Researching Readers

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Observing the ever-broadening horizon of young adult fiction, those studying or seeking viable territory within the market may be daunted and discouraged—how can one possibly cater to or predict the market to ensure successful publishing endeavors or even simply produce appropriate written material? While synthesizing primary and secondary research about the reading habits and preferences of young adults cannot guarantee successful ventures for writers and publishers, detecting this group's prevalent desires and tendencies is vital to initiate application of correspondent findings. Beginning to understand and produce content young adults crave can be as simple as recognizing emerging literary preferences by tracking overarching themes across young adult subgenres or as complex as synthesizing collections of research to understand which themes avoid, offer, or revise. In the search to satisfy and captivate young adults and ensure the audience receives not merely content they want but content they need, literature providers must first determine what exactly young adults desire: what can be gleaned from direct and secondhand research to determine young adult readers' satisfaction? More specifically, which themes—and aspects which accompany theme such as character inclusion and plot—please or repulse this group? Creating and synthesizing data to answer these questions ensure young adult readers are thoroughly understood and provides them a foundation on which to impact their sector of the world—the content they read impacts their expanding worldview and, by extent, antecedes their interaction, understanding of, and contribution to their environment.

Literature Review

When Antero Garcia was a budding educator, he noticed the near-nonexistent—or at least inadequate—representation in the young adult literature proffered for students (Garcia, 2013). Literature marketed towards his young students of color displayed primarily Caucasian protagonists in situations unlikely to be applicable to his students. (Garcia, 2013). Recognizing

this issue regarding the effect this lack of representation would have on his students and their

interactions with reading, Garcia realized that literature provides a long-lasting effect on young

readers' mindset and how thy judge and interact with their societal sectors (2013). Justifying this

call for diverse representation in young adult literature, Sturm and Michel introduce some

defining trademarks of the young adult's experience from the American Academy of Child and

Adolescent Psychiatry, including the idea that young adults seek to defy and define their

boundaries and viewpoints during this particular stage of life (American Academy of Child and

Adolescent Psychiatry as cited in Sturm and Michel, 2009). So, as young readers interact with

literature sought to facilitate their integral thought evolution, they undeniably—even

subconsciously—merge these literary themes and characterization with their interaction with

society. More specifically, Sturm and Michel suggest that young adults crave and patronize

realistic books—especially those presented in a fantastic, mysterious, or paranormal context

(2009). However, while young adults strive to find literature that represents themselves, they also

use literature as a safe place to 'explore' those different from themselves (Sturm and Michel,

2009). Here, lies the comfort in the contrast. Echoing this idea is another observation examining

the aspects of a young adult subgenre, the problem novel, that have led to its timeless popularity:

The familiar structure creates a sense of comfort that helps balance the stressors in the story,

making them more tolerable (Sturm and Michel, 2009). Although the problem novel is

highlighted here, it seems that young adults seek literary representation in part for its ability to

offer solidarity and present new issues and advice in comfortable, predictable format.

Methods

To gather and analyze data, I engaged in multiple practices simultaneously. However, I

collected evidence from limited audiences: I synthesized peers' Teen Book Fest by the Bay

observations from thirteen peers' comments, and I obtained transcripts of remote digital

interviews from an undisclosed number of local collegiate high school students. Despite the
controlled nature of these interactions, I completed critical observation, synthesized information
from peers' and my own Book Fest observations and Garcia's, Michel's, and Sturm's scholarly
research, and coded young student readers' remote interview responses to identify common
themes. More specifically, I attended Corpus Christi's Teen Book Fest by the Bay where I
attended the First Timers: How We Got Here and For Real sessions and observed young adult
activity and interaction with the book sale and authors' booths. To supplement this critical
observation, I thoroughly read my peers' observations and synthesized this with information
from Garcia's and Sturm and Michel's articles to further explore my focuses: material- and
motif-related factors determining young adults' likelihood to read a book, specifically
overarching genre themes this group desires or dreads and their respective reasoning regarding
theme choices. As I read through peers' observations and coded student responses from the
remote interview questions presented on the interactive Padlet site, I considered any information
that could supplement my overall understanding of these focuses. When coding students'
answers, I ranked responses from most common to least common and calculated the percentage
of student participants that provided each respective response to more accurately represent and
relay common themes. I noted that percentages often amounted to anywhere from 2-20 percent
over 100 percent as students often included multiple valid—and, later, ranked—comments in a
single answer.

Results

Diversity was consistently mentioned as a successful and reoccurring focus in today's
young adult literature. From peers' and my own observations, six authors at the Book Fest
emphasized that diversity and representation are the motifs within their books (Classmates,
2019). Similarly, 42 percent of interviewed students cited "relatability" as the most interesting

aspect of reading; opportunity for imagination was the other common point of interest for these

student readers (Students, personal communication, February 21, 2019). Furthermore, Garcia,

Sturm, and Michel each emphasized that young adults crave diverse books—those that allow

them representation, examination of their own and others' expanding boundaries and goals, and

(the sometimes subconscious) application of these literary themes into their societal

engagements. Similarly, out of the students who offered substantial justification for their book

recommendations for peers, 62 percent of these cited all-age relatability and the inclusion of life

lessons as the qualifiers that determined recommendation (Students, personal communication,

February 21, 2019). The other qualifier was overall interest in plot. To supplement this, authors

on the For Real panel at the Book Fest cited these common young adult issues as motifs in their

young adult books: individual self-esteem perceptions especially regarding media depictions of

weight and its relation to happiness, sexism in both familial relationships and societal

representation of the sexes, and intra-familial differences—especially those related to language

barriers. Peers' observations reflect that multiple other authors participating in the panels also

cited lack of representation in childhood and young adult literature as motivation for their books'

themes (Classmates, 2019). More specifically, in order of most favored subgenre, students'

answers were as follows: fiction—specifically historical, scientific, or romantic: 65 percent;

nonfiction: 25 percent; mystery: 25 percent; and horror: 10 percent (Students, personal

communication, February 21, 2019). Among most relatable themes, students cited depictions of

high-school: 40 percent, societal pressures: 40 percent, and issues specific to young people: 40

percent. Collegiate high school students also specified themes and subgenres they do not like

(Students, personal communication, February 21, 2019). For instance, 72 percent of students

agreed that they are tired of seeing romance stories, and 32 percent do not like stories with

similar plots and/or repeated character types (Students, personal communication, February 21, 2019).

Conclusions

From peers' and my own digital interaction with collegiate high school students and Book Fest observations, it seems that young adult readers crave books that represent a wide variety of people and situations, not books that repeat the same scenarios or depict stereotypical characters (Classmates, 2019). When analyzing more information gathered from these limited interactions to calculate percentages of common answers, the data suggests that young adults are interested in a wide variety of sub-genres, the most popular being historical fiction, followed by scientific fiction, romantic fiction, nonfiction, mystery, and horror books (Students, personal communication, February 21, 2019). Some scholarly authors—such as researchers from the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Garcia, Sturm, and Michel—echo the idea that young adult audiences appreciate and patronize content representative of themselves and situations. Similarly, some Book Fest authors cited thorough and diverse representation as important and defining motifs within their works. Therefore, it seems that themes depicting overused stock characters and/or non-diverse, non-inclusive themes and plot scenarios are not as desirable or, possibly, as successful in the young adult market. Conclusions from this synthesized research could offer a small suggestion for authors seeking to successfully write for the young adult market; the above brief examination of young adults' desired and detested literary themes could potentially offer guidance for authors seeking a place in the relationship between young adults' literary interactions and young adults' increasingly broadened interactions with their societal environments.

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