that they shared these experiences with others. Namely, all the participants in this study were involved in the Bookish community—some were distinctly active members of this community and identified themselves as such, while others were peripheral members. The more active members of the Bookish community created content that revolved around books on social media platforms and websites. Most popular of these was Instagram (or Bookstagram). The more passive, peripheral members of the Bookish community used social media and websites like Goodreads to find books, curate book lists, post reviews, and read the reviews of others. Nevertheless, all participants discussed how important it was to them to be able to discuss their reading experiences with other readers. Several participants did not have people who they could connect with over books in their everyday lives. Online platforms like Instagram and Goodreads allowed them the opportunity to seek out other readers who shared the same passion for books. Several readers talked about having formed friendships with other readers online. One of the most valuable gains from participating in a community of readers was the way it opened new perspectives to the participants. Their reading experiences could change depending on the perspectives of other readers that they became aware of. Other readers' experiences therefore informed the way participants approached texts. The participation in a community of readers helped readers generate new meanings from texts.

Janice Radway used Fish's notion of the interpretive community to account for the patterns of responses in her study about romance readers; I see the Bookish community as

functioning in a similar way. Although the response of the reader to the text depends on the reader's complex mosaic of knowledge, attitudes, and cultural and social context among other variables, the reader's construction of meaning from a text is impacted by other readers who share their experiences of texts. By actively discussing their interpretations and adjusting their view of texts based on other readers' perspectives, the readers collectively construct meaning. This does not mean that readers will necessarily accept other interpretations; however, the participants in this study often discussed the importance that they placed on learning about other viewpoints, particularly if these were outside of their lived experience.

What's more, it appeared that the participants produced at times very similar meanings from texts. This points to the way that, although Fish suggests that the text can produce an indefinite number of interpretations, there are parallels between the meanings that readers produce. There are regularities in the interpretations that the participants spoke of. I also do not assume that it is only the interpretive community that determines how participants responded to YA dystopian texts. As mentioned earlier, readers are incredibly complex, and their interpretations are dependent on their background and context in the widest sense of the word.

Fish leaves the concept of the interpretive community open and malleable, without providing a concrete explanation on how to determine who qualifies as a member and who does not. Fish's critics have suggested that it is impractical to talk about an interpretive community that one cannot define. However, I argue that the flexibility of the concept of interpretive community is important for the purposes of this study. Because the Bookish community participates in a variety of activities online across a vast array of platforms and through a host of media, it may at first seem that it is too open a group to call them an interpretive community. Nonetheless, I see the Bookish community as unified in its goals and what I see as their

fundamental features. Namely, the goal of the Bookish community is to share a love of reading

with others, and more specifically, to share (or exchange) reading experiences. Such readers seek

out other readers' reviews and recommendations. Importantly, they express their own views on

books as well. By seeking out the opinions of other readers instead of conventional literary

critics, they place value on the lived experiences of other readers.

Although overall the participants described YA dystopia with nostalgia, several of them

noting that the genre was "over," many were hopeful that it will return. Many participants saw

YA dystopia's future as linked with other genres such as YA fantasy or YA sci-fi. YA dystopia

had left its mark on the participants, who saw it as a genre with an impact that stretched beyond

the pages of a novel. The participants described the appeal of YA dystopia as rooted in its serious

and complex themes, inspiring teen protagonists, and the exciting and action-packed stories that

they offered. As discussed in Chapter 1, the YA dystopia is meant both to be didactical and to

serve as a "pleasurable retreat" (Basu et al. 5) from the reader's everyday life. The participants

talked about the thrilling and fast-paced nature of the genre as one of its main points of appeal.

Similarly, participants placed significant importance on the "philosophical" aspect of the genre,

as Participant V described it. Participants enjoyed the serious tone of YA dystopias and the

genre's commentary on social and political issues. Most participants valued the social and

political critique of YA dystopias above other themes such as the romance plot. This is a finding

that to my mind points to the way the actual reader of YA dystopia as represented by the

participants in this study is underestimated not only by publishers and authors, but also, to some

extent, by scholars. In Chapter 1, I outlined the ways that some scholars of YA literature see the

reader as one who will be equally (if not more) invested in the romance plot of YA dystopian

novels since the implied teenage reader is understood to be "preoccup[ied] with courtship" (Basu

et al. 8). In contrast to this, the participants in this study were mainly interested in the politics and the worldbuilding of the YA dystopia and saw the growing emphasis on the romance plot as distracting. In addition, several participants were frustrated or disturbed by the badly executed romance plots of many YA dystopias, saying that they perpetuate toxic relationships through such tropes as the heteronormative love triangle.

Many participants thus produced meanings that leaned oppositional to the dominant ideology of the YA dystopian text (Hall). This is to say that the implied reader of the YA dystopian genre is understood to be heterosexual and invested in the romance plot. The implied reader is meant to care about which one of the two male suitors the female protagonist will eventually end up with. However, the participants often saw the typical love triangle between the female protagonist and two poorly-developed male characters as unrealistic and unnecessary, with some calling this feature "lazy writing." Participants criticized the way the male characters in the YA dystopia seemed often to exist purely for the purpose of loving the female protagonist. One of the two male love interests was usually described as possessive, jealous, and representative of toxic masculinity. This is an oppositional reading of the YA dystopian text, because the trope of the love triangle with two boys competing for the attention of the female protagonist is meant to entice the reader, rather than produce this negative response. The reader is expected to enjoy the tension between the characters—the reader is meant to wonder, "who will she choose?" But the participants that spoke about the love triangle were less than impressed with the forced conflict that the love triangle created in YA dystopias. As one participant eloquently put, "It is never, ever, ever the second guy." It was clear to the participants who the female protagonist would choose in the end. In this way, YA dystopia underestimates the reader

by assuming their investment in a heteronormative romance that they perceive as a toxic relationship.

The participants spoke highly of the female protagonists in YA dystopias—Katniss in The Hunger Games was most frequently talked about as a groundbreaking portrayal of a female character in a YA genre. On the other hand, male characters were for the most part discussed as examples of toxic masculinity. Many participants believed that authors spent little to no effort in creating compelling male characters that subverted gender expectations. The attitude most participants felt towards male characters in the genre could be summed up with the colorful assertion made by one of the participants that "Gale is trash." This quote refers to Katniss' best friend and secondary love interest in *The Hunger Games* novels. Gale was seen by many participants as the epitome of toxic masculinity. This is an oppositional reading of this character because Gale is meant to be perceived by the reader as appealing and attractive. For example, the episode where Gale kisses Katniss without her consent in *Catching Fire* was surely not meant to be interpreted as an instance of disrespecting the female protagonist's boundaries. Rather, it was meant to be perceived as romantic, passionate, and spontaneous—hence, normal. This is not the way that several participants perceived this scene. The semiotic excess of the novels provides readers with the opportunity to construct oppositional meanings. Moreover, the way participants spoke about consent, boundaries, and toxic masculinity indicated a progressive liberal influence on their readings of YA dystopian novels. The language used by the participants as they discussed romance in this genre had overtones of social justice. As Rosenblatt states, readers bring their entire lived experience to the text when they construct meaning. The participants in this study brought their specific historical, social, and cultural contexts to their readings of YA dystopia. This means that the participants viewed the YA dystopian text through a much more

complex set of lenses than the text would assume based on the implied reader constructed therein.

The YA dystopian texts largely depict a white, heteronormative world where the vast majority of characters are able-bodied. It is assumed that the implied reader of the YA dystopia will take these characteristics of the genre to be normal and natural. Nevertheless, many participants outlined how the worlds constructed by YA dystopian texts were problematic because they failed to represent diverse identities. Several participants talked about how the absence of people of color, queer characters, and characters with disabilities had negatively impacted them. These participants often could not see themselves reflected in the YA dystopias that they read and thus felt their identities were effectively erased. Nonetheless, there were many participants who said that although representation was important, there was no straightforward way of achieving more diversity in YA novels. Some readers thus produced negotiated meanings of YA dystopias through the view that diverse identities matter, but authors should be able to write whatever kind of characters they want. Others said that readers could simply imagine diverse identities in the characters that they read. This is a reading that leans toward the dominant discourse of the YA dystopian novel, which presupposes that "white" is an unmarked category. If a character is not explicitly described as a person of color, then they are assumed to be white. Whether or not to imagine the character as white is not a choice that the reader can simply make, because in a patriarchal system, white identities are at the top of the racial hierarchy, and therefore they are most often encountered in texts, media, and pop culture. The reader therefore may not be able to simply project their identity onto a character, as some participants have suggested they might. Several participants who identified as persons of color emphasized the negative effect that being unable to see themselves in YA dystopia and other YA

genres could have on readers. The idea that most characters in YA dystopia were white, cisgender, heterosexual, and able-bodied was seen by these participants as harmful, unrealistic, and outdated. This is a reading of YA dystopia that leans toward the oppositional end of the spectrum as participants often expressed that they wanted to see rich, complex, and nuanced characters with realistic features. More specifically, such characters were understood to occupy a variety of diverse identities. Through an intersectional feminist perspective, the more marginalized identities a person has, the more invisible they are made by hegemonic power structures (Crenshaw 140). Thus, the YA dystopian novel erases marginalized identities by upholding the hegemonic ideal.

Participants were divided on how they saw that this issue could be mitigated. Several participants talked about how authors should be able to write characters without diverse identities without the fear of being "cancelled" by the Bookish community. Some saw the demand for representation that gained popularity online through such hashtags as #OwnVoices and #DiversifyYourBookshelf as a fad that followed in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. Some described this as disingenuous and performative activism. Still, other participants said that they were inspired to search for books that contained diverse characters and/or were written by diverse authors because of the abovementioned hashtags on social media platforms such as Instagram. Many participants talked about reexamining their views on diversity and representation in the novels they chose to read thanks to the push by other readers online. I believe that this indicates how the Bookish community as an interpretive community steers readers toward specific interpretive lenses such as critical race theory and intersectionality. However, the maximalist tendencies of cancel culture prevalent on Instagram and other social

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media platforms may drive readers toward the idea that diversity and representation is forced upon authors and readers who rather care about the literary merit of the novel.

Assertions

The way the participants discussed sharing their reading experiences with other readers of YA dystopia showed how the participants sought a sense of community and belonging to connect with other readers. Particularly, several participants spoke about how they had recently become actively involved in the online Bookish community because of the isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic. All participants spoke about discovering new YA novels through other readers' recommendations. Participants accepted other readers as critics they could trust if the readers appeared to share their tastes and opinions. However, participants also sought out critiques of novels produced by readers who had different perspectives and/or lived experiences than themselves because they expected that other readers' input could inform their understanding of the novel. Thus, through actively producing reviews, engaging in conversations with other readers, and reading the reviews of other readers, the Bookish community as an interpretive community facilitates the negotiation of meaning (Hall and Fiske).

Notably, publishers can tap into the marketing potential of the Bookish community to promote novels to potential consumers. Publishers use methods such as ARCs (Advanced Reader Copies) and bookish paraphernalia to promote certain novels that they are trying to sell. However, the interviews with participants showed that instead of getting to know their target audience to understand their needs, it seemed as though the publishing industry reverted to producing "copy and paste" versions of YA dystopian novels. These novels were seen as weak and unoriginal replicas of big, successful titles such as *The Hunger Games*, meant to give the reader the same story and characters in a slightly different package. This strategy was only

partially successful as participants discussed being tired of the lack of complexity and originality in YA dystopias, which is a significant factor in the genre's decline in popularity. The publishing industry conceives of an implied adolescent reader who is not invested in worldbuilding, plot, and authentic representation of diverse identities. Thus, there is a gap between this implied adolescent reader and the actual readers represented by the interview participants for this study. Participants largely produced oppositional and negotiated meanings of YA dystopian novels wherein they rejected the heteronormative love triangle, toxic relationships, toxic masculinity, and oversimplification of the worldbuilding of YA dystopian novels. Many participants emphasized the importance of social and political critique at the core of YA dystopia. What's more, many readers resisted the positioning of the implied reader in the YA dystopian text as white, heteronormative, and able-bodied, expressing that it was important to see rich, complex characters that reflected the lived experiences of a diverse world.

YA dystopia was described as a genre on the decline also due to its perceived limits. Many of the participants discussed the YA dystopian novel as one that must have ties to the real world, which is why they believed authors were constrained in how creative they could be. For example, some participants listed the oppressive government and the rebellion against it as a precondition for any YA dystopia. That being said, participants allowed that there was space for originality in the genre as many of them named the novel *Scythe* as an example of a more recent YA dystopia done well. It was significant that participants talked about the future of YA dystopia as linked to other genres—to the mind of many participants, YA dystopia could fuse together with YA fantasy or YA sci-fi to break out of the limits imposed on the genre by its necessary ties to realism.

Thus, some of the participants produced preferred readings of YA dystopia by accepting the idea that the genre must fit certain parameters to be intelligible in the sense that its depiction of white, able-bodied, heteronormative characters was rooted in the realities of the real world. This means that several participants saw the depiction of such characters in YA dystopias as normal, natural, and taken for granted. Some of the participants justified the choices of authors to depict worlds without representation of marginalized groups because the YA dystopian setting is a reflection of the hegemonic power structures of the real world. However, none of these participants spoke about the way the hegemonic power structures are not resisted in YA dystopia and most often remain intact at the end of the novel, often culminating in a white, heterosexual romance of two able-bodied characters.

Nonetheless, there were many participants who spoke of the negative effects that the erasure of marginalized identities in YA dystopia and other YA genres had on readers who could not see themselves represented in the novel. In this way, participants produced negotiated and oppositional readings to the ideology of the YA dystopian genre that focuses stories on characters that most often fit the patriarchal hegemonic ideal. The negotiated meanings produced by some readers foregrounded that representation in the YA genre was important and that there was "no excuse" for authors not to include characters of marginalized groups in their works. However, they also voiced concerns over the emphasis on representation and diversity in Young Adult literature being a trend that will fade away. Indeed, it seems that publishers are currently capitalizing on diversity and inclusion as buzzwords to sell more novels; however, this poses significant issues of trivializing representation and placing some authors with marginalized identities under threat. For example, by currently emphasizing publishing novels that fit the authentic representation standards popularized by the "Own Voices" movement, some authors

may feel pressured to out themselves in order to get published or to avoid backlash for depicting queer characters if the authors themselves have not come out as queer to the public. In addition to this, some readers worried that the initiatives to promote diversity and representation in the YA genre were leading many readers in the Bookish community to perpetuate cancel culture. If readers did not encounter accurate or enough representation in some novels, they could attack the author and perhaps damage their career, as some participants feared.

Even so, there were participants who produced largely oppositional meanings to the dominant discourse in YA dystopias when it came to representation. They expressed that authors could do thorough research, hire sensitivity readers, and take other precautions to avoid perpetuating negative stereotypes and microaggressions against marginalized groups depicted in their novels. But these participants were clear on the fact that diverse representation should be a part of any novel because omitting diverse characters creates a distorted image of the world, which privileges white, heteronormative, able-bodied identities. Moreover, replicating these types of normative characters was linked to the reproduction of tropes that made characters flat and boring. For example, Participant VIII described the female protagonist of *Matched*—Cassia—as an example of a paint by the numbers character who does not realize how beautiful she is and spends the entirety of the novel choosing between two equally uninteresting male characters. Participants believed that representing complex characters with a variety of diverse identities would not only be more interesting but also would make the characters seem more authentic and therefore more relatable to a larger audience of readers.

To add to this point, readers also spoke about wanting to see more vulnerable, flawed, and realistic teen protagonists in YA dystopian novels. This once again underscores the way that the ideology working in the YA dystopian text constructs an inaccurate image of the implied

reader as it assumes the reader will readily accept a formulaic replication of character tropes. Participants also spoke about the fact that by trying to mimic the success of *The Hunger Games* and its portrayal of Katniss as a subversive female character, authors and publishers produced a "paint by the numbers" version of the "badass female heroine." Many participants produced negotiated meanings of the female protagonist in YA dystopia as they enjoyed the characters' agency, but also found that such characters were depicted as masculine to the point of framing such traditionally feminine characteristics as vulnerability and emotionality as weakness. Therefore, although the YA dystopia creates an image of the female protagonist as a powerful force of societal change, at the same time, these novels depict traditionally masculine traits as more desirable than traditionally feminine traits. Furthermore, YA dystopias limit the subversive potential of the female protagonist by placing her in a compulsory heterosexual romance. Many participants saw this as a drawback, producing oppositional readings to the heteronormativity of the YA dystopian world of the novel, which is meant to be accepted as natural by the implied reader. It should be noted that many readers wished to encounter more "found family" stories that centered on friendship and familial love in YA dystopias. Usually, teen protagonists of popular YA dystopian novels cared about little else than the very sudden romantic relationship they develop with a mysterious stranger, which to many readers seemed unrealistic and therefore, unrelatable.

The majority of participants were in agreement that romance should not be central to the YA dystopian novel. The implied reader of the novel was meant to be invested in the romance between the characters more so than the political and social critique in this genre. However, most participants criticized such novels as weak examples of YA dystopia and expressed a desire to read about more complex topics. In this way, readers produced largely oppositional readings to

the ideology of the YA dystopian novel that underestimates the actual reader. Further, the participants were dissatisfied with the reductive portrayal of male characters in YA dystopias. The purpose of such characters was largely only to love the female protagonist and therefore, many male characters were flat and undynamic. Readers produced distinctly oppositional readings to one of the male characters typically found in YA dystopian love triangles who were described as possessive, jealous, and who disregarded the female protagonist's consent. This depiction of male characters was irritating to many readers who wanted to see more subversive gender performance in YA dystopia. Largely, participants talked about male characters who were nurturing and emotionally intelligent ("softer boys," as one participant called them) as positive examples of what sort of masculinity they wished were represented in YA genres.

Participants felt that YA dystopia had naturally plateaued after the boom that it achieved at the height of *The Hunger Games* popularity with the franchise being adapted to film. In Rosenblatt's terms, the YA dystopian novels were significant events in the readers' lives; however, the readers seemed to have effectively grown out of the genre and moved on to YA fantasy, YA sci-fi and other YA sub-genres. Still, the participants talked at length about the importance that YA dystopias had in their lives as readers. The dystopian energies of these novels were inspiring and captivating to the participants. Based on the interviews conducted with readers, I have reached the conclusion that the decline of YA dystopia is rooted in the genre's inflexibility, its simplistic conception of the implied adolescent reader, and its inability to adapt to the reader's needs and desires to see a more rich, diverse, and complex world reflected in the novel. It should be added that some readers felt that YA dystopias were also currently more difficult to read due to the state of the world. Political unrest, social justice issues, and the global pandemic of Covid-19 are propelling the readers to search for escape in worlds of genres like YA

fantasy. This leads me to conclude that since the participants valued the dystopian energies of the YA dystopian novels that they loved but at the same time felt like they did not wish to read about worlds based on their own, readers were interested in dystopia as "not so much a specific genre as a particular kind of oppositional and critical energy or spirit," as Booker has asserted. This dystopian energy of a work does not have to be confined to the rigid structure of the YA dystopian novel as it has thus far largely been reproduced. Instead, works of any YA sub-genre could take on a dystopian energy to provide readers the opportunity to encounter social and political critique without the perceived limits of the setting based in our own world. Readers want to be inspired by the agency of realistic teen protagonists who can resist oppressive dominant power structures, but YA dystopia has not continued to produce works that are successful at presenting original stories that capture the complexity that readers are looking for.

CONCLUSIONS

This project set out to explore the ways that actual readers of YA dystopia perceived novels in this genre with regard to the ideology at work therein. To address the lived experiences of readers, a hermeneutical phenomenological approach was adopted to interviews as the data collection method of choice. In addition to this, the project also addressed the Bookish community on Instagram as an interpretive community that has an impact on how some readers construct meaning of texts such as YA dystopian novels. I used an intersectional feminist lens to address the dominant patriarchal ideological discourses prevalent in the YA dystopian novel as a product of the larger genre of Children's and Young Adult literature. The reader response to YA dystopia was approached through a cultural studies perspective based on the theories of active audiences and reader resistance advanced by Stuart Hall and John Fiske. Additionally, Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reader response informed my approach through its emphasis on the reader's lived experience. The transactional theory's focus on the lived experience of the reader aligns with the hermeneutical phenomenological approach used in the qualitative research portion of this project as it also emphasizes the lived experience of the participant.

To see how readers produced patterns of meaning from YA dystopian novels, I employed Stanley Fish's concept of the interpretive community. The Bookish community on Instagram was taken to be an interpretive community that fosters communication between readers and thus impacts their reading experiences. To understand the gap that exists between the implied reader of the genre of YA dystopia and the actual reader who encounters novels within this genre, I used Wolfgang Iser's concept of the implied reader to describe the predispositions that the YA genre (and YA dystopia in particular) assumes characterize its intended audience. The tropes frequently found in YA dystopian novels pointed to specific assumptions that this genre holds

about its implied adolescent reader. Gathering qualitative research data from hermeneutical phenomenological interviews with readers of YA dystopia allowed for an examination of the gap between actual readers as represented by the participants of this study and the implied reader constructed by the YA dystopia.

Most interview participants spoke about how impactful YA dystopia had been when they first encountered this genre when they were teenagers or young adults. YA dystopian novels such as *The Hunger Games*, *Maze Runner*, and *Divergent* were significant events in the participants' lives as readers. The participants appreciated the dystopian energy (Booker 3) of novels such as *The Hunger Games* that offered complex social and political critique of society. The readers enjoyed the philosophical questions posed by YA dystopian novels. However, what once appeared as distant and exaggerated imaginings of what a dystopian future might look like now seem to parallel the reader's actual world in ways that are sometimes too close for comfort. The participants are now more drawn to the worlds depicted in YA fantasy and other YA sub-genres because they offer an escape that cannot be found in YA dystopias in the same way. Moreover, YA dystopian novels often dilute the potential for social and political critique by offering replicas of big titles in this genre such as *The Hunger Games*. Participants were unimpressed by the simplistic worldbuilding, the heteronormative love triangle and repetitive character tropes. The participants particularly resisted the centrality of the romance plot in YA dystopias and often characterized it as distracting from the larger and more important issues in the novel.

The participants placed significant importance on sharing their reading experiences with others. To be precise, the participants wanted to explore the perspectives of others who read the same genres that they did. Participants used the reviews of other readers on social media

platforms like Instagram to discover new novels and to gain a more nuanced understanding of

the works that they had read. The ability to connect with other readers fostered the participants'

development of critical lenses. For example, the Bookish community online advocated for

authentic representation in YA novels and tried to center BIPOC authors in the wake of the

Black Lives Matter movement against racial injustice in the spring and summer of 2020. The

reader of YA dystopia is impacted by their context and surrounding discourses, and, in the case

of the participants in this study, by the communities of readers online that they interact with, like

the Bookish community on Instagram (or "Bookstagram").

The publishing industry underestimates the reader by publishing YA dystopian novels

that lack rich and complex worldbuilding and characters. Many participants disliked the focus on

the heteronormative romance and the trope of the love triangle in YA dystopias, which they

believed often overshadowed the dystopian plot of the novel, thus undermining the genre's

potential for social and political commentary. Additionally, many participants wanted to see YA

dystopian novels that represented a range of diverse identities. Publishers seem to think of the

YA dystopian reader as someone who will accept an implicit white, heteronormative narrative as

natural. In addition to this, the publishing industry assumes that the YA reader will be satisfied

with replicas of original works that they enjoyed; thus publishers underestimate the reader and

the effect of the Young Adult genre. Participants, however, want the publishing industry and

society in general to take YA genres such as dystopia seriously.

The findings of this project suggest that perhaps YA dystopia's future lies in merging

with other YA sub-genres such as YA fantasy or sci-fi that are currently popular with readers. It

is likely that other YA sub-genres contain the same potential for political and social critique that

readers appreciated about YA dystopia. YA readers such as the participants in this study were

interested in the dystopian energy of texts (Booker pg?). Thus, perhaps the very best of YA dystopia can be retained through other genres that challenge the reader to examine complex philosophical questions. YA dystopia's fusion with other genres may offer the potential for more rich and creative storytelling while retaining the subversive potential of dystopia.

If YA dystopia were to reemerge and regain the interest of its once ardent readership, it would have to do so under new conditions. The genre would have to reevaluate its conception of the implied reader and reconstruct it accordingly. The actual reader has been underestimated by YA dystopia through its repetitive use of lackluster characters, tropes such as the love triangle, the needless focus on romance, and simplistic worldbuilding. Through a "don't fix what ain't broke" approach, as one participant put it, the publishing industry churned out YA dystopian novels that aimed to replicate *The Hunger Games'* success. The participants in this study indicated that this model was no longer effective and that they expected to encounter original and complex stories. The publishing industry seems to use the online Bookish community as a peer-to-peer marketing tool instead of a pathway toward establishing a better understanding of the actual reader.

The participant engagement in communities of readers online on social media platforms like Instagram appeared to help the readers construct a more robust understanding of popular YA novels. The participants spoke about other readers inspiring them to seek out more novels with better representation and to question novels that perpetuate the dominant discourse of the patriarchy as an ideological system. In this way, connecting one's reading experience to that of other readers may allow for avenues of resistance to dominant ideological power structures. Of course, the reader brings their entire lived experience and specific context to the encounter with a text. Which is to say that sharing their reading experiences with other readers is only one facet of

the process of meaning-making. However, this study points to the way that other readers'

perspectives may contribute to the process of a reader constructing meaning from texts.

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APPENDIX A

Promotional Poster for the Research Study
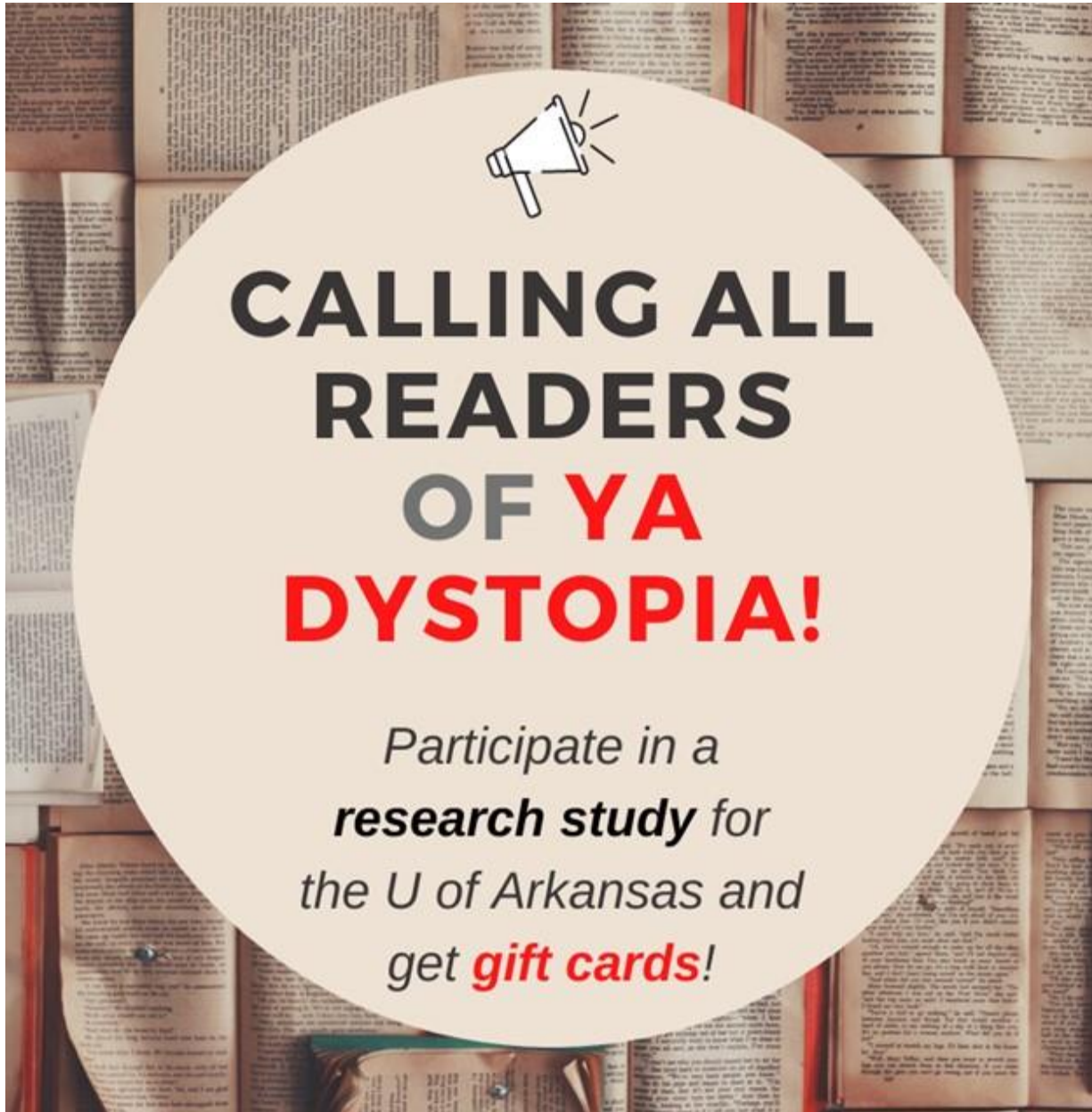
APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form
Reader Response to Gender in Young Adult Dystopian Novels

The University of Arkansas supports the practice of protection for people participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study.

This study examines how readers of Young Adult dystopian fiction perceive gender as it is depicted in the works of this genre. To collect data for this study, the researcher will be conducting two interviews with the participant via Zoom. Each of the two interviews will be 1.5 hours long. Each interview will be recorded, and a digital transcript of each interview will be obtained for data analysis purposes. All interview recordings and transcripts will be kept for three years after the completion of the study according to the requirements of state and federal regulations; the data will be destroyed in March 2024. The data will be used as a part of the researcher's doctoral dissertation project in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Arkansas.
The participant will receive a direct benefit of gift cards worth $5 and $10 to Starbucks or Amazon based on the participant's preference in gratitude for their time. The participant will receive a $5 gift card at the end of Interview 1 and a $10 gift card at the end of Interview 2.

There are no risks involved in participating in this study. Your name will not be associated in any way with the information collected or with the research findings from this study. The purpose of this study is to collect data to further the research in children's and Young Adult literature. The researcher will not share information about you with anyone unless required by law or unless you give written permission. All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by Arkansas law and University policy.

By signing this form, you give permission for the use and disclosure of your information for purposes of this study at any time in the future. You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form. However, if you refuse to sign, your information cannot be included in this study.

You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose information collected about yourself at any time by sending your request to Zane (Emilija) Sarma at ██████@uark.edu. If you cancel permission to use your information, the researcher will stop collecting additional information about you. If you choose not to participate, or if you withdraw your participation, there will be no negative consequences.

I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study and the use and disclosure of information about me. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my rights as a research participant, I may contact the principal investigator.

I agree to the uses and disclosures of my information as described above. By my signature I affirm that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

████████████	████████████	████████████
Participant's Signature	Type/Print Participant's Name	Date

For any questions about this research, please contact the principal researcher, Zane Emilija Sarma, at ▇▇▇@uark.edu or the research supervisor, Dr. Susan Marren, at ▇▇▇@uark.edu.

For questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact Ro Windwalker, the University's IRB Coordinator, at (479) 575-2208 or by e-mail at irb@uark.edu.

APPENDIX C

Parental Guardian Informed Consent Form

Reader Response to Gender in Young Adult Dystopian Novels

The University of Arkansas supports the practice of protection for people participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish your offspring, son, or daughter to participate in the present study.

This study examines how readers of Young Adult dystopian fiction perceive gender as it is depicted in the works of this genre. To collect data for this study, the researcher will be conducting two interviews with the participant via Zoom. Each of the two interviews will be 1.5 hours long. Each interview will be recorded, and a digital transcript of each interview will be obtained for data analysis purposes. All interview recordings and transcripts will be kept for three years after the completion of the study according to the requirements of state and federal regulations; the data will be destroyed in March 2024. The data will be used as a part of the researcher's doctoral dissertation project in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Arkansas.
The participant will receive a direct benefit of gift cards worth $5 and $10 to Starbucks or Amazon based on the participant's preference in gratitude for their time. The participant will receive a $5 gift card at the end of Interview 1 and a $10 gift card at the end of Interview 2.

There are no risks involved in participating in this study. As the parent or guardian of the participant, you are welcome to be present at each of the two interviews. Your offspring, son, or daughter's name will not be associated in any way with the information collected or with the research findings from this study. The purpose of this study is to collect data to further the research in children's and Young Adult literature. The researcher will not share information about your offspring, son, or daughter with anyone unless required by law or unless you give written permission. All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by Arkansas law and University policy.

By signing this form, you give permission for the use and disclosure of your offspring, son, or daughter's information for purposes of this study at any time in the future. You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form. However, if you refuse to sign, your offspring, son, or daughter's information cannot be included in this study.

You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose information collected about your offspring, son, or daughter at any time by sending your request to Zane (Emilija) Sarma at ███████@uark.edu. If you cancel permission to use your offspring, son, or daughter's information, the researcher will stop collecting additional information about them. If you choose not to allow your offspring, son, or daughter to participate or if your offspring, son, or daughter chooses not to participate there will be no negative consequences. If you withdraw your offspring, son, or daughter's participation or if your offspring, son, or daughter chooses to withdraw their participation, there will be no negative consequences.

For the participant: Even if your parent/guardian agrees to your participation, you are free to not participate or to change your mind and stop participating at any time.

I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study and the use and disclosure of information about my offspring, son, or daughter for the study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my offspring, son, or daughter's rights as a research participant, I may contact the principal investigator.

I agree to allow my offspring, son, or daughter to take part in this study as a research participant. I further agree to the uses and disclosures of my information as described above. By my signature I affirm that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

████████████████   ████████████
_____   _____
Parent/Guardian or Representative's Signature   Relationship to Participant

I have discussed this study with my parent or guardian, and I agree to participate.

████████████████   ██████████████   ██████████████
_____   _____   _____
Participant's Signature   Type/Print Participant's Name   Date

For any questions about this research, please contact the principal researcher, Zane (Emilija) Sarma, at ████████@uark.edu or the research supervisor, Dr. Susan Marren, at ████████@uark.edu.

For questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact Ro Windwalker, the University's IRB Coordinator, at (479) 575-2208 or by e-mail at irb@uark.edu.

APPENDIX D

IRB Approval Letter

UNIVERSITY OF
ARKANSAS

To:	Emilija Sarma
From:	Douglas J AdamsJustin R Chimka, Chair IRB Expedited Review
Date:	01/28/2022
Action:	**Expedited Approval**
Action Date:	01/28/2022
Protocol #:	2009287552R001
Study Title:	Reader Response to Masculinity Ideology in Young Adult Dystopian Fiction: Participant Interviews
Expiration Date:	11/23/2022
Last Approval Date:	01/28/2022

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Susan M Marren, Investigator

Interview I Protocol

Interview 1 Protocol for Adults

Interviewee name: _____
Interview date: _____

Script prior to interview:
My name is Zane (Emilija) Sarma and I will be conducting the interview. I'd like to thank you again for agreeing to be a part of this research study for my doctoral dissertation. As I've mentioned before, this research study aims to find out how readers see gender in works of Young Adult dystopian fiction. As a reader of YA dystopian fiction, your insight is very important for this study. The data from this research study will be used in my doctoral dissertation for the University of Arkansas in the Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies program.
This research study is split into two interviews. This is Interview 1. This interview will be approximately 90 minutes long. During the course of this interview, I will be asking you about your background as a reader, your history with reading YA dystopian fiction, and your favorite work of YA dystopian fiction.
As you know, the consent form that you received and signed prior to this interview stipulates that the two interviews will be recorded for the purpose of downloading an interview transcript to help with the data analysis process. All research data will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study. Are you still comfortable with this interview being recorded?
Do you have any questions before we start?
If you have any questions at any point during the course of the interview, feel free to stop me at any time and let me know.

A. The Reader's History with YA Dystopian Novels
To start, I'd like to ask you some questions to get to know you and your history with reading.
1. Tell me a little bit about yourself!
2. Tell me about yourself as a reader!
Probe: 2.1. When did you start reading?
             2.2. What genres did you like as a child?
             2.3. When did you start reading YA dystopias?
3. What is it about YA dystopias in particular that you enjoy?
Probe: 3.1. What particular features set this genre apart from the rest?
4. What are some of your favorite YA dystopian novels?
Probe: 4.1. What YA dystopian novels have particularly stood out to you?
5. What is your favorite YA dystopian novel?
6. What is your least favorite YA dystopian novel?
7. What is the last YA dystopian novel you read?

B. The Reader's Favorite YA Dystopian Novel
Now I'd like to ask you specific questions about your favorite YA dystopian novel, _____, in more detail.

1. Why is _____ your favorite YA dystopian novel?
2. Who is your favorite female character in the novel?
Probe: 2.1. What are the characteristics of _____ that appeal to you?
           2.2. Are there example scenes or events from the novel that make that character your favorite?
           2.3. Is there anything else about _____ that you like but haven't mentioned?
3. Who is your favorite male character in the novel?
Probe: 3.1. What are the characteristics of _____ that appeal to you?
           3.2. Are there example scenes or events from the novel that make that character your favorite?
           3.3. Is there anything else about _____ that you like but haven't mentioned?
4. Which character is your overall favorite in this novel?
Probe: 4.1. Why is CHARACTER X your favorite rather than CHARACTER Y?
5. Who is your least favorite character?
Probe: 5.1. What are the characteristics of _____ that make them your least favorite?
           5.2. Are there example scenes or events from the novel that make that character your least favorite?
           5.3. Is there anything else about _____ that you don't really like but haven't mentioned?

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTION

6. Do you know of anybody else who reads YA dystopian fiction that I could reach out to for an interview?

This marks the end of Interview 1. Thank you so much for your input and your time! I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you today.
We have scheduled Interview 2 for _____. Does this date and time still work for you?
I will be sending you the electronic $5 gift card to (Starbucks/Amazon) to your email address shortly as thanks for your time and participation. Please let me know if you have any questions!
I look forward to speaking to you again soon!

Interview II Protocol

Interview 2 Protocol

Interviewee name: _____
Interview date: _____

Script prior to interview:
It is good to see you again, _____! Thank you for returning for the second interview in this research study. I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me again.
As I've mentioned before, this research study aims to find out how readers see gender in works of Young Adult dystopian fiction. As a reader of YA dystopian fiction, your insight is very important for this study. The data from this research study will be used in my doctoral dissertation for the University of Arkansas in the Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies program.
As Interview 1, Interview 2 will be approximately 90 minutes long. During the course of this interview, I will be asking you about your least favorite and most recently read works of YA dystopian fiction, and some general questions about gender.
As you know, the consent form that you signed previously stipulates that the two interviews will be recorded for the purpose of downloading an interview transcript to help with the data analysis process. All research data will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study. Are you still comfortable with this interview being recorded?
Do you have any questions before we start?
If you have any questions at any point during the course of the interview, feel free to stop me at any time and let me know.

A. The Reader's Least Favorite and Most Recently Read YA Dystopian Novels
To start, I'd like to ask you some questions about your least favorite and most recently ready novels.

1. During our last interview, you mentioned that your least favorite YA dystopian novel was _____. Talk to me about this novel!
Probe: 1.1. What didn't you like about the plot?
           1.2. Was there anything you didn't like about the setting?
           1.3. How do you feel about the characters in this novel?
           1.4. Who was your least favorite character and why?
2. What was the last YA dystopian novel you read?
Probe: 2.1. How do you feel about this novel versus your favorite and least favorite novels?
           2.2. Which character from the novel was your favorite and why?
           2.3. In what ways is this character like or is not like your all-time favorite character?
           2.4. Which character was your least favorite?
           2.5. In what ways is this character like or not like your all-time least favorite character?

B. Gender Performance in the Context of YA Dystopian Worlds and the Context of Real Life

I would now like to ask you about the dystopian setting that your favorite character lives in and the world we live in right now.

1. **Think about your favorite character, _____, being transported to a story written about the world that you and I live in right now. Would _____ still be your favorite character if they acted like they do in the YA dystopian novel?**

Probe: 1.1. Why?

1.2. Would _____ need to change in any way to adapt to the world around them? How?

C. The Reader's Conception of Gender

Now I'd like to ask you some questions about men and women in general.

AVERAGE MAN/IDEAL MAN.

1. I want you to picture a man. Describe him to me!

Probe: 1.1. What does he look like?

1.2. How would you characterize him?

1.3. If you pictured a specific man, who is he?

2. Would you say that the man you pictured is an example of an average man?

Probe: 2.1. Why/why not?

2.2. What features or traits come to your mind right away when you think of the average man?

3. Can you describe somebody in your life or social circle that embodies this average man?

Probe: 3.1. In what ways does this person embody the average man to you?

3.2. In what ways would you say the person you mentioned is not like this average man?

4. Describe someone who does not embody the average man!

5. Take a minute to think about this: Describe an ideal man to me—the way that you think society sees an ideal man.

Probe: 5.1. What does he look like?

5.2. How would you characterize him?

5.3. Are there any specific examples of "ideal men" you can think of? Who comes to mind?

6. Do you think society's image of an ideal man is like yours?

Probe 6.1. How do you think the dystopian world of your favorite novel, _____ envisions an ideal man?

6.2. How is that different to how you think our society envisions an ideal man?

6.3. So, you've given me a picture of an ideal man in our world and an ideal man in a dystopian world, and you've told me how the two are different. Are they similar in any way?

7. Now let's apply the same questions thinking about women. How would you describe an average woman?

Probe: 7.1. What does an average woman look like to you?

7.2. How would you characterize her?

7.3. Who in your life most resembles this average woman? Why?

7.4. In what ways is this person not like the average woman?

8. Now think about the ideal woman. How is she different from the average woman?

Probe: 8.1. What does she look like?

8.2. How would you characterize her?

8.3. Are there any examples of "ideal women" you can think of?

This marks the end of Interview 2. Thank you so much for your input and your time! Your contribution to this research study is greatly appreciated.

I will be sending you the electronic $10 gift card to (Starbucks/Amazon) to your email address shortly as thanks for your time and participation in Interview 2. Please let me know if you have any questions!

Initial Coding Sample

Interviewer: So, tell me about yourself as a reader. When did you start reading?	
Participant VI: Oh, gosh. I think I was pretty small. Um, probably like... three or four. I know that they weren't very good at teaching us how to read at school so my mom taught me. And then I was just kind of obsessed. I listened to a lot of audiobooks as a kid, because I had trouble sleeping so that definitely got me more into, like, stories and reading as a result. So yeah, I guess most of my life I've been obsessively reading.	**STARTED READING** **"OBSESSED"**
Interviewer: Mm hmm. What kind of got you started--got you kind of excited and interested in reading? What kind of genres were you gravitating towards when you were younger?	
Participant VI: I always gravitated towards fantasy. And... I'm not sure particularly why. I mean, I guess it kind of started out with, like, classics... That was--my mom worked for television, so she had access to, like, audio plays and stuff. So, I read a lot of *Anna [of the] Green Gables*--like that kind of stuff, which I really enjoyed. But my favorite one as a kid was *Tom's Midnight Garden*, which I don't know if you'll know it. Because I don't know if it's known in America... but it's about a boy who kind of travels in time and he goes back to the past to this, like, magic garden, and that was like, "Whoa! Fantasy!" but like "Period Fantasy!" And it probably went from there. And then when I got a bit older, you know, I saw stuff with dragons on it. And I always was into, like, anime and video games and stuff like that. So, I was like, "Ooh, I like that!" And then I guess then eventually--because dystopia didn't really exist when I was a kid. I mean, it did, but not in like YA or anything.	**FIRST GENRE INTERESTED IN** **"DYSTOPIA DIDN'T EXIST IN YA"**
And then I just kind of stumbled across it in like 2008...	**FIRST YA DYST.**
Interviewer: Mm hmm.	
Participant VI: Um, in the form of *The Hunger Games*	**"THE HUNGER GAMES"**
Interviewer: Uh huh. Okay. So, you started with *The Hunger Games*?	

Participant VI: Yeah, that's probably... probably the first dystopia that I ever read the I can think of. ... **Interviewer**: So, what is it about YA dystopia as a genre that you particularly enjoy? **Participant VI:** I guess because it focuses kind of on things that people ==can relate to==. But it's not... I find a lot of contemporary... It's ==really ironic==, but I find a lot of ==contemporary novels== really-- especially in ==YA==-- ==really depressing==. And although dystopia, like, by nature is quite depressing, it's kind of ==more hopeful== because it's like, "Hey, these bad things are happening! But we can stop those bad things happening!" Whereas I find contemporary [fiction] is like, "Wow, my father abused me, and everyone is dead, and this is just sad!" and I'm like, "Great." So yeah, I guess I like ==the fantasy element==. You know, you've usually got some ==futuristic== stuff going on as well. And you have, like, characters who, like, ==face against adversity== and I'm like, "Yeah, I love it! ==Underdogs==!" Very British--I like the underdog. Interviewer: Okay, so... What would you say are some particular features of this genre that set it apart from other genres that you like? Participant: Um, I guess it kind of ==leans more into like a sci-fi==, kind of... I mean, obviously, sci-fi is a separate thing, but it ==leans away from fantasy==... but it has enough, like, interesting elements that makes it kind of ==distinct==. Um, Yes... That's a good point--I suppose some dystopia is kind of ==like some sci-fi==, but whereas a lot of sci-fi seems to be more like, "Everything is great, and we live in this ==utopia==!" It's... it's not. It's ==obviously the opposite==. YA dystopia... Sorry, I'm really trying to think. I've never thought about this before. Interviewer: That's okay. No worries.	==**RELATABLE**== ==**"REALLY IRONIC"**== ==**VS OTHER GENRES**== ==**"REALLY DEPRESSING"**== ==**"MORE HOPEFUL"**== ==**ENJOY**== ==**"FUTURISTIC"**== ==**"CHARACTERS FACE ADVERSITY"**== ==**"UNDERDOGS"**== ==**"LEANS INTO SCI-FI"**== ==**"LEANS AWAY FROM FANTASY"**== ==**"DISTINCT"**== ==**SIMILAR TO SCI-FI**== ==**"UTOPIA"**== ==**"OBVIOUSLY THE OPPOSITE"**==

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Codebook

Code	Description	Example
Beginning to Read	The participant describes the beginning of their relationship with literature. The participant reflects on when they started reading, what genres appealed to them.	"...it was kind of hard to keep friends and books filled in the gaps. This is where the YA novels come in. I read more than just dystopia. But the thing is, as I looked up the definition of dystopia ... I realized that it ... involved any society with any sort of notable inequity, which would be most young adult novels, actually."
Discovering YA dystopia	The participant reflects on when they first discovered the YA dystopian genre and what works in particular appealed to them and why.	"When *The Hunger Games* was starting to pick up--I remember the impact of that because I was very into dystopia ... I remember reading the Hunger Games, probably in 36 hours my sophomore year. I could not put that book down."
Appeal of YA dystopia	The participant considers what sets YA dystopia apart from other genres and how it compares to other genres the participant enjoys. The participant talks about the features that they particularly enjoy about YA dystopia.	"...it's [YA dystopia] so much more--not only relatable--but it seems like YA fiction, to me, is a lot more emotionally driven and more aware of everything rather than if I was to pick up some, you know, adult fiction."
Favorite YA dystopia	The participant reflects on what YA dystopias they have especially enjoyed and why.	"So, I think my favorite thing about that sort of genre is kind of like the subversion of tropes and the subversion of like 'normal' gender roles that you'd see in society. They don't exist in dystopian fiction, because it's a brand-new world."
Least favorite YA dystopia	The participant reflects on what YA dystopias they have not enjoyed and why.	"One of the things that really, really bothered me about *The Selection* was that it starts off as a political dystopia-type-thing ... and then it quickly becomes--it's

		just about the romance and the love triangle."

Agency	The participant talks about the agency of characters in YA dystopian novels.	"...it's always teenagers, like, you know, figuring out how to save the world--as cliche as that sounds. And I think that it shows that we shouldn't underestimate young people."
"World building"	The participant describes the world building in YA dystopia, considering whether it is well or poorly developed.	"I feel like something that I see lacking now, or, like, in the early 2010s in YA dystopia was mostly, like, the world building and, um, really enhancing that more instead of having it underdeveloped."
"Politics"	The participant discusses the political conflict often central to YA dystopian novels, or discusses lack thereof and the consequences of omitting political commentary.	"...definitely for *Scythe* and *The Hunger Games*, it's the political aspect. I think the authors have done so much research and, um, they've really ... thought it through in order to write a book that reflects on, like, our society and how, um--the extreme end of how our society could go."
Social critique	The participant talks about the way YA dystopias do (or do not) reflect on societal issues in the real world.	"...it [*Divergent*] didn't really have the social commentary that *The Hunger Games* had."
Family	The participant reflects on the role of the family unit, familial bonds, the found family trope in YA dystopia.	"I think it's really sad that ... many characters' parents are dead. I'd like to see some supportive family in there [YA dystopia]."
Romance	The participant discusses the what role romance should play in YA dystopia and the implications of romance becoming central in YA dystopian fiction.	"I feel somewhere along the book [*Divergent*], the author got really obsessed with the relationship. And I don't know if it was to give us relief or something from the plot but the obsession with the relationship and the teenage drama ... I think it took over from what was really important in the plot."
"Toxic relationships"	The participant discusses romance that devolves into	"... 90% of the time they start that toxic relationship out

	toxic relationships in YA dystopia and the implications such depictions of relationships may have for readers.	romanticizing it within the first book and knowing that there are younger kids reading stuff like this. I get really upset because they're not going to understand that it is toxic."
"Boundaries"	The participant talks about the male characters' respect or transgression of the female characters' boundaries and consent in YA dystopia.	"I think that's something that Finnick definitely brings, but, like, I guess, so does Peeta ... he's very like--they're all quite accepting of boundaries. And I guess it did leave a big impression on me."
"Love triangle"	The participant discusses the romance plot devolving into a love triangle usually between two male characters and a female character.	"But there's also the idea of like, this central plot being almost a love triangle [in *Matched*]. And that is so commonly done in loads of Young Adult stuff--not just YA dystopia, that it just wasn't.. there's others that have done it better. And also, after a while It gets a bit boring."
"Insta-love"	The participant talks about the instant love connection typical of love interests and the protagonists in YA dystopia.	"... that guy that she meets in the woods, Hunter--the one who she falls in love with ... like in a few chapters or something. They barely know each other. … almost, like, two thirds into the story there was that instant love kind of plotline. It just wasn't well done. It was a little sloppy."
"Positive Masculinity"	The participant discusses instances of male characters that are vulnerable, emotionally mature, open, or nurturing.	"Peeta is the one character that stands out to me who would actually fit ... my ideal sense of a man because he was vulnerable. His vulnerability was shown off nicely in all the books. ... Um, he did not give off those patriarchal norms that we think the men should have."
"Badass female character"	The participant describes female protagonists or female characters in YA dystopia. The participant talks about the subversive gender performance of female characters.	"...that's like a huge trend I see right now in YA is just, like, the badass female character who's strong, has, like, a lot of muscles..."

"Toxic masculinity"	The participant talks about male characters in YA dystopia who exhibit traits of toxic masculinity such as aggression, possessiveness, dominance, and others.	"I feel like maybe sometimes to make up for the fact that the girls are super badass in some of these novels, they have, they feel like they need to make the guys even more obnoxious."

Bad female character	The participant discusses female characters or female protagonists in YA dystopia that are written poorly.	"One of the reasons I was so frustrated with Tris Prior was because I felt that she was the discount version of Katniss"
Accurate representation	The participant talks about the importance of faithful representation of diversity in YA dystopia and why it may be lacking.	"...what happens is when you're talking about, say, racism or when you're talking about people being homophobes or addressing the whole LGBTQ+ idea--what generally happens is people are so scared to be socially incorrect, that they don't address the concept at all, right?"
Race	The participant discusses the way race is depicted (or is not depicted) in YA fiction and specifically YA dystopian novels. The participant discusses their attitude toward the depiction of race in YA fiction.	"Katniss was described as having darker skin, um, compared to, like, everyone else, which was like racial commentary [sic]. But then the movies happened, and Hollywood decided to whitewash Katniss, which, um, I was really upset when I found that out too."
"Mental health"	The participant talks about the representation of mental health issues in YA dystopia. The participant discusses their attitude toward the depiction of mental health issues in YA fiction.	"[Katniss] a good rep for what mental health can look like."
(Dis)ability	The participant considers the representation of ability and disability in YA dystopian fiction. The participant discusses their attitude toward the depiction of (dis)ability in YA fiction.	"[Peeta] ends up losing his lower leg. So, he becomes like, where he has a prosthetic, which-- that was the first time I'd encountered any kind of disability or anything in a YA dystopia."

LGBTQ+	The participant discusses the depiction of LGBTQ+ identities in YA fiction and YA dystopian fiction or the lack thereof. The participant discusses their attitude toward the depiction of LGBTQ+ identities in YA fiction.	"I definitely see a lot of frustration in the LGBT community for stuff ... possibly more for like Trans people ... I've read a couple of non-binary characters in YA--not in dystopia, sadly. But like, I've never come across a Trans character in ... a YA novel at all that wasn't a contemporary. I think, like, representation in general is kind of lacking in anything that's not based in, like, the real world."
Decline of YA dystopia	The participant talks about the issues in YA dystopia and what they believe are the reasons for the genre's decline.	"I do think YA Fiction had its peak 100% between like 2008 and 2014. I think that peak ended when the last *Hunger Games* film came out, because now any YA adaptation of a dystopian book doesn't do well in cinemas at all. *The Darkest Minds* is a perfect example, like, it got negative reviews. I just think people are over the dystopian trend."
Fantasy	The participant talks about the YA fantasy genre or fantasy written for an adult audience, or fantasy elements in YA dystopia.	"... fantasy has taken over because there's a lot of things you can do with it. … You don't have the strictness of the plot that dystopia has."
Sci-Fi	The participant talks about the YA sci-fi genre or sci-fi written for an adult audience, or sci-fi elements in YA dystopia.	"I think, at least for the future of YA dystopia--they could cross over more with YA science fiction ... dystopia still has to, like, be possible in reality and do more with the new technologies."
A good YA dystopia	The participant reflects on what elements are necessary for a YA dystopian novel to appeal to them and the elements that should be omitted from the genre.	"... it [a good YA dystopia] has to have, like, a structure for governments and, like, for laws. Rules that you can't break and rules that the people can't bend in some way so that [it] doesn't go back on it later, which really makes you upset. And it has to

		put the dystopia first before any other side plots..."
Authors unaware	The participant considers problematic aspects of YA dystopia and wonders how aware authors are of these aspects in their works.	"I think there's so many Gales in all of dystopian fiction … I don't know what it is, because I always wonder if authors know that they're writing these sorts of characters..."
"Bookstagram"	The participant talks about the Bookish community on Instagram—Bookstagram. The participant describes the community and their involvement in it.	"I actually created a Bookstagram [during Covid-19 quarantine], which is how I found your interview or case study, or whatever. ... that has been really cool-- to meet a community of people who read."
Sharing readings	The participant talks about how and why they share reading experiences with other readers.	"I started it [Bookstagram] last year. ... it's more to gain a different perspective on what I have read."
Goodreads	The participant describes the website Goodreads and their involvement in it.	"...for *The Red Queen* series, I saw it on Goodreads once and it looked really interesting. So, I thought, why not?"
"BookTube"	The participant talks about the Bookish community on YouTube—BookTube.	"I found EpicReads through YouTube and so, I watched a lot of their videos, and they also have, like, kind of informative videos where it's talking about the history of YA."
"BookTok"	The participant considers the Bookish community on the TikTok platform—BookTok and discusses their participation.	"I don't watch BookTok that much, but my friends do. And they say that it's definitely more diverse and people are, like, promoting more diverse books."
Cancel culture	The participant talks about the policing of other readers in the Bookish community, readers "canceling" authors who either do not include representation of diverse identities in their works or mismanage this representation.	"Everything is starting to get better. And it's also starting to get slightly worse because of 'cancel culture' and people calling other people out for the representation."

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity
I	F	20	White
II	F	26	White
III	F	24	Mixed-race
IV	F	20	Asian
V	F	14	Person of Color
VI	F	27	White
VII	F	30	Mixed-race
VIII	F	16	Asian
IX	F	30	White
X	F	18	Person of Color
XI	M	18	South Asian
XII	F	19	Mixed-race
XIII	M	24	White
XIV	M	23	South Asian
XV	M	30	White
XVI	M	21	White