Qualitative Research Proposal

The New Normal: Studying the impact of health-related young adult novels, and health communication in younger generations.

3/9/2018

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# Abstract:

Young-adult literature is books whose main character is in the young adult age range. They are marketed towards twelve to twenty-year-old readers. As our culture has been changing, the topics addressed in young adult fiction have been growing in complexity. This proposal focuses on both media studies and health communication, and the crossover impact of young adult fiction on the improvement of health communication among the current young adult generation by looking at books such as *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green and others.

*Keywords:* Young Adult, Fiction, Health Communication, Media Effects, Suicide, Terminal Illness, Mental Health, YA

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## INTRODUCTION:

*The Fault in Our Stars*, *the Hunger Games*, *Twilight*, *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Chances are, you’ve read one of these books, or at least seen a media adaptation of it. Current Young Adult (YA) books are dealing with deeper subject matter, and more intense situations than ever before. Not many people understand the power of YA, but most of us can recall a book that made an impact on us, both recently, and when we were younger. It may be the same book, or it may be a variety of books. This is that power. When you are a parent, you will think back on books that impacted you, and share those with your children. Young Adult literature has been increasing in popularity in the last five years. An article in the Atlantic that discussed why adults are reading young adult books stated approximately 55 percent of today’s YA readers are adults. According to a new Pew Research Center study, young Americans are more voracious readers than other age demographics. Eighty percent of citizens ages 18-29 have read a book in the last year, compared to 71 percent of those ages 30-49, and 68 percent for those ages 50-64. We study video games, we study movies, we study TV shows and we study music. Why aren’t we studying reading? YA books have increased in complexity over the last decade, and now deal with heavy topics like rape, gun violence, mental illness, and terminal illness to name a few. Research is lacking for how these types of book affect the generation reading them.

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

This proposal focuses on both media studies and health communication, and the crossover impact of young adult fiction on the improvement of health communication among the younger generation. The problem is that many scholars have not considered young adult fiction an influential area of study, but over the course of the last five to ten years, young adult literature has increased in literary complexity, and has begun to tackle more and more complicated issues. Our world has begun to expose children to more stimuli than ever before, and there is no way to shield them in the age of social media and 24 hour news cycles. Since young adult literature has grown in both complexity and popularity, it deserves to be studied for the impact it is having on the younger generation, just the same as we study other media.

### SPECIFIC PURPOSE:

I intend to tackle the impact that books that address health concerns, like mental and terminal illnesses, has on the young readers who read them. Though YA books are now tackling a wide variety of topics, I think the most pressing are the books tackling mental and physical health concerns. These books that I chose to focus on are The Fault in Our Stars by John Green, Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher, and Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky. All three books I chose were on the best-sellers list in the genre and have all been adapted to either a television show or movie. I will not be tackling other books in the genre, even if they contain other sensitive issues, such as rape, illness, or death. The genre of YA is too broad, so in order to try and get the best results possible, I will be narrowing the scope of my study to focus on these realistic YA fiction books with a focus mental health and terminal illness.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

Through this study, I hope to find a connection between these types of books, and the improvement in the health communication ability of the people who read them. The study will take people who have read these books, both recently, and when they were younger, and see how they respond to various questions dealing with topics of sensitive natures, such as, “How comfortable would you be talking to someone who admitted to attempting suicide?” and these questions will be asked to people who have read the books, as well as those who have not in order to build a baseline foundation. Currently, there is a solid body of work on improving health communication, and opening dialogues about sensitive issues like this, but no research has been done with the connection to books that deal with these issues head on. Researchers have concluded that while reading readers begin to form a bond with the characters, and experience situations as though they themselves are actually involved in the situations. With this framework in mind, young adults who read these books will feel as though they had a friend who dealt with mental health issues and would therefore feel more prepared to enter into a dialogue about these issues, either with other people or on behalf of itself. I believe that this work is important because topics like depression, suicide, terminal illnesses, and the whole discussion on the right to die continue to be something that people are not willing to openly discuss. Many young adults struggle in silence and choose to take drastic means because they feel like they no one understands them, or they do not feel comfortable reaching out to get help. As adolescents read more books like the ones mentioned above, I believe that our mental health will begin to become a more common topic in society, and as these young people grow up and start their own families, they will be more willing to discuss these issues openly and raise their children with a new outlook on our overall health and wellbeing.

### LITERATURE REVIEW:

#### Theoretical Framework:

In this study, I will be using a few theories and criticisms to guide my research. Each of the theories gives credence to what I am hoping to discover with my research and can help my research transition into actual results throughout the study.

##### Para-Social Relationship Theory

The effects of parasocial relationships have been studied in many genres, but not yet in Young Adult fiction. Horton and Wohl were the first to use the terms "parasocial interactions" (PSI) and "parasocial relationships" (PSR). Their research related to television and how viewers build relationships with the television personality. (Horton and Wohl). This has also been shown to be applicable in social media with the followers feeling a relationship with celebrity they are following. This effect can be applied to young adult fiction as well. As the reader follows the journey of the main character, they begin to feel like the character is their friend. They begin to think of them as a real person, and their relationship will make the emotional impact of the novel much deeper.

##### Narrative Transportation Theory

This theory, based in phycology, deals with the idea that when people lose themselves in a story, their views and perceptions change to reflect that story. Deighton, Romer & McQueen (1989) posited this theory arguing that a story invites story receivers into the action it portrays and, as a result, makes them lose themselves in the story. This theory provides framework for the impact that young adult books have on their readers.

##### Reader-Response Criticism

This literary criticism looks at the reader, and their response to a particular work. Reader-response criticism argues that literature should be viewed as a performance in which each person creates their own, unique, text-related performance. This means that each reader can take away something unique and different from each book that is read. The reader is active in the process of reading, and is adding their personal feelings and expectations into the medium which changes how it impacts them.

##### Cultivation Theory

The basis of this theory is that media shapes how we view social reality. Traditionally, this theory has been applied to television, but can also be used to explain the impact of books. What we watch shapes how we view the world. In the case of my study, the media shapes how we view illness and how we interact with illness. I believe that this theory will help prove that interacting with these characters will help shape young adult’s view and interact with health situations.

### Themes and Trends in Research:

Harry Potter, the book that brought focus back to children’s and young adult literature. The research done on an fMRI study on people who have read Harry Potter is what triggered this current prospective study. If that book series showed an impact on the tolerance and empathy of the generation that read them then it is possible other books will have similar effects. Though YA books are still a relatively an untouched topic in communication research, books are covered in other disciplines. According to one study, “Fictional narrative experience may have an important and profound impact on how people feel and behave in their daily lives.” (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013, p. 1). There’s a reason that people are still reading and continue reading through multiple generations. Researchers have noticed a shift over the last 10 years in young adult fiction, and slowly people are starting to research this though people are still drawn to research on the visual media component more than the written word. But people are still quite divided on whether or not young adult fiction warrants real research. Petrone et al (2015) actually created a “youth lens” by which to analyze young adult books through for further research though it is lacking in real connections to young adult issues currently.

#### The Featured Texts

For Thirteen Reasons Why, there is currently no academic writing on the novel itself, despite being out for over 10 years before Netflix decided to adapt the book into a television series. Once the series wrapped earlier in 2017, there is currently only one piece of published work on the television series. Researchers used Google Trend to find out what the trending searches related to 13 Reasons Why were and compared them to the amount of suicide searches they would anticipate without that show being released. (Ayers et al). The only academic work is a warning that the visual version of the text had begun a trend of suicides and actually could be harmful to the younger generation. In the article, the researchers barely mention the written work, despite the large amount of changes that were made for the big screen. The Fault in Our Stars is another book that was around long before it’s media counterpart, but both seem to be very absent in the academic realm. There were two articles written in medical journals about the book and it’s portray of cancer and cancer support groups. Lastly, Perks of Being a Wallflower has the largest presence online. Many researchers have dived into this book, or included it in their research, because it touches on LGBTQ struggles in both print and movie version. This book broke many boundaries when it was released and was banned from many schools because of it.

#### Research in Reading and Health Communication

The bulk of the research that is available about young adult fiction comes from either an educator’s point of view, or the view of someone trying to give YA a place. The research heavily focuses on the discussion of whether or not YA had any literary merit, and where it’s merit actually comes from. Though looking at the recent YA books, “Overall trends in subject matter included a shift away from coming-of-age stories to a focus on books with themes of fitting in, finding oneself, and dealing with major life change.” (Koss and Teale p. 569). The books are changing, and researchers are taking note, “Young adult literature provides rich literary material for exploring issues and dilemmas of the human experience as perceived by the young... There are many young adult books… that deal with... young people sorting through and confronting the issue of being "different," of finding their place in a sometimes confusing and diverse world.” (Bontempo, p.31). The changes are getting more people to notice that these books are no longer just fluff. But overall, reading has been found to cause change in people who read. According to a research study about the increase in empathy because of reading the researchers found “the current study has shown that the effects do not present themselves immediately, but that the effects are guided by an absolute sleeper effect. Theoretically, fictional narratives are more likely to influence behavior over the course of a week rather than directly after the narrative experience because the process of transformation of an individual needs time to unfold.” (Bal and Veltkamp p.9). In a study done by Howard, they look at how pleasure reading in young adults effects their identity constructions, and “many teens readily acknowledged that pleasure reading is part of the ‘success spiral’ and recognized that teens who read for pleasure will likely enjoy greater success in school by developing their general literacy skills including reading comprehension, vocabulary, and verbal fluency” (Howard p.49). This isn’t the only important finding, Howard (p.54) also found that “the text acts as a stimulus, encouraging the reader to formulate a hypothesis about what the text means, but no text can guarantee the type of response evoked. The text does not control the reader; readers make choices as they read texts.”

#### In The Classroom

Teachers are beginning to bring YA books into the classroom to help them teach sensitive issues in a way the students may relate to. In a study conducted to look at teaching *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson and seeing if it would lower people’s rape myth acceptance, and “the finding of significantly lower levels of rape myth acceptance in both boys and girls who participated in the *Speak* unit supports the efficacy of the intervention.” (Malo-Juvera p. 420). This book is about a young girl who is raped the summer before starting high school and cannot find a way to tell anyone. This book is a great example of rape culture and how rape can impact someone’s life. In a study by Bean and Moni, the researchers look at using critical literary stance in the classroom to engage students, and found that “through discussion of such choices, students may also better understand how they are being constructed as adolescents in the texts and how such constructions compare with their own attempts to form their identities” (Bean and Moni p. 639). Overall, these young adult books have had a positive effect in the classroom and help mold young minds. It is plasable to believe this would happen outside of the classroom as well.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

***RQ1:*** How does reading about health issues, controlling for book type and age, impact the communication ability of the reader?

***RQ1a:*** Does reading about a sensitive health topic improve the reader’s ability to communicate about that topic in real life?

METHODS:

### SAMPLE:

For the textural analysis, I will be focusing on three young adult books. I have chosen my books according to a few qualifications. First, I want the main character in the book to be between the ages of 13 and 18. Secondly, the book needed to rank on the best seller list for young adult fiction at least one time, proving that the book is popular and read by a large amount of people. Thirdly, I wanted to choose a novel that had a visual media adaptation of it. This means the book was popular enough on its own to warrant someone adapting it to the screen. Lastly, I need the book to be focused on a health issues, specifically, to narrow the field a mental health issue, though one will focus on terminal illness which I think has ties to traditional medical issues as well as mental health struggles. The three books that have been chosen according to these details are The Fault in Our Stars by John Green, which deals with a young female protagonist who knows she has a terminal illness and is trying to live her life as normally as possible with the time she has left. The second book is Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher, which is a book that chronicles 13 reasons why a young girl decided to take her own life, and the struggles she faced. Lastly, I chose Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky which deals with a young man who tries to take his own life and ends up in a mental hospital and learns more about life and mental illness through the patients there.

For this qualitative survey, I intend to focus on young adult, in college, primarily 18 to 25 years old. I chose this age because they will be more easily accessible, as well as will have fewer restrictions from the IRB due to being a less sensitive population at over 18. Since the subject matter of some questions in the qualitative survey will be dealing with sensitive and triggering material, the study participants will need to be of consenting age. Though the study would have a deeper impact with the target demographic of 12 to 18, which young adult books are written for, this population is a protected group of individuals. There would be much stricter guidelines, and many of the hypothetical health questions may be too sensitive for that population which is why at this time I decided to exclude the younger sample participants. The sample will be gathered from two sources, the population of students at University of Colorado at Colorado Springs (UCCS), as well as the social media of various students. I will ask professors in various departments at UCCS, including the English, History and Communication departments to offer the survey to their students, and will be urging them to offer extra credit if possible. I will also include a financial incentive for people who participate in the survey. 10 of the respondents will be awarded a $10 amazon gift card. At the end of the survey, a screen will encourage people to share the survey on social media for an additional entry to win a gift card. The sharing will be on online networking sites like Facebook and Goodreads. In this way, we will be getting a random snowball sample from referrals from other participants. I plan to submit my plan for the survey to the IRB, with the complete questions and method for sampling the population. I will also include at the top of the survey both campus and community resources for anyone struggling with mental or physical health issues, so if any items are triggering, the participants will know where to go for help. The survey will be completely optional and completely anonymous so participants can chose to leave if at any time they feel uncomfortable. For the survey to be acceptable, the anticipated number of responses will be 150 for the online survey portion of the study, if not more. This way we should have a solid foundation of individuals who are active readers, as well as those who have read the books being used in the first level of the study.

### DESIGN:

For this study, I will be doing a two main steps. For the first level, I will be doing a textural analysis on the three books that have been chosen to reflect the most popular and impactful books of this type available over the last five to ten years. The books used in this study are The Fault in Our Stars by John Green, Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher, and Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky. All three of these books ranked on best seller lists, and have been adapted into a media version, either a television show or a movie. From these qualifications, we can assume that these books have had an impact on their readers by the number of sales as well as the interest in adapting them for the big screen. Through the textural analysis, I will be reading the books for a few key themes which I will note, including the urge to be normal, the support surrounding the character, the feeling of being alienated, and openness on the discussions of the illnesses in question.

For the second part of the study, I will be taking the trends and themes that appeared through the textural analysis and developing a survey for responses from readers. The survey will ask a variety of questions in order to help prevent the participants from figuring out what the purpose of the survey will be. We will gather demographic data, as well as asking about their reading habits, genre preferences, and their willingness to discuss some topics, as well as if they have used drugs, or drink. We will structure the survey to have the demographic questions, and the questions about health issues, drug use, and other questions to help us keep the purpose from being obvious, and then will end with asking the person if they have read 7-10 different popular young adult books in the past few years, and at what age they read them. Lastly, the survey will ask if the people would like to be contacted for future research in this same topic. The surveys will be send out from professors in various departments including history, English, communication and psychology departments targeting both undergraduate and graduate students. Once all the responses are gathered, we will analyze the responses in relation to if they have read the key books, and how their open their responses to the health communication questions were.

### DATA ANALYSIS

#### Textural Analysis

For the textural analysis, we will be analyzing the books for three core situations and how they are handled in the books. The core three items we’ll be looking at are:

1. Does the character strive to have a “normal” life, despite the health issues they are facing?
2. When the illness is discussed, does the character have a sense of isolation or abandonment?
3. What kind of support does the character get from those around them?

For each of these situations, we will look at if and when it happens these situations, and how they are handled. We will see if the themes of normal, isolation, or support come up multiple times in the book and note how often they are mentioned. Lastly, we look at what the takeaway message is from each of the books. All of the results of this analysis will then inform the choice of questions in the qualitative survey.

#### Qualitative Survey

For the qualitative survey, I will be coding the responses to each of the open-ended questions looking for trends in each of the various questions. The responses will be open-ended, so we will be looking for the positive responses to the questions, and key words such as open, honest, willing, understanding, empathy. We will compare the responses of those who did not read the key books, to those who did, and look for differences, and especially looking for a more positive response in those who read the books. Those who read the books will hopefully provide more in-depth answers, as well as overall have a more caring tone to them. We will focus on open ended questions such and reactions to books they have read like, “What was the last YA book that had an impact on you?” or “Can you think of a YA book that made you cry?” Lastly, we will ask questions about specific books that were used in the earlier textural analysis, “Have you read the Fault in our Stars? How did you feel at the end of the novel?” Lastly, to help gauge the impact of reading, and reading these types of books on health communication we will ask questions about hypothetical heath situations such as “How comfortable would you be talking to someone who admitted to attempting suicide?”

#### Overall

Once the survey results come in, we will use the impact of the responses and the way respondents reacted to the hypothetical health situation questions to make connections between books and how they affect people, and how people communicate about health issues. We will use the current research in the realm of health communication for markers that relate to open health communication and attempt to see if any of the responses that we coded relate to these.

# BUDGET/TIMELINE

## Projected Costs

For this project, the projected costs are quite minimal. Since I’ve not doing any coding, I will not need a team of coders for reliability. I will require the use of a paid SurveyMonkey account which would be about $25 a month, so for the length of the project that would be $125, and then I will need to cover incentive to encourage people to participate in the survey, and since I will be giving away 10 $10 amazon gift cards I will need $100 to cover the purchase of this incentive. My total projected costs with the inclusion of incidentals and printing requirements, I should only need $300 for my study.

## Timeline

For this project, we are looking at a timeline of about 5 months. In the first two months, I will conduct the literary analysis, looking for the key items and themes in the three books, and then in the third month, we will begin the process of writing out the questions for the survey, using the themes and key items featured in the book to inform the question writing process. Once the survey is complete, and passes IRB approval, hopefully in that same month. The fourth month will involve getting the survey out on UCCS’s campus and encouraging students to share the survey on social media. My hope is to encourage various Facebook pages from campus, like The Graduate Communication Student Association to share the link on their Facebook as well. Once the month ends, we will look at the completed number of surveys and decide if we should extend the time or wrap up the responses. The final month will be spent doing data analysis, and writing the final research paper, and preparing for the defense of the thesis research.

# PROJECTED OUTCOMES

Overall, I believe that the outcome with reject the null hypothesis and will support my research hypothesis. I think reading will impact the health communication skills of the people reading them, especially those of a younger generation that read these books while still in the technical young adult stage. During a foundational time in your life, connecting to characters and forming bonds while they go through some intense health issues will impact your ability to feel strongly about health issues, and feel confident in communicating them. One of the major barriers to health communication is the “loss of words” or the feeling of being completely unprepared to discuss the issue. The other finding that I’m expecting is that readers of these books will be from all ages, possibly even older than 25. Though I am trying to focus my survey on the 18-25 crowds, with a snowball sample using social media and the campus, it will be completely possible we will get people outside of our intended age range. I believe that we will see the books having an impact on all the ages.

## Areas for Future Research

This qualitative study is just the beginning for this research. In the same vein, the next step would to be to perform a quantitative experiment having two groups, one reading a key book like Thirteen Reasons Why, and the other group reading a different book, and then issuing them surveys before, halfway, and at the end of their reading period. I think that research project, in conjunction with this one would give us more definitive proof of the effect of these novels directly on how people communicate about health issues. Once this study is completed, research in young adult literature will not have even scratched the top of the iceberg. There are so many opportunities to see why these books are so popular and are so meaningful. YA books have many areas of research, because they have so many different plot points and genres. Some YA books have great messages, and some have amazing mold breaking characters. From gender roles in young adult books, different portrayals of sexuality, female characters and their personality and YA books keep getting more interesting and more diverse every day. Looking at what in the world is driving the need for more complex books, and more diverse lead characters. How do these books affect those who read them, and are their lasting impacts? Some may not be positive as well. Reading these books at an impressionable age has the potential to affect the individual’s perceptions and values. Young Adult books, though underrated in academic view, have large potential and deep meanings that can be explored.

# CONCLUSION

Overall, the reason we still write books, buy books, read books is because reading impacts us in a way that no other media does. Written word has a completely different impact because the action happens in your imagination. As we saw, researchers have paved the way to show that not only are YA books complex and challenging now, but they have seen changes in people just by reading, and by discussing these books in a classroom setting. The roadmap is there to find out if these books can make an effect on a specific portion of our culture, and the stigmatism around mental health is the perfect place to start.

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