

The 2014 Rainbow List: A Descriptive Study of the List and Ten Public Libraries' Ownership

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Abstract

Are libraries purchasing adequate materials for their youth LGBTQ collections? This study compares the ownership of the 2014 Rainbow Book List (RBL) titles to a list created from the top ten titles of Best Fiction for Young Adults (BFYA), the Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers (QP), and the Teens' Top Ten (TTT) in the public libraries from the top ten largest cities in the United States. It also reports on the balance of the 2014 RBL list in regards to target audience, diversity in types of fiction, nonfiction, and theme. In general, libraries owned fewer copies of RBL titles than those on the comparison list.

Introduction

As LGBTQ issues command a more permanent position within the mainstream cultural discourse, determining the dimensions of this historically marginalized population becomes increasingly imperative. To accomplish this task, Gates examined the findings of eleven U.S. and international surveys that reported on sexual orientation or gender identity. This research concluded that an estimated 3.5% adults in the United States identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, even though approximately 8.2% of Americans reported participating in

same-sex behaviors.ⁱ Survey methodology and terminology certainly affect the way in which people answer questions, and this phenomenon may be intensified in the case of self-identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) when disclosing such personal information can have severe consequences.ⁱⁱ However, one valuable insight to come out of *A Survey of LGBT Americans: Attitudes, Experiences and Values in Changing Times* by the Pew Research Center that is applicable to librarians working with youth is that the majority of LGBT adults became certain of their sexual identity between the ages of ten and nineteen. The survey found that the median age at which lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults first began contemplating their sexual status as heterosexual or straight is twelve, whereas the definitive recognition of their sexual identity as a member of the LGBTQ community materialized at a median age of seventeen.ⁱⁱⁱ If youth are questioning at twelve, then young adult librarians are uniquely positioned to provide them with materials that can offer insight, reflection, and comfort that they are not alone in their questioning or experience.

The mission of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) is “to expand and strengthen library services for teens, aged 12–18.”^{iv} One way that YALSA expresses its mission is through its many booklists (<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/bookawards/booklists/members>) that support the selection of award-winning titles and facilitate effective and meaningful collection development. While many of these lists highlight excellent LGBTQ titles, that is not their focus or intent. It was the birth of the Rainbow Book List (<http://glbtrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/>) in 2008 by the Rainbow Book List Committee of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Round Table that provided librarians with valuable information to assist teens with identifying materials that explore the LGBTQ perspectives. This list is an annual “bibliography of quality books with significant and authentic GLBTQ content, which are recommended for people from birth through eighteen years of age.”^v

This study will present descriptive statistics for the 2014 Rainbow Book List (RBL) and its ownership by public libraries in the ten largest cities in the United States. Additionally, it will compare the ownership of RBL titles to selected titles from a comparison list comprised of titles from three other book lists, including the Best Fiction for Young Adults (BFYA),^{vi} the Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers (QP)^{vii}, and the Teens’ Top Ten (TTT),^{viii} in an effort to examine the potential disparities that exist between ownership of items on conventional top ten lists and ownership of RBL titles.

Literature Review

Many articles have been written on LGBTQ resources for teens, but they most often focus on a selection of titles with annotations, content analysis of selected titles, or ways for libraries to provide services to this group.^{ix} There are fewer studies that delve into analysis of the makeup of LGBTQ booklists and public libraries' ownership and treatment of the titles on these lists. As a result, this study will explore the composition of the RBL and its application in public libraries. Literature surrounding the availability of LGBTQ resources in both public libraries and school libraries, as well as research analyzing the characteristics of non-LGBTQ booklists, will be critically examined.

Teen LGBTQ Resources in Public Libraries

Access to LGBTQ resources in public libraries can vary drastically. In an investigation of Indiana's county public library system, researchers revealed that the collections were lacking in LGBTQ subjects and that many books had been categorized as adult, making them harder for teens to access.^x Similarly, Stringer-Stanback found that in the public libraries of the four most populous counties in each of five selected states—Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia—collection size was impacted by diversity, with more demographically diverse counties having more LGBTQ materials.^{xi} A look at nine Canadian libraries revealed that LGBTQ books were less likely to be reviewed and less likely to be owned by the libraries than a selected list of non-LGBTQ fiction for teens.^{xii} In 1999 Spence compared nineteen urban public libraries in Canada and the United States and found that although American libraries held more titles from the list and more copies per capita, overall there was great variation in the percentage of titles and number of copies of listed books held across all libraries.^{xiii} A more recent study from 2017 examined twenty-four public libraries from six geographic areas—Northwest, Southwest, North-Central, South-Central, Northeast, and Southeast—to compare ownership of eighty LGBTQ titles. The checklist of eighty titles was created using the RBL, Stonewall Awards, and researcher selection. Ownership by population size—excluding metropolises with over one million inhabitants—and material type (print, ebook, CD, and downloadable) were reported. The study showed that “libraries serving populations greater than 300,000 held the most titles on the list,” whereas “libraries serving populations fewer than 20,000 had the largest ratio of copies per population of the books.” In the South-Central region (Oklahoma, Texas,

Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi), the selected libraries owned the least number of books in any format, while the Northeast region (Maine, New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New Jersey) libraries held the most.^{xiv} Together these studies highlight the discrepancies that exist within the LGBTQ holdings of one library to another. The ability to access LGBTQ resources can be inconsistent and unreliable, suggesting that there is a need to incorporate the use of a LGBTQ core collection to aid in collection development practices that are both equitable and dependable.

YA LGBTQ Resources in School Libraries

As public libraries struggle to maintain access to a consistent and balanced offering of LGBTQ resources, school libraries also offer limited access to LGBTQ materials. A study of Ohio's public high schools found that there were fewer LGBTQ materials in high school library collections than other controversial materials from a list of challenged—but not LGBTQ themed—material.^{xv} A similar study of one southern U.S. state examined the collections of 125 high schools for inclusion of twenty-one LGBTQ titles recommended as core collection materials. The study reported that the schools' collections did not adequately represent the “estimated 5.9 percent of students in American high schools” since the “average number of LGBTQ-themed titles held by these school libraries was 0.4 percent.”^{xvi} In a comparison of schools in two very different U.S. states, one in the Northeast and one in the South, Oltmann found that in one state larger schools held more titles than smaller schools, but that the average holdings between states did not really differ.^{xvii} As this research indicates, both public libraries and school libraries under-collect LGBTQ resources. The lack of ownership and inclusion of these materials reveals the need for young adult librarians to reevaluate their approach to collection development and make strides for more inclusive practices that address the needs and interests of all segments of society.

YA LGBTQ Resources in the Lists

While public and school librarians must redirect their own collection development policies and practices, it is also important to acknowledge the active role that booklists play in determining what items are eventually included in a collection. If LGBTQ resources are underrepresented on booklists that librarians regularly reference and rely on to influence collection development, it stands to reason that LGBTQ resources will be inadequately represented in collections.

Benedikt's 1999 study reviewed five years of the Young Adult Library Service Association's (YALSA) Best Books for Young Adults—now called Best Fiction for Young Adults—to examine the diversity of content and the ethnicity and gender of the authors.^{xviii} From 1994 to 1998, there were 266 fiction books on the lists; only eight books were determined by Benedikt to deal with homosexuality. In a related study, Koss and Teale created a “representative sample” of 59 titles that included a selection of books from the Printz Award, Best Books for Young Adults, and Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults, and they found that LGBTQ themes were represented in just six of the books.^{xix} In an investigation of 248 titles, Rawson found that

LGBT protagonists were underrepresented within the bestsellers category, where all one hundred and thirty-six coded protagonists were identified as straight or as having no romantic preference within the novel. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual protagonists were found among the award-winning and Teens' Top Ten titles, where their prevalence was similar to actual U.S. demographics among teens.^{xx}

Given this research, librarians who serve teens should expand their use of booklists that have the propensity to neglect LGBTQ themes and instead identify other reading lists that offer more diverse perspectives and more accurately reflect the increasing diversity of young adult populations.

Research Questions

The following research questions governed the development of this study, serving as a framework for the investigation of its outcomes:

1. What does the makeup of the 2014 RBL look like?
 - a. How frequently are the following categories represented on the 2014 RBL: Gay, Bisexual, Lesbian, Transgender, and Multiple?
 - b. What is the breakdown of the list by age designation?
 - c. How much of the list is designated as fiction, nonfiction, or graphic novel?
2. How are the 2014 RBL titles treated in the selected public libraries?
 - a. To what classification (Adult, Juvenile, YA, or YA/Adult) are the 2014 RBL titles assigned in the public library's catalog?
 - b. Are some categories of the 2014 RBL less represented in the collections of the ten libraries?

3. Which titles on the 2014 RBL have the most and least copies available?
4. How does ownership and classification of the 2014 RBL titles compare to ownership of selected titles from three top ten lists?

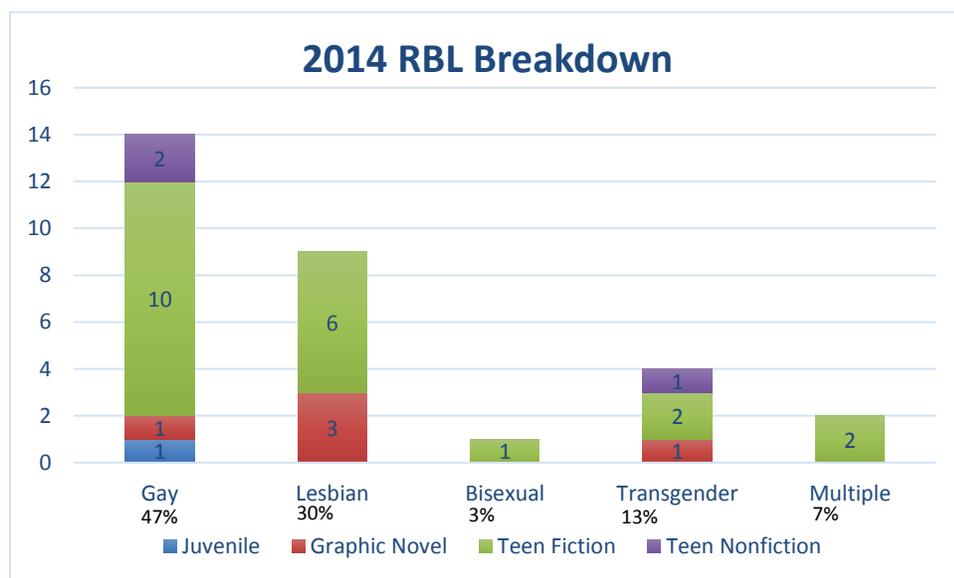
Methods

The American Library Association (ALA) sponsors two LGBTQ reading lists—the Rainbow Book List (RBL)^{xxi} for youth and Over the Rainbow Books^{xxii} for adults—and one award, the Stonewall Book Award, which was first awarded in 1971 for books with “exceptional merit” relating to the LGBTQ experience, with a youth category titled the Mike Morgan and Larry Romans Children’s and Young Adult Literature Award.^{xxiii} Although there are many suggested reading lists on the topic of LGBTQ, this study focuses solely on ALA’s booklists, not the awards, for youth on the topic. In order to offer some comparison to how ownership of the RBL titles fare against other teen books, a comparison list was created. The comparison list contains the top ten titles for the Best Fiction for Young Adults (BFYA),^{xxiv} the Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers (QP),^{xxv} and the Teens’ Top Ten (TTT).^{xxvi} The top ten lists were selected for inclusion on the comparison list because most libraries are not able to purchase the entirety of all the lists due to financial, space, and audience limitations. Consequently, some libraries are compelled to limit themselves to choosing books based solely on the recommendations of top ten lists. Lists from 2014 were used in order to ensure that libraries would have had ample time to include the titles in their collection.

Individuals who identify as LGBTQ “are members of every community” and are “diverse, come from all walks of life, and include people of all races and ethnicities, all ages, all socioeconomic statuses, and from all parts of the United States.”^{xxvii} This study looked at the public libraries of the ten largest cities in the United States in order to survey a significant portion of the country using only a handful of public library systems. Each public library’s online catalog was searched for every title in the RBL and the comparison list. For both lists, the number of print copies was counted—ebooks were not included since viewing rights differ by library. The classification designated in the catalog (Adult, Juvenile, Young Adult, and mixed status) was also recorded. For the RBL, the content of the book (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, or Multiple) was recorded.

Findings

Close to half (47%, or 14 titles out of 30) of the list is made up of titles with gay main characters or themes. Nine titles (or 30%) feature lesbian main characters or themes, four titles (13%) have transgender characters or themes, and two titles (7%) have characters or themes across multiple categories. The 2014 RBL has only one title, or 3%, for teens on bisexuality. Of the 30 titles, the majority are fiction, with 21 being listed as such (70%)—excluding four graphic novels with fictional content. The list is 10% nonfiction and 17% graphic novels. The only juvenile book, representing 3% of the list, is fiction with a gay main character.



Seven titles on the list were owned by less than half of the libraries surveyed. Of these seven titles, four were classified as having a lesbian main character or themes. One title in this category was not purchased by any of the ten public libraries, and another was only purchased by one of the libraries. Therefore, out of nine titles falling into the lesbian category, only six titles were purchased (and still owned) by half of the public libraries used in the study. The remaining three titles had gay main characters or themes.

Regarding books in the transgender category, the only nonfiction title was owned by six out of the ten libraries, but nine copies of the work were found in the six libraries. The transgender graphic novel was purchased by six of the ten libraries, totaling 17 copies. The final transgender title, a fiction novel, was more widely purchased—all ten libraries owned it, with a total of 89 copies.

When looking at overall number of copies, 11 titles had over 120 copies in circulation across the ten libraries—ranging from 306 to 123. The 2014 RBL Top Ten had five titles on the list, with over 120 copies. The top title and the title with the third most copies were also on the BFYA Top Ten list (Table 1).

Table 1

Title	Total number of copies	Theme
Smith, Andrew. <i>Winger</i> . [†] Simon & Schuster, 2013. Grades 9 and up.	306	Gay
Block, Francesca Lia. <i>Love in the Time of Global Warming</i> . [*] Henry Holt, 2013. Grades 9–12.	185	Multiple
Federle, Tim. <i>Better Nate than Ever</i> . ^{*,†} Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2013. Grades 4 and up.	180	Gay
Farizan, Sara. <i>If You Could Be Mine</i> . [*] Algonquin Young Readers, 2013. Grades 9 and up.	177	Lesbian
Levithan, David. <i>Two Boys Kissing</i> . Random House, 2013. Grades 8 and up.	173	Multiple

^{*}Denotes Top Ten for RBL 2014; [†]Denotes Top Ten for BFYA.

There was only one title, *Giraffe People* by Jill Malone, which was not owned in any of the ten libraries surveyed. The titles with the lowest number of copies are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Title	Total number of copies	Theme
Sutherland, Suzanne. <i>When We Were Good</i> . Sumach Press, 2013. Grades 9 and up.	8	Lesbian
Moynihan, Lindsay. <i>The Waiting Tree</i> . Amazon Children's Publishing, 2013. Grades 9 and up.	5	Gay
Egloff, Z. <i>Leap</i> . [*] Bywater Books, 2013. Grades 9 and up.	1	Lesbian
Fishback, Jere M. <i>Tyler Buckspan</i> . Prizm/Torquere Press, 2013. Grades 9 and up.	1	Gay

*Denotes Top Ten for RBL 2014.

Three of the ten public libraries had at least 80% of the titles from the 2014 RBL—with the highest percentage of ownership being 90%, or 27 out of 30 titles, and the lowest being 53% (16 titles). The average ownership was 70% of the titles. In total, the ten libraries owned 2,417 copies of titles from the 2014 RBL.

The majority of titles were classified as YA in the online library catalog—in 22 of the 30 titles, the YA category received the highest number of marks versus adult, juvenile, and mixed. There were eight titles that were designated as juvenile by some libraries. However, the majority of libraries applied the juvenile designation to only two titles: the first, *Better Nate than Ever* by Tim Federle, is also classified as juvenile by the RBL; the second is the graphic novel *Wandering Son*, vol. 4, by Shimura Takako. Federle's book is categorized as gay, and Takako's graphic novel is categorized as transgender. One library was excluded from the juvenile count since the library did not have a YA category in the catalog.

Overall, 12 titles were designated as adult by some of the libraries, but there were four instances in which the majority of libraries designated the titles as ADU, or adult, in their online catalog. Only one of the four titles was categorized as transgender, while the other three were categorized as lesbian. In the case of *Calling Dr. Laura: A Graphic Memoir* by Nicole Georges, all ten libraries owned the title, but eight of them housed it in the adult collection. Similarly, *Blue Is the Warmest Color* by Julie Maroh was owned by eight libraries, but seven of them classified it as adult. Only one library purchased Z. Eglhoff's *Leap* and classified it as adult.

There were 5,798 print copies of the 30 titles from the comparison list in the collections of the ten libraries versus the 2,417 from the 2014 RBL. The two titles that were found on both lists remained in the study. In both instances, the number of copies increased in the month between data collection. *Better Nate than Ever* increased by 25 copies and *Winger* increased by four.

All ten public libraries had at least 90% of the titles from the comparison list—with the highest percentage of ownership being 100% for four libraries. The average ownership was 96% of the control list titles being owned versus 70% average ownership for 2014 RBL titles.

Additionally, none of the libraries owned all of the 2014 RBL titles, but four libraries owned all of the comparison list titles.

When looking at volume of ownership, there are some rather stark differences between numbers of copies owned (Table 3). Even adding up all five titles with the fewest copies from the 2014 RBL, the number is still less than half of the title with the lowest number of copies from the comparison list. Additionally, the title with highest number of copies on the 2014 RBL—which also happens to be on BFYA—would not even make the top five from the comparison list.

Table 3

Comparison List		2014 RBL	
Highest	Lowest	Highest	Lowest
489	37	306	0
489	52	185	1
378	66	180	1
355	67	177	5
322	72	173	8

The majority of titles from the 2014 RBL were classified as YA in the online library catalog—in 22 of the 30 titles. In fact, the YA category received the highest number of entries as compared to those classified as adult, juvenile, and mixed. In contrast, there were three titles from the comparison list that were classified as adult by at least one library. However, there were no instances where the majority of the copies were designated as adult. There were three titles on the comparison list that received the majority of their classification as juvenile, including one of the duplicate titles from the 2014 RBL—*Better Nate than Ever*.

Discussion

As discussed in the literature review, it is estimated that LGBTQ adults make up at least 3.5% of the adult population. In addition, there are nearly “700,000 transgender individuals in the US. Given these findings, it seems reasonable to assert that approximately 9 million [adult] Americans identify as LGBT.”^{xxviii} Statistics that accurately capture the extent of the teen LGBTQ population are harder to produce. However, some estimates suggest that about two and half million teens fall into this category.^{xxix} Regardless of the exact figure, it is certainly in the

millions, which underscores the necessity of ensuring that quality LGBTQ resources are available for teens in libraries around the country. To effectively serve this population, librarians must calibrate their approach to collection management by relying on a variety of booklists and sources to inform effective collection development.

Overall, ownership of the 2014 RBL was approximately 42% of the comparison list. In general, libraries owned fewer copies of RBL titles than those on the comparison list. The limited amount of LGBTQ resources available in libraries may force library users to reserve materials on a sensitive topic and thereby contribute to the struggles of an already vulnerable population. As stated by Cockett:

A balanced fiction collection should assuage the fears of gay and lesbian YAs, assuring them that they are not alone. But just as importantly, it will give heterosexual youth a picture of and perhaps some insight into the larger world around them.^{xxx}

The 2014 RBL was heavily weighted toward teens and toward fiction. Though it is difficult to determine if the list equitably addresses gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender themes, respectively, an initial review of the items listed on the 2014 RBL suggests that it is more focused on gay characters and themes. This is consistent with earlier research by Jenkins^{xxxix} and has also been identified by Cart, who further laments a lack of diversity of genres within the listed fiction.^{xxxix} Ideally, LGBTQ literature would be balanced in its representation of the individual members comprising its population. Efforts to include more lesbian, bisexual, and transgender characters and themes on future RBLs should be expanded.

Limitations

Due to the limited number of libraries surveyed in this study—the public libraries from the top ten largest cities in the United States—the work described here cannot provide definitive answers or be used to make generalizations on library ownership of 2014 RBL or how that ownership compares to other booklists. The small sample size of thirty books in ten public libraries also makes statistical analysis beyond descriptive methods unreliable. Another limitation of this study is that the consistency of data collection was dependent on several graduate students following the design protocol exactly, and that the authors used online resources, such as Goodreads and Amazon, to determine the book theme/category and not the books themselves. Additionally,

library collections change—books are added and deleted continually. The data on ownership of the 2014 RBL and the created 2014 Top Ten comparison list, all of which were announced or released in January 2014, were collected in July 2015. This was done in order to give libraries time to research and purchase materials; however, this also means that in the eighteen months between when the list was released and when the data were collected, materials may have been removed due to loss, damage, wear, theft, low circulation, or any other number of valid reasons.

Conclusion

While progress has been made—consider the fact that there was not even a Rainbow Book List until 2008—there is more work to be done. As the only ALA book list on LGBTQ issues for teens and youth, librarians should consider the significance of the booklist and include it as an evaluative measure in their purchasing decisions. Although it may be difficult to accurately pinpoint the exact number of teens dealing with LGBTQ issues and relationships, estimates demonstrate that there is a need for LGBTQ resources to be readily available in support of this population. Additionally, exposure to these issues for non-LGBTQ students is essential for developing understanding and acceptance. If libraries are only purchasing a few LGBTQ titles from booklists or a few copies of these titles, are they really meeting the needs of youth? Booklist committee members need to strive for more balanced lists with more titles for younger individuals, diversity in types of fiction and theme, and more nonfiction, provided that the publishing industry supports this balance and the titles fit their criteria. Libraries and researchers would benefit from additional investigation into libraries' collections on LGBTQ materials for youth and teens.

Notes

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- ⁱ Gary J. Gates, “How Many People Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender?,” The Williams Institute, April 2011, <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Gates-How-Many-People-LGBT-Apr-2011.pdf>.
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- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ^{iv} YALSA: Young Adult Library Services Association, “About YALSA,” <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/aboutyalsa>.
- ^v Rainbow Book List, “About,” January 30, 2009, <http://glbrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/about>.
- ^{vi} YALSA: Young Adult Library Services Association, “Best Fiction for Young Adults,” <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/best-fiction-young-adults>.
- ^{vii} YALSA: Young Adult Library Services Association, “Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers,” <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/quick-picks-reluctant-young-adult-readers>.
- ^{viii} YALSA: Young Adult Library Services Association, “YALSA’s Teen’ Top Ten,” <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/teenstopten>.
- ^{ix} Lynn Cockett, “Entering the Mainstream: Fiction about Gay and Lesbian Teens,” *School Library Journal* 41, no. 2 (February 1995): 32; Elisabeth W. Rauch, “GLBTQ Collections Are for Every Library Serving Teens!” *Voice of Youth Advocates* 33, no. 3 (2010): 216–18; Devon Greyson, “GLBTQ Content in Comics/Graphic Novels for Teens,” *Collection Building* 26, no. 4 (November 2007): 130–34; Thomas Crisp and Suzanne Knezek, “Challenging Texts: ‘I Just Don’t See Myself Here’: Challenging Conversations about LGBTQ Adolescent Literature,” *English Journal* 99, no. 3 (2010): 76–79; Clair Gross, “What Makes a Good YA Coming-Out Novel?” *Horn Book Magazine* 89, no. 2 (2013): 23–26; Christine Jenkins, “From Queer to Gay and Back Again: Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–1997,” *Library Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (1998): 298–334.
- ^x Jennifer Chance Cook, “GLBTQ Teen Literature: Is It Out There in Indiana?” *Indiana Libraries* 23, no. 2 (December 2004): 25–28.

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- ^{xi} Kynita Stringer-Stanback, “Young Adult Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Nonfiction Collections and Countywide Anti-Discrimination Policies,” *Urban Library Journal* 17, no. 2 (2011).
- ^{xii} Michele Boon and Vivian Howard, “Recent Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender Fiction for Teens: Are Canadian Libraries Providing Adequate Collections?” *Collection Building* 23, no. 3 (2004): 133–38.
- ^{xiii} Alex Spence, “Gay Young Adult Fiction in the Public Library: A Comparative Survey,” *Public Libraries* 38, no. 4 (July 1999): 224.
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- ^{xv} Candi Pierce Garry, “Selection or Censorship? School Librarians and LGBTQ Resources,” *School Libraries Worldwide* 21, no. 1 (January 2015): 73–90.
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- ^{xvii} Shannon M. Oltmann, “Variables Related to School Media Center LGBT Collections,” *LIBRI* 65, no. 1 (2015): 25–33.
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- ^{xx} Casey Rawson, “Are All Lists Created Equal? Diversity in Award-Winning and Best-Selling Young Adult Fiction,” *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults* 1, no. 3 (2011).
- ^{xxi} Rainbow Book List, “About,” January 30, 2009, <http://glbtrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/about>.
- ^{xxii} Over the Rainbow Books, August 2015, <http://www.glbtrt.ala.org/overtherainbow/>.
- ^{xxiii} GLBTRT, “Stonewall Book Awards List,” <http://www.ala.org/rt/glbtrt/award/stonewall/honored>.

^{xxiv} YALSA, “Best Fiction for Young Adults,” <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/best-fiction-young-adults>.

^{xxv} YALSA, “Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers,” <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/quick-picks-reluctant-young-adult-readers>.

^{xxvi} YALSA, “YALSA’s Teen’ Top Ten,” <http://www.ala.org/yalsa/teenstopten>.

^{xxvii} Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health,” <https://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/>.

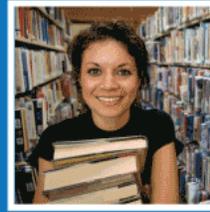
^{xxviii} Gates, “How Many People Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender?”

^{xxix} Rauch, “GLBTQ Collections Are for Every Library Serving Teens!,” 216–18.

^{xxx} Cockett, “Entering the Mainstream,” 32.

^{xxxi} Christine Jenkins, “Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian Characters and Themes 1969–92: A Historical Reading of Content, Gender, and Narrative Distance,” *Youth Services in Libraries* 7, no. 1 (1993): 43–55.

^{xxxii} Michael Cart, “Carte Blanche: Of Rainbows and Lists,” *Booklist* 107, no. 12 (February 15, 2011): 65.



Asian American Teen Fiction: An Urban Public Library Analysis

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Abstract

According to the US Census, Asians have been the fastest-growing racial group since 2000,¹ yet publishing and library collections have not kept up pace. While there has been some progress, more work needs to be done in both publishing and public libraries to diversify collections and make sure that acquisitions are current and authentic. The authors examined 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016 teen book acquisitions at one urban public library system to determine whether or not there was any significant increase in materials depicting Asian and Asian American characters. The results demonstrate that there is a relative and significant lack of representation and insider authorship of Asian American teen literature in an urban public library with a high Asian American youth population.

Introduction

In February 2016, teen author and We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) team member Stacey Lee wrote a tongue-in-cheek article for *Hyphen Magazine* titled “Dear Non-Asian Writer,” in which she described microaggressions that many Asian Americans face on a daily basis. She also listed cultural missteps that non-Asian authors make when, without sufficient research and immersion,

¹ Jesse Holland, “Census: Asians Remain Fastest-Growing Racial Group in US,” *U.S. News*, June 23, 2016, <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2016-06-23/census-asians-remain-fastest-growing-racial-group-in-us>.

they include stereotyped Asian characters in their books.² Within one week, teen author and WNDB CEO and president Ellen Oh³ also wrote a post on her Tumblr titled “Dear White Writers,” which began, “Yes We Need Diverse Books. But that doesn’t always mean that we want YOU to write them.”⁴ These Asian American teen authors tapped into a criticism that underrepresented members of the youth literature community had long been directing at the publishing industry, and which librarian Edith Campbell stated succinctly on her blog: “The call came out for more diverse books and White authors asked ‘how can I write diverse characters’ when they should have asked *how can I support authors of color*” (emphasis in original).⁵

While Lee and Oh were addressing stereotypes and distortions resulting from outsider authorship, in this study we focus on absence and invisibility. Outsider authorship, as Lee, Oh, and others claim, may distort stories about communities that are already underrepresented in publishing. The void of teen literature depicting people who are not white is an absence that George Gerbner refers to as symbolic annihilation. Gerbner claims that absence and erasure are forms of structural oppression that pervade our society. Since the 1970s the concept of symbolic annihilation has only gained weight in its importance. Today, many use the phrase “erasure is violence” to communicate a similar critique; for example, in 2015 Reina Gossett addressed the historical erasure of trans women as a form of violence, and that today “learning and sharing histories of trans women of color . . . [is] a strategy to transform and heal from historical isolation and erasure.”⁶ By examining the absence of books by and about an underrepresented community, a library can determine if they are able to improve their collection by acquiring more inclusive books.

One researcher, Dahlen, is a Korean American with an academic background in Asian American studies. However, we focused on the larger issue of quantitative patterns in collection

² Stacy Lee. “Dear Non-Asian Writer,” *Hyphen* (blog), February 11, 2016, <http://hyphenmagazine.com/blog/2016/02/dear-non-asian-writer>.

³ “About WNDB,” *We Need Diverse Books*, <https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb/>.

⁴ Ellen Oh, “Dear White Writers,” *Ello’s World* (blog), February 16, 2016, <http://elloellenoh.tumblr.com/post/139448275729/dear-white-writers>.

⁵ Edith Campbell, “Can You Hear Us Now?,” *Crazy QuiltEdi* (blog), July 29, 2016, <https://campbele.wordpress.com/2016/07/29/can-you-hear-us-now/>.

⁶ Reina Gossett, “Reina Gossett: Historical Erasure as Violence,” interview by Barnard Center for Research on Women, *Barnard Center for Research on Women*, October 30, 2015, <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/reina-gossett-historical-erasure-as-violence/>.

development within a specific community, during particular moments in teen literature publishing. Evaluating the titles for authenticity and quality would be the next step in building upon the research we conduct here.

Research Questions

Our research is driven by this question: To what extent has a particular urban library system included diverse and current Asian American teen fiction in its collection? We answer this question in light of cultural contexts, publishing trends, authorship, and community demographics.

Literature Review

Asian American Teen Fiction

A discussion of Asian American teen fiction must begin with a consideration of who is Asian American and what is Asian American literature.⁷ In 1968, while he was a graduate student at UC Berkeley, pioneering Asian Americanist Yuji Ichioka coined the term “Asian American” during the San Francisco State University Third World Liberation Front strikes “as a political term of identification . . . to articulate the kinds of concerns Asian American students had about the political position of people of Asian heritage living in the United States.” It is a “political and panethnic identification” that “connotes a desire for a different and better world where Asian American contributions are recognized.”⁸ Lisa Lowe notes that “the boundaries and definitions of Asian American culture are continually shifting and being contested,” pointing to the great diversity within Asian America.⁹ Indeed, according to the 2015 United States Census, 21.0 million residents identified as Asian alone or in combination with another race.¹⁰ And though we are aware of the critical discussions happening in both popular literature and scholarship regarding these shifting boundaries of, for example, the inclusion of South Asians and Pacific

⁷ Min Hyoung Song, *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

⁸ Kent A. Ono and Vincent N. Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 9.

⁹ Lisa Lowe, “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Marking Asian American Differences,” in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, ed. Min Zhou and J. V. Gatewood (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 509.

¹⁰ US Census Bureau, “FFF: Asian-American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month: May 2017,” <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2017/cb17-ff07.html>.

Islanders in Asian America,¹¹ we err on the side of inclusion. A different organization may use different terminology. For example, the Cooperative Children’s Books Center (CCBC) at the University of Wisconsin Madison School of Education uses “Asian/Pacifics,” and we use “Asian” to include all members of the Asian diaspora. And while scholars, library workers, educators, and policymakers use words such as “diversity,” “multicultural,” and “inclusion” in varying ways, for the sake of clarity here we use “diverse” to mean non-white.

Despite rapidly growing and diversifying demographics, the increasing number of books, and stronger buying power among Asian Americans, there is not yet sufficient research addressing Asian American stories for young people. This dearth of research matches a similar lack of scholarship that is made available to youth to learn about Asian American history. The late scholar Ronald Takaki wrote, “My teachers and textbooks did not explain the diversity of our community or the sources of our unity.”¹² Scholars such as Junko Yokota, Rocío Davis, Dolores de Manuel, and Sarah Park Dahlen have addressed various aspects of Asian American children’s and teen literature, but overall scholarship addressing Asian American youth literature is underrepresented in comparison to the scholarship addressing literatures depicting other non-white communities. And though Asian American literature has existed for more than a century, in *The Children of 1965: On Writing, and Not Writing, as an Asian American* (2013), Min Hyung Song writes about the relatively recent golden age of Asian American literature, analyzing works mostly written for adult readers, though some include child protagonists.

We agree with Song that “race also continues to organize social experiences, to set limits to cultural expression, and just as important, to inspire creativity.”¹³ Despite such limits and structural barriers to publishing, the creative cultural production of Asian Americans in American literature has been tremendous. For example, Karen Tei Yamashita’s *I Hotel* (2010) was a finalist for the National Book Award, and Alexander Chee’s *Edinburgh* (2001) and many other writings have won numerous awards. Scholar Viet Thanh Nguyen’s debut novel, *The Sympathizer* (2015), won a Pulitzer Prize and a Carnegie Medal. In the realm of youth literature, Linda Sue Park (*A Single Shard*, 2001), Cynthia Kadohata (*Kira-Kira*, 2004), and Erin Entrada Kelly (*Hello, Universe*, 2017) won the John Newbery Medal. Gene Luen Yang’s groundbreaking

¹¹ Vicente Diaz, “To ‘P’ or Not to ‘P’?,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 7, no. 3, (2004): 183–208, <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/wp-content/uploads/DiazToPorNot.pdf>.

¹² Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore* (New York: Little, Brown, 1998), 3.

¹³ Song, *The Children of 1965*, 10.

American Born Chinese (2006) was the first graphic novel to be nominated for the National Book Award; it also won YALSA's Michael L. Printz Award. Dan Santat won the Caldecott Medal for *The Adventures of Beekle: The Unimaginary Friend* (2014). Recently, writer Pooja Makhijani traced the development of South Asian youth literature, beginning with Newbery Award-winner Dhan Gopal Mukerji's *Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon* (1927), all the way up to Mitali Perkins' *You Bring the Distant Near* (2017), which was longlisted for the National Book Award.¹⁴

The stereotype that Asian Americans are apolitical may lead to the conclusion that Asian Americans may be relatively silent on issues of diversity in youth literature. (There are notable exceptions, such as when Korean American parents in New England called for the removal of the novel *So Far from the Bamboo Grove* (1986) from the K–6 curriculum on the basis that the book is a one-sided portrayal of Japan's brutal colonization of Korea.)¹⁵ For this reason, we are concerned that the relative lack of attention paid to Asian American youth literature may translate to low-quality and distorted representations; uninformed decision-making on the part of agents, editors, publishers, and reviewers; and misguided collection development, curriculum, and programming decisions on the part of library workers, educators, and bookstore owners.

Though to some extent we relied on book reviews to evaluate the plot and inclusion of Asian American characters, we recognize this as a limited process. First, because as the Lee & Low Diversity Baseline Survey revealed,¹⁶ the majority of reviewers are white, and, second, as author Malinda Lo has pointed out, some may not “discuss diversity in a skillful way” because of their lack of knowledge and lived experiences with Asian American communities.¹⁷ For example, K. T. Horning demonstrated, through her *School Library Journal* diversity keynote

¹⁴ Pooja Makhijani, “What a Forgotten Kids’ Book Reveals about U.S. Publishing,” *Atlantic*, October 3, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/10/what-a-forgotten-kids-book-reveals-about-us-publishing/539709/>.

¹⁵ Sung-ae Lee, “Remembering or Misremembering? Historicity and the Case of ‘So Far from the Bamboo Grove,’” *Children’s Literature in Education* 39, no. 2 (June 2008): 85–93.

¹⁶ Jason Low, “Where Is the Diversity in Publishing? The 2015 Diversity Baseline Survey Results,” *The Open Book* (blog), January 26, 2016, <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2016/01/26/where-is-the-diversity-in-publishing-the-2015-diversity-baseline-survey-results/>.

¹⁷ Malinda Lo, “Perceptions of Diversity in Book Reviews,” *Diversity in YA* (blog), February 18, 2015, <https://www.malindalo.com/blog/2015/02/perceptions-of-diversity-in-book-reviews>.

webinar, how some reviewers missed some significant issues when reviewing E. E. Charlton-Trujillo's *When We Was Fierce* (2016).¹⁸

Mirrors and Windows

It remains that publishers must diversify the books they publish, and libraries must be proactive in collecting, promoting, and programming diverse books. As Rudine Sims Bishop writes, young people need to see reflections of themselves in the media around them (mirrors), and they also need to read about people whose experiences are different from their own (windows),¹⁹ whether it is due to race, class, gender, ability, status, and so on. For these reasons, Gene Luen Yang began his tenure as the fifth National Ambassador for Young People's Literature with the platform Reading Without Walls, in which one of his challenges to readers is to "Read a book about a **character** who doesn't look like you or live like you."²⁰ In his "Glare of Disdain" comic, Yang illustrates how not having window books caused him and a classmate to misunderstand one another; had they read books such as Mike Jung's *Geeks, Girls, and Secret Identities* (2012) or Uma Krishnaswami's *The Grand Plan to Fix Everything* (2011), he asks, "would things have been different?"²¹ Moreover, YALSA²² and ALSC²³ emphasize that library staff and educators need to be culturally competent, particularly because the profession is majority white and

¹⁸ K. T. Horning, "SLJ Diversity Course: Keynote Lecture by K. T. Horning" (lecture), *School Library Journal*, YouTube, July 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjk7qT0mXI0>.

¹⁹ Rudine Sims Bishop, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," *Perspectives* 1, no. 3 (1990): ix–xi.

²⁰ Gene Luen Yang, "Reading Without Walls" (2016), <http://read.macmillan.com/mcpg/reading-without-walls/>.

²¹ Gene Luen Yang, "Glare of Disdain," *New York Times*, April 1, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/04/01/books/review/28sketchbook-yang.html>.

²² The 2010 YALSA *Competencies for Librarians Serving Youth* says, "3. Demonstrate an understanding of, and a respect for, diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic values," under Area II: Knowledge of Client Group (<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/guidelines/yacompetencies2010>), while the 2017 *Teen Services Competencies for Library Staff* lists "Cultural Competency and Responsiveness: Actively promotes respect for cultural diversity and creates an inclusive, welcoming, and respectful library atmosphere that embraces diversity," as one of seven major content areas (http://www.ala.org/yalsa/sites/ala.org.yalsa/files/content/YALSA_TeenCompetencies_web_Final.pdf).

²³ Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC), "Competencies for Librarians Serving Children in Public Libraries" (revised 2015), <http://www.ala.org/alsc/edcareers/alsccorecomps>.

female.²⁴ Regarding collections, the authors of *The Future of Library Services for and with Teens: A Call to Action* note that in an “envisioned future,” “Materials in the collections reflect the demographics of the community. . . .”²⁵

Looking back on publishing, Rudine Sims Bishop writes, “In spite of all the attention to diversity and multicultural literature in the past two or three decades, the percentage of books in which historically underrepresented children, such as African-Americans, Asian/Pacific-Americans, Latinos, and Native/First Nations people, can find their mirrors has not substantially increased over the years.”²⁶ Junko Yokota agrees: “In more recent years, the representation of Asian and Asian Americans in literature has grown substantially”; however, there is still much room for improvement. As Yokota concludes her essay, “So much of the Asian world is still underrepresented.” And according to the CCBC research, the number of books depicting the Asian diaspora is not growing at the same pace as our diversifying society.²⁷ Nor are a lot of those diverse books written by Asian and Asian American authors.

It is vital for libraries to embody the ALA Core Values of Librarianship concerning diversity: “We value our nation’s diversity and strive to reflect that diversity by providing a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities we serve.”²⁸ Being aware of the library’s own collection of diverse materials or lack thereof is an important step in the work of “providing a full spectrum of resources.” This also reflects the Core Value of Social Responsibility: “the contribution that librarianship can make in ameliorating or solving the critical problems of society.” For example, racism and hate continue to be social problems; the Southern Poverty Law

²⁴ See the following for the whiteness of librarianship: American Library Association, “Diversity Counts,” (report, revised 2007), 3–4, <http://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/diversity/diversitycounts/divcounts>. See MIT Library Director Chris Bourg’s blog post “The Unbearable Whiteness of Librarianship,” *Feral Librarian* (blog), March 3, 2014, <https://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/2014/03/03/the-unbearable-whiteness-of-librarianship/>.

²⁵ Linda W. Braun, Maureen L. Hartman, Sandra Hughes-Hassell, Kafi Kumasi, and Beth Yoke, *The Future of Library Services for and with Teens: A Call to Action* (Chicago: YALSA, 2014), 15, http://www.ala.org/yaforum/sites/ala.org.yaforum/files/content/YALSA_nationalforum_final.pdf.

²⁶ Rudine Sims Bishop, “Multicultural Children’s Literature: Where Are We?” *Kirkus*, September 13, 2017, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/multicultural-childrens-literature-where-are-we/>.

²⁷ Junko Yokota, “Asian Americans in Literature for Children and Young Adults,” *Teacher Librarian* 36, no. 3 (2009): 15.

²⁸ American Library Association, “Core Values of Librarianship” (2004), <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues>.

Center observes that the number of hate groups continues to rise,²⁹ and specifically as “Trump electrifies radical right.”³⁰ Libraries can provide diverse and accurate reading materials to counter harmful stereotypes persisting in media and popular culture, leading to a society that is better informed and inclusive, and prepared to fight these “critical problems” in our society.

Representations Across Various Media

Absented, whitewashed, and problematic representations of Asian Americans are not isolated to teen literature, but persist across all media. In *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism* (2016), Nancy Wang Yuen comments on the larger issues of nonwhite representations when she writes, “Far from neutral, mass media institutions such as Hollywood are major transmitters of racist ideologies. . . . Hollywood’s dominant narratives of whites as heroes and actors of color as sidekicks or villains legitimates and reproduce hierarchies existent in US society.”³¹ Kent A. Ono and Vincent T. Pham observe, “Representations of Asian Americans in the media have been both sparse and problematic.”³² Similar issues exist in theater, as Josephine Lee explains, “Until recently the history of Asian characters on the American stage was dominated by the repetition of stereotypes.”³³ Esther Kim Lee describes how “popular representations of Asians in mainstream theatre were stereotypical or overtly mocking of Asian culture, and nearly all Asian roles were given to white actors.”³⁴

Asian American actors have been both proactive and reactive to these problems. For example, in 1992 political activists formed the Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) to monitor and advocate for better representations.³⁵ The protest of the “yellowface” casting of *Miss Saigon* was a “landmark instance of Asian American activism against derogatory

²⁹ Southern Poverty Law Center, “Hate Map,” <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>.

³⁰ Southern Poverty Law Center, “Hate Groups Increase for Second Consecutive Year as Trump Electrifies Radical Right,” February 15, 2017, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2017/02/15/hate-groups-increase-second-consecutive-year-trump-electrifies-radical-right>.

³¹ Nancy Wang Yuen, *Reel Inequality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 7.

³² Ono and Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, 173.

³³ Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 90.

³⁴ Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 24; cited in Lori K. Lopez, *Asian American Media Activism: Fighting for Cultural Citizenship* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 41.

³⁵ Ono and Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, 165–69.

representations.”³⁶ Proactively, Asian Americans established theater companies such as East West Players (Los Angeles) and Mu Performing Arts (Twin Cities), making for themselves a third space where they could both challenge stereotypes and create new possibilities for their communities.³⁷ As well, movements such as #OscarsSoWhite and #WhiteWashedOUT demonstrate that Asian Americans will not tolerate how the media—and Hollywood specifically—continue to erase and distort their experiences.³⁸

Because of this lengthy history of relative erasure and distorted representation in media, as well as the accumulation of decades of relatively homogenous reading materials, it is even more vital for libraries to include diverse stories. White supremacy has shaped publishing³⁹ and has led to such accumulated privilege that it has also resulted in relatively white collections in libraries and schools. An accumulation of absence has resulted in relative erasure for Asian American readers. Additionally, the persistent imbalance of outsider authorship over #OwnVoices writers is also deeply problematic.

Perhaps writers feel capable of writing stories from different communities because they genuinely believe they are familiar with the variety of diverse backgrounds that exist. However, while people have never been more technologically connected, this “illusion of close proximity may mask our actual lack of contextual knowledge and understanding of material relationships with others.”⁴⁰ Moreover, the Public Religion Research Institute survey reports that “among white Americans, 91% of people comprising their social networks are also white.”⁴¹ If that is the case, then how do white people know enough about Asian Americans to write their stories?

Collection Development

³⁶ Ibid., 100.

³⁷ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

³⁸ Yuen, *Reel Inequality*, 1–6.

³⁹ Donnaræ MacCann, *White Supremacy in Children’s Literature: Characterizations of African Americans, 1830–1900* (London: Routledge, 2000); Zetta Elliott, “Let’s Talk about Reparations: What Does the Publishing Industry Owe Our Kids?,” *Medium*, October 22, 2016, <https://medium.com/embrace-race/lets-talk-about-reparations-what-does-the-publishing-industry-owe-our-kids-3f58e5986607>.

⁴⁰ Ono and Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media*, 3.

⁴¹ Daniel Cox, Juhem Navarro-Rivera, and Robert P. Jones, “Race, Religion, and Political Affiliation of Americans’ Core Social Networks,” Public Religion Research Institute, August 3, 2016, <https://www.prrri.org/research/poll-race-religion-politics-americans-social-networks/>.

Collection development is an essential component of library work. Every library must have a detailed collection development policy, “a formal document that describes the library’s collections of materials and documents its goals for collection development.”⁴² Supplemental policies may enhance the collection development policy; specifically, the library might create a document that “[describes] the population’s cultural, economic, and linguistic diversity, specifying the presence of linguistic, ethnic, or cultural groups the library may have a goal of serving.”⁴³ These documents should demonstrate a commitment to advocating for the “needs and interests of the library’s or collection’s service population.”⁴⁴ Ongoing review of the collection is also important, as is reviewing a collection for inclusion of materials depicting particular topics or representing particular communities. For example, Thomas Crisp et al. found that books in some early childhood classroom libraries “were relatively homogenous, especially given their very diverse student population, and even the racially diverse backgrounds of the teachers.”⁴⁵ They write, “We did not evaluate the representations coded here according to quality of representation (e.g. accuracy of depiction, authenticity), and many of these depictions would be deemed problematic when examined with evaluative criteria for diverse representations.”⁴⁶ In a methodologically and topically different study, Beth Brendler et al., examined the inclusion of LGBTQ* young adult materials in multiple public libraries across the nation and found “nuanced” results regarding the extent to which they included particular books; for example, libraries serving smaller communities had the largest ratio of copies, while libraries serving large populations tended to have more books in various formats, but relatively higher ratios per copy.⁴⁷ These kinds of analyses on particular topics may reveal significant strengths or gaps.

⁴² Amy S. Pattee, *Developing Library Collections for Today’s Young Adults* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2014), 25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴⁵ Thomas Crisp, Suzanne M. Knezek, Margaret Quinn, Gary E. Bingham, Kristy Girardeau, and Francheska Starks, “What’s on Our Bookshelves? The Diversity of Children’s Literature in Early Childhood Classroom Libraries,” *Journal of Children’s Literature* 42, no. 2 (2016): 33.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Beth Brendler, Lindsay Beckman, Denice Adkins, Heather Moulaison Sandy, Natalia Wiggins-Prelas, and Vanessa Adams, “‘Provide the Highest Level of Service’: Public Library Collections of LGBTQ* Materials for Adolescents in the United States,” *Journal of Research on Libraries and Young Adults* 8, no. 1 (2017): 1.

A collection must be continually reviewed in order to ensure that it is meeting the needs of the community, and the Crisp et al. and Brendler et al. studies provide strong models of how to do so. As well, in 2017 Lee & Low Books published a “Classroom Library Questionnaire” to help educators evaluate the extent to which their classroom libraries are diverse. This template is “a tool to analyze the books in your library and determine where there are strengths and gaps in diversity,” by asking questions such as whether or not books “are written or illustrated by a person of color or a Native/Indigenous person,” “are set in contemporary Asia,” or contain “generalizations about a group of people”⁴⁸—all considerations that the researchers are also concerned with. This questionnaire can be used to complement and deepen the work the researchers have begun here.

Methods

We selected a midwestern urban public library system with a sizable Asian American population. We searched the catalog to see how many books the library held that were published in a given year and examined how many of those books—published in that year—contain Asian content. On July 20, 2016, we looked at books published in 2010, 2012, and 2014. On January 4, 2017, we examined the acquisitions that were published in 2016 to see if the authorship and representation trends we found in our 2016 research continued.

First, we searched the library’s catalog for the following subject terms: Asia, Asian, Biracial, Burma, Burmese, China, Chinese, East Indian, Filipino, Hmong, India, Japan, Japanese, Korea, Korean, Laos, Philippines, Racially Mixed People, Thai, Vietnamese; and we noted those that were cataloged as teen collection, fiction, and physical books, but not graphic novels. We limited our search to these Asian subject-term categories because they also had the biggest demographic presence in the community. Second, we compared our search results with the CCBC multicultural publishing statistics lists from 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016, which Director K. T. Horning generously shared with us. The CCBC, often used as a baseline for research, “receives the majority of new U.S. trade books published for children and teens each year.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Veronica Schneider, “Classroom Library Assessment: How Culturally Responsive Is Your Library?,” *The Open Book* (blog), May 22, 2017, <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2017/05/22/classroom-library-assessment-how-culturally-responsive-is-your-classroom-library/>.

⁴⁹ Cooperative Children’s Book Center School of Education, University of Wisconsin–Madison, “See: Publishing Statistics on Children’s Books about People of Color and First/Native Nations and by People

Therefore, it was useful to see how many books they received with Asian content and to use their lists to supplement our initial searches. Third, we examined the book summaries and reviews for each of the cataloged entries for books published in those four years for books we may have missed through our first two searches, though it is possible that there exist books where the summaries do not indicate that a character is Asian. Through this manual search, we found additional results that were not cataloged as Asian or on the CCBC list.

We did not include graphic novels because many are in series or originally published in other countries and would have inflated our numbers. We did not want to obscure the need for our domestic publishers to publish more diverse books. Also, including books that originated in other countries, which most likely depict Asians in those countries, might perpetuate the idea of the Asian as “forever foreigner,” a stereotype that, according to Asian American studies professor Min Zhou, is a source of “frustration among second-generation Asian Americans who detest being treated as immigrants or foreigners.”⁵⁰ Graphic novels, comics, and manga are often released more frequently than other kinds of books, which again would alter our data. We also did not include nonfiction in order to keep our data set manageable. We discussed whether or not to include anthologies, and how. We also discussed whether or not and how to include books that are part of a series and books where the setting is somewhere in Asia but the protagonist is not Asian. In the end, we decided to limit our research to fiction with an Asian protagonist; further research should be conducted on other genres and formats. Finally, we should also consider that the weeding of books due to physical damage and declining interest may decrease the number of books in the catalog.

Findings

Our results show snapshots of what the catalog contained on July 20, 2016, and January 4, 2017.

For 2010, we found that only 11 books, or 2% of the total fiction teen books collected (544), included an Asian protagonist. Of those 11 books, 5 were authored by people we identify as Asian, while 8 authors were not Asian (one book was co-authored by a trio, bringing our total authorship numbers to 13).

of Color and First/Native Nations Authors and Illustrators,”
<https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>.

⁵⁰ Min Zhou, “Are Asian Americans Becoming White?” in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, ed. Zhou and Gatewood, 383.

For 2012, we found 19 books, or about 2.5% of the total fiction teen books collected (749), included an Asian protagonist. Of those 19 books, 7 were authored by people we identify as Asian, while 13 authors were not Asian (one book was co-authored, bringing our total authorship numbers to 20).

For 2014, we found 31 books, or about 3.5% of the total fiction teen books collected (896), included an Asian protagonist. Of those 31 books, 9 were authored by people we identify as Asian, while 22 authors were not Asian.

For 2016, we found 53 books, or about 7.9% of the total fiction teen books collected (671), included an Asian protagonist. Of those 53 books, 15 were authored by people we identify as Asian, while 38 authors were not Asian.

Table 1. Teen Fiction Acquisitions Including an Asian Protagonist

Collection	2010	2012	2014	2016	Total
Asian Teen Fiction	11	19	31	53	114
Total Teen Fiction	554	749	896	671	2,870
Percentage	2%	2.5%	3.5%	7.9%	4.0%

Table 2. Authorship

Authorship	2010 ¹	2012 ²	2014 ³	2016	TOTAL
<i>Asian</i>	5	7	9	15	36
Total Authors	13	19	31	53	116
Percentage	38.5%	36.8%	29.0%	28.3%	31.0%
<i>Non-Asian</i>	8	13	22	38	81
Total Authors	13	19	31	53	116
Percentage	61.5%	68.4%	71.0%	71.7%	69.8%

¹ One book had three non-Asian authors: *The Clone Codes* (2010) was written by Patricia C. McKissack, Fredrick L. McKissack, and John Patrick McKissack.

² One book, *Burn for Burn* (2012), had two authors: Jenny Han and Siobhan Vivian.

³ One author wrote two books: Jenny Han wrote *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2014) and *Ashes to Ashes* (2014).

Table 3. Breakdown of the Big Five Publishers

Publisher	2010	2012	2014	2016	Total
Simon and Schuster (1924)	3	4	6	3	16
Penguin Random House (2013)	0	0	9	17	26
HarperCollins (1817)	0	3	4	9	16
Hachette (1826)	2	1	1	1	5
Macmillan (1843)	1	2	2	8	13
Penguin (1935)	2	1	0	0	3
Random House (1927)	0	2	0	0	2
Total	8	13	22	38	81

According to our data, in 2010, 3 of the books acquired by the library were published by Simon and Schuster. Hachette and Penguin both published 2 of the acquired books, with Macmillan publishing 1.

In 2012, Simon and Schuster again ranked at the top with 4 publications, followed by 3 from HarperCollins, 2 each from Macmillan and Random House, and 1 each from Penguin and Hachette.

In 2014, Penguin and Random House merged, and 9 of the library's acquisitions were published by Penguin Random House. Simon and Schuster published 6 of the books, followed by 4 from HarperCollins, 2 from Macmillan, and 1 from Hachette.

In 2016, 17 of the books were published by Penguin Random House, followed by 9 from HarperCollins, 8 from Macmillan, 3 from Simon and Schuster, and 1 from Hachette.

In total, over the four years, the library acquired the most books published by Penguin Random House at a total of 26. The library also acquired an additional 3 from Penguin and 2 from Random House prior to the merger. Simon and Schuster and HarperCollins were the next largest acquisitions, with 16 each; Macmillan followed with 13, and Hachette had 5. The numbers of books acquired increased each year, going from 8 in 2010, to 13 in 2012, to 22 in 2014, and to 38 in 2016, for a total of 81 books acquired from the Big Five publishers.

Table 4. Other Publishers

Publisher	2010	2012	2014	2016	Total
Algonquin	0	0	2	0	2
Arsenal Pulp Press	0	0	1	0	1
Bloomsbury	0	0	1	1	2
Candlewick Press	0	1	1	2	4
Charlesbridge	1	0	0	0	1
Cinco Puntos Press	0	0	0	1	1
Disney-Hyperion Books	0	0	0	3	3
Flux	0	0	0	1	1
Groundwood Books-House of Anansi Press	0	1	0	0	1
Haikasoru	1	0	0	0	1
Interlude Press	0	0	0	1	1
Lee & Low Books	0	1	0	0	1
Lerner	0	0	0	1	1

Month9Books	0	0	0	1	1
Orca Books	0	0	1	1	2
Pajama Press	0	0	1	0	1
Polis Books	0	0	0	1	1
Scarlet Voyage	0	0	1	0	1
Scholastic	1	1	1	1	4
Skyhorse	0	0	0	1	1
Splinter Sterling Publishing	0	1	0	0	1
Tuttle Publishing	0	1	0	0	1
Total	3	6	9	15	33

Over the years, in terms of non–Big Five publishers, the library acquired 4 books published by Candlewick and Scholastic; it acquired 3 books from Disney-Hyperion Books, and 2 from Algonquin, Bloomsbury, and Orca Books. The library acquired 1 book from each of the following publishers: Arsenal Pulp Press, Charlesbridge, Cinco Puntos Press, Flux, Groundwood Books-House of Anansi Press, Haikasoru Press, Interlude Press, Lee & Low Books, Lerner, Month9Books, Pajama Press, Polis Books, Scarlet Voyage, Skyhorse, Splinter Sterling Press, and Tuttle Publishing. As with the Big Five acquisitions, the numbers increased each year; they went from 3 in 2010, to 6 in 2012, to 9 in 2014, to 15 in 2016, for a total of 33 books acquired from non–Big Five publishers.

Discussion

This library system has collected a small number of Asian American teen fiction books (4.0% of total acquisitions across four years of data), and the majority of these books (69.8%) are not written by Asian American writers (see table 2). These numbers stand in stark contrast to the library community’s demographics. Fifty percent of the students in K–12 are not white; specifically, 13% of the students are of Asian descent. Twenty-one percent under 20 are of Asian

descent. These youths are being served by a library profession that is predominantly white (88% nationwide; it is likely that this midwestern library system has a higher percentage of white library staff), and they are being taught by a profession that is also very white (82%; similarly, it is likely that this midwestern community has a higher rate of white educators). This kind of imbalance can lead to biases in selecting what books would be good in the library or classroom. We also wonder what kind of coursework, training, or professional development opportunities library staff and teachers have had in regards to critically evaluating, collecting, and programming diverse books.

According to table 1, the number of books containing Asian content increased every two years. The first several years were slow (2% to 3.5%), but a big jump occurred between 2014 and 2016, from 3.5% to 7.9%. Interestingly, the number of books the library collected that were published in 2010, 2012, and 2014 increased slowly, but decreased in 2016, which partly explains the higher percentage of 7.9%. According to table 2, both the numbers of non-Asian and Asian authors has increased. However, the number of non-Asian authors has risen significantly, so over time the percentage of Asian authors *decreased*, demonstrating that more non-Asian than Asian authors are publishing books for teens and being acquired by libraries. Libraries are limited to what agents and publishers acquire and publish; however, although the majority of books for young people published in 2010, 2012, 2014, and 2016 were written by Asian Americans (CCBC),⁵¹ the majority of texts collected and retained by this library were not written by Asian Americans (see table 2). This was generally true across bigger publishers.

Outsider authorship may increase the likelihood of stereotypes and misrepresentation. For instance, some Asian Americans criticize the representations of biracial Park and his Korean military bride mother in *Eleanor & Park* (2012) by Rainbow Rowell.⁵² Specifically, we found that although the numbers of books with Asian characters increased overall, this did not necessarily reflect an increase in the number of culturally authentic stories. While we did not read and evaluate every book, we noted for example that Graham Salisbury's *Hunt for the Bamboo Rat* (2014) contains stereotypes such as the inclusion of model minority characteristics

⁵¹ The CCBC tracks books for all reading levels, so it is possible that insider authorship skews to younger readers.

⁵² See this blog post as well as those linked at the bottom of the post: "Is *Eleanor & Park* Racist? And Other Questions to Ask," *Rich in Color*, March 26, 2014, <http://richincolor.com/2014/03/is-eleanor-and-park-racist-and-other-questions-to-ask/>.

and the trope of the forever foreigner. Salisbury is not Asian or Indigenous; he grew up in Hawai‘i and has written many stories set there. Not only is there a lack of books set in Hawai‘i and the South Pacific, but many of the existing stories are not written by Indigenous people. Considering this, it is important to support more #OwnVoices⁵³—authors who write stories that are representative of their own experiences, perspectives, and lives.

Specifically regarding 2016 data, we identified a least two Asian American authors (Marie Lu and Julie Kagawa) whose novels do not include Asian characters, supporting the CCBC’s observation that, at least from 2012 to 2015, more Asian American authors were writing about non-Asian topics than they were writing books that depicted Asian topics or people.⁵⁴ We did not include them in our final data. However, we did include Traci Chee’s *The Reader* (2016), even though Chee herself says, “*The Reader* isn’t an Asian-inspired fantasy,” because in the same Tumblr post, Chee writes, “But she has straight black hair and teardrop-shaped eyes, and she’s small but mighty, which is generally how I feel about my own stature. *She looks like me.*”⁵⁵

Finally, one of our major observations is that nearly all books found across the four years were authored by women, whether Asian American or not Asian American. While Gene Luen Yang, past National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature (2016–2017), is probably the most visible and popular Asian American male teen author, his books are not included in our data because they are in graphic novel format.⁵⁶ In other years, Asian American male authors such as Ken Mochizuki, Paul Yee, and David Yoo have published stories for teen readers. The one Asian American male author we found out of a total of 115 authors across our four years of data was Rahul Kanakia, author of *Enter Title Here* (2016).

⁵³ Corinne Duyvis, “#OwnVoices,” *Corinne Duyvis* (blog), September 6, 2015, <http://www.corinneduyvis.net/ownvoices/>.

⁵⁴ In 2014, when the CCBC data first showed that Asian American writers wrote more “by” than “about” stories (<https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp>), author Zetta Elliott interrogated this phenomenon in two roundtable discussions on her blog; the first on July 16, 2015 (<http://www.zettaelliott.com/race-representation-in-asian-american-kid-lit/>), and the second on August 7, 2015 (<http://www.zettaelliott.com/asian-pride-in-kid-lit/>). In 2016, these numbers returned to more “about” than “by.”

⁵⁵ Traci Chee, “The Stories You Have to Tell,” *Diversity in YA* (blog), September 16, 2016, <http://diversityinya.tumblr.com/post/150358076512/the-stories-you-have-to-tell>.

⁵⁶ According to the APALA Talk Story bibliography (<http://talkstorytogether.org/>), which Sarah Dahlen compiles, most contemporary male YA authors create graphic novels.

Overall, the number of Asian characters has increased over the years, but those characters may not be easily discernible if reviewers do not make note of them in their reviews or if they are secondary characters. Related, libraries need to pay special attention to how books are cataloged. We found about one-third of our books through a manual search, which raises questions about how those books may or may not be findable in terms of subject terms and catalog searches. This is also related to the issue of whether or not a book should be called “diverse,” “multicultural,” “Asian,” and so on, because a book is more than the ethnicity of its protagonists. In a situation where a library decides to explicitly label their books with specific keywords, we also wonder about the extent to which catalogers have taken courses in cultural competence, diverse literature, et cetera. Subject headings have historically been biased toward a white, Western, male bias. For example, in 1971 Sanford Berman published *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People*, in which he pointed out numerous instances of racism within Library of Congress Subject Headings. Though this tract was published fifty years ago, issues remain; in 2016 the Library of Congress announced it would remove “illegal alien” and replace it with “noncitizen” and “unauthorized immigration,” causing significant criticism from certain members of the House of Representatives.⁵⁷

This particular library system has retained the most copies of best-selling authors’ books, regardless of whether or not the author was Asian American. This is unsurprising given that libraries base their collection management policies (such as weeding) in part on how often an item circulates in a given year, and this policy favors best sellers, popular authors, and books to which publishers have devoted more promotion. However, circulation statistics alone should not determine whether or not a book should be weeded. Renee Vaillancourt writes, “The library’s mission and role priorities as well as the scope of the YA collection should provide guidance on what types of materials to emphasize.” She continues, “Consideration should also be given to what kinds of YA materials are available in other institutions nearby.”⁵⁸ If the library’s mission is to empower patrons and strengthen their community, then providing a wide variety of authentic stories is paramount.

⁵⁷ Lisa Peet, “Library of Congress Drops Illegal Alien Subject Heading, Provokes Backlash Legislation,” *Library Journal*, June 13, 2016, <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2016/06/legislation/library-of-congress-drops-illegal-alien-subject-heading-provokes-backlash-legislation/#>.

⁵⁸ Renee J. Vaillancourt, *Managing Young Adult Services: A Self-Help Manual* (Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2002), 81.

Conclusion

In this research, we evaluated the extent to which a public library collection includes Asian American teen literature by studying its new acquisitions in light of publishing trends, authorship, and community demographics, and found that the library had acquired a relatively small number of books written mostly by non-Asian writers. Additionally, only one of these books is written by an Asian American male. The problems of misrepresentation, erasure, and appropriation are systemic and multi-pronged, so resolving these issues must happen in different arenas, such as in MFA programs, libraries, library science education, and, of course, the publishing industry.

We all have a responsibility to help readers access quality diverse books, and the acronym LEAD (Listen, Evaluate, Advocate, Diversify)⁵⁹ can guide us as we work for change. Library workers and other educators, especially those who are not Asian American, can *listen* to Asian American community members, writers, critics, and researchers. Additionally, we must *evaluate* our collections, using resources such as Lee & Low's "Classroom Library Questionnaire."⁶⁰ Related, we should examine the extent to which specific books are discoverable. We spent dozens of hours and employed various search strategies to find teen fiction with Asian characters; patrons may not invest as much time as we did, or library staff may pick only the first few books that appear in a search when planning for a display. Some books may never be discovered because of the way they are cataloged, so technical services must ensure that books are appropriately tagged.

There are many points along the publishing and library processes where we can *advocate* for change. First, we can identify, mentor, and connect emerging writers; demand that publishers acquire more #OwnVoices authors; and support independent publishers such as Lee & Low Books and Cinco Puntos Press and imprints such as Salaam Reads that publish diverse books. Next, social media has revolutionized the way we advocate and has expanded the reach of our advocacy. For example, in "Diversity as Evolutionary in Children's Literature: The Blog Effect," librarian Edith Campbell shares how "today's scholar activists, educators, and librarians are able to reach audiences through social network sites and through these vehicles affect significant

⁵⁹ Antonio Backman came up with the LEAD acronym during the course of this research.

⁶⁰ Schneider, "Classroom Library Assessment," <http://blog.leeandlow.com/2017/05/22/classroom-library-assessment-how-culturally-responsive-is-your-classroom-library/>.

change in children's [and teen] literature."⁶¹ Similarly, in the award-winning article "Much Ado about *A Fine Dessert*: The Cultural Politics of Representing Slavery in Children's Literature," scholars Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Debbie Reese, and K. T. Horning write about how "the use of social media to broadcast and circulate perspectives . . . countered [the] laudatory critical reception" originally accorded to *A Fine Dessert* and shifted the direction of the discussion.⁶² Readers, library staff, educators, writers, and illustrators can engage through blogs, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media platforms.

Finally, library educators must *diversify* required readings so students read and research diverse books and learn how to evaluate them. It then follows that librarians and library workers must acquire, promote, and program #OwnVoices books, including self-published books. We can bring authors of different backgrounds into our libraries and surrounding schools. Readers can also make a big difference by diversifying their reading. For example, readers can take Gene Luen Yang's National Ambassador for Young People's Literature challenge to "read without walls." By so doing, readers can avoid the "glare of disdain" that Yang himself experienced as a child.

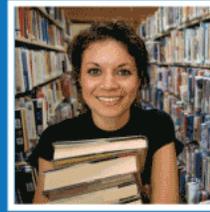
But in order for readers to find those books, they need to be acquired and accessible. Our research demonstrates that public libraries may not be acquiring enough Asian American teen literature, and that the majority of the acquired books are written by non-Asian authors. We suggest publishers and libraries set goals to invert the ratio so that the majority of teen literature depicting Asians is also authored by Asians, and that libraries make sure the books are appropriately cataloged and promoted. They must also ensure that the books depict a range of experiences and perspectives on the Asian diaspora. Yokota notes, "No one book can be 'the best book' for representing Asian American literature. In fact, it takes many books to create a multidimensional look at a culture."⁶³ Books such as *Watched* by Marina Budhos (2016), *When Dimple Met Rishi* by Sandhya Menon (2017), *A Line in the Dark* by Malinda Lo (2017), *Fred Korematsu Speaks Up* by Laura Atkins and Stan Yogi (2017), and the *Prophecy Trilogy* by Ellen

⁶¹ Edith Campbell, "Diversity as Evolutionary in Children's Literature: The Blog Effect," *Children & Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children* 15, no. 3 (2017): 9–13.

⁶² Ebony Elizabeth Thomas, Debbie Reese, and K. T. Horning, "Much Ado about *A Fine Dessert*: The Cultural Politics of Representing Slavery in Children's Literature," *Journal of Children's Literature* 42, no. 2 (2016): 6–17.

⁶³ Yokota, "Asian Americans in Literature for Children and Young Adults," 16.

Oh provide diverse authorship, genres, topics, and time periods, thereby creating those multidimensional looks that Yokota tells us we so clearly need.



Happiness at the End of the Rainbow: Exploring Happy Endings in Young Adult Literature with Queer Female Protagonists, 2009–2017

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Abstract

Early LGBTQ+ young adult literature painted a negative and depressing view of what it means to be queer, typically featuring isolated and socially rejected stereotypical LGBTQ+ characters, homophobia as a key plot element, and sad endings for the LGBTQ+ characters. This problematic representation has shifted over the years to be more inclusive, more diverse, and more positive. A sample of twenty-two English-language LGBTQ+ young adult novels written between 2009 and 2017 with happy endings and female protagonists was analyzed to determine the diversity of happy endings and characters now present in the genre. While there is still more progress to be made, particularly in the intersectionality of identities, our study finds that there is a clear direction away from the problematic past of this literary tradition with more diversity of representation and a range of positive outcomes for the protagonists.

Introduction

Diversity in young adult literature has significantly increased in the last two decades, with increased representation of characters of various backgrounds, races, religions, and gender identities.¹ This development is particularly obvious in young adult LGBTQ+ literature, which has evolved dramatically since the first gay-themed young adult novels were published in the 1970s. Not only are there now more books on the market with LGBTQ+ protagonists; there are also now more novels with queer female protagonists, with varying sexual orientations and

gender identities. In addition, the number of these books that feature happy endings also appears to be on the rise, conveying the clear message that a queer life can also be a happy and successful life. In this study, a sample of English-language books published between 2009 and 2017 with female protagonists and happy endings was analyzed to identify and define the various types of happy ending present in these novels and the characteristics of the protagonist herself. This analysis highlights the contrast between past LGBTQ+ young adult literature and more contemporary novels.

Defining Terms

The vocabulary concerning LGBTQ+ people is constantly shifting. No word has suffered as much confusion as “queer,” generally considered to be the Q in LGBTQ+. This term was once a homophobic slur, but the community has begun to reclaim it in recent years, working to use it as an umbrella term for any identities that are not straight. While we acknowledge the word’s checkered history, we will use the phrase “queer identity” to describe any gender identity or sexual orientation experienced by the protagonists in this sample; though when we are discussing one protagonist in particular, we will use their particular queer identity.

The queer terms discussed in this paper are defined as follows:

Lesbian: a female who is attracted to other women.

Bisexual: a person who is attracted to two or more genders.

Transgender: a person whose gender identity does not match their sex; e.g., a girl who was born with a boy’s body. A transgender person can be MtF (male to female) or FtM (female to male)

Asexual: a person who does not experience sexual attraction to anyone, regardless of gender.

Genderqueer: a person whose gender identity does not conform to the societal norms for that gender, or whose gender identity may be fluid.

Cisgender: a person whose gender identity matches their sex at birth.

Research Questions

This research sought to address the following research questions:

1. Have at least twenty English-language LGBTQ+ young adult novels with happy endings featuring female protagonists been published between 2009 and 2017?

2. Based on a content analysis of the novels identified in (1), is it possible to develop a simple typology of happy endings in recent LGBTQ+ young adult novels featuring queer female protagonists?
3. What are the characteristics of the protagonists of the novels identified in (1)?

Literature Review

The history of LGBTQ+ young adult fiction is a short and generally a sad one. The first LGBTQ+ young adult novel is generally acknowledged to be *I'll Get There. It'd Better Be Worth the Trip* by John Donovan, published in 1969.ⁱⁱ This novel is typical of LGBTQ+ YA novels written during the period of the 1970s to the 1990s; these novels can be characterized by four consistent features. First, there was a lack of diversity of representation of the LGBTQ+ characters themselves, and they were generally depicted as stereotypes. Second, there was a lack of LGBTQ+ characters in the novels, and the LGBTQ+ character was rarely the protagonist. Third, the vast majority of the novels had homophobia as a major theme or plot device.ⁱⁱⁱ Fourth, the LGBTQ+ characters were often alone, rejected by heterosexual peers,^{iv} and isolated from the LGBTQ+ community. In most young adult novels of this period, LGBTQ+ characters usually suffered and often died, and these novels generally made it clear that a queer life was not a happy or successful life.^v

This pattern was certainly reflective of societal attitudes toward homosexuality in general at that time, and as social attitudes began to change, so did literary representations. Between 2000 and 2004, sixty-two books were published that can be identified as “queer YA.”^{vi} The majority of these books featured LGBTQ+ protagonists, and these characters were not simply gay or lesbian— more “diverse queer and trans identities”^{vii} began to be represented in YA fiction. The genre has continued to expand, with protagonists of various queer identities and plots of every imaginable type. However, LGBTQ+ YA literature struggled to break away from its past reliance on homophobia as a theme, and novels often ended up “othering” the LGBTQ+ community, despite attempts to normalize queer identities.^{viii} It was also still rare until recently to have more than two queer characters in a novel; one notable exception from that time period is *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan (2003), which showcased a variety of developed LGBTQ+ characters.^{ix}

Representation of LGBTQ+ identities in young adult literature is very important, as Epstein points out:

I believe that there are two major types of reading that people do: we might read books to see ourselves reflected (i.e., mirror books) and we might also read books to see other selves (i.e., window books).^x

Both of these kinds of reading experiences should be available in LGBTQ+ YA literature. Young adults who are LGBTQ+ can find themselves in the pages, while non-LGBTQ+ young adults may be exposed to the other sexual and gender identities, and their understanding may be broadened as a result. This would be particularly important for questioning young adults, who may start out reading “window books” but then actually find themselves looking in a mirror. This type of reading experience would help them to shape their own identities and to develop their own concepts about identities in the world at large.

However, there are challenges to representation in LGBTQ+ young adult literature. First, the queer characters in these novels are still by and large either gay or lesbian, though that has begun to change.^{xi} Other types of representation are also missing, as Jiménez notes: “While these books feature sexual diversity, other kinds of diversity (in terms of race, religion, ability, class) tend to be ignored.”^{xii} This lack of intersectionality is a major problem because it reduces the LGBTQ+ experience to that of white, able-bodied, middle-class queer teens.^{xiii} Ignoring intersectional diversity within the LGBTQ+ community itself may be just as isolating as ignoring LGBTQ+ people in general in literature.

Finally, the vast majority of LGBTQ+ young adult literature is written about male characters. According to Malinda Lo (one of the authors featured in the sample), only 25% of LGBTQ+ literature focuses on queer female protagonists, while 4% focuses on those with fluid gender identities and/or trans characters.^{xiv} This huge gender disparity is a problem that should be addressed—if these numbers hold true, that means that the majority of LGBTQ+ young adult literature focuses on cisgender gay males. While the needs of this community are obvious, queer females need “mirror books” too, especially since traditionally female sexuality has been “problematic” in young adult literature, often minimized or described using euphemisms.^{xv}

Methods

We set out to identify a minimum of twenty books that satisfied our four criteria, on the assumption that twenty books would provide sufficient substance and variety for a meaningful analysis. To be included in our sample, books had to (1) be published in English, (2) have a queer female protagonist, (3) have a happy ending, and (4) have a publication date of 2009–2017. We began our search using the lists of titles compiled by Malinda Lo, who has been tracking the number of young adult books with LGBTQ+ characters since 2011 on her blog.^{xvi} We added to this list by searching the public library catalog using the search terms “young adult literature” and (“lesbian literature,” “bisexual literature,” “asexual literature,” etc.) within the date ranges 2009–2017. Reviews on Goodreads were consulted to determine if the titles identified had positive endings before they were added to the sample.

We did not attempt to create an exhaustive list of every book published within the date range satisfying these criteria. Our goal was to compile a sufficiently substantial sample that could be read and analyzed within a six-month period; we aimed to identify a minimum of twenty titles for analysis, and we were successful in meeting (and slightly exceeding) this target. Our process yielded the twenty-two titles, all available at our local public library, that were included in this study. These titles are summarized in table 1. A content analysis of each of these twenty-two titles was conducted to identify the type of happy ending and the features of the protagonists. (Appendix A provides full publication information for each of the novels included in the sample.)

Table 1. The Novels in the Sample

Title	Author	Year	Protagonist(s)	LGBTQ+ Identity
<i>Ash</i>	Malinda Lo	2009	Ash	Lesbian
<i>Sparks: The Epic, Completely True Blue, (Almost) Holy Quest of Debbie</i>	S. J. Adams	2011	Debbie	Lesbian
<i>Huntress</i>	Malinda Lo	2011	Kaede; Taisin	Lesbian; lesbian
<i>Being Emily</i>	Rachel Gold	2012	Emily	Trans (MtF)
<i>It's Our Prom (So Deal with It)</i>	Julie Anne Peters	2012	Azure; Luke	Lesbian; gay
<i>Everything Leads to You</i>	Nina LaCour	2014	Emi	Lesbian
<i>Lies My Girlfriend Told Me</i>	Julie Anne Peters	2014	Alix	Lesbian
<i>Femme</i>	Mette Bach	2015	Sofie	Lesbian

<i>Read Me Like a Book</i>	Liz Kessler	2015	Ashleigh	Lesbian
<i>Not Otherwise Specified</i>	Hannah Moskowitz	2015	Etta	Bisexual
<i>Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit</i>	Jaye Robin Brown	2016	Joanna	Lesbian
<i>Jess, Chunk, and the Road to Infinity</i>	Kristin Elizabeth Clark	2016	Jess	Trans (MtF)
<i>Of Fire and Stars</i>	Audrey Coulthurst	2016	Dennaleia; Amaranthine	Lesbian; bisexual
<i>Girl Mans Up</i>	M-E Girard	2016	Pen	Genderqueer + lesbian
<i>You Know Me Well</i>	Nina LaCour and David Levithan	2016	Kate; Mark	Lesbian; gay
<i>Every Heart a Doorway</i>	Seanán McGuire	2016	Nancy	Asexual
<i>If I Was Your Girl</i>	Meredith Russo	2016	Amanda	Trans (MtF)
<i>Finding Your Feet</i>	Cass Lennox	2017	Evie; Ty	Female asexual; trans (FtM)
<i>Rough Patch</i>	Nicole Markotić	2017	Keira	Bisexual
<i>Tash Hearts Tolstoy</i>	Kathryn Ormsbee	2017	Tash	Female asexual
<i>It's Not Like It's a Secret</i>	Misa Sugiura	2017	Sana	Lesbian
<i>Our Own Private Universe</i>	Robin Talley	2017	Aki	Bisexual

Defining and Classifying Happy Endings

We chose to highlight happy endings in LGBTQ+ young adult literature with female protagonists for three main reasons. The first is simple: new stories are needed to combat the trends from earlier decades in which queer characters were rarely shown having positive life experiences. The world is changing for people who are LGBTQ+, and young adult literature should reflect that social change. The second reason is that nearly every genre of stories has a mix of happy and sad endings, and LGBTQ+ young adult literature needs to offer that variety too. The third reason relates to the feelings of the audience. The girls who are described on the pages of these novels reflect real-life girls across these orientation and gender spectrums who are at a vulnerable age for self-esteem and for their feelings about their futures. Seeing that their identities are not only reflected in literature, but that they are also granted happy endings, can give them hope for their own futures.

One of the challenges we faced in this project was defining what constitutes a “happy ending” as there is no standard, widely accepted definition. We developed our own definition of a happy ending as one in which the protagonist is successful at the conclusion of the novel in that

she has achieved an important goal, but this success may not always appear as obvious or explicit “happiness.” Close reading of the selected novels led us to the identification of four distinct types of happy endings: the *romantic* happy ending, the *quest* happy ending, the *freedom* happy ending, and the *discovery* happy ending. All but one of the novels analyzed fit at least two of these categories. Each of these types is described in more detail below.

Type 1: Romantic

The romantic is the simplest kind of happy ending: at the end of the novel, the heroine is with the partner of her choice (whether or not this is the person she was originally interested in) and is happy in that relationship. This kind of happy ending is the most common type in the novels analyzed and occurs not only in books where romance drives the plot, but also in books in which the focus is not primarily romantic. Regardless of the genesis of the relationship, the story ends with the suggestion of a positive future for the heroine and her love interest.

Type 2: Quest

In this type of happy ending, the heroine has a quest from the beginning of the novel. The quest could be something as simple as creating the perfect prom, such as Azure in Peters’ *It’s Our Prom (So Deal with It)*, or as ambitious as rescuing a kingdom (e.g., Kaede in Lo’s *Huntress*). The heroine may not complete the goal in the way she expected, and the quest may be an ongoing struggle, but the story ends with a sense of fulfillment.

Type 3: Freedom

Novels with this type of happy ending are generally darker than the other types, and the happiness of the book overall is often questionable. Typically, the heroine is introduced in uncomfortable circumstances—the victim of homophobia, for example, or in an abusive or uncaring household (such as Ash in *Ash*, Pen in *Girl Mans Up*, Keira in *Rough Patch*, and Sofie in *Femme*). They live in a daily struggle, and their self-esteem suffers. However, the book ends with an escape from the situation, and while this escape may be bittersweet, the protagonist’s future looks brighter and freer.

Type 4: Discovery

This type of happy ending is the most ambiguous of the four. While finding out the truth is its own kind of freedom (see above), it may not be a cheerful truth. If the truth is about the protagonist's sexual orientation and/or gender identity, this discovery may result in new problems to overcome. If the truth is about the protagonist's family, the satisfaction of discovery may be muted by the truth's repercussions. However, by the book's end, it is clear that the heroine is happier because of the discovery, and her future, while shaped by the past, remains hopeful.

Findings

Types of Happy Endings

Using the typology of four distinct types of happy endings identified earlier (Type 1: Romantic; Type 2: Quest; Type 3: Freedom; Type 4: Discovery), a content analysis of the twenty-two novels was completed and each novel was classified according to the type of happy ending it exemplified. As tables 2–5 make clear, all but one of the novels (*Rough Patch*) has more than one type of happy ending.

Books with romantic happy endings, in which the protagonist succeeds in establishing a romantic relationship, were the most prevalent. Seventeen out of the twenty-two titles had this type of ending.

Table 2. Books with Romantic Happy Endings (Type 1)

Title	Author	Year	Happy Ending Description
<i>Ash</i>	Malinda Lo	2009	Because she breaks her mother's curse, Ash is free to be with Kaisa.
<i>Sparks: The Epic, Completely True Blue, (Almost) Holy Quest of Debbie</i>	S. J. Adams	2011	Debbie doesn't end up with Lisa, but she does have a date with Moira, and she is happier at the prospect of that relationship.
<i>It's Our Prom (So Deal with It)</i>	Julie Anne Peters	2012	Azure gets back with her girlfriend Desi, and Luke starts dating Ryan.
<i>Everything Leads to You</i>	Nina LaCour	2014	Emi and Ava get together once the movie is finished.
<i>Lies My Girlfriend Told Me</i>	Julie Anne Peters	2014	Alix and Lianna move past the lies in their relationship and agree to give it another

			try, confessing their love for each other.
<i>Femme</i>	Mette Bach	2015	Sofie and Clea are publicly a couple and plan to go away together to college.
<i>Read Me Like a Book</i>	Liz Kessler	2015	Ashleigh begins a relationship with Taylor.
<i>Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit</i>	Jaye Robin Brown	2016	Joanna and Mary decide to stay together, and they're out and proud.
<i>Jess, Chunk, and the Road to Infinity</i>	Kristin Elizabeth Clark	2016	Jess and Chunk (Chuck) confess their feelings.
<i>Of Fire and Stars</i>	Audrey Coulthurst	2016	Denna and Mare go away together, looking to find out more about magic.
<i>Girl Mans Up</i>	M. E. Girard	2016	Pen and Blake end up together and happy.
<i>You Know Me Well</i>	Nina LaCour and David Levithan	2016	Kate and Violet are together, and Mark finds a boy he's interested in too.
<i>If I Was Your Girl</i>	Meredith Russo	2016	This one is ambiguous: Grant isn't sure he wants to continue their relationship when he discovers that Amanda is trans, but he wants to learn more, and the book ends on a conversation in Grant's car.
<i>Finding Your Feet</i>	Cass Lennox	2017	Evie and Ty are together, and they continue their relationship when Evie returns to Toronto.
<i>Tash Hearts Tolstoy</i>	Kathryn Ormsbee	2017	Tash and Paul get together after realizing that they've both had crushes on each other for a while.
<i>It's Not Like It's a Secret</i>	Misa Sugiura	2017	Jaime forgives Sana for cheating, and they remain together.
<i>Our Own Private Universe</i>	Robin Talley	2017	Aki and Christa decide that their "summer fling" is going to continue, though Christa will have to be closeted.

Five books in the sample did not have romantic happy endings, and they fall into two categories.

Romantic Failures: Huntress, Being Emily, and Rough Patch all end with couples breaking up. The breakup in *Huntress* results from Taisin becoming a sage and needing to be celibate; *Being Emily* has a time skip of two years, during which Emily and Claire have broken up because of distance; and the breakup in *Rough Patch* results from the girlfriend's brother stabbing Keira when he discovers their relationship.

No Romantic Plot: Neither Every Heart a Doorway nor Not Otherwise Specified have strong romantic plots. In *Every Heart a Doorway*, Nancy's goal is to return to the land of the

Dead, which she accomplishes at the end of the book. In *Not Otherwise Specified*, Etta deals with a crush on a boy and long-held feelings for her friend Rachel, but once again her goal is to find herself and get to Brentwood with her new friends, and she accomplishes these goals and sorts out her feelings without embarking on a romantic relationship.

Fourteen of the novels in the sample concluded with the successful completion of a quest, as table 3 summarizes.

Table 3. Books with Quest Happy Endings (Type 2)

Title	Author	Year	Happy Ending
<i>Ash</i>	Malinda Lo	2009	Ash is able to free Sidhean from her mother's curse, which allows her to pay her debt.
<i>Sparks: The Epic, Completely True Blue, (Almost) Holy Quest of Debbie</i>	S. J. Adams	2011	Debbie confesses her feelings to Lisa (unreciprocated), but she fulfills her holy quest, as well the other to-do quests on the Church of Blue list.
<i>Huntress</i>	Malinda Lo	2011	Kaede and Taisin defeat Elowen, the Fairy Queen's daughter. Kaede becomes the King's Huntsman, and Taisin becomes a Sage.
<i>Being Emily</i>	Rachel Gold	2012	Emily is able to transition, and she is beginning the process of surgery as she attends college as a girl.
<i>Everything Leads to You</i>	Nina LaCour	2014	Emi and Ava finish the movie and discover Ava's past.
<i>It's Our Prom (So Deal with It)</i>	Julie Anne Peters	2014	Azure and Luke manage to pull off a great alternative prom, and Luke's play goes off without a hitch.
<i>Not Otherwise Specified</i>	Hannah Moskowitz	2015	Etta passes the audition and goes to Brentwood.
<i>Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit</i>	Jaye Robin Brown	2016	Joanna gets to have her radio show for her dad's church, and she runs it on her own terms.
<i>Jess, Chunk, and the Road to Infinity</i>	Kristin Elizabeth Clark	2016	Jess makes it to her father's wedding, and she attends as a girl.
<i>You Know Me Well</i>	Nina LaCour and David Levithan	2016	Kate is able to have her art show, and her parents agree to let her defer college for a year.
<i>Every Heart a Doorway</i>	Seanan McGuire	2016	Nancy and her friends solve the

			murders, and she finds the door back to the land of the Dead.
<i>If I Was Your Girl</i>	Meredith Russo	2016	Amanda manages to pass, and even when that comes apart, she is still able to go to school in her dad's town without too much fear (after the Parker incident).
<i>Tash Hearts Tolstoy</i>	Kathryn Ormsbee	2017	Tash doesn't win a Golden Tuba, but <i>Unhappy Families</i> is finished, and she begins another project.
<i>Our Own Private Universe</i>	Robin Talley	2017	Aki and Jake's debates go well, and they decide to work on being youth delegates for their church.

Twelve titles can be classified as having Type 3: Freedom happy endings, in which the protagonist escapes from a bad situation and faces a brighter and more hopeful future.

Table 4. Books with Freedom Happy Endings (Type 3)

Title	Author	Year	Happy Ending Description
<i>Ash</i>	Malinda Lo	2009	Ash is able to leave her stepmother's home and be with Kaisa.
<i>Huntress</i>	Malinda Lo	2011	Kaede is able to leave the academy and pursue the job of Huntsman.
<i>Being Emily</i>	Rachel Gold	2012	Emily is able to get out of her home, and eventually her family accepts her.
<i>Femme</i>	Mette Bach	2015	Sofie and Clea are going away to college, escaping their small town.
<i>Not Otherwise Specified</i>	Hannah Moskowitz	2015	Etta is able to get out of Nebraska and away from her former biphobic friends.
<i>Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit</i>	Jaye Robin Brown	2016	Joanna is able to come out in her new town at last, and she deals with the consequences.
<i>Of Fire and Stars</i>	Audrey Coulthurst	2016	Denna and Mare both escape their royal lives (Denna by faking her own death).
<i>Girl Mans Up</i>	M. E. Girard	2016	Pen goes to live with her brother, keeping a relationship with her parents but getting away from their expectations.
<i>Every Heart a Doorway</i>	Seanán McGuire	2016	Nancy is able to return to the land of the Dead, where she felt at home.
<i>If I Was Your Girl</i>	Meredith Russo	2016	Parker attacks Amanda when she's

			outed by Bee, but eventually she is able to live as someone openly trans.
<i>Finding Your Feet</i>	Cass Lennox	2017	Evie sorts out her uncomfortable relationship with her mother and moves to Toronto, while Ty is finally able to move on from Lucette.
<i>Rough Patch</i>	Nicole Markotić	2017	Keira's family grows closer, with the exception of her biphobic father, who leaves.

Sixteen titles ended with discovery, the fourth type of happy ending identified, in which the protagonist either makes a self-discovery or learns a truth that has a major impact on her life.

Table 5. Books with Discovery Happy Endings (Type 4)

Title	Author	Year	Happy Ending Description
<i>Ash</i>	Malinda Lo	2009	Ash finds out about her mother's relationship with the Fairies, and she is able to find the solution to the curse.
<i>Sparks: The Epic, Completely True Blue, (Almost) Holy Quest of Debbie</i>	S. J. Adams	2011	Debbie discovers her spirituality in the Church of Blue.
<i>Huntress</i>	Malinda Lo	2011	Taisin discovers the extent of her powers, and Kaede discovers the Fairy kingdom and finds that she wants to be the King's Huntsman.
<i>Everything Leads to You</i>	Nina LaCour	2014	Emi and Ava solve the mystery of Ava's family history.
<i>Lies My Girlfriend Told Me</i>	Julie Anne Peters	2014	Alix discovers Swanee's lies, and she finds a way to connect with her baby brother.
<i>Femme</i>	Mette Bach	2015	Sofie discovers that she's gay and finds a way to have a relationship with Clea.
<i>Read Me Like a Book</i>	Liz Kessler	2015	Ashleigh discovers that she's gay and has a crush on her English teacher (which her English teacher does not return).
<i>Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit</i>	Jaye Robin Brown	2016	Joanna finds out more about her family and figures out how her faith works in her father's church.

<i>Jess, Chunk, and the Road to Infinity</i>	Kristin Elizabeth Clark	2016	Jess realizes that she's been treating Chuck badly as a friend, and she resolves to be better.
<i>Of Fire and Stars</i>	Audrey Coulthurst	2016	Denna discovers how powerful her magic is, and she and Amaranthine solve Casmiel's murder.
<i>You Know Me Well</i>	Nina LaCour and David Levithan	2016	Kate and Luke both manage to sort out their relationships with their best friends and find new, important relationships.
<i>Every Heart a Doorway</i>	Seanán McGuire	2016	Nancy and her friends discover the truth about the murders.
<i>If I Was Your Girl</i>	Meredith Russo	2016	Amanda builds a relationship with her father and sorts out the past and the present.
<i>Tash Hearts Tolstoy</i>	Kathryn Ormsbee	2017	Tash finds out a lot about fame and how she wants to respond to it.
<i>It's Not Like It's a Secret</i>	Misa Sugiura	2017	Sana discovers the truth about her father's affair: he is having an affair because of his arranged marriage, and Sana's mother is allowing it to let him be happy.
<i>Our Own Private Universe</i>	Robin Talley	2017	Aki finds more meaning in her faith and her father's church.

Of all the novels analyzed in this study, *Rough Patch* by Nicole Markotić has the most ambiguous happy ending. Its heroine, Keira, suffers deeply for being bisexual. Her first relationship with a girl, Jayne, ends with Jayne's brother stabbing her, injuring her so badly she may never be able to figure skate again. Her father has left the family because he is unable to deal with her bisexuality. It could be argued that this book does not have a happy ending. However, Markotić frames this ending in a positive light. Keira is now out, and her unsupportive father is out of her life, which is better than having him in her life to abuse her. The rest of her family is supportive, and Keira is ready to move forward in her life, even though there is uncertainty about what her future will hold.

The book's title provides a clue to the reason this ending can still be called happy: this episode is certainly a *rough patch* in Keira's life, and she experiences terrible pain for her identity. However, there is a sense that Keira is strong enough to move forward with the help of

her family and friends. This is an episode in Keira’s life, and it’s clear that Markotić believes that the rest of her life will be happier despite experiencing it.

The Protagonists

As table 1 indicates, the protagonists in these novels are varied both in sexual orientations and in gender identities. Table 6 analyzes the different LGBTQ+ identities represented.

Table 6. LGBTQ+ Identity by Number of Books

Lesbian	13
Bisexual	4
Asexual	3
Transgender	3
Genderqueer	1

Clearly, lesbians are still by far the most common queer representation in LGBTQ+ YA novels with female protagonists; however, other LGBTQ+ identities are being represented in increasing numbers. This is particularly impressive for asexual characters, since human asexuality was only officially recognized in 2004.^{xvii} Three books in our sample of books published since 2009 feature asexual female leads and end happily, which is promising indeed. It is also interesting to note that in our eight-year publishing window of 2009–2017, representation becomes increasingly varied with the passage of time. Table 7 shows the distribution of LGBTQ+ identities by publication year.

Table 7. LGBTQ+ Identities by Year

Year	Number of Books in Sample	LGBTQ+ Identities
2009	1	1 lesbian
2011	2	2 lesbians
2012	2	1 lesbian, 1 transgender
2014	2	2 lesbians
2015	3	1 bisexual, 2 lesbians
2016	7	4 lesbians, 1 genderqueer, 2 transgender, 1 asexual

2017	5	2 asexual, 2 bisexual, 1 lesbian
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From 2015 onward, there is a noticeable increase in the variety of LGBTQ+ identities, with 2016 being the most diverse year. It is also important to note that our analysis began in June 2017, so any books published after this date were not included in the data set. Thus the 2017 figures only include books published in the first half of the year.

Discussion

This sample of books clearly demonstrates that there is a shift in LGBTQ+ young adult literature from the past, particularly from the 1969–1982 period as analyzed by Cuseo,^{xviii} but even from the early 2000s, as described by Epstein.^{xix} In previous decades, there were four major problems in LGBTQ+ young adult literature: a lack of diversity in representation, a lack of LGBTQ+ characters, homophobia as a plot device, and a severe lack of happy endings. The sample analyzed in this study exhibits significant positive development in each of these areas.

Problem 1: Diversity of Representation

The books analyzed in this sample all have female protagonists, so the LGBTQ+ identities are naturally limited to those possible for girls. It is true that the majority of these characters are lesbians, but in the 2015–2017 period, there was more variety, with representation of asexual, bisexual, and transgender characters. There were also some books, primarily fantasy titles, in which labels were not used (*Ash*, *Huntress*, and *Of Fire and Stars*), although the characters' LGBTQ+ identities are clear and unambiguous.

There is not a huge amount of racial diversity among the characters in this sample, and most of the characters identify as white, although three protagonists are never explicitly identified by racial identity. Table 8 depicts the racial diversity of protagonists.

Table 8. Race of Protagonists

Race	Number of protagonists
White	15
Mixed	1
Black	2
Asian	1
Ambiguous	3

Most of the characters come from a non-specific background, generally middle class and “typical” for their surroundings (American, Canadian, British). However, there are two exceptions in which the protagonists come from cultural minority groups. Pen in *Girl Mans Up* comes from a traditional Portuguese family, and Sana in *It’s Not Like It’s a Secret* comes from a traditional Japanese family. Both girls experience life through the lenses of their families’ expectations, and they experience their LGBTQ+ identities through that lens as well. This leads to conflict within the family, and it takes a lot of compromise and understanding of those traditions in order for Pen and Sana to find their own paths. For Pen, this path leads her away from her parents’ home, whereas Sana develops an increased understanding of her heritage and her parents develop an understanding of their daughter’s reality.

Problem 2: Number of LGBTQ+ Characters

Each book in this sample has at least two LGBTQ+ characters, generally the protagonist and their love interest. However, the majority of the novels have more than two queer characters, and a few books have a wide cast of LGBTQ+ characters of varying ages, such as *If I Was Your Girl*, which features Amanda’s trans support group. The books with the greatest number of LGBTQ+ characters are *You Know Me Well* and *Finding Your Feet*, both of which feature an almost entirely LGBTQ+ cast, with the parents being the only straight characters. As both of these books take place during Pride Week (in San Francisco and Toronto, respectively), the novels are able to depict an entire community of LGBTQ+ people of different ages and identities celebrating each other.

Having a broader cast of LGBTQ+ characters besides the protagonist is positive for two reasons. The first is the development of a sense of community that helps to eliminate the isolation prevalent in LGBTQ+ young adult fiction from earlier years. The more LGBTQ+ characters present, the greater sense of community and positive identity. When the protagonist is not alone in their identity, they have a greater sense of place and connection, and a support network of people when they may be facing resistance at home or school. The second reason is that the presence of more LGBTQ+ characters gives the protagonist (and through them, the reader) an understanding of the variety of LGBTQ+ identities and shows them that there are many ways to be LGBTQ+ and still find a community.

Problem 3: Homophobia

The majority of these novels take place in contemporary real-world settings, and unfortunately homophobia remains an issue. Even the stories that take place in a fantasy world (*Ash*, *Huntress*, *Of Fire and Stars*) contain hints of homophobia. Two books in particular, *Femme* and *Rough Patch*, take place in communities where homophobia is a real threat. Others exist in more neutral environments, with some homophobic characters in the protagonists' lives, and still others mention homophobia as a real problem even though the characters do not directly encounter it in any meaningful way.

However, homophobia is rarely the “plot device” that it was in the past. Characters might be concerned about coming out, but their stories focus on their own identity crises or other goals, and homophobia is not a central theme. Some novels explore the consequences of actions by homophobic characters, such as when the fathers of both Keira (*Rough Patch*) and Ashleigh (*Read Me Like a Book*) fail to cope with their daughters' identities, but the homophobic characters are always clearly depicted as being in the wrong, and the protagonists have a supportive network to help them through the experience.

It must be noted, however, that some of the characters experience hatred targeted specifically at them because of their identity. Etta in *Not Otherwise Specified* is ostracized from her lesbian friend group for being bisexual; Nancy (*Every Heart a Doorway*), Evie (*Finding Your Feet*), and Tash (*Tash Hearts Tolstoy*) experience backlash about their asexuality; and transphobia is accepted as a matter of course for Jess (*Jess, Chunk, and the Road to Infinity*), Amanda (*If I Was Your Girl*) and Emily (*Being Emily*). These depictions illustrate that prejudice exists in unexpected places, sometimes even within the LGBTQ+ community itself. This is an important issue for young LGBTQ+ teens of any identity, and the fact that this is depicted in these books actually subverts the “homophobia as plot” trope by identifying the fact that people can fear and hate any identity that contradicts their expectations.

Problem 4: Happy Endings

From the tables above, it's clear that every book in this sample has at least one kind of happy ending. In fact, with the exception of *Rough Patch*, they all have at least two different kinds of happy endings. This finding suggests that the stories are not only giving readers positive plot outcomes, but they're also giving them positive resolution of the different storylines as well,

showing that romance is not the only kind of narrative for LGBTQ+ girls. Furthermore, the trend of increasing numbers of LGBTQ+ young adult novels being published no doubt reflects the trend in many parts of the world toward acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities and shows that the days of the “unhappy queer teen” may become a thing of the past.

Conclusion

The twenty-two books in this sample show a clear, positive movement away from the LGBTQ+ young adult literature of the past. Whereas such novels were once heavily focused upon homophobic, stereotypical narratives featuring one-dimensional male characters and usually ending in tragedy, the sample shows that new stories are being told. Contemporary LGBTQ+ young adult literature includes heroines across the spectrum of sexual orientation and gender identity, with stories that contain multiple happy endings, a cast of LGBTQ+ characters, and depth of character development that make these stories sing. There is still progress to be made in the intersectionality of identities; representation is not truly diverse until all facets of identity may be found within a category. However, the remarkable amount of change even within the years of the sample show that there is hope that change will continue. For LGBTQ+ young women, it is to be hoped that fictional happy endings are just the beginning.

Appendix A: Chronological List of Young Adult Novels Analyzed

Lo, Malinda. 2009. *Ash*. New York: Hachette.

Adams, S. J. 2011. *Sparks: The Epic, Completely True Blue, (Almost) Holy Quest of Debbie*. Woodbury, MN: Flux.

Lo, Malinda. 2011. *Huntress*. New York: Hachette.

Gold, Rachel. 2012. *Being Emily*. Tallahassee: Bella Books.

Peters, Julie Anne. 2012. *It's Our Prom (So Deal with It)*. New York: Hachette.

LaCour, Nina. 2014. *Everything Leads to You*. New York: Dutton Books.

Peters, Julie Anne. 2014. *Lies My Girlfriend Told Me*. New York: Little, Brown.

Bach, Mette. 2015. *Femme*. Toronto: James Lorimer.

Kessler, Liz. 2015. *Read Me Like a Book*. London: Indigo.

Moskowitz, Hannah. 2015. *Not Otherwise Specified*. New York: Simon Pulse.

Brown, Jaye Robin. 2016. *Georgia Peaches and Other Forbidden Fruit*. New York: HarperTeen.

- Clark, Kristin Elizabeth. 2016. *Jess, Chunk, and the Road to Infinity*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Coulthurst, Audrey. 2016. *Of Fire and Stars*. New York, Balzer + Bray (HarperCollins).
- Girard, M-G. 2016. *Girl Mans Up*. New York: HarperCollins.
- LaCour, Nina, and David Levithan. 2016. *You Know Me Well*. New York: St. Martin's.
- McGuire, Seanan. 2016. *Every Heart a Doorway*. New York: Tor.
- Russo, Meredith. 2016. *If I Was Your Girl*. New York: Flatiron Books.
- Lennox, Cass. 2017. *Finding Your Feet*. Burnside, NC: Riptide Publishing.
- Markotić, Nicole. 2017. *Rough Patch*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Ormsbee, Kathryn. 2017. *Tash Hearts Tolstoy*. New York: Simon & Schuster BFYR.
- Sugiura, Misa. 2017. *It's Not Like It's a Secret*. New York: Harper Teen.
- Talley, Robin. 2017. *Our Own Private Universe*. New York: Harlequin Teen.

Notes

ⁱ Shelley Diaz, "Embracing Diversity in YA Lit," *School Library Journal*, September 12, 2013, <http://www.slj.com/2013/09/teens-ya/embracing-diversity-in-ya-lit/#>; Malinda Lo, "LGBTQ YA by the Numbers," *Malinda Lo* (blog), October 12, 2017, <https://www.malindalo.com/blog/2017/10/12/lgbtq-ya-by-the-numbers-2015-16>.

ⁱⁱ Allan A. Cuseo, *Homosexual Characters in YA Novels: A Literary Analysis, 1969–1982* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992); John Goldsmith, "The Evolution of Queer Representation in the Young Adult Genre" (Honors thesis, Western Oregon University, 2016), http://digitalcommons.wou.edu/honors_theses/96.

ⁱⁱⁱ B. J. Epstein, "We're Here, We're (Not?) Queer: GLBTQ Characters in Children's Books," *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 8, no. 3 (2012): 287–300, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2012.677241>.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 292.

^v Goldsmith, "The Evolution of Queer Representation"; B. J. Epstein, *Are The Kids All Right?* (London: HammerOn Press, 2013).

^{vi} Goldsmith, "The Evolution of Queer Representation."

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 11.

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x Epstein, "We're Here, We're (Not) Queer," 287.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Laura M. Jiménez, “Representations in Award-Winning LGBTQ Young Adult Literature from 2000–2013,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 19, no. 4 (2015): 414.

^{xiii} Epstein, “We’re Here, We’re (Not) Queer.”

^{xiv} Jiménez, “Representations in Award-Winning LGBTQ Young Adult Literature”; Lo, “LGBTQ YA by the Numbers.”

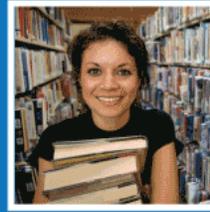
^{xv} Epstein, “We’re Here, We’re (Not) Queer.”

^{xvi} Lo, “LGBTQ YA by the Numbers.”

^{xvii} Lori Anne Brotto, Morag A. Yule, and Boris B. Gorzalka, “Asexuality: An Extreme Variant of Sexual Desire Disorder?” *Journal of Sexual Medicine* 12 no. 3 (2015): 646–60,
<https://doi.org/10.1111/jsm.12806>.

^{xviii} Cuseo, *Homosexual Characters in YA Novels*.

^{xix} Epstein, “We’re Here, We’re (Not) Queer.”



INFLO-mation: A Model for Exploring Information Behavior through Hip Hop

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Abstract

This paper explores the insights that hip hop might afford young adult library researchers who study information behavior, particularly in online environments. A Critical Race Theory (CRT) approach was used to explain how existing information behavior models describe youth experiences in ways that mask their unique racialized experiences and culturally specific information-creating behaviors. Using CRT's counter-storytelling method, a new model called INFLO-mation is introduced, featuring a continuum of information behaviors captured within three descriptive categories of creativity: Rhythm, Rhyme, and Remix (R³). Findings include a discussion the INFLO model, its classification scheme, and illustrative examples from contemporary teens' digital media practices rooted in hip hop culture.

Introduction

“Okay, Ladies, now let’s get in formation.”

—Beyoncé, “Formation,” *Lemonade* (2016)

In this paper, I introduce a model for exploring information behavior (IB) called INFLO-mation (INFLO). This model also serves as a call to action for library and information science (LIS) professionals to “Get INFLO-mation,” or to leverage hip hop culture as a way to expand how they view, study, and support the everyday IB of teens. This call to action is reminiscent of a popular song by singer Beyoncé, who commands listeners to “get in formation,” or to get in one accord with a radical aura of Black positivity.

This INFLO model is grounded in over fifteen years of my thinking and writing about the intersections of adolescent literacy, school librarianship, and issues of equity in education.ⁱ It also reflects my lived experiences as a Black female scholar who came of age in the 1990s during the golden era of hip hop, which was the proverbial soundtrack of my youth. My experience as a school librarian in an urban school district, coupled with having two teenage children of my own, also shapes my evolving understanding about the way today's youth live and learn in the digital age.

Conceived of as a middle-range theory, the INFLO model offers a bridge between broad theories of IB and the everyday practices of young adults. The term “middle-range theory” refers to an approach to sociological theorizing aimed at integrating theory and empirical research. Rather than starting with a broad abstract entity like “the social system,” middle-range theories start with empirical phenomena and abstract from them to create general statements that can be verified by data.ⁱⁱ In general, IB refers to the ways that people need, seek, manage, give, and use information.ⁱⁱⁱ The focus of IB research has shifted over time from a focus on systems and users in libraries to include a broader range of information-related phenomena that span academic and everyday life, and both physical and digital environments. Recent scholarship has recognized that people not only seek information from static resources like books and databases, but they are actively involved in sharing and creating new information sources with the onset of Web 2.0 technologies. For example, Koh developed a framework to explore the “information-creating behaviors” of contemporary youth who are engaged in making participatory contributions to the changing information world through wikis, online magazines, and graphic programming languages such as Scratch.^{iv}

The INFLO model builds on this relatively new branch of IB scholarship that focuses on information-creating behaviors among youth, particularly in online spaces. It also emerged in response to some theoretical gaps that were identified in a report on youth digital media practices entitled *Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media (HOMAGO)*.^v It is important to note that the INFLO model does not seek to explain the totality of youth information-creating behaviors. Rather, like other middle-range theories, it seeks to contribute a special theory that is applicable to limited conceptual ranges.^{vi} In this case, the conceptual range applies to contemporary young adults whose daily experiences and digital media practices are shaped largely by their affiliation and identification with hip hop culture.

One quick example of the unique information-creating behaviors that hip hop culture has spawned include online freestyle rap challenges. These rap challenges consist of people recording their verses/bars/lyrics et cetera over a common instrumental beat that is subsequently shared via video uploads on social media sites like Twitter and Instagram. These rap challenges go viral through the use of hashtags such as #SoGonechallenge and #Getgeekedchallenge. The instrumental beat gives everyone a level playing field to create their rhymes, but everyone takes it their own way, like painters with a blank canvas. From high school students to celebrities, anyone can use this platform to showcase their talents.

Hip Hop Demographics

According to a report by Nielsen music, hip hop is now the most revenue-generating genre of all music types.^{vii} In 2017 Google honored the forty-fourth anniversary of the birth of hip hop with an interactive Google Doodle that featured a graffiti-style logo on the Google homepage seen by people all over the world.^{viii} Although it is difficult to validate their statistics, a number of media sources report some variation of figures indicating that 24 million people between the ages of 19–34 from around the world comprise hip hop’s primary listening audience, with Black listeners at 46%, Hispanics at 25%, and the remaining percentage of listeners biracial.^{ix} In terms of behavior, hip hop fans are at the forefront of the digital movement, with 18% saying they like to be among the first to buy new media technologies. This fan base is also more likely than the average person to be interested in gaming/purchasing a gaming console.^x

Research Question

With such a substantial segment of the population participating in hip hop culture, there is a tremendous opportunity for researchers to better understand how hip hop influences the way today’s teens live and learn. Therefore, this research is guided by the following overarching question: *What insights might hip hop afford researchers who study teens’ information behaviors and information needs, particularly in online contexts?*

Problem Statement

“I’m kicking new flava in ya ear’ / Mack’s a brand new flava in ya ear.”

—Craig Mack, “Flava in Ya Ear,” *Project Funk Da World* (1994)

Due to the commercial success of hip hop music and culture, today's teens synthesize their multiracial identity primarily from a position of Blackness rather than whiteness.^{xi} *Issues of race, however, are not just Black and white in America. By the year 2050, there will be more nonwhite than white Americans, and most of the nonwhite population will be Asian and Latino, not Black.*^{xii} However, mainstream research on information behavior draws primarily upon positivist and print-based psychologistic discourses that reify whiteness.^{xiii} According to Kincheloe and Steinberg, "Whiteness privileges mind over body, intellectual over experiential ways of knowing, mental abstractions over passion."^{xiv}

For example, the two prevailing curricular themes in library and information science—information literacy and information inquiry—frame learning primarily within a decontextualized, task-based problem-solving context. Yet this approach is incongruent with the more rhythmic, visual, and oral ways that today's youth live and learn, particularly in the digital age, where videos that go viral often center on a new or classic hip hop song or trending dance moves.

Optimistically, there have been important shifts in how information behavior is studied. The trajectory of IB research is now leaning toward more expansive and transformative understandings of what constitutes information and knowledge.^{xv} For example, the HOMAGO is a notable exception to mainstream approaches to the study of youth information behavior. The report shifts away from individualistic and skill-based understandings of information behavior that label youth into categories such as "computer lads" toward a stance that recognizes that the social context (e.g., hanging out) is a more useful way to study young people's practices, learning styles, and identity formation.

Although the HOMAGO report takes a more expansive view on youth information behaviors, the conceptual categories it employs to frame the analysis are problematic. In particular, the report categorizes youth experiences into three genres of participation including "hanging out," "messaging around," and "geeking out." In reading the HOMAGO report, I felt a sense of detachment from these three descriptive categories as a way to describe youth experiences. In particular, I had trouble envisioning my fourteen-year-old son's everyday practices as being represented in the report without having to bracket out the latent racial associations that the conceptual categories of "hanging out" and "messaging around" bring to mind in mainstream American discourses.

Namely, I had trouble reconciling the ways in which phrases like “geeking out” have emerged as normative placeholders to connote whiteness while phrases like “hanging out” and “messaging around” are conceptually linked to criminalized images of Black and Brown people.^{xvi} When I see the phrases “hanging out” and “messaging around,” I am reminded of two Black male teenagers, Trayvon Martin and Emmett Till.^{xvii} These young men were both killed in the context of doing everyday, mundane life activities like hanging out with friends or messaging around near a local store. Their murders symbolize a historical pattern of racial violence against Blacks in America.^{xviii} The fact that nearly sixty years has passed between the time fourteen-year-old Emmett Till’s murder sparked the civil rights movement in 1955 and the 2012 not-guilty verdict in the killing of Trayvon Martin spurred the Black Lives Matter movement shows that America has yet to fully deal with its anti-Black racist past.

It is important to note that many of the unarmed Black and Latino people who have been killed by police under these spurious circumstances have been teens or young adults. This unfortunate statistic is supported by research, which suggests that teens of color are not granted the same presumption of childhood and innocence and naiveté as their white counterparts when it comes to encounters with the police and other authority figures—including educators.^{xix} Yet data suggests that police regularly deescalate situations involving whites who are armed when arrested while unarmed Black and Latino youth continue to be killed with impunity by the state.^{xx} Given these issues, I decided to develop a more “culturally sustaining”^{xxi} framework to explore information behaviors, one that is grounded in the lived experiences of youth of color. Introducing this new way of exploring information behavior can be likened to the new “futuristic, robotic, George Jetson” style of rap that Craig Mack brought with his 1994 hit single, “Flava in Ya Ear.”

Theoretical Framework

“Used to speak the king’s English then I got a rash.”

—Mos Def, “Hip Hop,” *Black on Both Sides* (1999)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) helps examine the ideology of racism and gives voice to the racialized experiences of people of color.^{xxii} Counter-storytelling is a method that CRT researchers often employ to tell the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told.^{xxiii} Counter-storytelling is also a tool for challenging the dominant discourse on race and

furthering the struggle for racial reform. As mentioned previously, hip hop has a similar counter-hegemonic capacity to give voice to the lived experiences of people who have been racially oppressed or otherwise marginalized in society.

Part of giving voice to people of color is allowing them to tell their stories in their native tongue, without imposing the rules of language that the majoritarian group considers legitimate.^{xxiv} Rapper Mos Def poetically captures this sentiment for Black people who speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and who often feel restricted by societal norms that privilege speaking Standard American English. He quips that he “got a rash” from speaking “the King’s English.” This lyric gives voice to the experiences of linguistic colonization that many people of color share. Rap has historically functioned as a form of counter-storytelling in that rappers have defied societal norms by using Ebonics^{xxv} and hip hop vernacular speech patterns as their weapon of choice in the fight to tell their story on their own terms in their own words.

CRT also helps unmask the often well-disguised rhetoric of shared normative values such as neutrality and color-blindness that are enmeshed in the ontological fabric of many mainstream discourses. The field of library and information science has had a propensity to uncritically promote a mantra of neutrality and color-blindness in its efforts for libraries to be seen as bastions of democracy and as the great equalizers.^{xxvi} However, counter-storytelling allows for a broader multicultural history of public libraries to be told from the vantage point of racial minorities. African Americans, for example, were barred from entering public libraries during the period of racial segregation despite being taxpaying citizens.^{xxvii} Similarly, CRT affords other branches of library and information science, such as research on information behavior, to critically examine its own research epistemologies to look for blind spots and omissions when it comes to studying people of color.^{xxviii}

Conceptual Review of Literature

“Hip-hop is not just a mirror of what is, but should also be a reflection of what could be.”

—President Barack Obama^{xxix}

Hip hop has become part of a leisure economy that now has a global commercial and cultural impact. However, it is important to recognize that the origins of hip hop are rooted in the story of

a few Black entrepreneurs (including DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and Grandmaster Flash) who in the late 1970s and early 1980s nurtured an active scene in Bronx, Harlem, Queens, and elsewhere at block parties and nightclubs.^{xxx} These early pioneers have been credited not only for their musical talents, but for having the foresight to see that music could be a positive force for change in the lives of Black and Latino youth for whom gangs and drug dealing were a reality. In the following passage, legendary hip hop artist KRS-One speaks about the contributions of Afrika Bambaataa to hip hop's cultural existence:

But Afrika Bambaataa is the first one to tell all of us, "Let's come together under this banner called Hip Hop. And we gon' call ourselves Zulu Nation. But really, it's Hip Hop. It's this new thing that we're gonna cause in the world." It was deliberate. Hip Hop was never a mistake. . . . Those principles: peace, unity, love, and having fun became the principles for this new culture called Hip Hop. Afrika Bambaataa would meet with us regularly. This was no haphazard thing. We just rapping on the corner. That's MTV's history. Real Hip Hop history is Afrika Bambaataa sitting everybody down and saying, "Listen, all this black, white, red, yellow is stupid. We're all human beings. Let's come together on that."^{xxxi}

KRS-One makes two significant points about the origins of hip hop including the facts that (1) it was deliberately developed with social justice outcomes through young adult activism; and (2) it was inclusive in terms of who could join the movement as allies in the struggle for social justice. Unlike other youth subcultures, hip hop has survived the test of time and managed to become the single largest cultural bridge that connects youth around the world. Whether through its influences in music, fashion, language, business, entertainment, and so on, hip hop occupies a major space in the twenty-first-century cultural milieu.

With its beginnings in underground youth culture, hip hop has also had significant counter-hegemonic potential.^{xxxii} Bettina Love echoes this idea that hip hop is rooted in a long history of anti-Black state violence. She writes:

Our ability to fight oppression through music is so abiding and distinctive that people think it's magical. Hip Hop has an ancestral need and obligation to combine social protest, music, and modes of cultural expression to address systemic racism, classism, suffering, and social neglect.^{xxxiii}

Alongside its social justice leanings, hip hop also has a unique ability to reproduce itself in ways that reflect the evolving nature of youth identity. Critics argue, however, that hip hop can and does reproduce systemic inequalities despite its potential to effect change.^{xxxiv} Notwithstanding these criticisms, hip hop has managed to etch out a significant space in mainstream American popular culture where young people have a dedicated space to voice their pain, hopes, styles, attitude, and other expressions of self. Globally speaking, hip hop has “gone viral” through the proliferation of social media and Internet use among teens and young adults.^{xxxv} As a result, there are some unique information behaviors that emerge at the crossroads of hip hop culture and youths’ digital media practices, which the next section provides analytic tools for researchers to explore further.

Methodology

Using a CRT counter-narrative approach, I developed a new model for exploring information behavior that responds to the conceptual blind spots of the HOMAGO report pertaining to the racial realities of young people of color. The terminology used to create the INFLO model and its descriptive categories are grounded in one of the main cultural influences on today’s young adults—hip hop. The conceptual system I developed features three levels of classification for information behaviors—Rhythm, Rhyme, and Remix (R³). Each of these categories aligns with the original elements of hip hop—break dancing, emceeing, and DJing.

More specifically, the four original pillars that make hip hop “a way of life” include (1) emceeing, which includes rapping (also called MCing or mc-ing), (2) DJing and (turntablism), (3) break dancing (or street dance), and (4) graffiti art. Each of these elements exemplifies the levels of creativity that young people exhibit in their everyday lives, particularly in their digital media practices. The INFLO model provides explanations for each level of creativity within the R³ framework, spanning basic, intermediate, and advanced levels.

The INFLO Model

In order for models to be useful, they should be able to provide a conceptual system of definitions and classifications of the related data, events, and phenomena to guide the researcher in their interpretations.^{xxxvi} To that end, the INFLO model presented in table 1 provides a breakdown of the analytic framework that researchers can use to explore a range of information-creation behaviors grounded in hip hop culture.

Table 1. INFLO-mation Model

Hip Hop Elements (original core elements)	Rhythm¹ (break dancing)	Rhyme² (emceeing/MCing)	Remix³ (DJing)
Level of Creativity	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced
Conceptual definitions of hip hop elements	Hip hop has ancestral roots in the African DRUMBEAT, which represents a shared foundation of communication, understanding, and knowledge building.	Hip hop represents the VOICE of what’s happening in the world. Hip hop brings marginalized perspectives into mainstream consciousness through its core element of emceeing (aka rapping).	Hip hop is a highly APPROPRIATIVE culture and art form, borrowing from a myriad of sources in the creation of new sonic forms and new knowledge products.
Spectrum of information-creation behaviors	<i>Vibing</i> <i>Flowing</i> <i>Jamming</i>	<i>Rapping</i> <i>Freestyling</i> <i>Schooling</i>	<i>Sampling</i> <i>Flipping</i> <i>Tagging</i>
	Basic mode of information production that starts from a popular rhythm or instrumental beat and is modified for different information contexts. The emphasis is on the rhythm and movement rather than the lyrics or ideas.	A synthesis of new and existing rhythms <i>and</i> rhymes during multimedia information-production behavior. The lyrics and ideas are primary over the beat as they express a unique point of view.	Creative reuse of information in order to produce new information. Remixing includes creative, educational, and ethical aspects.
Sample related data	#jujuonthatbeat challenge	#geekedupchallenge Cloud emcees	Group identity hashtags, e-graffiti art, YouTube mixes

Findings and Discussion

This study sought to explore the ways in which hip hop culture might enhance and enliven the way scholars study information behavior among teens and young adults. Through a CRT counter-narrative approach, I identified several cultural incongruences in some of the frameworks that have been used to study youth information behavior in the past. In particular, I found that the three descriptive categories employed in the HOMAGO report—hanging out,

messing around, geeking out—are problematic because they mask the racial realities that youth of color, especially Black youth, experience regularly due to the historical pattern of anti-Black state violence in America. Consequently, I derived a corollary set of descriptive categories—Rhythm, Rhyme, and Remix. These categories help give voice to a new range of information-creation behaviors that have emerged in social media and Internet spaces that connect directly back to hip hop culture. Figure 1 below contains sample data of videos and images that reflect the kinds of information-creation behaviors described in the INFLO model from table 1.

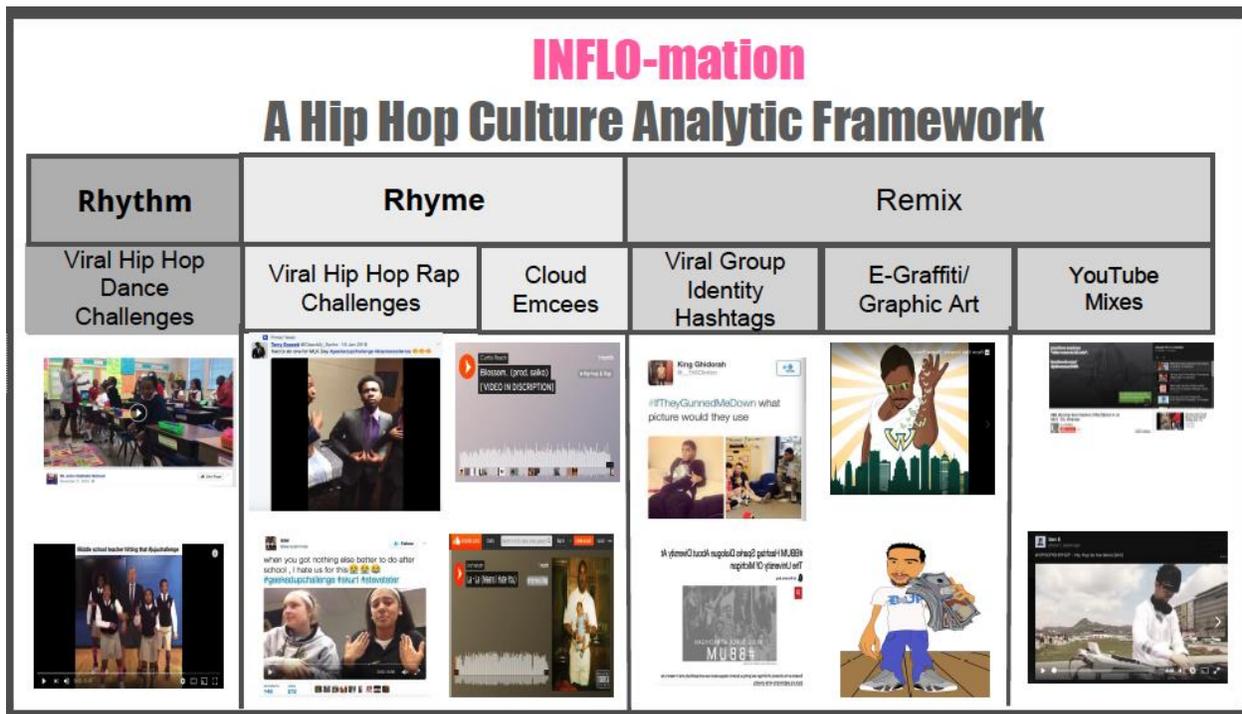


Figure 1. INFLO-mation: A Hip Hop Culture Analytic Framework

Spectrum of Information-Creation Behaviors

Vibing, Flowing, and Jamming. The sample data applied to the R³ framework show that information behaviors that fall on the basic end of the creativity spectrum are more spontaneous than those that fall on the advanced end of the spectrum. For example, viral dance videos often require less forethought than a viral rap video since the movements are already prescribed by the dance creator. Rap videos require a higher level of engagement with creating new lyrics. Moreover, the basic-level information-creation behaviors tend to be less educational than those on the advanced level. For example, the #jujuonthatbeat challenge are videos primarily created

by young people who wanted to be a part of a trending dance move that accompanies a hip hop song called “Juju on That Beat” by Zay Hilfigerrr and Zayion McCall.^{xxxvii} In most cases, these videos are impromptu productions captured on cell phones and uploaded to social media sites like Vine, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. They tend to emphasize the softer skills of presentation and performance on the academic literacies spectrum.

However, the sample video screenshot data featured in figure 1 within the Rhythm category is taken from a second-grade classroom where the teacher led the students in a morning routine that incorporated the juju beat dance moves along with an original rhyme about getting ready to learn.^{xxxviii} This sample data shows that the line between basic (Rhythm) and intermediate (Rhyme) information-creation behaviors can be blurred when teachers allow hip hop inside the classroom for educational purposes.

At the basic level of information-creation behaviors, individuals are mainly “vibing, flowing, and jamming,” or simply riding the rhythm or beat in the moment. The fact that a trending dance video from social media was brought into the classroom for educational purposes brings this sample piece of data closer to the intermediate level of creativity because the teacher took the next step of “rapping” her own original lyrics as well. The process of recording the video and posting it on the Internet using the appropriate hashtags for others to access and retrieve also reflect basic-level information behaviors.

Rapping, Freestyling, Schooling. Within the intermediate level of creativity, the emphasis is on language (rhyming), which provides a more direct bridge to traditional academic literacies.^{xxxix} The two sample videos from figure 1 in the Rhythm category each feature students taking the #geekedupchallenge. They each created a freestyle rhyme that introduces themselves over the same instrumental beat that the challenge is based on. These videos were chosen because they represent high school and college students in a moment of “schooling,” or teaching the world about their areas of study and their academic life in general.^{xl} These freestyle rap videos can easily move along the creativity continuum from basic sharing of biographical information to advanced coverage of highly complex ideas that create awareness about various subjects from biology to politics. For example, a college student at Morehouse created a music video on mitosis and DNA that was seen over 600,000 times on YouTube.^{xli} He rapped about DNA and RNA in a creative remix of a Lil Uzi Vert song that he says inspired him.

The final sample data in the Rhyme classification features Cloud emcees, which refer to burgeoning rap artists who utilized cloud-based music platforms like SoundCloud to establish their followings and to market and promote their work on social media. These novice artists are etching out an identity and creating a unique style that brings this information-creation behavior from the cusp of intermediate level to the advanced end of the spectrum.

Sampling, Flipping, Tagging. On the advanced (Remix) end of the information-creation behavior spectrum, the key characteristics include having a clear point of view, social consciousness-raising elements, originality, and technical acumen. For example, figure 1 features two examples of “flipping” and social “tagging” behaviors in the use of two different group identity hashtags: #iftheygunnedmedown and #BBUM (Being Black at University of Michigan). The former is an example of a phenomena that occurs on Twitter where young people use hashtags as a form of social “tagging” to rewrite the mainstream narrative about themselves or to amplify their racialized experiences. In the case of the #iftheygunnedmedown hashtag, users were posting “dueling” photos of themselves—one where the subject looks wholesome, and another where the same person might look like a troublemaker. This hashtag was used more than 100,000 times in the first twenty-four hours of its appearance on the Internet.^{xlii} The other hashtag, #BBUM, ignited a dynamic dialogue about race and specifically what it means to be Black at a predominantly White university.^{xliii}

Other examples that fall within the advanced end of the creativity spectrum include e-graffiti and YouTube mixes. Although graffiti is a cultural object that predates the birth of hip hop, in 1980 the media began to link graffiti with other emerging urban cultures—those of break dancing and rap music, which birthed the concept of hip hop. Graffiti is linked to other hip hop elements indirectly because the artistry was often displayed in the same public spaces where DJs and break-dancers performed at block parties. In that sense, there was a cultural, mental, and spiritual connection between the young adults participating in DJing, rap, break dancing, and graffiti.

With stiffer regulations prohibiting graffiti art on public buildings, coupled with the digital tools available to create artwork on computers, the presence of e-graffiti is now a staple in the online public sphere. The first image in the e-graffiti classification features an image posted on Wayne State University’s Instagram page. The image shows a Black male superimposed on the backdrop of a Detroit cityscape while sprinkling the university’s “W” emblems down on the

city. The caption on the post reads: “Wayne State, the essential flavor of Detroit.”^{xliv} The public nature of this image is one of the reasons it can be characterized as e-graffiti. More importantly, the image presents a decidedly urban and unapologetically Black point of view.

The final two examples in the Remix category feature YouTube mixes, which are a nonstop playlist inspired by a song or video in a particular genre. The skills needed to create an original mix require advanced DJ skills that blend old school turntable techniques with new school software-based DJ tools. The creator of the mix must have an in-depth knowledge of music in order to sample music that reflects the breadth and depth of hip hop music. For example, DJ Ultraman has a series of mixes on mixcloud.com that are grouped into playlists with titles such as “Life & Liberation Mixtape Pt. 3” (Conscious Hip-Hop); “Roots & Lovers Rock Reggae Mix” (mETHODOLOGY Sessions); and “SD-La’s Summer Mix” (’90s Hip-Hop and R&B).^{xlv}

Words Matter

“Speech is my hammer bang the world into shape / Now let it fall”

—Mos Def, “Hip Hop,” *Black on Both Sides* (1999)

Library and information science professionals should be especially attuned to ways in which certain subject headings and classification schemes can overlook and alienate people from backgrounds that are already marginalized. Cataloging librarian Sanford Berman openly criticized centrally performed cataloging and standard cataloging tools that supported bias in subject headings, such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings. In his 1971 publication, *Prejudices and Antipathies: A Tract on the LC Subject Heads Concerning People*, Berman lists 225 headings with proposed alterations, additions, or deletions and cross-references to “more accurately reflect the language used in addressing these topics, to rectify errors of bias, and to better guide librarians and readers to material of interest.” Berman writes, “The fact that a number of meanings may be assigned to a given word explains why messages are subject to misinterpretation and why our communication is open to misunderstandings.”^{xlvi}

Berman helped elevate the consciousness of the LIS profession in recognizing the power of naming that catalogers have to privilege or marginalize entire groups of people based on the terminology they assign to subject headings. Similarly, I developed the three R’s framework with a cultural sensitivity to the hip hop vernacular young adults might use to describe their

information behaviors. I aimed to give voice to those who might not see themselves reflected in the HOMAGO report because of the racialized connotations found in its analysis framework.

Limitations

Although I consider myself a cultural insider in the hip hop community, I am no longer a young adult. Therefore, I recognize my own limitations and potential to conceptualize young people as a cohesive group defined by their presumed difference from today's adults as well as youth from the past.^{xlvii}

Future Directions

A next step for this research might be to present the INFLO model to a group of teens to allow them to use social tagging as a way to democratize the analysis process. One way to do this is by allowing them to generate their own keywords to categorize the range of information-creation behaviors they employ in their daily lives.

This approach would follow the efforts of Christo Sims, who co-authored the HOMAGO book and later gave college students who took part in the original study an opportunity to reply publicly to how well the book appeared to portray their younger years.^{xlviii} One group of Sims' college students wrote a review of the HOMAGO book as a whole. In order to foreground their voices, I will quote from the text at length. Laura Johnston writes:

For the most part, I agreed with the genres presented in this chapter. As I have either witnessed the genres of participation through my own experience, or through my friends' experiences. . . . But the deeper we got into discussing the book and reading our peers' responses, the more we started to notice subtle disagreement and uneasiness amongst our classmates about the way the book characterizes our adolescence. We weren't in complete disagreement—HOMAGO wasn't getting us completely wrong—but we weren't sold either.

The fact that young adults took the opportunity to speak back to the HOMAGO report is a significant contribution to research. I plan to further refine this INFLO-mation framework by designing a participatory action research project with youth to allow for their input on the terminology and classification scheme along with identifying real-world examples from their digital practices.

Conclusion

While the HOMAGO report rightfully places new media at the center of peer culture in the United States, the conceptual framework leaves little room to examine the ever-increasing, yet distinct role that hip hop culture plays in the birthing of unique kinds of information behavior in the twenty-first century. As U.S. school and public libraries are evolving to meet users' changing needs, we need to create new frameworks and to design principles that reflect how youth are actually using and interacting with information both inside and outside of library spaces. Hip hop offers a wealth of insights in these efforts.

Notes

ⁱ See, e.g., Kafi D. Kumasi, "Critical Race Theory and Education: Mapping a Legacy of Activism and Scholarship," in *Beyond Critique: Exploring Critical Social Theories and Education*, ed. Bradley A. U. Levinson et al. (New York: Routledge, 2015), 208–31; Kafi D. Kumasi and Renee F. Hill, "Examining the Hidden Ideologies within Cultural Competence Discourses among Library and Information Science (LIS) Students: Implications for School Library Pedagogy," *School Libraries Worldwide* 19, no. 1 (2013): 128; Kafi D. Kumasi, "'The Library Is Like Her House': Reimagining Youth of Color in LIS Discourses," in *Transforming Young Adult Services: A Reader for Our Age*, ed. A. Bernier (Chicago: ALA–Neal Schuman, 2013), 103–13.

ⁱⁱ Raymond Boudon, "Review: What Middle-Range Theories Are," *Contemporary Sociology* 20, no. 4 (1991): 519–22.

ⁱⁱⁱ Karen E. Fisher, Sanda Erdelez, and Lynne McKechnie, eds., *Theories of Information Behavior* (Medford Township, NJ: Information Today, 2005).

^{iv} Kyungwon Koh, "Adolescents' Information-Creating Behavior Embedded in Digital Media Practice Using Scratch," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 64, no. 9 (2013): 1826–41.

^v Mizuko Ito et al., *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

^{vi} Nik R. Hassan and Paul Benjamin Lowry, "Seeking Middle-Range Theories in Information Systems Research" (paper presented at the International Conference on Information Systems [ICIS 2015], Fort Worth, TX, 2015).

^{vii} Hugh McIntyre, "Report: Hip-Hop/R&B Is the Dominant Genre in the U.S. for the First Time," *Forbes*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hughmcintyre/2017/07/17/hip-hoprb-has-now-become-the-dominant-genre-in-the-u-s-for-the-first-time/#52f813f25383>.

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^{ix} Gaille, Brandon. "25 Good Hip Hop Demographics." *BrandonGaille: Marketing Expert and BlogMaster* (audio blog), February 5, 2015. Accessed May 23, 2018. <https://brandongaille.com/25-good-hip-hop-demographics/>.

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Farai Chideya, *The Color of Our Future* (New York: William Morrow, 1999).

^{xii} Ibid.

^{xiii} Cushla Kapitzke, "Information Literacy: A Positivist Epistemology and a Politics of Outformation," *Educational Theory* 53, no. 1 (2003): 37–53; Todd Honma, "Trippin' Over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies," *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2005).

^{xiv} Joe L. Kincheloe and Shirley R. Steinberg, "Addressing the Crisis of Whiteness: Reconfiguring White Identity in a Pedagogy of Whiteness," in *White Reign: Deploying Whiteness in America*, ed. Joe L. Kincheloe, Shirley R. Steinberg, Nelson M. Rodriguez, and Ronald E. Chennault (New York: St. Martin's, 1998): 3–29.

^{xv} R. David Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

^{xvi} G. Ladson-Billings, "Just What Is Critical Race Theory and What's It Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?" *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 11, no. 1 (1998): 7–24.

^{xvii} Ta'les L. Love, "Emmett & Trayvon: Analyzing Their Literal and Symbolic Relationship," *TRiO-McNair Scholars Undergraduate Research Journal* 1, no. 1 (2015).

^{xviii} Homer Hawkins and Richard Thomas, "White Policing of Black Populations: A History of Race and Social Control in America," in *Out of Order: Policing Black People*, ed. Ellis Cashmore and Eugene McLaughlin (New York: Routledge, 1991), 65–86.

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^{xxi} Django Paris, "Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice," *Educational Researcher* 41, no. 3 (2012): 93–97.

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^{xxv} Geneva Smitherman, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (Boston: Houghton, 1977).

^{xxvi} Christine Pawley, "Unequal Legacies: Race and Multiculturalism in the LIS Curriculum," *Library Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2006): 149–68.

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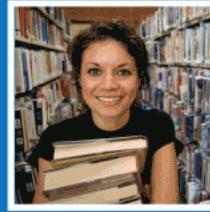
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Middle-Schoolers' Perceptions of Government: Intersection of Information and Civic Literacies

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Abstract

This article examines young people's perceptions of government, as well as the connection between these perceptions and their information and civic literacies. A case study of 37 young teens uses descriptive survey data, along with participant observation and other qualitative data collection methods, and finds that participants base their perceptions of government on a variety of factors, including institutions, the presidency, policies and policy outcomes, and the media's portrayal of government. Nearly half of the overall perceptions that each participant had of government was negative. Within these perceptions, however, participants demonstrated contradictory opinions and gaps in civic and information literacy, providing important implications for librarians and library workers and educators.

Introduction

In an age where “fake news” is discussed both by and about government daily, general trust in government is an area prime for research. The effect of an increasingly polarized political environment on youth is particularly concerning. As Kelly states, “The very nature of social trust—trust in individuals and trust in government and social institutions—promotes the likelihood for individuals to actively engage in society through service, voting, and other forms of self-governance, such as political activism,”ⁱ citing such studies as Glaeser, Laibson, Scheinkman, and Soutter;ⁱⁱ Kwak, Shah, and Holbert;ⁱⁱⁱ Newton;^{iv} Newton and Norris;^v and Torney-Purta, Richardson, and Barber^{vi} as further proof. The developmental stages of this study's participants, eleven- to fourteen-year-olds, are described by Piaget and Inhelder as

concrete operational and formal operational, wherein young people are beginning to form their own opinions and beliefs, and are developing critical thinking skills and attitudes of trust.^{vii} This study posits that these formative stages thus have a direct impact on future civic and voting behavior, given that both involve critical thinking and attitudes of trust. Thus, this article, using data collected during a larger study on youth and government information, discusses eleven- to fourteen-year-olds' perceptions of government and observes connections between their perceptions of government and their information and civic literacy skills.^{viii} The findings inform education in these literacies and suggest specific areas in which youth may have critical gaps in knowledge

Research Questions

This study asks two primary questions:

1. What are participants' perceptions of government?
2. What are the connections between perceptions of government and participants' information and civic literacies?

Literature Review

This study examines young people's perceptions of government and the connection between these perceptions and their information and civic literacies. Because this is an exploratory study, we did not know what the participants based their perceptions of government on. The following review of the literature looks at research that explains inputs that may influence young people's perceptions, including political socialization and, specifically, the influences of the media, major world events, and civic education on people's ideologies.

Political Socialization

Much of the scholarship related to government and younger adolescents and children focuses on political socialization. Scholars find that young people show signs of having a distinct political identity.^{ix} Additionally, early perceptions of government institutions affect "a young person's developing identity for political participation, for a sense of civic responsibility, and for a sense of political efficacy."^x Flanagan and Sherrod highlight the differences between early research on political socialization, in which young children, assumed to be passive, were the focus of study and authority figures were expected to be their biggest influences versus the research of later

years, in which adolescents and young adults were believed to be more active participants in their political development.^{xi} Recent research tends to unite the two views with new knowledge of developmental patterns and plasticity of beliefs throughout life. Influences believed to have some effect on young people's later political beliefs include parents, peers, the media, level of education, involvement in organized activities as youth, civic education, and major world events that occur during their formative years.^{xii} Particularly salient to this study are the possible effects of the media and major world events on young people's ideologies.

Media Use and Influence

Adolescents spend a lot of time around media. A 2010 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found particularly high rates of media use among children and young teens: "Eleven- to fourteen-year-olds average just under nine hours of media use a day (8:40), and when multitasking is taken into account, pack in nearly 12 hours of media exposure (11:53)."^{xiii} These numbers are compelling for many reasons, but particularly notable for this study is the relationship of media use and political socialization. Studies find that media has a profound impact on young people, particularly with regards to health behaviors like aggression and use of tobacco and alcohol.^{xiv} Additionally, scholars note that both the choice of media type and the consumption of media affect young people's general socialization; as Arnett explains, "When they seek entertainment or high sensation from media, when they use media materials toward identity formation or for coping, when they participate in a media-based youth subculture, adolescents are also, in a larger sense, participating in activities that are part of their socialization."^{xv} With adults, TV news has been connected to political polarization,^{xvi} and trust in government has been linked to the overall positivity or negativity of the press.^{xvii} Perhaps more notably, many studies have recently linked media use to higher levels of civic engagement^{xviii} and political knowledge.^{xix} Overall, the type, frequency, and attitudes of media influence young people's socialization.

Societal Climate

Political socialization also depends on the societal climate in which a person develops. In their study of the socialization effects of political campaigns, Sears and Valentino assert that "most socializing communications, and the greatest socialization gains, are likely to be triggered by the intervention of exogenous political events."^{xx} This carries with it the implication that while socialization may be related to a life stage, connections are based more on events that occur

during a period of time in a generation’s youth than the general developmental characteristics that all generations possess, an example of which, the authors cite, are the trusting attitudes that children tended to have under Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy compared to the less favorable attitudes developed under Presidents Johnson and Nixon.^{xxi} Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers found that although parent-child transmission of political views is generally predictably strong, during periods of societal change, such as the 1960s, politicized households more frequently produced children who disagreed with parental views.^{xxii} While these data do not necessarily reflect the current state of society, they do suggest that when society goes through periods of change (such as after significant cultural events), normal political socialization processes can be altered.

Methods

This study uses data gathered from 37 eleven- to fourteen-year-old participants of the second year of an after-school program held during the 2014–2015 school year in four mid-Atlantic middle schools. Two of the schools were grades K–8, and two were grades 6–8. Participants were drawn only from grades 5–8 at all four schools. As table 1 shows, of the 37 participants, 14 were male (38%) and 23 were female (62%). The majority were (self-described) Hispanic/Latino (34%) or Black (31%), 9% identified as Asian, 3% as white, 13% as two or more races, and 9% as other.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant Gender	Participant Race*	Participant Grade*
Male: 14 (38%) Female: 23 (62%)	Asian: 3 (9%) Black: 10 (31%) Hispanic/Latino: 11 (34%) White: 1 (3%) Two+ races: 4 (13%) Other: 3 (9%)	5th grade: 3 (9%) 6th grade: 3 (9%) 7th grade: 15 (47%) 8th grade: 11 (34%)

*Five students did not fill out surveys, so self-described race and grades are unknown and did not figure into the percentages.

The after-school program was part of a larger research study designed to help young people conduct online research on health topics of personal interest. During the first year of the after-school program, the participants encountered government-produced websites during their personal research. Many of the youth were unaware of how to distinguish government information from other types of websites and displayed some confusion over the source of information displayed on government websites. The second year of the program offered an opportunity to further study youth knowledge of and perceptions of government websites, as well as their perceptions of the government in general. The findings of these questions are presented in the author's dissertation,^{xxiii} but this article focuses specifically on the participants' understanding and perceptions of government.

Several qualitative data collection methods were used to understand participants' perceptions, including some that were already being used in the after-school program and others that were developed specifically to study the participants' perceptions of government and government websites. These methods included a survey, a health literacy assessment tool, interviews, a card-sorting activity, a credibility screenshot poster activity, word association, and participant observation during the weekly one-hour sessions of the ten- to twelve-week program at each of the four schools. These methods are described briefly below.

- *Survey*: Questions asked about trust in government, including open-ended questions asking participants to define government and about their knowledge of government websites and agencies, as well as questions on their general trust and belief in fairness and equality in America. Some questions were informed by or adapted from prior work.^{xxiv}
- *Health Literacy Assessment Tool*: Participants were asked to answer questions about the meaning of URLs, credibility judgments, and other information-literacy skills.
- *Interviews*: Semi-structured interviews of approximately fifteen minutes each were conducted at each school early in the after-school program with one to two participants at a time. Participants were asked about their strategies for search and their perceptions of government and government websites. Interview techniques were informed by guidelines for interviews with children.^{xxv}
- *Card-Sorting Activity*: Researchers used three decks—types of people, types of sources, and types of Internet sites—made up of several individual cards with a particular source

printed on the front (e.g., in the people deck, one card had “teacher” printed on it) to ask groups of 2–4 participants whether they would use the source and why (or why not).

- *Credibility Screenshot Poster Activity:* Poster-sized screenshots from the homepages of several health-related websites were presented during the after-school program to participants who then used Post-it notes to write explanations for their evaluations and to stick on the sections of the homepages they thought made the sites trustworthy (green Post-its) or not trustworthy (pink Post-its). For this study, data were only analyzed from the participants’ thoughts on the homepage of www.alzheimers.gov.
- *Word Association:* This activity was designed to capture participants’ understanding of government and government websites. Participants were asked: “What does the term ‘government’ mean to you? In other words, what words do you associate with the term ‘government’?” After completing their list for government, the same question was asked for dot-gov websites. The group then discussed their answers.
- *Participant Observation:* Throughout the after-school program, at each school, the researchers present at each session kept field notes and wrote observation notes. This practice of using multiple evaluators is described by Patton as “investigator triangulation”^{xxvi} and is one method this study used to corroborate observations. In addition to these field and observation notes, each session was audio-recorded and relevant segments were transcribed.

Note: Because the data collection for this study was undertaken during a voluntary after-school program, there was significant variance in the attendance of participants.

The data collected from these tools were studied using content analysis.^{xxvii} The transcriptions of all the activities were coded three ways: using codes from the literature, in vivo, and summative. Data were also analyzed using hand-coded sentiment analysis (coding each statement as positive, negative, or neutral) to gain a better understanding of how each participant felt overall about the government. This was important because it was rare that participants offered only positive or only negative statements throughout the program.

The data was collected as part of an IRB-approved study. The participants’ parents consented to their participation, and the youth gave their own assent. The families were offered fifty dollars for their participation in the after-school program. Participants’ privacy was protected through the use of pseudonyms in all of the data collection tools and the artifacts

gathered throughout the program. These pseudonyms, chosen by the participants, are used throughout this article.

Findings

Participants’ Definitions of Government

At the outset of this study, researcher-assigned definitions of the term “government” were left intentionally vague. This was a conscious decision made to uncover how these participants arrived at their opinions on government. In other words, one aspect of the research question was uncovering what concepts of government figured into the formation of these youths’ perceptions.

In their definitions of “government,” participants varied in the boundaries they placed on the institution. Eight participants used the generic word “people” in their definitions, such as Nunu’s answer that government is “a group of people that make laws, also people who gather info of other places or jobs.” A few participants mentioned the president or presidents specifically, either by defining the government as a president (Unknown, Ms. Sterious, Katniss, Waldo) or by mentioning the president, e.g., “Government—helps the president with decisions” (Jay the Greatest, as well as Soccer4Life). Other participants thought of government in terms of a place or area (Batman, Anonymys, Coffee Ice Cream, Jessica, and Foxy57), a group (Ana Lynch), a service (Sweet Hershey Kiss), an agency (Flash), and “a thing” (The Blue Anime). Sparten117 described the government as “branches.” In addition to these conceptions, participants considered the functions of government. Table 2 shows the most common.

Table 2. Common Functions Included in Definitions of Governments

Function	Examples
Law-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “As a place where people talk about laws” (Batman) • “A group of people that make laws, also people who gather info of other places or jobs” (Nunu) • “People who make laws” (Unknown)
Generally helps or does not help America/Americans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The government stands up for our rights and laws” (Morgan Rice) • “The government does not care about the economy or us” (Jazzy Jay)
Protection, safety, and security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “To me government is a group that ensures security and safety” (Ana Lynch) • “A place to protect our state” (Foxy57)

Leadership, law, and order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The agency that runs a country” (Flash) • “A service which helps to run and keep America a civilized place” (Sweet Hershey Kiss) • “The people that control our society” (Gabriela)
Taxation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “They steal our taxes to give to other countries” (Jazzy Jay) • “A thing where people collect taxes and help other people” (Agent Chicken Wing)

Other participants described the government as “secret” (Dr. Who, Marie), fair (Percy Potter), “somewhat” untrustworthy (Natsu Dragniel), reliable and serious (Hopekeeper), and private and important (Marie). Overall, many of the definitions were neutral statements (e.g., the definition offered by Flash in table 2), but many also demonstrated emotional responses toward the government (e.g., Jazzy Jay’s definition).

Participants’ Perceptions of Government

The next section examines the factors through which participants filtered their evaluations of government, as well as whether these evaluations were positive or negative. This section organizes participants’ evaluations into five categories taken from the literature on trust and government.^{xxviii} These categories are participants’ evaluations of the following:

1. *Specific Institutions:* This category includes participants’ opinions of government based on their opinion of institutions, such as elected officials and political parties, as well as the more general “people” they refer to as carrying out the duties of government.
2. *The President:* This category includes participants’ opinions of government based on their opinions of then-president Obama.
3. *Policy and Policy Outcomes:* This category includes participants’ opinions of both government based on their evaluation of general government operations (e.g., their role in providing security) as well as of specific policies (e.g., the Affordable Care Act).
4. *Information from the Media:* This category includes participants’ opinions based on their experience with media’s evaluation and presentation of government.
5. *Government in General:* This category includes participants’ references to the degree to which the government is fair, impartial, nondiscriminatory, equitable, and

trustworthy without a specific clarification as to what part of government they were referring.

The subsections that follow describe both the positive and negative perceptions of participants within these categories. This organization demonstrates the frequency with which participants had opposite opinions on similar issues. For example, while many participants stated their belief in the government's equity, other participants said that they believe the government is unfair. Other themes included trust, economics, effectiveness, helpfulness, and knowledge. In addition to these general evaluations, more specific themes, including government secrecy and surveillance, terrorism, and government defense emerged from both the positive and negative statements. As was expected, participants generally did not have only negative or only positive things to say about the government. For example, during one word association activity, Batman stated, "Government gives rules [positive], but some rules are iffy and they basically don't make sense [negative]."

Institutional Evaluation

While participants did not often mention specific institutions, many of their positive statements reflect an evaluation of the people who run the country. Percy Potter listed in his word association the term "leadership" to describe government. Coffee Ice Cream said that government is "something like a second president," which means "they help run the United States, and you know, keep it good, not bad and stuff." In his interview, Flash said government means "a type of agency or type of group that runs the country and helps makes the country better." Ana Lynch said she believed that "the government is a group to keep people secure, and safe," and when asked if she trusted them, she replied in the affirmative.

The lack of specificity in institution may be due to a lack of knowledge; in one instance, a researcher asked participants to give her an example of a trusted source. Cap'n Crunch answered "the FDC" but could not recall what it stood for past "Federal." Additionally, 7 (out of 32) respondents answered the survey question "What is a government agency? If you can, give an example" with, "I don't know," "?," "I'm not sure," or left the question blank.

Some negative evaluations focused on elected officials. Chocolate Rain and Unknown both mentioned that elected officials often say one thing, but do another. More specifically, Chocolate Rain said that "when people run for governor and stuff like that, they tell you one

thing and then they win and they don't come through with what they said." Unknown referenced that politicians make promises during campaigns, "oh I'm going to do this, this, this, and this" but in fact "they don't do any of that." The survey also specifically asked respondents whether they felt elected officials could be trusted. Eleven participants (just over one-third) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Political parties came up at one school. Unknown mentioned "Republicans" in his word association, which prompted Nightwing to note that he doesn't "like them." Unknown agreed, saying he "go[es] for Democrats." Batman mentioned that he had heard "that many people, many Republicans, only a small party refused that [then-]President Barack Obama [should] be President. For some reason." He elaborated that he thinks that is "wrong because it was two mixed presidents so far. Frederick Douglas[s] and President Barack Obama." Putting aside the incorrect history, it was clear that while Batman did not know why the other party disliked the president, he equated it in some way to race. Cap'n Crunch echoed these sentiments when he told a researcher that since he is Hispanic, he feels "offensive [offended] when Republicans made decisions about immigration."

Presidential Evaluation

Surprisingly few of the students evaluated the president at all during the program. Many wrote "the President" in their word associations, and all respondents to the survey knew that Barack Obama was the U.S. president (which was the case at the time this data was collected), but none of these answers carried any sort of judgment either way. Batman did elaborate on his assertion of the government's usefulness "in information" with the explanation that "President Barack Obama usually has meetings . . . to declare laws, how will the laws be treated, why do we need the laws, and how good the laws will be when you announce them." On the more negative side, during one session Natsu Dragniel, Jazzy Jay, and Anonymys discussed whether then-president Obama is "a puppet" because, as Jazzy Jay opined, "you say you care about the people, you should have enough time or something to at least write the speeches to say to the people." Anonymys reminded the group that the president has to "sign bills" (presumably suggesting that this took up the majority of his time), but Jazzy Jay was undeterred.

Policies and Policy Outcome Evaluation

While mentions of specific policies were rare, participants frequently talked about government decisions and actions generally. Among the positive statements representing this evaluation, Dr. Who said that the government “can make really good decisions to help lots of the people.”

LolaRam wrote in her word cloud about government the term “helpers” and further clarified that she thinks “the government helps you in paper, work, and money.” Agent Chicken Wing defined government as “a thing where people collect taxes and help other people,” and Flash said that the government is “good” and that “they help the environment and people . . . like the communities.”

Some participants had a positive view of government as it related to jobs or the economy. Ana Lynch, for example, wrote “high quality job” in her word association for government. Agent Chicken Wing noted that “when we get our tax, it goes to the government and then helps us, so I think that’s good.” Similarly, Batman told an interviewer, “Government means to me, like as a part of our life, like taxes. Taxes help, benefit people if they’re cops, police, usually they get reductions and that money, that money that they have goes back to them too. Because you know you get income tax which goes back to you.”

Evaluations of government’s policies were not all positive, however. Two of the participants noted that they do not like it when the government makes decisions with which they do not agree. Jay the Greatest said that “at times it [the government] could have a point, but sometimes it needs to help people out more ’cause sometimes we may not agree with what they say.” Queen Pam agreed, saying, “You can trust them a little, but not sometimes because they may make decisions without us agreeing on it.” Sparten117 asserted that the government “make[s] stupid laws” and referenced that in the state in which the research took place and where he lives, “there’s pretty much taxes on everything and my dad’s really mad.” Sweet Hershey Kiss also had concerns over monetary policy:

I have trust issues when it comes to money. Think about it. . . . When you first start dealing with the government when you become an adult, you have to go through forms, beginning to get tax money and having to pay tax money, and when it comes to the government, sometimes they try to out cheat you with your money.

Natsu Dragniel negatively referenced the government’s funding of wars, saying that “they . . . get into other countries’ business.”

In a few cases, there were discussions about specific policies. One of these instances was the Ebola outbreak of 2014. Kira thought that the government responded “pretty well” to the scare, and Morgan Rice remembered that “they didn’t let some people from East Africa in” and that she “kind of did agree that they were checking them and then they did let them come in, but they had to get a check-up to see if they had Ebola.” When a researcher asked the group for an example of a time the government “screwed up” (echoing the words of a participant), Nightwing answered, “ObamaCare . . . A whole lot of people didn’t like ObamaCare. I don’t know why, but I just know ObamaCare was a problem.”

Media Evaluation

Many students connected their distrust of either the government or the media with their perception of the other. Sweet Hershey Kiss said she would not go to government agency websites for information because she has “kind of a trust issue with the government. They change their story all the time, just like the news, that’s why I didn’t choose news websites. Cuz there’s no way on TV there can be news at 5, news at 6, they’re just changing the story up a little bit and replaying on TV.” She mentioned in another session that she does not read the newspaper “because it’s not worth it.” When asked how she finds out about issues, she said she mostly gets alerts on her phone or her mother tells her things. She said, however, that “most of the time [she doesn’t] really trust . . . so many things have happened and the government have made promises that they’ve never been able to keep.” Agent Chicken Wing said she does not like the news because it scares her. She agreed with Marie and Sweet Hershey Kiss that “the media does have a big impact because something might happen, but what the media tells us might not be true,” and when asked whether she thought the government has influence over what the media says, she replied that “maybe they bribe them to say this or that.”

Many of the students gave examples of learning things about the government from media. Most of these statements were negative, and many of the anecdotes mentioned were conspiracy theories. This information came from both entertainment and the news. Kira learned about Area 51 from a documentary she saw on the Discovery Channel, Ms. Sterious thought she heard about it from the movie *Monsters vs. Aliens*, and Mr. Paste said he gets his information on the government’s secrets from a show that airs on weekend nights on (he thinks) the CW. Chocolate Rain just mentioned she learned about these types of theories online:

There're a lot of theories when you go online . . . because the world is really overpopulated and [the government] secretly knows the cures to these things [that] they're not exposing . . . like the guy who had Ebola, how come the nurse, the patient died, the nurse died, but then one of the researchers who caught it, he's still alive? I don't trust them!

Some of the information was more sinister, such as Agent Chicken Wing's account that she saw on CNN that the government is "planning something." While she could not remember the details, she said "I know it's bad . . ." Jazzy Jay remembered that she has heard about "these policemen raping . . . girls" and notes to her fellow participants that they would have heard about it too "if [they] listen to the news. . . ."

Some of the media's information that taught participants about the government was more positive. Morgan Rice mentioned that she "heard . . . on NPR or something, that [the government] checks all our text messages. . . . That someone gave out the secret," but she thinks that is okay because of the threat of terrorism. Kira offered as a reason for her positive evaluation of the government's response to Ebola: "As you can see in the news, there's not a lot more cases of it." A few of the participants even learned about government websites from the media. Cap'n Crunch noted that government websites make him think about exercise because "sometimes there are commercials that say every child should get active at least an hour a day. And then go to this website, something I can't remember . . . like getactive.gov or getmoving.gov." Unknown heard about a government website for health care on the news, and Dr. Who mentioned that he connects health to government because he had heard ads for healthcare.gov.

Generic Evaluation

Some of the participants' perceptions either were based on a non-specific idea of government or on one that they did not specifically state. For example, many of the participants described the government as trustworthy. Participants phrased this in a variety of ways. When asked in an interview whether they trusted the government, both Morgan Rice and Ana Lynch simply said yes. Hopekeeper listed "trustworthy" in her word association. Morgan Rice noted in her survey that "the government stands up for our rights and laws." None of these statements clarified how the participant was defining government, however.

This happened with negative evaluations as well. Marie, for example, explained that though she trusts the government “to a level, it depends on what they’re talking about. There’s been a couple of cases where they haven’t been particularly honest about what they’re doing or what is happening and they make people think all these things are happening and in reality they’re not.” In response to a researcher’s questioning whether she trusts government, NinjaGirl mentioned that the government “can take your house away.” Though she was sure they could not take kids away, they do “take their houses, their car, their money, their phone.” This seemed to be from personal experience, as she told the researcher that she knows someone to whom this has happened. Participants also brought up more general ideas of inequality. Chocolate Ice Cream wrote in her word association that the government is “mean with Spanish people.” Presumably these opinions are referring to either specific government policy or officials, but the participants did not elaborate on which.

Overall Perceptions of Government

From the above data and the sentiment analysis conducted on each participant’s set of statements made throughout the program, nearly half of the participants had overall negative perceptions of government. Table 3 represents the overall perceptions.

Table 3. Participants’ Dominant Attitude about Government

Generally Positive about Government	Generally Negative about Government	Neutral about Government	Not Enough Data
1. Ana Lynch 2. Anonymys 3. Dr. Who 4. Flash 5. Foxy57 6. Hopekeeper 7. Kira 8. LilMarMar 9. LolaRam 10. Morgan Rice 11. Percy Potter 12. Soccer4Life 13. The Blue Anime 14. Unknown	1. Agent Chicken Wing 2. Chocolate Rain 3. Coffee Ice Cream 4. Jay the Greatest 5. Jazzy Jay 6. Marie 7. Mr. Paste 8. Ms. Sterious 9. Natsu Dragniel 10. Nightwing 11. NinjaGirl 12. Nunu 13. Queen Pam 14. Sparten117 15. Sweet Hershey Kiss	1. Batman 2. Cap’n Crunch 3. Waldo	1. Gabriela 2. Jessica 3. Katniss 4. Mr. Golden Man 5. SuperSweet

Discussion

Comparison to Prior Research

This study's participants evaluated the government using many similar measures, as adults have also demonstrated in prior studies of trust and government. While the participants did occasionally evaluate the president and institutions, opinions most commonly seemed to stem from participants' views of policies and from the type of media to which they had been exposed. These particular foci of the participants seem to connect with prior findings in political socialization research that current events and periods of society upheaval can influence political development.^{xxix} The general state of society was an obvious underlying element to participants' evaluations. Agent Chicken Wing, for example, does not like the news because it scares her; they constantly talk about ISIS—"beheaded this . . . beheaded that." Sweet Hershey Kiss brought up issues of racial profiling by the police during her interview:

I mean with the Michael Ferguson, with the Michael Brown thing, it's not fair how they're making assumptions. I mean, I just want everything to come together as one, not just saying, "Oh, the white man was picking on the black man, or the black boy deserved it." I mean, it's just all about equality and fairness.

The participants' general lack of trust also echoes prior research. A recent study using data from two national studies found that trust "was at an all-time low in 2012 among 12th graders. For example, 32% of 12th graders in 1976–1978 agreed that 'most people can be trusted,' but this figure sunk to 18% in 2010–2012."^{xxx} These twelfth-graders also showed marked decreases in confidence in institutions; for example, their opinions on how good of a job large corporations were doing sunk significantly between 2000–2002 and 2010–2012, from 54% rating them "good" or "very good in the early 2000s," to 33% just a decade later. The authors suggest that these numbers may be due to economic inequality or rising crime rates, the latter of which was noted by this study's participants obliquely during data collection (e.g., Jazzy Jay's comments on the police).

Implications for Librarians and Library Workers and Educators

The findings shed light on how a librarian, librarian worker, or other type of educator can contextualize his or her students' perceptions of government in order to best provide instruction

on issues of policy and civics, particularly important when teaching students who may have preexisting biases and negative opinions. Indeed, one of the school librarians helping to run the after-school program at Jazzy Jay’s school demonstrated a keen awareness of the need for this type of individualized instruction when she had several conversations with Jazzy Jay about the difference between opinions and facts, the danger of parroting others’ beliefs without having the knowledge to back them up, and the benefits of government that Jazzy Jay was ignoring. As this librarian said, “Opinions are like elbows: everyone has them.” This type of critical thinking and analysis is often missing from a school day organized around tests and other assessments.

One way to introduce these skills is to tie them to the curriculum. The social studies curriculum for the state in which this study took place aligns well with many of the literacy gaps:

1. Analyze the usefulness of various sources of information used to make political decisions.
2. Analyze the influence of the media on political life.
3. Examine the impact of governmental decisions on individual rights and responsibilities in the United States.
4. Analyze how government needs to provide more protection and order during times of crisis, such as natural disasters and threats to national security.
5. Analyze a document to determine point of view. Identify bias and prejudice. Compare information to prior knowledge. Determine the reliability of the document. Compare ideas, models, systems, and perspectives. Reconstruct the arguments of issues or events. Assess the costs and benefits of alternatives. Verify or change prior understandings based on new information.
6. Engage in civic participation and public discourse.^{xxx}

Having students look at the information used by the government may give them insight into (a) the real-life application of information-literacy skills and (b) a greater belief in the transparency of the political process. Learning to critically examine the media may help them identify their own biases and mitigate the effect of popular conspiracy theories or misinformation. Considering individual rights, as well as the benefits and trade-offs of increased protection and security, will help students make educated decisions regarding their beliefs in policies, information-related and not. Analyzing documents, comparing information, and

changing opinions based on new information are critical information-literacy skills that will also help to teach young people to have open minds and alter past beliefs if they find them to be false. Finally, engaging in civic discourse teaches young people about different perspectives and allows them to see their own fallacies of belief. Because of the time constraints on the typical classroom teacher, this is a role that teen services librarians in public libraries and school librarians can embrace.

Limitations

This is not a longitudinal study, so we cannot know whether these events—the terrorism caused by ISIS in the Middle East and the many prominent instances of police brutality during confrontations with young African Americans—or this general distrust will continue to impact the participants over the course of their political lives. Additionally, the years immediately following this study were even more politically chaotic. The media’s relationship with the Trump administration, as well as the administration’s concept of truth (and arguable reliance on misinformation and a lack of transparency), would likely have had considerable impact on these participants’ responses. However, if anything, this points to the importance of this research and the need for further study. Young people’s perceptions of government and the civic and information-literacy skills they use (or do not use) to form these perceptions are more important than ever.

Aside from the timing of the study, this is a relatively small sample size and a specific demographic of youth, reducing the generalizability of these results. Future studies should investigate youth with different characteristics—race, ethnicity, economic status, family political background, and exposure to media—to see how these characteristics further influence their perceptions.

Conclusion

This study had two goals: (1) To learn participants’ perceptions of government and (2) to observe connections between their perceptions of government and their information and civic literacies. These issues are important because of the following:

- The potential insight that a study of young adolescents who are just starting to form abstract beliefs might give to agencies and educators who are attempting to develop the next civically engaged generation.

- Better understanding the distrust of government that recent studies of young people have shown.

This study is yet one more example of the critical role that information and civic literacy plays in the lives of people of all ages and only emphasizes the need for educators to help youth understand information bias, information policy, and information and civic literacy skills.

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