Do Online Audience Make Bestsellers?

Readers' Emotional Engagement in Young Adult Literature and the Case of John Green's Books

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Abstract

Emotional engagement is central in the experience of reading narrative fiction. As we currently live in the digital era, readers are now able to express these emotions online by writing reviews and engage with other readers and/or authors. Furthermore, authors and publishers have also actively engaged readers online by holding social media campaigns. This is especially true in the genre Young Adult (YA) literature in the 21st century, as the target audience are digital natives who actively go online to share their reading experience. This paper aims to study how emotion is expressed in online book reviews and how it links with the perceived success of YA books. I use sentiment analysis and close reading to investigate the Goodreads reviews of YA author John Green's four published books.

1 Introduction

1.1 YA Literature, Online Community and Emotion

Books are hedonic products: readers read them for personal pleasure and emotional engagement (Clement, Proppe & Rott 2007). This emotional engagement is especially important in the experience of reading narrative fiction, as a reader who is not emotionally engaged shows that the book fails to meet its objective (Mar et al. 2011).

Emotional engagement has also been found as one of the dominant characteristics of a middlebrow – middle-class readers who form the majority of readers studied in this paper (Driscoll 2014). Driscoll (2014) argued that the central goal of middlebrow reading is to emotionally connect not only with the book but also with others.

Furthermore, as we currently live in digital era, readers are now able to share this engagement online; they can write reviews, connect with other fans and/or authors, and even write their own fanfiction, which is an original work that is based on existing popular novels. For example, in an article studying online book clubs, Fister (2005) found that readers – particularly women – join clubs to participate in discussion and express their emotions after reading a book, and ultimately to be a part of a community.

This is especially true for Young Adult (YA) literature. As the target audience are digital natives, the ability of teenagers to engage with other readers and/or authors online is greater than before.

YA literature itself is fluid, and its definition continues to evolve due to changing culture (Cart 2001, Cart 2010, Crowe 1998, Smith 2002). In this study, I use Crowe (1998)'s definition of YA Literature: all genres of literature that are written for and marketed to young adults, as well as the traditional YA age range of 12 to 18 years old (Cart 2001, Cart 2010, Smith 2002). However, it is important to note that there is an ongoing debate among experts about what and who can now be classified as YA.

YA books have seen a sharp rise in popularity, following a decline in the early 1990s (Cart 2010, Koss and Teale 2009). This trend started with the publication of J.K. Rowling's

Harry Potter first book in 1997, which moment was referred to as the start of the second golden age of YA literature (Cart 2010). One bestselling YA book soon replaces another, including vampire saga *Twilight*, dystopian trilogy *The Hunger Games* and contemporary fiction *The Fault in Our Stars (TFiOS)*.

The latter, *TFiOS* by John Green, was published in 2012; it went to become #1 *The New York Times* Bestseller for seven consecutive weeks and was adapted into a movie in 2014 (Swanson 2015). That same year, Nielsen BookScan, a company that tracks print book sales, revealed that the book has sold more than 1.8 million paperback copies (Swanson 2015). In comparison, Nielsen BookScan's 2014 #1 adult fiction bestseller, *Gone Girl* (2012) by Gillian Flynn, was also adapted into a movie but has less than one million paperback copies sold (Swanson 2015). Hence, with this kind of success, no one can argue the rising popularity of YA literature in the publishing world.

As YA literature becomes more popular than ever, a lot of YA authors and publishers now actively try to engage readers by holding campaigns, both offline and online. For example, in 2014 Penguin created a campaign, 'Talk TFiOS', to promote *TFiOS* movie tie-in book version (Studio Output 2014). The campaign encouraged passersby in London to write a note to their loved ones on a blackboard, take a picture of it and share it on Twitter using hashtags #shareyourlove #TFiOS. This campaign resulted in over 200 per cent of target book sales reached and an increase of their online fans by 36 per cent in one day, generating over 4.5 million Twitter retweets and mentions.

Despite the increasing role that YA readers play on the success of a book, research in YA literature has shown little attention on how teenagers' online engagement affects the industry at large. In a study that looked at the state of research on YA literature over the years, Hayn, Kaplan and Nolen (2011) concluded that the bulk of research from 2000 to 2010 focused on book content, and not the teens. Earlier research looked at the controversial content in YA books, such as sex before marriage, homosexuality, and drug and physical abuse (Nimon 1998, Smith 2002). Other research looked at the importance of using contemporary YA books in addition to classic YA books in school to increase teens' reading interest (Bean and Harper 2006, Glaus 2013), while recent research talked

about the current trend of YA literature, such as the rise of dystopian genre (Ames 2013, Koss and Teale 2009).

I have found only two studies that focus on teenagers and their reading experience. Gauthier (2002) argued that teens read to find themselves and a community they can feel they belong to. This shows that teens are not only looking to be emotionally engaged with a book, but also to engage with other readers. A sense of community is shown to be central in teens' reading experience, and while Gauthier has not looked at online communities, I argue that this is still the case.

This is further echoed in a study by Curwood and Fink (2013), who looked at importance of 'online affinity space' – a virtual place in which informal learning occurs – on one teenager's reading experience. They found that the teenager, Jack, went online straightaway after finishing *The Hunger Games*. He admitted that his parents and siblings have not read the book, making him unable to talk about it. Thus, Curwood and Fink concluded that by going online, teenagers want to express their emotions after reading and to find a like-minded community who read the same book.

As the target audience of YA books are digital natives, the role of active readers in the online world may be more significant than what is perceived by the academics at the moment.

1.2 Aims and Significance

As explained in the previous section, readers are actively going online and expressing their emotional engagement after finishing a book. Thus, this paper aims to look at readers' emotional engagement and how this relates with the Goodreads rating of a YA book. I am also interested in how readers react towards online campaigns that authors and publishers' do to promote their books, and whether this is reflected in the readers' reviews.

I would answer these research questions: How does the emotion expressed vary between online reviews of highly-rated and less highly-rated YA books? How emotional is the language used? Do the author and publishers' attempts to engage readers online affect the emotional state of the reviews?

I argue that emotional engagement, mediated by the online world, is linked to the perceived success (higher Goodreads rating) of the books.

This study would analyse a representative sample of readers' Goodreads reviews on YA author John Green's four books: *Looking for Alaska* (2005), *An Abundance of Katherines* (2006), *Paper Towns* (2008) and *The Fault in Our Stars* (2012). I use sentiment analysis and close reading.

In studying readers' emotional engagement on John Green's books, I draw on Driscoll's book on new literary middlebrow, which is a cultural formation characterised by eight key features, two of which are emotional engagement and online mediation (Driscoll 2014). I argue that the readers of John Green are the new literary middlebrows. I would discuss this further in the Methodology section.

That being said, I want to raise the limitation of this study: stronger book content would be more likely to elicit emotional response from the audience, which may influence this study's aim in finding significance of the readers' role in the perceived success of a book. In other words, the relationship found between readers' engagement and a book's success may merely be due to strong content and not because of readers' engagement.

In addressing this limitation, I argue that strong content, which creates certain emotion to the readers, is not enough for a book to be successful. Clement, Proppe and Rott (2007) found that word of mouth is an important aspect in a book's success. Thus, this implies for a book to be successful, readers need not to only engage emotionally with the book, but also to share their reading experience with others.

In establishing this significance, the YA publishing industry, future YA authors, and teachers and librarians would be affected. Firstly, the YA publishing industry may change how they market the books: putting more effort in creating an online community before a book is published. Secondly, this will also affect first-time authors, as publishers may be reluctant to publish new authors with few online fans, despite having written good manuscripts. Thirdly, teachers and librarians may change their tactics in trying to increase teenagers' reading interest by referring them to online communities where they can engage with other readers.

Nevertheless, this may also influence publishers to simply publish a book because it talks about a certain topic that can be debated more in the media, and not necessarily because it has a good story. This, in turn, will affect the quality of YA publication as a whole.

Hence, this phenomenon may take YA literature to the next level, engaging more young readers than ever, or result in the fall of the second golden age of YA literature as the books become more formulaic.

2 Methodology

2.1 Theoretical Framework

As mentioned in the previous section, I would study readers' emotional engagement on John Green's books by looking at Driscoll's work on new literary middlebrow. The eight key features of a middlebrow are middle-class, reverential towards elite culture, entrepreneurial, mediated, feminised, emotional, recreational and earnest (Driscoll 2014). I argue that readers of John Green are the new literary middlebrows. Firstly, his books are read widely by middle-class public. The readers themselves are reverential, or 'aware of the stuff they ought to like', and commercial. This is especially true for readers of *TFiOS*, as its commercial success may influence people to read the book just because everyone else seems to be reading it. Furthermore, the readers' connection towards other readers and/or authors is mediated by institutions such as book clubs and social media. The bulk of the readers are female, and they are emotionally engaged to share their reading experience. They also read books for pleasure. Lastly, they are reading with emphasis on personal growth and social values. The four books reflect a lot of values such as handling adversities, finding and losing love, self-identity, friendship and more.

In this study, I focus on two characteristics of middlebrows: emotion and mediation. Driscoll (2014) stated that reading is an emotional experience, and one of the dominant features of a middlebrow is to be engaged in book clubs – expressing emotions towards a book and having a sense of shared intimacy with other readers. Furthermore, the relationship between readers with other readers and/or authors is mediated largely by the digital world.

I would expand on these characteristics, believing that the shared intimacy extends towards online platform Goodreads, where readers write book reviews as a form of engagement with other readers as well as with the author.

2.2 Data Source

I choose to analyse the Goodreads reviews of John Green's four published books as the representative of YA literature, which characteristics can be seen in Table 1. All four books are contemporary fiction that talk about similar YA issues, such as boy-girl relationship and finding identity, with varying degree of success. This would keep constant several factors – including genre, themes, fan-based community, and author's writing style – which enables us to see the significance of reader's engagement more accurately. Furthermore, the success of *TFiOS*, as shown in previous section of this paper, enables John Green's books to be good representatives among YA literature.

Table 1 **Characteristics of John Green's four YA books as of 24th August 2015**

Title	Published	Goodreads Rating	Goodreads Reviews
Looking For Alaska	Speak, 2005	4.15; 596,776 ratings	37,699 reviews
An Abundance of Katherines	Dutton Books, 2006	3.71; 243,559 ratings	16,091 reviews
Paper Towns	Speak, 2008	3.98; 458,924 ratings	31,936 reviews
The Fault in Our Stars	Dutton Books, 2012	4.36; 1,585,486 ratings	125,720 reviews

The research methodology is divided into two analyses: sentiment analysis and close reading.

I would analyse the books' Goodreads reviews to look at the readers' emotional engagement. Goodreads is the largest social network site for readers (Nakamura 2013). Founded in 2006, Goodreads offers the ability to rate a book on 1 to 5 scale rating (with 5

being the best), leave a review, like and reply to other people's reviews, join a discussion board, and ask and answer unresolved questions about the book. Like Facebook, users are also able to be 'friends' and follow each other's reading activity. Authors have their own authors' profiles, enabling interaction between readers and authors. To date, it has 40 million members, 1.1 billion books and 43 million reviews in its database (Goodreads 2015).

Before choosing to look at Goodreads reviews, I have considered using the books' Amazon reviews or the reviews posted on John Green's website; both would have provided a sizable data for this study (it has about four thousand reviews on each book). Nevertheless, the reviews posted in these two sources are seen to be analytical instead of emotional. This would make it hard to look at readers' emotional engagement, which is the focus of this study. Furthermore, looking at Amazon reviews would limit the readers to those who bought the books there, which is not ideal as it would affect the diversity of the data. Thus, I choose Goodreads reviews as the readers come from different backgrounds; the platform also enables readers to show emotional engagement.

2.3 Analysis

In a study looking at audience emotional engagement and literary festivals, Driscoll (2015) used sentiment analysis and close reading to analyse 20,189 tweets and 921 survey responses from 2013 Melbourne Writers Festival. She explored the significance of emotion and concluded that emotional comments are linked to perceived intimacy between the attendees, presenters and organisers, thus increasing the festival participation.

As I aim to study readers' emotional engagement through Goodreads reviews, her research methods are directly adaptable to be used in this paper.

I would choose a representative sample randomly, starting on 100 reviews on each book and adjusting the number (with an incremental increase of 100) to get the right representative number of reviews (determined by less than 0.3 change on the sentiment analysis's emotional scale), and capping the reviews to 1,000 for each book. Furthermore, I would compare the reviews before and after major events, which include movie release of *TFiOS*

and *Paper Towns,* as well as major online campaigns that are held by John Green and his publishers. I am interested to see whether the author and publishers' attempts to engage the readers affect how readers express their emotional engagement.

In scraping the data from Goodreads itself, I choose to use software OutWit Hub, as this tool enables me to collect and organise data from online sources.

2.3.1 Sentiment Analysis

Sentiment analysis is used to take 'a large body of short textual comments and counts how often positive and negative words occur' (Driscoll 2015). While the analysis has not been used widely in the humanities area, Driscoll (2015) argued that sentiment analysis has offered new ways to 'find meaning in very large user-generated datasets' on the internet, which is directly applicable to this study's data.

Mirroring Driscoll (2015)'s work, I would use the software SentiStrength, one of the commonly used sentiment analysis program, to assess the strength of expressed emotion on a numerical scale (-5 being very negative and 5 being very positive) (Driscoll 2015). This shows the positivity or negativity nature of a written text, enabling us to compare the level of emotion expressed between different books' reviews.

2.3.2 Close Reading Analysis

Nonetheless, while sentiment analysis is able to create a snapshot on the nature of emotions elicited in the reviews, it still has its shortcomings. Driscoll (2015) noted that computational analysis on emotions has a risk in reducing expressions of emotion to a numerical scale, thus eliminating the context of these emotions. Hence, close reading is used to diminish this risk.

I would do close reading on the twenty most positive and negative reviews shown through the sentiment analysis for each book. I would study the reviews' content and language, as well as looking at the number of likes and comments these reviews have.

3 Chapter Outline and Timeline

In outlining my chapters, I follow a thematic structure. The outline of the thesis would go as follow:

Abstract

Introduction

The thesis begins with introducing the research context, its aims and significance, as well as a summary of the results.

Chapter 1: YA Literature, Online Community and Emotion

The first chapter would give an overview of YA literature and how it has continued to evolve over the years, specifically looking at the teenage readers' engagement with authors and/or other readers. I would talk about the target market itself, young adults, and their reading habits, and how teenagers as digital natives are drawn to share their emotions in the online world after reading a book. Then, I would give an overview of John Green's four books, as well as explaining the theoretical framework of this thesis and the methodologies adopted.

Chapter 2: How Publishers and Authors as Producers Engage Readers Online

The second chapter would talk about how author John Green and his publishers act as the producers and try to engage the readers online. I would especially focus on their ways to emotionally engage the readers – for example by creating social media campaigns – as well as their attempts to make the readers commit to buy Green's future books.

Chapter 3: Sentiment Analysis, Close Reading and John Green's Goodreads Book Reviews: How Readers as Consumers Engage Emotionally

The third chapter would talk about the producers' attempts to emotionally engage the readers translate to the consumers' reviews on Goodreads. I would discuss the findings on the sentiment analysis and close reading and show how teenagers react emotionally to the books, as well as how this links towards the perceived success of the books.

Conclusion

Lastly, I would conclude the paper by drawing on the whole thesis, as well as making some assumptions based on this research results on the future of YA Publishing.

The timeline of the thesis can be seen as follow:

Table 2 **Thesis Timeline**

11 September 2015	Submission of Research Proposal
6 October 2015	Submitting rough drafts of chapter 1 and 2 to supervisor, ready to work on data analysis.
3 November 2015	Finish data analysis, main findings are ready to be analysed and discussed.
12 February 2016	Drafts of chapter 1, 2, and 3 are ready to be submitted to the supervisor. Supervisor will note any major concern regarding the bigger picture of the thesis.
23 March 2016	Finalise the thesis draft, including bibliographies. Discuss again with supervisor on the state of the thesis and whether there are major problems.
6 May 2016	Submit final version of thesis.

4 Annotated Bibliography

1. Cart, M, 2010, 'Young adult literature: From romance to realism', *American Library Situation*.

In this book, Cart talked about the history of YA Literature over the years: how YA became a separate genre in the publishing industry in 1967 and the shifting trends that happened in recent years. My research would refer to this book on its rich historical context for YA literature, as well as how culture has influenced its change to cater to the new readers.

2. Curwood, J S & Fink, L, 2013, 'The Hunger Games: Literature, literacy, and online affinity spaces', *Language Arts,* vol. 90, no.6, pp. 417–427.

This study focused on a 13-year-old boy, Jack, and analysed his reading experiences on *The Hunger Games* trilogy. Curwood and Fink found that Jack was keen to jump online to engage with the books and other readers. My research would expand on this finding, making a generalisation that teenagers are eager to be a part of an online community to share their reading experiences.

3. Crowe, C, 1998, 'Young Adult Literature: What Is Young Adult Literature?', *The English Journal,* vol. 88, pp. 120–122.

As YA literature continues to evolve due to changing culture, in this study Crowe summarised the history of YA literature and redefined what YA literature is. He concluded that the current definition of YA literature is books of all genres that are published since 1967, written for and marketed to YA. It was year where S.E. Hinton's was published – the first book written for teenagers. In this research, I use his definition of YA literature, as it ties well with the historical context of YA literature over the years.

4. Driscoll, B, 2014, 'The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-first Century', *Palgrave Macmillan.*

In this book, Driscoll talked about how to classify 21st century middlebrow, and its significance in cultural formations. She argued that there are eight key characteristics of middlebrow: middle-class, reverential, commercial, feminised, mediated, recreational, emotional and earnest. I base my research's theoretical framework on this, arguing that the readers of John Green are middlebrows. I particularly focus the characteristics of emotion and mediation, which emphasises on the need for middlebrow readers to engage emotionally with other readers in the digital world.

5. Driscoll, B, 2015, 'Sentiment analysis and the literary festival audience', *Continuum (ahead-of-print)*, pp.1–13.

This study explored the relationship between audience emotional engagement and literary festival. Driscoll analysed survey responses and tweets from the 2013 Melbourne Writers Festival using sentiment analysis and close reading. By studying the engagement, she concluded that emotion is significant to the perceived intimacy between participants and organisers. This article showed that her research methods are useful in studying audience engagement from a large text of data. The methods are adaptable to be used in my research, as I aim to study readers' emotional engagement from online book reviews.

6. Fister, B, 2005, 'Reading as a Contact Sport: Online Book Groups and the Social Dimensions of Reading', *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, pp. 303–309.

Fister explored the notion of book groups as a popular way for readers to come together and share their reading experiences. She argued that book groups can be extended online, enabling people from different countries to become a member of online book groups. She studied the members of an online reading group 4MysteryAddicts and found that a sense of community is central in reading experience. While she mainly talked about adult females as the readers, I would expand on this finding and argue that teenagers also go online to share their reading experience.

7. Gauthier, G, 'Whose Community? Where Is the YA in YA Literature?' *The English Journal*, vol. 91, pp. 70–76.

Gauthier drew on the concept of community in YA readers, and argued that teenagers read because they want to find themselves in the books. That being said, books for YA market are written by adult authors, creating a distinct age difference between the authors and readers. Thus, this may make teen readers unable to connect with the book's content. In studying YA books' contents and their reception, he concluded that authors need to write what teenage readers want to read, as this will then create a community where teenagers can connect with the book and also other teenagers. I rely on this study as it shows the importance of community in YA reading experience. I would extend on this argument, saying that online community is important for teenagers to share their reading.

8. Koss, M D & Teale, W H, 2009, 'What's Happening in YA Literature? Trends in Books for Adolescents', *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy,* vol. 52, no.7, pp. 563–572.

Koss and Teale analysed the trends found in YA books, including characteristics such as genres, descriptive features, subject matters and writing styles. They found that the majority of the work is contemporary realistic fiction with white European American characters dominating; novels were written mostly on themes of finding oneself and dealing with major life changes. This study is particularly useful in painting the context and recent trends of YA literature as the framework of my research. Furthermore, the overall trends of YA literature that are found in this study are also found in John Green's four books, which supports my choice in choosing them as the representative books of YA literature.

9. Mar, R A, Oatley, K, Djikic, M, & Mullin, J, 2011, 'Emotion and narrative fiction: Interactive influences before during, and after reading', *Cognition & Emotion,* vol. 25, no. 5, pp. 818–833.

The article examined the relationship between emotion and one's reading experience. The authors found that the emotion that readers experience after reading a book may influence them to behave in certain ways, showing that emotion is central to reading narrative fiction. The findings of this article complement my research argument that readers' emotional engagement is important to perceived success of a book.

10. Nakamura, L, 2013, 'Words with Friends: Socially Networked Reading on Goodreads', *PMLA,* vol. 128, no. 1, pp. 238–243.

Nakamura argued that in this digitised era, online community is a key factor to one's reading experience, and we can no longer separate one from the other. It is normal for people to ask, 'What are you reading?' and this conversation has been shifted online. Nakamura highlighted the importance of Goodreads to a reader's overall reading experience, as well as laying out the characteristics of Goodreads. This is especially useful for my research as the data source I used is Goodreads book reviews, thus I

would be referring to this paper on the significance of Goodreads in creating online reading community.

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