Do you see yourself?

The effects of representation within fantasy young adult literature

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Introduction

Teenage years are critical for identity formation. Young adult literature is a medium in which teenagers use to help form identities through relating with characters and situations. It is important to have literature available to teenagers that is relatable to a wide audience so that all young adults can find novels that they feel represented by. This study will be looking into the cultural binaries that could limit representation in fantasy young adult literature, such as white/other, rich/poor, female/male. In this way, people can be aware of what is hindering or enabling, depending on our results, wide representation of different sorts of people so that young adults can all find themselves within the books they are reading.

Theory

As an avid young adult literature consumer both in my teenage years and currently, I can say with some degree of certainty that there are ample young adult (YA) books marketed towards female adolescents. Others have noticed this trend as well. Kokesh and Sternadori (2015) chose to limit their study of how YA literature affects identity construction to white, middle-class, adolescent girls (p. 139). Park (2012) conducted her own analysis of how YA literature impacts readers, focusing in on the novel *Speak* which features a female protagonist and a focus group made up of only teen girls. It is not a new idea to look at how young adult literature affects girls, as it is not a far stretch to say that most young adult literature is written for and marketed to the adolescent girl. My study will include both male and female adult respondents from Marshall Universities first-year general education courses, as well as participants from a larger community. I theorize, that female respondents will show a greater interest in young adult literature, citing that they've read a lot of YA literature, enjoyed YA literature, and have a broader appreciation and understanding of the various sub-genres young

adult literature can exist in. I also predict that middle-class, white, females will report the most positive experience with young adult literature.

Adolescence is a chaotic, unpredictable time for many teenagers, a time when kids are learning who they are, who they want to be, and figuring out how to become independent adults. Young adult novels are written specifically for this audience. According to Stephens (2007) "Young adult books typically include the following elements: (a) teenage protagonists, (b) a distinctly teenage voice and/or attitude, and (c) a journey toward identity discovery and separation from adults" (p. 41). The idea of young adult books is that young adults can read and relate with the main character's similar struggles and learn something in the end relating to morals/ethics.

Garner (1999) found that for many reading was not a search for identity but rather a search for confirmation of identity through finding aspects of their identity within the characters they read about (pp. 106-107). They read to relate. Kokesh and Sternadori (2015) adopt a similar idea, that "[teen girls] identification with fictional characters, the one-sided friendships they form with them, and the degree to which they perceive the books as realistic—all factors known to contribute to a text's influence on the identity construction and social attitudes of readers" (p. 140). In other words, the more the reader relates to the characters, the more likely they will be to adopt characteristics of the characters into their own identity.

Based on these studies and logical thought, I theorize that young readers relating to the protagonists in the stories they consume is very important to their enjoyment of such stories. I predict that the more readers relate to characters the more they will enjoy them. No one is going to adopt mannerisms or morals from a character or book they do not enjoy, though they may adopt measures to be unlike characters they dislike, as Garner (1999) points out. In most cases,

enjoyment must precede identity formation. In order to relate to a character, similar traits between the reader and character must be found which is why there is a need for diverse young adult literature. I predict that surveys will show, women prefer reading about women, and men about men, and that respondents will say they enjoy stories about characters similar to them, except in the case of fantasy novels.

I theorize that fantasy young adult novels have a greater correlation with identity formation than other sub-genres of YA literature. I predict that my survey results will show that readers of fantasy, dystopian, sci-fi, and supernatural novels, read less to relate *and* more to escape. These fiction sub-genres are all similar to each other as they aim to be unrealistic, often featuring worlds and creatures that are mythical. As part of the broader category of young adult literature, they are usually based on some great life-saving mission the main teenage character has to complete. Characters of these escapist novels (fantasy, dystopian, sci-fi, supernatural) are usually somewhat realistic in their ways of thinking and personality traits, whether human or not. For instance, brave, strong characters who sometimes get angry at the responsibility are common in these types of YA novels. They aim to be relatable enough to appeal to adolescent readers, but fantastical enough to transport readers to a world unlike their own.

Garcia interviews author and publisher Rhoda Belleza, who is known for her young adult novels that feature diverse characters. She talks about the work and research involved in creating diverse, often minority characters and even in marketing them in a way that make them seem appealing to publishers. Garcia quotes Belleza. "I am actively and publicly seeking diverse voices and representation in books," (qtd. Garcia, 2017, p. 222). From reading this article, I can garner the implication that diverse books are not the norm nor are they easy to produce and publish. I am going to compare this viewpoint to that of those who consume young adult novels.

Methods (1)

My data come from two different surveys, though some questions do appear on both surveys and it is possible some people took both though there is no way of knowing for sure as anonymity was ensured in both surveys. The first survey was a collaborative effort and contained questions on various different topics, with YA literature questions I created scattered throughout it. The data are derived from a survey of students taking the general education classes of Marshall University's Department Sociology and Anthropology that was developed and administered by the department's Senior Seminar course.[1] The survey was conducted between February 26 and March 19, 2019, where the students entered 13 classes on the Huntington campus, read the consent statement, passed out the forms, and collected the forms through a slit on the top of a box to ensure anonymity. One class from the Teays Valley and the Mid-Ohio Valley Center campuses were administered by their instructors. An invitation to the online version, developed using Qualtrics, was emailed to students who took online versions of the courses during the same period. The total population of in-class students on Huntington campus was 504, from which we received 231 responses for a rate of 65.5%, the population from remote campuses was 23, from which we received 18 for a rate of 78%, and the population of online students was 164, from which we received only 2 responses, a rate that was so low that we decided to not use them. The population of students in the department's general education courses has been generally representative of the broader student body at Marshall who are taking general education courses.

Most of the respondents, 74.7%, of this survey were between the ages of 18-20 as I predicted due to the distribution of it in introductory college courses. My hope is that people of

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[1] The survey received Marshall IRB approval as study # 725823-6 under the title "Capstone Survey."

this age will still have a good memory of their young adulthood and their reading habits when they were between the ages of 13 and 17. Of course, I considered speaking to teenagers, but decided against it due to complications with IRB approval and I hoped that people out of the turbulent years of adolescence may better be able to look back and analyze their past reading experiences.

Methods (2)

The next survey, which I will call a questionnaire as it is not a representative sample, was made through Marshall's Qualtrics account. I created a Qualtrics questionnaire and distributed it through my social media and through an email to Marshall University students and faculty, collecting 88 complete responses in total. Participants accessed the questionnaire through an anonymous link and were able to continue if they agreed to the consent form listed as the first question. IP address tracking was disabled so there is no way to know who or where the questionnaire was taken by respondents. This questionnaire contained only questions related to my research, with many requests for text responses to allow participants to share their opinions and feelings on young adult literature in their own words.

Data (1)

The collaborative survey was constructed with a section for basic demographics, a section asking how often respondents engaged in given behaviors, and a section of statements which the respondent would indicate four levels strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) with neutral recorded but not prompted.

The following show some of the general demographic makeup of the respondents, where 74.7% are between 18 and 20 years of age, 34.6% are male, 7.5% are transsexual, 81.4% are white, 85.4% are in college straight from high school, 45.4% describe their parents as below

middle class, 57.8% are from traditional households (i.e. 2 parents and siblings), 61.5% of

mothers and 72.4 % of fathers have less than a baccalaureate education, 70.3% are from rural or

small town settings, and 85.7% are from West Virginia. The largest religious affiliation is

Evangelical at 39.2%, followed by "none" at 25.5%, though 72.6% report religion as either

"important" or "very important." The largest political affiliation is "moderate" at 25.1%, while

16.4% identified as Democrat, 15.5% identify as Republican, 16.0% identify as "other liberal" or

"far left," 5.5% identify as "other conservative" or "far right," and 21.0% report that they "don't

care." The distribution was clearly skewed to lowerclassmen as the majority of students were

Freshmen 52.5%, followed by Sophomores at 30.4%, with some 17.0% as upperclassmen. The

distribution of students between Marshall colleges tended to over represent Liberal Arts, and

underrepresent Business and Science, but it correlated more closely with the general population

of students (r=.67) than the distribution of Freshmen (r=.42).

Many of these questions were combined into scales, allowing for a finer measurement of

relevant concepts and offers significant data reduction. The *escapist* scale was constructed from

the question asking respondents to circle the genres of stories they prefer out of a list of 15

genres. The *escapist* scale shows a preference for the following genres:

1. Fantasy

2. Science fiction

3. Supernatural

4. Horror

5. Dystopian

These questions scaled with a Cronbach α = .65. The mean score for the scale was .37, and 27.9

% of respondents scored above the midpoint of 12. The *impact* scale was constructed from five

questions designed to measure how respondents perceive the level of impact young adult novels

have had on them. It is comprised of agreement with the following statements:

1. I identify with different types of people in novels and movies

2. Novels with different main characters gives me insight into other people

3. Young adult novels have helped me understand who I am

4. I read young adult novels

5. I prefer reading novels to TV or movies

These questions scaled with a Cronbach α = .71. The mean score for the scale was .39, and

36.8% of respondents scored above the midpoint of 12.

Data (2)

The question "Can you tell me about your experiences reading characters that were

different from you?" appeared in my Qualtrics questionnaire and, to my surprise, most

respondents provided a very good summary of why they read in addition to what they read. Most

of the responses fit into one of four themes, with the exception of a few outliers (one person

wrote they didn't understand the question, another wrote they did not read, a few responses too

brief to garner meaning). There were four repeating themes:

1. Many respondents claimed they didn't care, or even preferred different characters from

    themselves so as to "escape" into someone else.

    > "I always found it amazing to pretend to be someone else even for just a few
    >
    > minutes, especially if the world I was reading about was fantastic in some way. I
    >
    > wanted to be part of it." (participant 6)

> "When I read I play a movie in my head as I read the book so I would put myself in that person's place. For me it was an escape from my home life and it introduced me to different personalities, ways of thinking, and cultures." (p 36)

2. Similar to this idea, some respondents stated that they enjoyed different characters as a way to "put themselves in someone else's shoes" so to speak, and thus learn more about themselves and humanity. This was the most common response.

> "Reading characters that are different from me not only allows me to experience the world from another perspective for a while but allows me to explore certain things about myself in trying to relate to the character." (p 11)
>
> "I feel that it helped me to better see the perspectives, though fictitious, of other living beings." (p 18)
>
> "It's a really enjoyable thing to read a well-written book about a character who differs (even drastically) from you, because if the author writes well, and you do your job as a reader, you can find fascinating points of commonality between yourself and this character." (p 22)

3. There was also a handful of respondents who claimed they preferred characters that were like them, usually stating that they found it easier to relate to them.

> "Honestly, I liked reading characters that were closer to who I was but in a more fantasy situation when I was younger, and I didn't read many books that differed from that." (p 8)
>
> "I did not really relate and so I didn't really remember them, or I got irritated with them." (p 60)

4. In many instances, respondents claimed they did not read many characters that were different from them, but imply it was because of the books they had access to and not a preference for similarities.

> "I can't say I ever remember reading about a character that might have been a different ethnicity or even different sexual orientation. Most of them seemed to be Caucasian and from a lower income house." (p 9)

> "I have not had that many experiences reading characters that were different than me." (p 24)

Another interesting finding that came out of this question, is the emphasis respondents made on having to seek out diverse characters. These responses fit into one of the four categories above but add to the discussion by claiming they have to make an effort to find diverse characters. One detailed response sums up this feeling well and appears in an abridged form below:

> "For a long while I didn't think much about the fact that most characters I saw were different from me, since most characters were able-bodied, neurotypical, cisgender, heterosexual and male (the antithesis of my entire being). However, once I started trying to find authors that wrote works that better reflected some aspect of my personality, I found that I connected to those narratives more intuitively and found everything much more enjoyable. Looking back, I have only a vague sense of disappointment that it took my own personal frustrations and efforts to find personally compelling literature, instead of more diverse literature being part of the norm of things." (p 77)

This person feels that they are a diverse person-- non-white, non-able-bodied, not cis or heterosexual. Diverse literature for them would be the opposite of these descriptions, which they state is most of what they were presented with, and they had to dig and work to find novels in which they felt represented by. Other respondents who expressed they had to search to find diverse novels, expressed that they were doing so in order to better understand other people for various reasons. This respondent differs as they are trying to find novels that understand them.

Analysis (1)

The correlations analysis explored a large number (204) relationships among the demographics and the questions specified for this study, so this study will only report as statistically significant those with probability levels of p<.01, anticipating the possibility of 2 false positive results (unless the p levels are much lower).

The *escapist* scale showed surprisingly few correlations. Preferring the genres we labelled *escapist* does not correlate with *age* (r=.034, p=.632), *being male* (r= -.047, p=.493), or *family social class* (r=-.002, p=.975). The *escapist* scale positively correlated with *preferring mystery stories* (r=.278, p<.001), *preferring LGBTQ stories* (r=.26, p<.001), and *preferring multicultural stories* (r=.205, p<.001). The *escapist* scale positively correlated with the *impact* scale (r=.372, p<.001) meaning that people who enjoy these genres, also feel agree with the questions in the *impact* scale.

The *impact* scale negatively correlated with *being male* (r= -.314, p<.001). As I predicted, the survey showed women responded that YA novels had an impact on them more than men did. Unlike predicted the *impact* scale did not correlate with *being white* (r= .035, p= .631) or coming from a *middle-class family* (r= -.066, p= .376). The *impact* scale did positively correlate with several other factors. Those who care about *sustaining the environment* (r= .339,

p<.001), *respect retail workers* (r= .316, p<.001), *know a lot of LGBTQ* members (r= .272,

p<.001), *knowledgeable about polyamorous relationships* (r= .262, p<.001), prefer *rock,*

alternative, folk, & jazz music (r= .258, p<.001), are *liberal* (r= .226, p=.002), *knowledgeable*

about sex trafficking (r= .218, p=.004), have a *liberal political ideology* (r= .204, p=.006), are a

member of the LGBTQ community themselves (r= .202, p=.005), and people from *single mother*

households (r= .187, p=.009) agree with the questions in the *impact* scale.

Analysis (2)

       Eight respondents in the Qualtrics survey, specifically used the word "escape" when

describing why they like to read. In the table below, the genres each of the eight people marked

as preferring are listed. 4 of the 8 people like fantasy. The same applies for supernatural. 3 of 8

like mystery novels. Sci-Fi, dystopian, horror, romance are all liked by 2 of the 8. Novels in

verse is only liked by 1 out of the 8. Genres not preferred by any of the 8 are realistic, action,

sports, historical fiction, humor, LGBTQ, and multicultural.

Fantasy, Sci-Fi, Supernatural, Dystopian
Fantasy, Romance, Supernatural, Mystery, Horror
Fantasy, Supernatural
Sci-Fi
Mystery
Romance
Supernatural, Mystery, Horror, Poetry/ Novels in Verse, Dystopian
Fantasy

       Only 8 out of 88 respondents claimed they liked to read to escape. 76 of these 88

respondents claimed to prefer the same genres of novels that the "escapists" liked. Therefore, I

can confidently deduce that preferring these genres does not mean one reads to escape. However, if one does read to escape there is a 50% chance their genres of choice will be fantasy or supernatural.

Diversity was a topic that was touched on in a number of Qualtrics responses. Many questions inquired into if people felt they had read diverse YA novels, enjoyed them, and why or why not. It was a common theme for respondents to list one specific book in which they felt was a. diverse and b. had changed their viewpoint for the better. These two concepts seemed to go hand in hand, learning about something new from a new perspective granted by a diverse character. Some examples follow:

"Yes, the characters in "It's Not Like It's a Secret" by Misa Sugiura definitely changed how I view racism." (p 11)

"The Compass Rose was the first thing that challenged my views on monogamy in a healthy way." (p 49)

"In the Harry Potter series, Hermoine is seen as the most intelligent student that the readers witness. She defies the role of women as submissive by defending her intelligence through persistence." (p 33)

The above examples were cut down to be shorter while still retaining the intended meaning. Many respondents followed up their praise for a diverse character with statements of how they had to search for this diversity.

"For the odd novel with main characters who were different from me…" (p 75)

"No, I did not start reading diverse literature until after I was 19. All of the protagonists were white female or males or assumed to be" (p 39)

"Most of the novels that I read during that time in my life were similar to me only older.

(p 47)

"I love and actively want to read about characters who show me a different worldview. I

say this as someone who has seen literature and media with my face represented on it my

entire life." (p 59)

Discussion

These data support the hypothesis that girls will have a more positive experience with

young adult literature than boys but lend no support that white, or middle-class girls will have an

even more positive experience.

My second hypothesis that the more readers relate to characters the more they'll enjoy

YA novels proved not to be a simple sliding scale. Of the people who felt YA novels had an

impact on them, most said they prefer characters different than them (r=.279, p<.001). The

people who said novels had an *impact* on them were mostly female and they also said they

preferred female characters (r=.241). From this I can gather that readers find that relating to

character's gender is enough similarities to enjoy a YA novel. They do not have to relate to the

character in many or most ways to enjoy it the most, they just need to relate on one factor and

their enjoyment of the novel is made up of a combination of this and many factors.

My third hypothesis goes hand in hand with the second. I predicted that people would

prefer to read about main characters of the same gender as themselves. Again, we found that

those who felt YA novels had an *impact* (mostly females) preferred female characters (r=.241).

However, they also said they prefer different characters (r=.241). From this data, I conclude that

yes, people generally prefer main characters of the same gender, however, girls most like stories

about other girls who differ from them in other ways.

My last hypothesis had to do with genre. I predicted that readers of fantasy, dystopian, sci-fi, and supernatural novels read less to relate and more to escape reality. Only 8 of 76 people who liked *escapist* genres, claimed they read more to escape. Of the people who claimed to read to escape, half preferred fantasy and supernatural genres. Liking the *escapist* genres does not necessarily mean one reads to escape, but if it is likely that these genres would be selected for escaping purposes.

My interests in this study were to look at how diverse novels (novels that feature main characters that have varying experiences and perspectives) impact young adult responses. The *impact* scale shows agreement with the following questions: I identify with different types of people in novels and movies, Novels with different main characters gives me insight into other people, Young adult novels have helped me understand who I am, I read young adult novels and I prefer reading novels to TV or movies. I'm going to attempt to build a profile of the people who agree with these statements.

The *impact* scale correlated with many factors and I think the heart of these factors is an open-mind, awareness of the world around you, and a desire to learn and improve as a human. People who are both liberal in mindset and in politics agreed with the questions in the *impact* scale. This is not to say that conservative people are never impacted by young adult novels, but more often liberals are. In general, liberal people tend to be more welcoming of differences (LGBTQ rights, pro-immigration, etc.) which explains why they like different types of characters. This goes hand in hand with the statistics that people who know a lot of LGBTQ people or are LGBTQ themselves also feel young adult novels have an *impact.*

In addition, those who are knowledgeable about polyamorous relationships, meaning they know it is different than an open-relationship and understand society doesn't view it as highly as

monogamy, also feel YA novels are impactful. People who care about sustaining the environment and are knowledgeable about sex trafficking also positively correlate with the *impact* scale. These are hot button issues in politics these days and this statistic shows that people who are impacted by YA lit may also be more up to date on societal and world issues. Another interesting factor that correlated rather highly is respect for retail workers, meaning they do not feel retail jobs are beneath them nor deserving of minimal pay. I suspect that this has to do with the second question in the *impact* scale, that novels help give insight into others or empathy. Those who feel novels help them empathize will likely be better able to empathize with people in the real-world, including people of notoriously "lesser" jobs. Overall, this information creates a picture of an open-minded, knowledgeable person. Whether they are that way from reading diverse novels or read diverse novels because they are open-minded is a whole different study.

Conclusion

As much previous research on young adult literature has found, young adults read to confirm their identities which is accomplished by relating to the characters. From my research I've found that females have the easiest time relating to characters. I've also found that while most people say relating is important to them, they found that they could relate to even characters who at first seemed nothing like themselves. Many people wrote about how they enjoy reading about different characters than themselves as a way of learning about humanity. A few people said that they found it hard to relate in young adult novels as most of the time they were not represented by the characters. This shows that diverse literature is beneficial to everyone: those who are represented in diverse literature, and those who are not as it is an opportunity for them to step into someone else's perspective.

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