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## A Shared Literary Experience

### Youth Reading, Creativity and Virtual Performances

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With the consumption of young adult (YA) literature by young adults position in the center within the novelties of the publishing world, we must consider that this phenomenon is associated with other practices involving young people. In this regard, we need to recognize that an important part of this literature's success coincides with the emergence of spaces on the Web where young people around the globe write and create videos to give their opinion on recent releases. YA literature also has its own broadcasting means, redesigned from traditional marketing strategies. Books for young people circulate on virtual spaces which spread literary novelties: literary blogs, YouTube channels dedicated to recommending new book releases, communities, closed Facebook groups, and other social media like Twitter and Instagram.

For some years, on the YouTube platform, a group of book lovers have been occupying a space; they are what are known as *booktubers*, and they present and review books for young people to their peers.

So, who are these booktubers? They constitute a virtual global community which shares the pleasure of reading fictional works. They record videos, discussing literature and the actions related to the book: from the desires and expectations around a new release, to ways of acquiring, collecting and storing books. They complain about the lack of money, time and space, poor editions, and the excess of novelties. They feel confident enough to recommend books or

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authors. They do not follow professional critics or specialist opinions. Besides reviewing the books, they show their personal libraries and offer recommendations as to how future booktubers should become initiated in booktubing.

Like the age group targeted by YA literature, this is a large social collective which brings together adolescents and young people – both male and female– aged between 11 and 30 years; and although the booktuber phenomenon is originally an Anglo-Saxon movement it has moved to different territories, firmly taking root in Spain, Mexico, Colombia and Argentina. In Argentina in particular, the *Feria del Libro* (book fair) presents a novelty every year, and each edition increasingly targets young readers. In fact, for its 42<sup>nd</sup> edition, the *Feria* hosted the First International Booktuber Meeting, with participating young readers from Chile, Peru, Colombia, Argentina and other Spanish-speaking countries.<sup>1</sup>

Other activities that are gathering supporters among the younger public, compatible with the YouTube platform, are booktalks (debates about books involving different readers) and book hauls (presentations of new publications and the most recent purchases made by booktubers themselves).

### Literature consumption by youngsters

In recent years, the literature choice for the younger audience has undergone a marked transformation. Simultaneously with classic authors –Charlotte Brontë (1847), Jane Austen (1813), Mark Twain (1876), Jules Verne (1865) and Daniel Defoe (1719), to mention only a few– a new wave of dystopian, romantic, fantastic and mythological works has emerged. This type of literature, which is experiencing huge growth in terms of publication numbers, is referred to as YA (Young Adult), a term coined by the media and the readers themselves.<sup>2</sup>

For their part, publishers, aware of how this growth drives the production of the book market, tend to have a label or a specialist in youth literature with which they release at least one or two copies per month.<sup>3</sup>

What subject do they tackle? These fictional works nearly always have adolescents or young people as the protagonists and are presented in the saga format, thus ensuring continuity in the story. The stories tend to portray interpersonal relations –friendship, companionship,

sentimental relationships– in a “positive light”, and some even address more complex themes like illness, bullying, unwanted pregnancy and sexual abuse.<sup>4</sup>

Which youth literature classics, if published today for the first time, would fit into YA literature? Possibly *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger (1951), *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen (1813), *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960), *The Outsiders* by Susan Hinton (1967), or *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding (1954).

Who are the readers? From the age of 12, young people consume these books, and although some believe the upper limit of the age range is 17 –given the subjects discussed, the characters and the narrative core– many adults also enjoy the books. In particular, in a study conducted among young Argentinians aged over 18 years old, a large proportion of those surveyed had recently read titles within this genre (Ravettino Destefanis, 2016).

It is a niche market made up of a loyal and socially active audience, keen to discover new experiences. Evidently, these YA book readers constitute a coveted group in the publishing industry. According to a study by Bowler (2012), these young people are: “the first to adopt”, for example e-book reading; “committed”, since if the book they are seeking is not available in electronic format they buy it in print; “loyal”, because they tend to read a favourite author’s previous books; and “socially active”, as although more than half of those surveyed admitted to not taking part in a reading group, they are active on social networks and often receive recommendations from friends.<sup>5</sup>

Some believe that it is sufficient to regard *literature* as a creative reading offer; that it is an art form without adjectives. That is to say that there is no need, except for the commercial aspect, to categorize it into an age group. Although literature aimed at younger readers has its idiosyncratic marks, “literature” is a whole, and this young group should not need reading material marked by a transition from childhood to adulthood.

Two factors define the YA genre. One is the commercial aspect seeking to renew its image and stop being labelled “juvenile”, which is deemed antiquated, to announce a novelty in the market which offers something different. The other defining factor of YA literature is the need to segment a group of young readers, 18-year-olds and over, to a

product defined by the themes of love, sex and suspense in romantic novels, epic sagas and vampirism (Perriconi, 2015).

What success do these books have? To answer this question, the scope of young people's expectations should be broadened to a space where images, hopes, wishes and experiences converge; in essence, we must *decipher young people's imaginary world*. Reconstructing the act of reading implies understanding how each community has genre classification systems which differentiate between fiction and truth, but also between the metaphorical and ironic discourse (Chartier, 1999); an imaginary group which works on plots, themes and characters, and simultaneously constitutes them.

### Booktubers as acting readers

Can booktubers be considered "acting readers"? Yes, insofar as they *interpret their reading*: they enthusiastically prepare their performances, resorting to words, gestures, images and sounds. They construct eloquent stories. Their representations have become more sophisticated over time, as one can tell by looking at their trajectory, seeing how they have bettered themselves in terms of creativity and effort. They have turned their practice into a trade, and in some cases their efforts yield results every month. Their progress is greatly owed to their charisma, ingenuity, wit and histrionics. Several of these young people read the book they recommend in its original language; reading in both English and Spanish allows them to offer even more sophisticated literary critiques. They create stories from the ones they read. They turn a book into an audio-visual performance. Nevertheless, in their representations, a personal style emerges that ends up resembling someone else's style. Booktubers share their similar tastes for literature, but also share the style they use to represent their critiques: looking at the performances alone, one will notice that although they are original, the style is shared throughout the community.<sup>6</sup>

The multiplicity of virtual resources to which they have access means that their confessional practices rapidly spread and become well-known on the Web. As a sociological phenomenon, we need to consider how young people, by becoming involved in the sphere of digital communication, make the *digitalized social context* the centre of their life experience. As a result, a new youth identity appears, constituted by the

pleasure of reading and the virtual community experience. In short, new *ways of being and acting in the world of young people* emerge as a result of the *literary and cultural consumption* that is shared and broadcasted.

The previously set ways of communicating reading material have changed. We could go so far as to state that booktubers operate as real *reading facilitators*. Likewise, they have opened a direct communication channel between writers, publishers and readers. As such, the dynamic imposed by these active readers has enabled publishers to approach them with a sales strategy for their books, leaving the traditional broadcasting channels to the side and teaming up with these young readers, sending them copies to review and inviting them to specific literary events such as book presentations and signings.

Another contemporary example uniting readers and producers is the fanfiction phenomenon. For example, fans of the *Twilight* series wrote a blog which gave rise to *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James<sup>7</sup> –which young people from the survey themselves mentioned having read, but to a lesser extent (Ravettino Destefanis, 2016).

Another contemporary practice which gives an account of the alliance between young readers and publishers is the recent initiative by the producers of the *Twilight* saga to encourage the spread of stories in order to continue it.<sup>8</sup> Could this modus operandi not be considered the modern version of the participation of 18<sup>th</sup>-century novel readers who sent letters to authors? Even the blog novel phenomenon, which has already been in the virtual literary circle for several years, is characterized by the active –and at times, collaborative– participation of its readers and by the immediacy between the writing and the publication as it is made up of releases. In this regard, if until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, newspapers were a first step towards the publishing of novels in a book format, from the 21<sup>st</sup> century onwards, Internet publications could be fulfilling that same role.<sup>9</sup> In short, readers' participation in the creative process and the periodic release of literature appear to go back a long time.

New information and communication technologies favour the emergence of the autobiographical story of the booktuber. Since the very start, the media have modified the way in which information circulates, demanding a redefinition of *the discursivity and the appropriation of contents*. While in the past, newspapers, radio and television provided

a space for the reinterpretation of old discourses and reports, today it is the Internet which has that role. In the same way that a self-report –the creation of the I reader– emerges in the booktubers’ performances, an *interpretative community* (De Certeau, 1996) appears, which keeps a reduced space for traditional individual and silent reading, and revolves more around participative and collaborative reading. In this regard, digital technology does not only refer to the novelty of mobile devices and appliances, but also to new ways of perceiving and of language, to new sensitivities and writing which gradually alter the experience of reading (Martin Barbero 2005).

In short, the booktuber phenomenon embodies the willingness to create a community that is looking for common attributes with other users/readers, to establish a conversational dynamic and present the act of reading as a fundamental social act of its own accord. That is to say, the identity-related axis in the self-report discourse is produced in the performative practice itself and in the creation of bonds which generate common, virtual and global narratives whereby books and reading operate as a connection with “the other”.

#### Notes

1. The cultural event geared towards adolescent readers (which brought together booktubers, bloggers and bookstagrammers) was boosted by the international presence of young writers for several days at the fair. <<http://www.el-libro.org.ar/internacional/propuestas-culturales>> [Accessed 31 January 2016].
2. Literature for Young Adults, abbreviated as YA or Ya-Lit, is gaining knowledge all over the world and can be defined as literature for young people (12 to 17 years old), despite having many readers from other age groups (over 18 years). It separates itself from children’s literature by leaving aside the ingenuity of the protagonists and concentrating on more adult themes.
3. According to the publishing company V&R Editoras, James Dashner, author of the *The Maze Runner* series, had sold 6,500,000 copies worldwide by last year. The first two books of the trilogy already have a film version, and the adaptation of the next book into a film is underway. The best-selling saga-film version dynamic is being repeated in other YA titles around the world, for instance *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games* and *The 5th Wave*. For its part, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* by J. K. Rowling, first published nearly 20 years ago, set the standard for this new youth trend. SOURCE: Oliva, Lorena. (2016). Literatura Young Adults: ¿negocio o pasión por leer? *La Nación*, 08 mayo 2016 [online]. Available at <<https://goo.gl/lxwTrO>>. [Accessed 31 January 2016].

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4. Oliva, Lorena. (2016). Literatura Young Adults: ¿negocio o pasión por leer? *La Nación*, 08 May 2016 [online]. Available at <<https://goo.gl/lxwTrO>>. [Accessed 31 January 2016].
5. Bowker Market Research. (2012). Young Adult Books Attract Growing Numbers of Adult Fans. Bowker, 13 September 2012 [online]. Available at <<https://goo.gl/NUglmH>>. [Accessed 31 January 2016].
6. As an example of renowned booktubers and pioneers in the trade, we can mention Christine from PolandBananasBooks, with over a hundred thousand followers, and JesseTheReader, who has exceeded 50 thousand subscribers. At the following link, a blogger recommends Argentinian booktubers <<http://goo.gl/aeOcNG>>. [Accessed 31 January 2016].
7. The idea came about between 2009 and 2011 as a fanfiction piece written by *Twilight* followers, one of whom was E.L. James. Access to these texts was free and could be gained through fanfiction.net. The British writer, who based her story on the protagonists of Meyer's novel, shared the chapters she wrote, which eventually became the trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey*. At the beginning, the compendium of chapters was called *Master of the Universe*, until the publisher acquired the publishing rights and the stories were removed from the Web. Eventually, both author and publisher decided to readapt the original texts and remove any references to the *Twilight* saga. SOURCE: Melty (2013). Cincuenta sombras de Grey: 5 cosas que deberías saber. *Melty.es*, 14 April 2013 [online]. Available at <<https://goo.gl/QP4C6a>>. [Accessed 31 January 2016].
8. Stephenie Meyer, the author of *Twilight*, and Lionsgate Entertainment, the production company in charge of its cinematographic adaptation, reached an agreement with Facebook that during 2015, the social network would release five short films. Through the competition "The Storytellers: New Creative Voices of The Twilight Saga", five directors would be chosen to write the new stories. The winners were selected by public vote as well as a panel of experts –made up exclusively of women– including the writer herself, actresses Kate Winslet, Julie Bowen and Octavia Spencer, the protagonist and the president of the association Women In Film, Cathy Schulman. SOURCE: Bishop, Brian. (2014). New 'Twilight' Short Films Are Coming to Facebook. *The Hollywood Reporter*, 30 September 2014 [online]. Available at <<https://goo.gl/y9ITpp>>. [Accessed 31 January 2016].
9. Furthermore, the blognovel has a format in which the posts replace what was initially organized into chapters. Both saga and blognovel readers can access the text through any release and can therefore "pick up the already commenced novel"; this is why each of the releases is updated with the progression of the story, which characters are acting at the time, and what has happened in the immediate past. The difference between the saga and the blognovel lies in how it is updated. While the saga presents an analysis summary of the facts and descriptions of the characters, blognovels provide this information through hyperlinks on the names of the characters (Ravettino Destefanis 2011).

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