

ONLINE READER COMMUNITIES

A Thesis
by
MADELINE SCOTT

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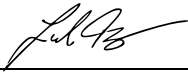
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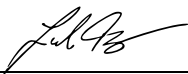
Dr. Bethany Mannon
Chairperson, Thesis Committee



Dr. Jessie Blackburn
Member, Thesis Committee



Dr. Leonardo Flores
Member, Thesis Committee



Dr. Leonardo Flores
Chairperson, Department of English

Marie Hoepfl, Ed.D.
Interim Dean, Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies

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Abstract

ONLINE READER COMMUNITIES

Madeline Scott

B.A., Appalachian State University (December 2021)

M.A., Appalachian State University (December 2022)

Chairperson: Dr. Bethany Mannon

Though research has been conducted on literature-focused communities in digital spaces, including online reading communities such as Goodreads, there is a specific kind of online community created for readers of young adult literature (YAL) that has yet to be explored academically. These websites and their associated social media accounts are not classified as imprints of their parent book publishing companies, as they do not publish or sell books themselves. However, they do contribute to the marketing and promotion of these young adult (YA) titles while using recreational digital content like quizzes, videos, and blog posts to create an online community around the genre. These communities do not exist outside of YAL; this and the stark contrast between themselves and the online presences of their parent publishing companies raises questions about the nature of their existence.

By way of a comparative website analysis of the four largest publishing companies in the US (Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins, and Simon & Schuster) and their respective online community websites (Underlined, NOVL, EpicReads, and Riveted by Simon Teen), this thesis will answer foundational questions about the definition, purpose, and general existence of these YAL-focused, community-centered websites which the author has elected to name “online reader communities,” or “ORCs.” Additionally, through comparative

rhetorical analyses of ORCs to preexisting communities created by brands for consumers called ‘online brand communities’ (OBCs) and of the ORC Epic Reads’s social media activities to those of its parent publishing company, HarperCollins, this thesis expands upon the foundation set in the first chapter to further establish ORCs significance within the fields of professional and technical writing, rhetoric and composition, and publishing. The results of these studies will then be used to propose the creation of an ORC for readers of adult literature, considering the implications of YAL-focused ORCs’ success within the publishing industry.

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Introduction

There is a fascinating phenomenon taking place within the book publishing industry's digital marketing and communications strategies. With the rise of the digital era, trade book publishing companies have turned to the online realm to advertise to and interact with their target audiences in a much more engaging manner than traditional digital marketing strategies can provide. Much of these companies' digital marketing strategies are unsurprising. Each publisher has a website address that functions simultaneously as the base of its online operations and as a digital vendor for its titles, along with active social media accounts across most major platforms (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook). These corporate entities and their target consumer audiences are also now engaging with each other in an entirely unprecedented way thanks to publishers' strategic use of digital marketing tools innovated within the Internet age. However, this phenomenon is currently only occurring within one corner of the book publishing world – young adult literature (YAL).

Breaking the norms of traditional digital marketing initiatives, the YAL departments of major book publishing companies are creating supported online communities for their readers. These spaces consist of traditional websites that act as digital bases of operations and extensive media presences used for product promotion, consumer-brand interaction, and community building amongst consumers. These communities do not currently exist outside of YAL, but their presence and impact extend across traditional websites and social media platforms. The website versions of these communities are distinct from imprints of their parent publishing companies, as they do not publish or sell books themselves. However, both these communities' websites and their social media accounts contribute to the marketing and promotion of YA titles while using recreational content like quizzes, videos, blog posts, and social media posts to engage fans of

YAL and create a community around the genre. Online reader communities (ORCs), as I propose they be named, are an underrepresented and overlooked subject within both digital and visual rhetorics and book publishing industry studies – an unfortunate oversight that I seek to rectify with this study.

This thesis answers foundational questions about the definition, purpose, and general existence of these young adult (YA) literature-focused, community-centered websites, which I have termed “online reader communities.” This project aims not only to introduce these communities to the academic community for the first time but to articulate that ORCs do not exist solely for commercial purposes. They do exist to promote and sell the YA books published by their respective sponsor publishing houses. Still, the social element created by connecting with their consumer base and creating a community amongst them is critical to these digital spaces’ success and the success of their parent companies. A successful ORC engages effectively with its members through a combination of promotional and recreational digital content across multiple platforms. ORCs must encourage the purchase of their books without selling them too overtly. In this thesis, I argue that ORCs' use of social media and the recreational content they post is critical to this success and that other areas of the book publishing industry could apply their methods to replicate this same effect.

I begin with a comparative website analysis of the four largest publishing companies in the US (Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins, and Simon & Schuster) and their respective online community websites (Underlined, NOVL, Epic Reads, and Riveted by Simon Teen) to acquire this new term and its definition. This study then expands on that definition by inquiring further into how publishing houses and consumers of YAL communicate and interact within these spaces by positing them as a subset of online brand communities

(OBCs) and creators of participatory cultures. Additionally, this study will examine the digital and visual rhetorics used by ORCs in social media spaces to encourage participation and target their intended audience(s) by extensively analyzing the social media presence of a singular ORC compared to the social media behavior of its parent publishing company.

Previously, no one has conducted academic research specifically on these spaces. The closest anyone has come to studying these communities has been by examining adjacent but related subjects, such as online fandom communities, informal virtual discourse communities centered on reading on social media, and review-based spaces such as Goodreads. As such, there is currently no name or definition for these spaces within digital and visual rhetoric, professional and technical writing (PTW), or literary or publishing studies. Therefore, this study will be the first piece of academic literature to term, define, and closely examine these digital communities and their impact on the relationships between literary fans and the corporate publishing industry. The significance of this cannot be overstated. These spaces represent an intriguing occurrence at the intersections of brand-consumer relations, participatory culture, digital and visual rhetorics, and memetic communication that no scholar has explored previously. My work will introduce a new theoretical concept to the PTW and publishing fields regarding professional communications with consumers in the publishing industry, examining the potential of digital and visual rhetorics, memetic communication, and fan culture as tools for not just brand promotion but genuine interactive online community building.

Thus, it is critical to understand what digital, visual, and memetically rhetorical strategies make these spaces successful so that they might be created in other corners of the publishing industry. Other publishers and genres could benefit from replicating these communities should they understand the elements that sustain them. Meanwhile, future researchers may consider how

these spaces can be recreated in new genres or other industries entirely. It will also allow them to consider the increasing phenomenon of online brand-consumer relations and interactions from an ethical perspective. By engaging in participatory culture rather than brand-centered control of online community spaces, ORCs pave the way for a more democratic form of industrial online interactive communities than major book publishing companies currently offer. Consumers play a significant role in producing and consuming the culture in these spaces through their regular participation. The types of content they engage with determine the types of content that the ORC will provide in the future, thus giving them significantly more say in how ORCs are run. Finally, my research will show publishers and PTW scholars the incredible potential of digital, visual, and memetic communications not just for brand marketing and promotion but also for interactive online community building and engagement in participatory cultures, especially in genres outside of YAL, such as adult literature.

Background

Defining Young Adult Literature

To understand ORCs, one must understand the importance of the corner of the book publishing industry they currently exist within. Young adult literature (YAL) is literature written for adolescent readers between 12 and 18 years old. The term “young adult” appeared for the first time around the mid-1940s as librarians began to classify teenagers by this term. Librarian Margaret Scoggin formally introduced this term in 1944 in a journal article, arguing that this new demographic group also signaled the creation of a new service population within both the library setting and literature as a whole. After the publication of Scoggin’s article, librarians started to use the terms “teenager” and “young adult” interchangeably when referring to that adolescent age group. In 1957, the American Library Association formalized this new genre as “young

adult” literature through the creation of its Young Adult Services Division, which provided librarians with guidance on how to best serve this new reader category (Cart, “How ‘Young Adult’ Fiction Blossomed”).

Even still, the term “young adult literature” did not find common usage amongst non-library audiences until the late 1960s. At that time, YAL consisted mainly of realistic fiction books discussing contemporary world issues and life circumstances that readers between 12 and 18 years old would likely find relatable. Though some of this initial description remains true in the modern era, much about the young adult (YA) genre and its target audience has changed over the past several decades. For example, the definition of “young adult” has expanded to include readers as young as ten and, on the other end of the range, as old as twenty-five. Additionally, since the mid-1990s, YAL has expanded beyond realistic fiction to become a genre that “welcomes artistic innovation, experimentation, and risk-taking.” Presently, YA books can be found across all genres, including speculative fiction, fantasy, horror, and more. Even further, YAL has moved outside the bounds of traditional print novels toward audiobooks and graphic novels (Cart, “Value of Young Adult Literature”).

Part of what makes YAL unique from other literary categories is how it addresses the needs of its intended reading population. This category became and remains relevant in the lives of its young readers by serving the unique physical, intellectual, emotional, and societal needs they possess as developing human beings. The issue of literacy has especially become another apparent developmental need in recent years, with the Alliance for Excellent Education going so far as to declare a “literary crisis among middle and high school students.” As a result, the need for “a wide variety of reading material that they (young adults) can and want to read” has become even more critical; YAL fulfills that need. YAL is in a unique position to offer young

readers a chance to see themselves in the books they are reading, no matter the genre or formatting of the stories they engage with. These texts can reassure young adults that they are not alone in their experiences but are a part of a larger community that shares their perspectives and feelings (Cart, “Value of Young Adult Literature”). YAL has the potential to serve its target population greatly, and so its importance within the broader literary industry cannot be understated or underestimated. That feeling of belonging created by the genre’s texts can be extended to the online sphere by basing digital communities around them. Thus, YAL is an ideal environment for a space like an ORC to exist within.

Researching Online Reader Communities

Once again, very little research has been conducted on these digital communities. No one in the fields of Rhetoric, Writing Studies, or Education is asking questions directly about them; however, related online spaces are being studied.

For example, the online journal *The Education Techie* completed a series of reviews of what it termed “online reading communities” in 2011. Though the difference in naming is subtle, the contrast between the two digital spaces is substantial. Through its examinations, the *Techie* indirectly defines online reading communities as spaces for a variety of book and book review-related activities, including composing and sharing book reviews, trading used books with other readers, and receiving and reviewing unpublished manuscripts for trade book publishing companies. These communities include digital platforms like Goodreads, BookMooch, PaperBackSwap, and NetGalley (“Online Reading Communities”). Meanwhile, others within the publishing industry have studied online reading communities through the lens of social media networks (Bolme). It defines these communities as those that exist within book clubs and blogs

online but outside social media, along with independent digital social platforms like Goodreads (Foasberg).

Additionally, some are beginning to examine the massive informal online reading communities present within specific social media platforms. Unlike ORCs, these groups are neither created nor maintained by a single corporate entity, nor do they exist under a formalized brand name. Essentially, there is no home website nor singular social media account per platform created to represent the community. Instead, individual users post about books and book-related issues to personally maintained social media accounts across different platforms but choose to identify as members of these larger communities.

Typically, each community is denoted by a combination of the word “book” and some part of the platform’s name. On Instagram, this community is called “Bookstagram,” while on the more recently popular video-sharing platform TikTok, the reading community is referred to as “BookTok” (Jactionary). Though the origins of each term cannot be determined due to their ubiquity across their respective and other platforms, users have widely adopted them. They often use them in the hashtags of their posts to name themselves as members of the community and increase their chances of interacting with other informal members.

Though none of these previously studied community spaces can be classified as ORCs based on how I define them, ORCs are affected by their behaviors. ORCs appear to consider these informal communities as they organize their online communications, especially those like Bookstagram and BookTok, which are born and bred on specific social media platforms. However, other elements of marketing within the Internet sphere that ORCs factor into their communications strategies must also be understood.

Digital Marketing and Memetic Communications

Digital marketing communications is not a nascent innovation. For over a decade, companies and organizations both corporate and independent have been using online tools, such as social media, to advertise to their target consumer audiences. In recent years, however, a new trend of online company-consumer interaction has emerged, wherein company representatives respond directly to users engaging with the business's social media accounts in ways that said users and outside observers could connect to and be expected to react positively to. For example, many companies across industries maintain active social media accounts that regularly post promotional content coded within popular online jokes or trends, otherwise known as "memes." Weaving in these personable materials amongst their more straightforward advertisements, these companies take advantage of the highly adaptable and recognizable format of popular memes by participating in the ones that are the most infamous at the current moment in an attempt to appear relatable and endear themselves to their target consumers.

This memetic form of marketing communication allows companies to create digital marketing materials that go beyond the superficiality of traditional advertising methods, thereby making them stand out amongst the massive amount of advertisements the average Internet user is bombarded with daily. Many typical advertisements (e.g., audio and video commercials, print ads, etc.) rely on similar promotional tactics that do not feel personalized to the audience. Even those intended to make a more emotional appeal feel impersonal because they primarily focus on promoting a product. However, when companies utilize memes in their marketing, they create a more personal connection with the audience by catering to their collective interests at that current moment. This method, in combination with the social media platforms companies use, allows them to respond to their consumers and give off the impression that they are friendly and

relatable living entities rather than massive and impersonal business conglomerates. This marketing strategy is beginning to be embraced by companies across every industry, including those involved in book publishing.

While this promotional methodology is being employed by major book publishing companies in the digital sphere, there is a uniqueness to the publishing industry's online marketing communications. By developing a network of community spaces across multiple platforms, publishers are allowing not just for interaction between company representatives and potential consumers but for the creation and sustenance of interactive online communities amongst these actors. Despite the distinctly innovative possibilities of ORCs, though, little to no research has been conducted specifically on them in both academic and industry arenas.

Background on Research Subjects

Research into online, book-centered communities has yet to extend beyond the adjacent areas of online *reading* communities, such as Goodreads, or massive but disorganized social media communities like Bookstagram and BookTok. As such, I could not find any scholarly research on ORCs as I define them. However, this does mean that they are not worth studying. The ORCs I am examining are well-known within the broader YA readership community; for example, at the time this study was conducted, Epic Reads (HarperCollins's ORC for its YA titles) has almost 211,000 followers on Twitter and 726,000 followers on Instagram. Epic Reads and its fellow communities also regularly attend major in-person YA book events and festivals, are often featured on their parent publishing companies' websites, and manage much of the promotion for the companies' YA titles. These communities clearly play a role within the larger publishing world, but that role has yet to be explored in the academic sphere. This project aims to rectify that issue.

Primary Subjects

The subjects of this study are the four largest trade book publishing companies in the United States, along with their associated ORCs. These companies and their reader communities are: Penguin Random House and Underlined; HarperCollins and Epic Reads; Simon & Schuster and Riveted by Simon Teen; and Hachette Book Group and NOVL (see fig. 1).

A note about these four publishing companies: On November 25, 2020, Penguin Random House announced that it planned to buy Simon & Schuster from ViacomCBS for \$2.175 billion. However, on November 1, 2021, the US Department of Justice sued to block Penguin Random House's acquisition of its rival company, arguing that the deal would cause "substantial harm" to authors within both companies involved in the deal and the publishing industry at large. The trial, *U.S. v. Bertelsmann SE & CO. KGaA, et al.*, began on August 1, 2022, and entered its third week on August 16 (PW Staff). As the deal had not officially closed at the time this research was conducted, and because Penguin executives claim Simon & Schuster will maintain its creative independence under its potential new ownership, both companies have been included as independent publishing entities in this project.



Fig. 1. Infographic: Visual comparison of trade book publishers and ORCs using logos, wordmarks, and catchphrases for identification.

These trade book publishing companies were selected for this study primarily due to their status as four of the largest trade book publishing companies in the United States (Milliot). Their positions afford them the resources necessary to construct and maintain online reader communities for their YA literature readers. Smaller, more independent companies do not have such resources or have the extensive audience size to justify such a venture. Popular book publishing companies without established children's and YA publishing departments have also been excluded from the study, as the impetus for these communities' existence is YA literature and its readers.

Additionally, though each of these companies created websites and web pages dedicated to its YA literature departments and imprints, these websites also have not been included in the primary study. Imprint websites and departmental webpages are contained within and designed very similarly to the general book publishing websites included in this study, functioning more like extensions of their parent companies' websites than autonomous agencies. They primarily exist to further organize and display featured titles from their imprint or department. These websites are not technologically or communicationally developed to the same level as the online reader communities'. As such, they do not merit, nor could sustain, the same analytic investigation as applied to the online reader communities.

Though readers are likely to recognize the names of each of the major publishing companies included in this study, they may not know much about their positions within the publishing industry. The following descriptions detail the size and influence of each featured publishing company and establish the connection between it and its respective ORC.

Penguin Random House – Penguin Random House (Penguin), established on July 1, 2013, comprises over 300 publishing imprints internationally. Its headquarters is located in New York City, with additional locations in more than 20 countries across six continents. It publishes a range of literary categories and genres, including digital and print adult and children’s fiction, nonfiction, and general trade book publishing. Penguin publishes 70,000 digital and 15,000 print titles annually, and more than 100,000 eBooks are available worldwide (“Our Story”). Penguin currently has social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Instagram (*Penguin*).

Underlined – Underlined is a Penguin Random House company and an ORC for “Book Nerds and aspiring writers” (“Underlined: Home”). “Book Nerd” is an official name for Underlined community members that the company has established as part of its branding and merchandise. Underlined does not publish any books under its name but promotes YAL books published by Penguin and its relevant imprint. Underlined currently has social media accounts on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok (*Underlined*).

Hachette Book Group - Hachette Book Group (Hachette) is a division of the third-largest trade and educational book publisher in the world, Hachette Livre, which is a subsidiary of the French media company, Lagardère. Its headquarters are located in New York City, but it has offices in six locations across the United States and a marketing and publicity company in Toronto. Hachette publishes more than 1,400 adult books annually (including 50-100 digitally exclusive titles), 300 books for young readers, and 450 audiobooks (“About Hachette Book Group”). Hachette currently has social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn (*Hachette*).

Though the larger Hachette Livre is a prominent and influential trade book publishing company, it was not included as a subject in this study due to the role it largely plays in the global publishing world. This study focuses on trade book publishing companies based in the United States; Hachette Livre's international standing makes it too different from the other subjects in the study. Additionally, its role is too broad to make an accurate comparison between its website and the website of Hachette's ORC. Its website also focuses more on the business side of its operations rather than promoting the books it publishes; for example, the publishing section merely describes the company's global branches and divisions. As such, including Hachette Livre in place of Hachette Book Group would not make for an accurate or effective comparative analysis in this study.

NOVL - Created by Hachette's YAL publishing division, Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, NOVL creates digital content for teenage readers. It is a young adult community created "for book lovers to rejoice in all things YA and bookish" ("About Little, Brown Books"). Like other ORCs, NOVL has a catchphrase that establishes itself as a part of the larger reading culture – "Booked All Week." NOVL currently has social media accounts on Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (*NOVL*).

HarperCollins – HarperCollins Publishers (HarperCollins) is the second-largest trade book publishing company in the world. The company was founded in 1817, then acquired by News Corporation in 1987. The official HarperCollins worldwide publishing group was formed in 1990 after News Corporation acquired the British publishing company William Collins and Sons. HarperCollins has publishing operations in 17 countries with over 120 book imprints. It publishes approximately 10,000 books annually in 16 languages and has a print and digital

catalog of more than 200,000 titles (“Company Profile”). HarperCollins currently has social media accounts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn (*HarperCollins*).

Epic Reads – Based at the HarperCollins Publishers headquarters in New York City, Epic Reads is an ORC created for fans of YAL. The company was established in June 2012 and describes itself as “a strong and mighty community of book nerds, authors, librarians, book bloggers, bookstagrammers and book tubers around the world.” Epic Reads also uses the term “Book Nerd” to describe its fans and coined the term “*book shimmy*,” which represents the bodily movements of someone excited about books (“About Us - Epic Reads”). Epic Reads currently has social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Pinterest, and TikTok (*Epic Reads*).

Simon & Schuster - Founded in 1924 by Richard L. Simon and M. Lincoln Schuster, Simon & Schuster (Simon) publishes more than 2000 titles annually across adult, children’s, and audio fiction and nonfiction literature. With approximately 1500 employees, Simon’s titles are physically and digitally distributed in more than 100 countries and territories worldwide, including the US, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and India. Its home website and related web properties (including Riveted by SimonTeen) receive a combined 2.5 million unique visitors per month (“Corporate Overview”). Simon currently has social media accounts on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn (*Simon*).

Riveted by Simon Teen – Riveted by Simon Teen (Riveted) is “an online community for anyone that loves young adult fiction!” Using the catchphrase “Believe in Your Shelf,” the website is dedicated to building a community around and promoting Simon Teen authors and books. Simon Teen is a registered imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc. (“About - Riveted). Riveted

functions under the username @SimonTeen on Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook (*Riveted*).

Chapter Overviews

Despite the novelty of this subject, this is not the first time I have studied ORCs and their role in the publishing industry. In my undergraduate honors thesis, I completed a comparative website analysis of the aforementioned four largest publishing houses in the US and their respective ORCs to originally term and define these digital spaces. Thus, Chapter 1: Online Reader Communities consists of that analysis of the previously mentioned primary study subjects – the four largest publishing companies in the US (Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins, and Simon & Schuster) and their respective ORCs (*Underlined*, *NOVL*, *Epic Reads*, and *Riveted* by Simon Teen). In doing so, I establish and define the term “online reader community” with accompanying practical digital and visual rhetorical examples from each of the subjects’ websites. However, this chapter does not examine any of the ORCs’ social media presences or interactions beyond the inclusion of whatever social media posts are embedded on their websites. Instead, it focuses only on the results of the comparative website analyses and the conclusions drawn from my examinations, which provides readers with all the context necessary to engage with the succeeding chapters focusing on ORCs in the context of their social media strategies. As this current study builds significantly on the findings of that research, I believe it necessary to physically include its results as the first chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 2: Online Reader Communities as Online Brand Communities focuses on establishing ORCs as subsets of online brand communities (OBCs). OBCs are specialized online communities based on social interactions among a brand’s consumers where organizations can establish relationships with their consumers and involve them in brand co-creation (Brodie et al.

105; Martínez-López et al. 25). As ORCs are inherently interactive spaces where publishing houses and their consumers may communicate with each other, I use evidence from foundational literature about OBCs to establish ORCs as evolutions of this form of brand-consumer relationship. Specifically, I compare the four aforementioned ORC subjects to the tenets of OBCs as described by Roderick J. Brodie et al. in “Consumer engagement in a virtual brand community: An exploratory analysis” and Francisco Martínez-López et al. in “Consumer engagement in an online brand community,” thereby taking a step outside of merely defining ORCs by contextualizing their importance within the wider publishing industry.

This second chapter also explores ORCs as creators of participatory culture within literary fandom on social media platforms. As evidenced in my descriptions of each ORC and its social media presences, each ORC regularly engages in social media activities across almost all major platforms. Each of these platforms has a specific culture of use; if brands want to expand their communities to a particular social media platform, they must understand the platform’s affordances, cultural and social norms, technologies, and ways in which their users are shaping that platform’s environment. Participatory culture occurs when fans are invited to actively participate in creating and circulating new media content, thereby demonstrating that fan communities’ practices are becoming increasingly incorporated into current media industry strategies (Burgess and Green ch. 1). However, some critics claim that entities like ORCs often fall short in committing to shared governance and joint ownership of digital community resources and therefore cannot be entirely defined as an expression of pure bottom-up participation within a traditional participatory culture. Still, I explore ORCs as a form of participatory culture to reveal fan communities’ and fan consumers’ exponentially increasing impact on contemporary industry media strategies, thereby opening the door to a discussion of

the digital and visual rhetorics employed in the establishment and maintenance of these digital spaces.

Chapter 3: Online Reader Communities on Social Media centers on a close rhetorical analysis of one ORC, particularly its digital and visual rhetorical strategies and use of memetic communication on social media, to determine ORCs' general methodologies for creating OBCs and participatory cultures through their social media accounts. Specifically, this chapter focuses on Epic Reads, the ORC sponsored by HarperCollins Publishers. It centers on detailed digital and visual rhetorical analyses of specific examples of Epic Reads's original social media content and direct community interactions (e.g., replies to followers, "retweets, etc.) to determine its communication strategies and their effects on its community-building efforts. In this chapter, I also compare the memetic communications used and viral trends participated in by Bookstagram, BookTube, BookTok, and BookTwitter users with the digital marketing strategies employed by ORCs. I do this to locate a potentially symbiotic or commensal relationship between ORCs and those larger online communities, which further enhances the participatory nature of ORCs for those consumers who exist in both spaces. In this way, I determine how Epic Reads's communication changes across platforms to engage with its target audiences and can make conclusions about how ORCs strategize their online communications to sustain their digital communities in the social media landscape.

Finally, in Chapter 4: Towards the Next Generation of ORCs, I use my analyses of ORCs' digital and visual rhetorical strategies on social media to discuss whether or not these YAL-focused communities can exist within not just YAL but adult literature readerships as well. Anderson and Auxier's "Social Media Use in 2021" reveals that many American adults are present on the same social media platforms found most popular amongst teenagers in Anderson

and Jiang's "Teens, Social Media and Technology 2018." Thus, it is reasonable and feasible for ORCs to target adults on the same platforms they use to target young adults, as the age demographic is present. In this fourth chapter of my thesis, I use the information gained from my analyses of Epic Reads's and other ORCs' digital communications and social media behaviors to propose an ORC designed for readers of adult literature. After providing a final definition of ORCs that is not exclusive to a YAL audience, I explain why an adult-literature-focused ORC is not just possible but could be extremely successful. I then describe what such an ORC would look like if it filled in the gaps that the online marketing strategies of general publishing companies possess. To fully visualize this new version of the ORC, I utilize the criteria generated in Chapter 1 for my comparative rhetorical website analysis with a new criterion added to address the new community's social media strategies. I end this chapter by discussing the potential benefits of an adult-literature-focused ORC, both for the industry and for readers themselves.

As there is still minimal general discussion of ORCs and no formal examinations of these communities in scholarly literature, this thesis makes significant contributions to both the fields of digital rhetoric and publishing industry studies. My research uncovers a key site where publishers interact with current and potential consumers at a time when brand-consumer relations are becoming increasingly critical to the success of publishing houses in the modern industry. While these online communities could have been a mere passing trend, they have instead become central to publishers' public relations and marketing strategies for YAL. Additionally, they have become popular spaces of entry to the literary world for fans seeking interactions with those similar to them.

Thus, it is critical to understand what digital, visual, and memetically rhetorical strategies make these spaces successful so that they might be created in other corners of the publishing industry. Other publishers and genres could benefit from replicating these communities should they understand the elements that sustain them. Meanwhile, future researchers may consider how these spaces can be recreated in new genres or other industries entirely. It will also allow them to consider the increasing phenomenon of online brand-consumer relations and interactions from an ethical perspective. By engaging in participatory culture rather than brand-centered control of online community spaces, ORCs pave the way for a more democratic form of industrial online interactive communities. The consumers play a significant role in producing and consuming the culture in these spaces, giving them significantly more say in how they are run. Finally, my research will show publishers and PTW scholars the incredible potential of digital, visual, and memetic communications for not just brand marketing and promotion but also interactive online community building and engagement in participatory cultures both within and beyond the modern book publishing industry.

Chapter 1: Online Reader Communities

Introduction

With the rise of the digital era, organizations like trade book publishing companies have turned to the online realm to advertise to and interact with their target audiences (e.g., their consumers). Much of these companies' digital marketing strategies are unsurprising; they have websites that function simultaneously as the bases of their online operations and as digital vendors for their titles, along with active social media accounts on most major platforms (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook). In this landscape, ORCs represent a third kind of online presence sponsored by these publishing companies, one that defies traditional definition and conventional online marketing strategies. These websites are centered around general trade publishing companies' young adult literature (YAL) titles, but they neither actively publish nor sell them. Instead, the content of these websites promotes a specific publisher's young adult (YA) titles, doing so indirectly through recreational digital content like blog posts, videos, and quizzes. These websites stand in stark contrast to the websites of general book publishers, and, even more interestingly, they only exist within the YAL publishing sphere.

These digital spaces have not been formally studied in the academic sphere before; as a result, I have the great privilege of proposing a new official term to describe them. I have elected to name these websites "online reader communities" (ORCs), a name that reflects the reader-focused, community-centered nature of these online spaces. This chapter attempts to answer foundational questions about the definition, purpose, and general existence of these young adult (YA) literature-focused, community-centered websites. Through a comparative website analysis of four major trade book publishing companies (Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins, and Simon & Schuster) and their respective ORCs for YA literature (Underlined,

NOVL, Epic Reads, and Riveted by Simon Teen), I intend to answer critical questions about the existence of ORCs. This analysis aims primarily to highlight the stark design and content-based differences between the websites of significant trade book publishing companies and those of their respective ORCs. In doing so, I intend to clarify and define ORCs, using my analyses to uncover the purpose these communities serve both trade book publishing companies and young adult literature readers. Additionally, I will attempt to uncover why these communities do not exist outside of YA literature, examining why this specific literary category justifies and sustains such a unique digital space.

Method and Methodology

Primary Subjects

The subjects of this study are the four largest trade book publishing companies in the United States, along with their associated ORCs. These companies and their reading communities are: Penguin Random House (Penguin) and Underlined; HarperCollins and Epic Reads; Simon & Schuster (Simon) and Riveted by Simon Teen (Riveted); and Hachette Book Group (Hachette) and NOVL (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Infographic: Visual comparison of trade book publishers and ORCs using logos, wordmarks, and catchphrases for identification.

Criteria for Analysis

This project used five website-related criteria to comparatively analyze the websites of the publishing companies included in the study against that of each company's respective ORC. These criteria were developed to analyze both website design and content, covering textual and audiovisual website elements, to comprehensively examine the fundamental differences between a trade book publishing company's website and an ORC's. The five criteria are as follows:

Logo and wordmark design - Each trade publishing company and ORC uses a logo or wordmark for branding purposes. The two are different, so each company will be analyzed based on which category it falls into (see fig. 2).

A *logo* is a graphic or emblem used by an organization to establish its identity and help consumers remember the brand or service it offers. Logos can be exclusively pictorial (image-based) or can incorporate text.

A *wordmark* is a text-based logo without additional pictures. The use of shapes, colors, and other graphic design elements is allowed. While a wordmark is a logo, not every logo is a wordmark ("Wordmark vs. Logo").



Fig. 2. Example: Wordmark vs. logo.

Homepage design - Each subject will be analyzed based on the design elements of its website's homepage. These elements include color scheme, organization, promotional materials, embedded social media accounts, and textual and visual content.

Website design - Each subject will also be analyzed based on the design elements of the overall website. These elements include those used to analyze each subject's homepage design, along with an analysis of the different pages contained on each subject's website.

Website copy - Website copy refers to the written content of a website. Each subject's website copy will be analyzed based on diction, syntax, and tone to understand the website's purpose and audience.

Additional features - In this study, "additional features" include any element of the subjects' websites that does not fit the definition of the prior criteria. These features include digital articles, quizzes, videos, blogs, interviews, and promotional offers.

Comparative Website Analysis

This section presents the data collected from the websites of the four trade publishing companies included in the study (Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins, and Simon & Schuster) and the websites of their respective ORCs (Underlined, NOVL, Epic Reads, and Riveted by Simon Teen). The analyses are completed based on the five criteria established in the previous section. Each company and its respective ORC are directly compared to each other based on each individual criterion rather than analyzing each entity through the complete list of criteria, as this creates a more direct comparison between each pair.

Penguin Random House and Underlined

Logo/wordmark design

Penguin Random House: Penguin's wordmark is minimalistic – a simple depiction of the publishing company's name with two orange lines surrounding the text. The wordmark's typeface is Shift Light, a Courier-type font that resembles a typewriter's text. Those who designed this wordmark thought sans-serif would be too cold, so they opted for a typeface with

literary charm and character (see fig. 3). Designers purposely made the wordmark simplistic enough to be used alongside the unique logos of Penguin's 250 imprints ("Penguin Random House - Story").



Fig. 3. Annotated wordmark from: "Penguin Random House." *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penguin_Random_House. Accessed 14 Oct. 2021.

Underlined: Underlined's wordmark is bold and artistic. Though it also does not use any pictorial elements, the designers used a bold font for the text, resembling calligraphy or handwriting. When website visitors hover over the wordmark on Underlined's website, the blue dash underneath moves, literally underlining the community name (see fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Annotated Underlined wordmark from: "Underlined (Updated for week of 5/11)." *Penguin Random House: Specialty Retail*, 17 April 2020, <https://www.penguinrandomhouseretail.com/2020/04/17/underlined/>. Accessed 14 October 2021.

This design choice invokes a more casual tone than Penguin's wordmark, as the handwriting-like typeface adds a humanistic element to the ORC's wordmark. Additionally, though both Penguin and Underlined use colorful lines within their wordmarks, the dynamic nature of Underlined's blue line adds movement to the wordmark. Penguin's wordmark, on the other hand, is static.

Homepage design

Penguin Random House: The design of Penguin's website homepage reflects its wordmark's design (see figs. 3 and 5). It is minimalistic, with a significant amount of white space, a subtle typeface, and a scattering of orange elements throughout the page to create contrast and draw viewers' attention to desired areas. Images are a central element on the homepage, often accompanied by minimal textual elements, such as a heading or a few descriptive sentences. When this research was completed, featured sections of the homepage included direct promotion of featured Penguin titles, an advertisement for Penguin's rewards program, and a gallery of featured books and new releases with direct links to purchase options.

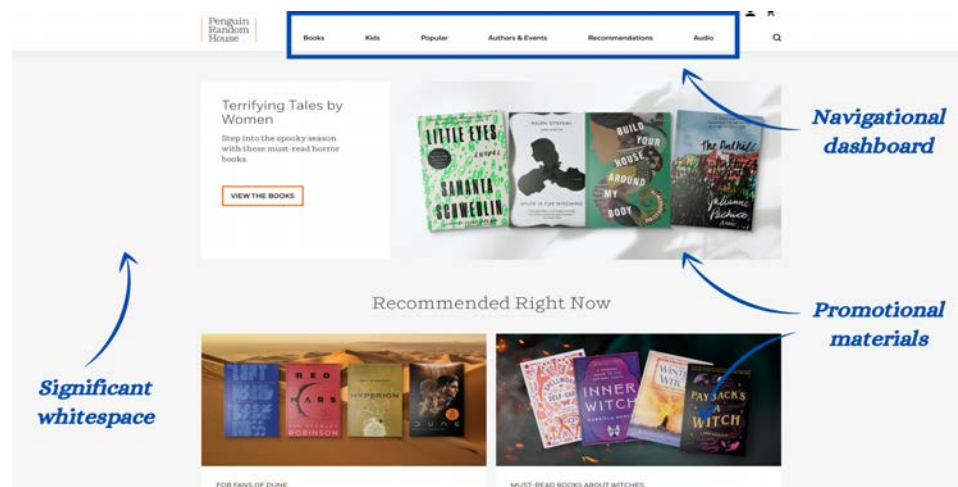


Fig. 5. Annotated homepage screenshot from: "Penguin Random House." *Penguin Random House*, <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/>. Accessed 18 Oct. 2021.

Underlined: Like Penguin, Underlined’s homepage also reflects the design of its wordmark (see figs. 4 and 6). Though the homepage still uses white space, most of the page is filled with bleeding headers and images, meaning that the images fill their allotted spaces on the web page and then spill beyond the margins. Additionally, the website’s designers add more color to its background than Penguin’s.

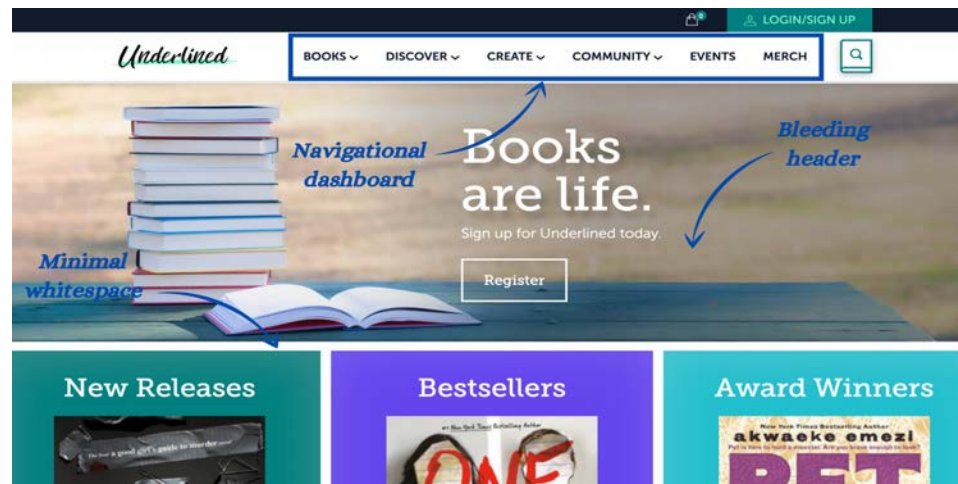


Fig. 6. Annotated homepage screenshot from: “Home - Underlined.” *Underlined*, <https://www.getunderlined.com/>. Accessed 18 Oct. 2021.

At the time this research was completed, featured sections on the homepage included a brief description of the community, an advertisement for Underlined’s email list, an advertisement for “the Underlined Writing Community” (which is, in reality, still the main email list), a section featuring Underlined’s branded merchandise, a gallery highlighting recently posted articles and quizzes, and three sections promoting YA titles published by Penguin.

Website design

Penguin Random House: At the top of the Penguin website, there is a dashboard meant to help viewers navigate the website (see fig. 5). The dashboard consists of six categories:

“Books,” “Kids,” “Popular,” “Authors & Events,” “Recommendations,” and “Audio.” Each section serves a different purpose in promoting and selling Penguin titles.

Books: This section is a directory for locating and purchasing Penguin titles for adults. Hovering over this word on the homepage releases a drop-down menu of literary categories and genres, specifically “Popular,” “Fiction,” “Nonfiction, and “Series.”

Kids: This section is a directory for locating and purchasing titles from Penguin’s children’s literature collection. Hovering one’s mouse over this word on the homepage releases a drop-down menu of specific categories and genres, such as “Popular,” “Trending Series,” “Beloved Characters,” and “Categories.”

Popular: This section of the website features a combination of promotional and recreational resources for website viewers. Hovering over this word on the homepage releases a drop-down menu of specific categories and genres, such as “Trending,” “Expert Picks,” “Features and Interviews,” and “For Book Clubs.” Each of these umbrella categories in the menu contains another list of more specific content for website viewers to choose from, featuring themed book recommendations, featured articles, author interviews, and links to Penguin’s various book club resources. In this case, “themed book recommendations” refers to lists of Penguin titles compiled based on a common trait or theme, such as “Anti-Racist Resources” and “New Historical Fiction.” Similarly, “author interviews” refers to interviews focused on Penguin Random House authors and their affiliated literary works.

Authors & Events: This section is a directory of Penguin’s authors and their works. Hovering over this word on the homepage releases a drop-down menu of two specific categories – “Our Authors” and “Trending Authors.” Each of these umbrella categories in the menu contains a unique list of Penguin authors for website viewers to choose from, each with their

own page consisting of a brief biography and a list of collected works they have published with Penguin Random House.

Recommendations: Similar to the “Popular” section, this section features a combination of promotional and recreational resources for website viewers. Hovering one’s mouse over this word on the homepage releases a drop-down menu of two categories – “Book Lists” and “Articles.” Each category contains a list of specific recreational digital resources for website visitors to choose from, including themed lists of book recommendations, author interviews, and excerpts from upcoming books.

Audio: This section of the website focuses on the audiobook side of Penguin’s publications. Hovering one’s mouse over this word on the homepage releases a drop-down menu of two categories – “Popular” and “Featured.” Beneath the “Featured” category title, there is a mixture of recreational digital resources focused on audiobook promotion.

Underlined: The top of the Underlined website also features a dashboard for website navigation (see fig. 6). The dashboard consists of six categories: “Books,” “Discover,” “Create,” “Community,” “Events,” and “Merch.” Each section serves a different purpose not only in promoting and selling Penguin YA titles but in creating a semi-interactive digital community for readers of YAL.

Books: This section provides website visitors with recommendations of specific Penguin YA titles. Hovering one’s mouse over this word on the homepage releases a drop-down menu featuring one category – “Reading Lists.” It is not a directory for purchase; instead, it recommends Penguin YA titles through a variety of articles centered on “Themed Reading Lists” and “Monthly New Releases.” There is no way to purchase a book from the Underlined website

directly. Website visitors must choose from a list of linked external vendors to buy a chosen book from (see fig. 7).

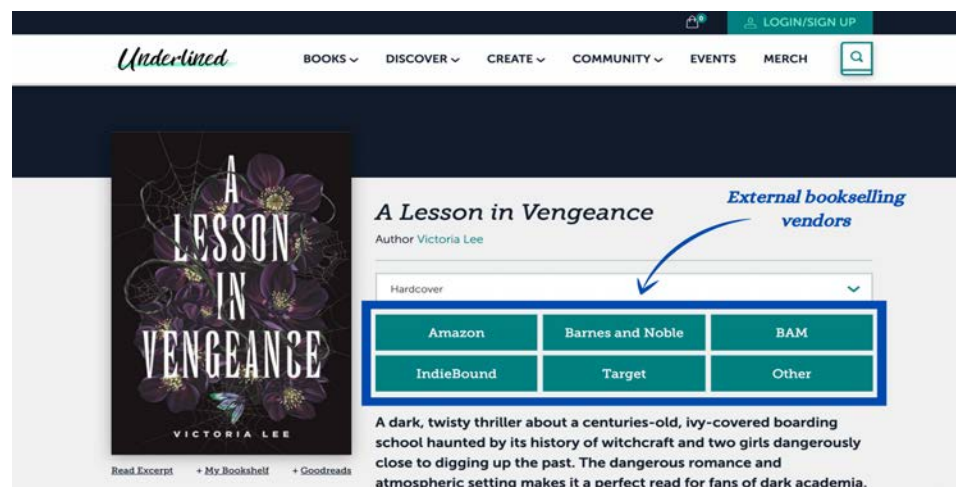


Fig. 7. Annotated screenshot of external bookselling vendors on the Underlined website from: “A Lesson in Vengeance.” *Underlined*, <https://www.getunderlined.com/books/653239/a-lesson-in-vengeance-by-victoria-lee/>. Accessed 21 Oct. 2021.

Discover: This section contains Underlined’s recreational digital content. Hovering over this word on the homepage releases a drop-down menu featuring three additional categories – “Articles,” “Quizzes,” and “Videos.” Topics featured in this content include themed lists of book recommendations, book recommendations based on the results of themed quizzes, and trailers for upcoming book releases.

Create: This section is the location of Underlined’s online writing community, a digital forum where participants can share, read, and comment on each others’ writing. Hovering one’s mouse over this word on the homepage releases a drop-down menu featuring two additional pages – “Explore” and “Start Writing.”

Community: This section of the Underlined website focuses on the social aspects of the ORC. Hovering one’s mouse over this word on the homepage releases a drop-down menu

featuring two additional pages – “Connect” and “Forum.” The “Connect” page contains a directory of registered members of the Underlined ORC, while the “Forum” page locates the community’s public online discussion forum. Website visitors must become registered members of Underlined’s online community to post to the forum.

Events: This page contains a calendar of all future events sponsored by Underlined and its parent company, Penguin Random House. When this research was completed, the upcoming events calendar consisted primarily of events centered on Penguin YA authors with forthcoming book releases.

Merch: This page is an online shopping platform for Underlined’s branded merchandise. Almost every merchandise item featured in the virtual store uses the name Underlined coined for members of its ORC – “Book Nerd.” Available merchandise includes t-shirts, hooded sweatshirts, socks, hats, bags, bookmarks, stickers, mugs, sleeves for canned drinks, and face masks. Unlike Penguin YA titles, website visitors can purchase Underlined merchandise directly from its website.

Website copy

Penguin Random House: Penguin’s website contains a minimal amount of text. On the homepage, text is only found in section headlines, subheadings, and the advertisement for the publisher’s “Reader Rewards” program. On other pages, the majority of featured text can be found in book descriptions, section headings and subheadings, author biographies, and articles.

On pages using more text, such as articles and author biographies, the focus remains on promoting Penguin’s published titles. This focus is evident in the headings of featured sections on the homepage, with the diction encouraging visitors to engage with and purchase a variety of promoted books. For example, when this research was completed, the subtitle of a featured

article on the homepage told visitors to “Pick up stories that are all the buzz right now!” Not only does this phrase create interest in website visitors for the books listed in that article, but the command “pick up” encourages them to purchase those titles without directly mentioning any financial decisions. That trend of indirectly encouraging purchases continues throughout the website.

There are also attempts throughout the website to go beyond sales and create a more personable image. For example, the “Popular” and “Recommendations” sections contain themed book lists where anonymous writers recommend Penguin titles based on their relation to specific topics and personality traits. The introductions to these articles are brief, but their tone is welcoming and relatable as the company writer attempts to build trust within the reader. Like the other pages, they do not directly tell the reader to purchase their recommended books but emphasize the benefits buying those books poses to their lifestyle.

Underlined: The Underlined website utilizes text across many of its pages, especially within articles, quizzes, and videos. The diction is more informal, as the website tries to create a friendly and relatable personality for its ORC. Underlined is not just trying to promote Penguin’s YA titles; it is encouraging fans of YAL to join its community and contribute to the conversations taking place there.

However, there is still some direct emphasis on book sales throughout the website. On the homepage, several sections are titled according to this directive, including “New Books,” “Best Sellers,” “Favorites,” and “The Best Books for You to Read.” While the first three headings use neutral, product-centered language to attract potential consumers, the last is reader-focused. It is not just promoting Penguin Random House YA titles but emphasizes that those books would primarily be beneficial for the website visitor to read.

This emphasis on reader-centered language continues throughout the rest of the website. Unlike Penguin’s website copy, the focus is not merely on increasing book sales but on creating a unique and entertaining experience for website visitors. For example, the subheading under the “All the Book Things” section on the homepage states: “Scrolling has never been more fun with our latest quizzes, reading lists, book trailers, and more!” This description encourages website visitors to explore by making the digital offerings seem exciting and engaging. Still, it pushes those visitors toward content that promotes Penguin’s YA publications – an indirect method of encouraging purchases while maintaining a friendly persona.

Additional features

Penguin Random House: Penguin’s website contains minimal additional features outside its primary promotional content. There are a few articles throughout the site containing themed lists of book recommendations, “editor’s picks,” and book club-related materials. However, there are no quizzes, videos, or other forms of non-sales media.

Underlined: Underlined’s website includes a variety of recreational digital content for visitors to peruse. The main categories include articles, quizzes, and videos.

The articles consistently focus on topics related to reading and writing. They include themed lists of book recommendations, writing advice and tips, and lists of newly released and upcoming Penguin YA titles. Thus, not every article posted to the website is sales-focused. Those like book recommendation lists maintain a friendly tone to appear relatable – more like a friend recommending a book they recently read than a company promoting their publications.

Quizzes posted to the website proceed similarly. They are all book-related, with topics such as book recommendations based on non-literary personality traits or opinions, themed

quizzes, and quizzes that seem unrelated to books but are connected to or are promotion for specific titles (see fig. 8).

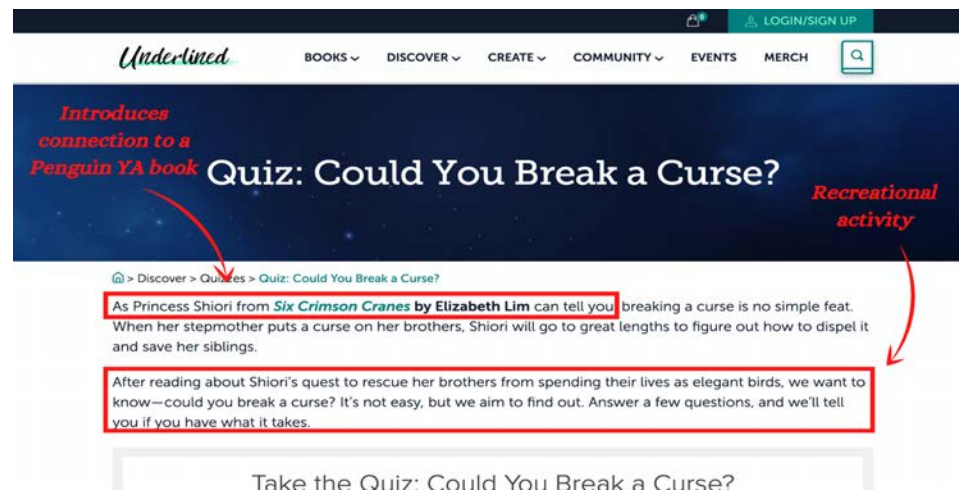


Fig. 8. Annotated quiz screenshot from: “Quiz: Could You Break a Curse?” *Underlined*, <https://www.getunderlined.com/quiz/ya-book-quiz-could-you-break-a-curse-six-crimson-cranes-by-elizabeth-lim/>. Accessed 21 Oct. 2021.

Hachette Book Group and NOVL

Logo/wordmark design

Hachette Book Group: Hachette’s logo is a stylistic yet minimalistic combination of pictorial and text-based design elements (see fig. 9). The pictorial element is the abstract “H,” representing the first letter in the company’s name, while the text-based part is the straightforward presentation of the publisher’s name in all lowercase letters. Though the logo uses color, designers use the same shade of light blue for both the pictorial and textual elements.



Fig. 9. Annotated Hachette logo from: “Hachette Book Group.” *Logos Download*, <https://logos-download.com/34153-hachette-book-group-logo-download.html>. Accessed 14 Oct. 2021

The logo uses a sans serif typeface for the text. This typeface does not resemble any font traditionally used in published books, so there is no literary connection between this design and the company’s products other than the company name, “Hachette *Book* Group.”

NOVL: NOVL’s logo combines pictorial and text-based design elements (see fig. 10). It features the online community’s name, and directly beneath the logo is the community’s catchphrase – “Booked All Week.” The logo is colorful and bold, and the heart accent inside the “O” adds a sense of youthfulness and personality to the branding. Additionally, the heart accent resembles the “like” button on many social media platforms popular with the community’s target audience.



Catchphrase

Fig. 10. Annotated NOVL logo from: “NOVL • Booked All Week.” *NOVL • Booked All Week*, <https://www.thenovl.com/>. Accessed 14 Oct. 2021.

Homepage design

Hachette Book Group: The Hachette website homepage begins with a scrolling gallery containing slides of varying designs and color schemes. Materials and content promoted by the slides include themed lists of book recommendations, direct promotions of new and upcoming book releases, and promotion of upcoming television and movie adaptations of Hachette titles.

On the homepage, there is an emphasis on promoting Hachette book sales before reaching other parts of the webpage (see fig. 11).

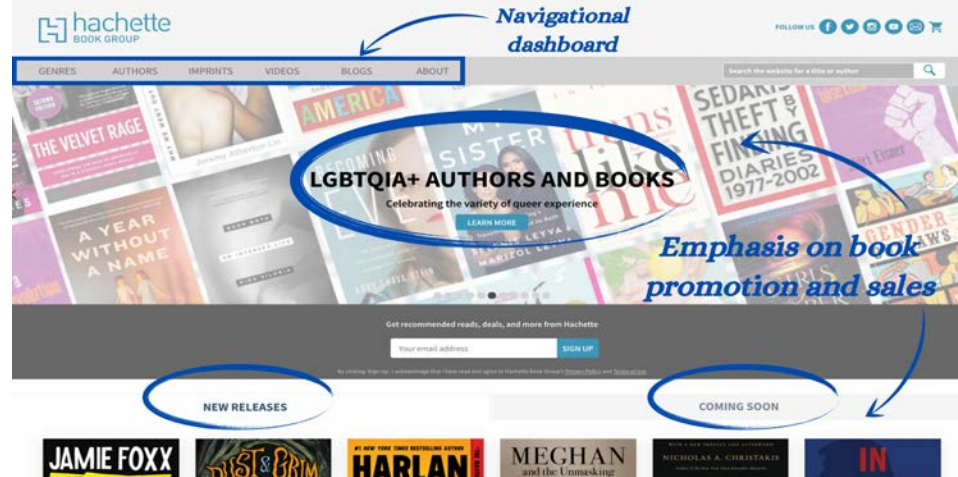


Fig. 11. Annotated homepage screenshot from: “Hachette Book Group.” *Hachette Book Group*, <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/>. Accessed 21 Oct. 2021.

The Hachette homepage also includes some less promotional content; though these sections feature Hachette titles and indirectly encourage purchase through exposure and engaging content, there are no links to online book vendors. These sections include an embedded view of their Instagram page, a scrolling gallery of different series from Hachette’s video production section, “Hachette Originals,” and another scrolling gallery of popular Hachette blog posts.

NOVL: NOVL’s homepage is fairly minimalistic compared to those of other ORCs. There is a significant amount of white space on the homepage with wide margins and no bleeding images. This design choice creates a significant contrast between the image-based elements of the homepage, such as the featured book covers. NOVL’s homepage features a navigation bar for the general website and a separate menu for navigating the homepage itself (see fig. 12). This feature is unique to this homepage; no other ORC nor general book publisher includes this feature on its website.

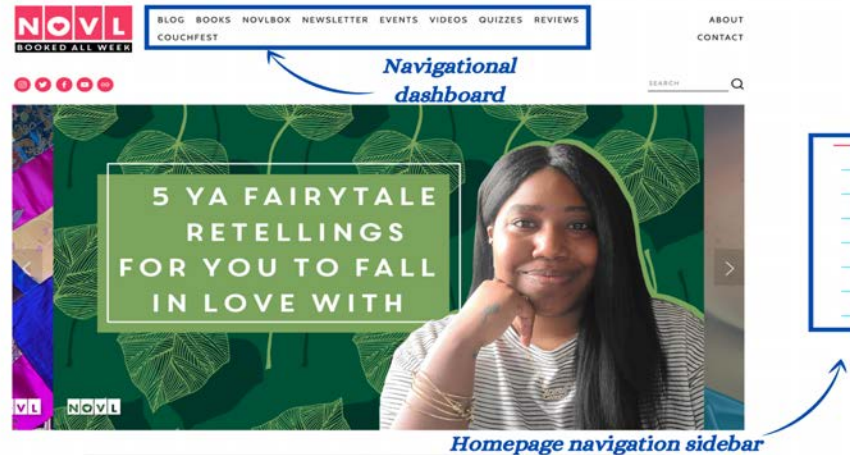


Fig. 12. Annotated screenshot from: “NOVL • Booked All Week.” *NOVL • Booked All Week*, <https://www.thenovl.com/>. Accessed 18 Oct. 2021.

The sections of this homepage are a combination of promotional and recreational digital content centered around Hachette’s YA titles, including a sliding gallery promoting blog posts on varying topics and, below that, a static gallery featuring recent releases of Hachette YA titles. The homepage also displays upcoming author events, a selection of bestselling Hachette YA titles, and embedded views of two of NOVL’s Instagram and Twitter accounts.

Website design

Hachette Book Group: Hachette maintains the design style employed on its homepage throughout its website. The continued use of significant white space sustains the emphasis on images and other visual elements, such as author pictures, book covers, and artistic representations of the company’s various genres.

At the top of each webpage is a dashboard meant to help viewers navigate the Hachette website. The dashboard consists of six categories: “Genres,” “Authors,” “Imprints,” “Videos,” “Blogs,” and “About.” Each section serves a different purpose in promoting and selling Hachette titles and informing website visitors about Hachette’s business dealings and publications.

Genres: The initial “Genres” page acts as a directory for the different genres Hachette publishes books under. Each genre is represented by an artistic interpretation of its primary theme. Selecting a genre takes visitors to a directory of relevant Hachette titles divided into two categories – “New Releases” and “Coming Soon.”

Authors: The “Authors” page is an extensive list of featured authors published by Hachette. Organized in alphabetical order, each featured author is represented by their name, a photographic portrait, and a brief description of their credentials. If a website visitor selects the “Read More” option for an author, they will be taken to a separate page with the full biography and a list of the author’s published works.

Imprints: This page features a comprehensive list of all Hachette subdivisions and imprints. Hovering over this word on the navigational dashboard releases a drop-down menu with links to each of Hachette’s seven imprints and their sub-imprints. Each imprint’s website’s design resembles that of Hachette – minimalistic style, bleeding image headers, galleries of featured books, and a small amount of additional digital content.

Videos: This page is a library of all Hachette video content. The three series stated explicitly as being created by “Hachette Originals” are “Author Inquiry,” which consists of interviews with Hachette authors, “Bold Recommendations,” which refers to book recommendations, and “Book Trailers,” which is precisely as the title suggests. Hovering over this word on the navigational dashboard releases a drop-down menu with links to each of Hachette’s ten original video series.

Blogs: This page is a directory of all of Hachette’s blogs. There are twelve blogs in total, including NOVL and Little, Brown Books for Young Readers. Hovering over this word on the navigational dashboard releases a drop-down menu with links to three of Hachette’s twelve

blogs. These featured blogs are “Novel Suspects,” Hachette’s mystery and thriller-focused blog, “The Current,” which focuses on Hachette’s nonfiction department, and “Open Book,” which was created to amplify historically underrepresented voices in the publishing industry (BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, etc.).

About: The “About” section is an introduction to Hachette as a company. Hovering over this word on the navigational dashboard releases a drop-down menu with links to two sections – “About Hachette Book Group” and “Careers.” The “About Hachette Book Group” page provides visitors with a brief overview of the company and its history, some current publication statistics, a list of authors published under the Hachette name, and a sliding gallery featuring some of Hachette’s current top books. Even on the about page, there is a focus on promoting and selling books.

NOVL: NOVL also maintains the design style employed on its homepage throughout the rest of its website. The website continues emphasizing visual elements over textual ones on almost every page. The only exceptions are pages where textual content is necessary to convey information, such as the description of the latest box in NOVL’s subscription box service, “NOVLbox,” and the registration page for NOVL’s newsletter.

At the top of the Hachette website is a dashboard meant to help viewers navigate the website. The dashboard consists of six categories: “Blog,” “Books,” “NOVLbox,” “Newsletter,” “Events,” “Videos,” “Quizzes,” “Reviews,” and “Couchfest.” Each section serves a different purpose in promoting and selling Hachette YA titles while building an online community around YAL. Unlike other websites studied, hovering over the names of each section in the dashboard does not trigger a drop-down box of different categories.

Blog: This section is the home for all of NOVL’s blog posts. Popular blog post topics include cover reveals, themed lists of book recommendations, YAL-themed quizzes, author interviews and features, and more YAL-related topics. Each post is represented by a unique graphic and a brief introduction to the content of the post.

Books: This page takes website visitors to a directory of recent and featured Hachette YA titles. The page is divided into four sections: recent releases (not titled), “Upcoming Books,” “Bestsellers,” and “Genres.” In the “Genres” section, each genre is represented by an associated symbol (ex. “Horror” is represented by a skull). If a website visitor selects a book, they will be taken to a separate page with a detailed description of the book and its author, along with a link to purchase it. Links for purchasing Hachette titles redirect website visitors to the shopping section of Hachette’s website.

NOVLbox: NOVLbox is a subscription box-based giveaway contest hosted by NOVL. The box features a collection of Hachette books, book-related merchandise, and additional mystery items. This page is a hub of information regarding NOVLbox, including the entry form, a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section, and a gallery of social media and blog posts about past NOVLboxes.

Newsletter: NOVL sends out monthly e-newsletters to those who sign up for them. These newsletters provide information about upcoming book releases, product giveaways, and general NOVL-related content. Community members can also sign up for the chance to receive advanced release copies (ARCs) of upcoming Hachette YA titles. This page is entirely text-based and is merely a location for website visitors to sign up for the newsletter.

Events: This page is a calendar of upcoming events sponsored by NOVL. The page consists of an interactive calendar with icons representing specific events filling their respective

dates. Hovering over a listed event reveals brief information about the event's date and time while clicking on the icon for that event takes visitors to a separate page with more information.

Videos: This section is the central location for NOVL's bi-weekly talk show, "NOVL Tea." This show premieres on IGTV – Instagram's long-form video feature. As such, the design of this page is a gallery of embedded Instagram posts. Each video has a stylized cover image featuring the main cast of the episode. Website visitors can play each video directly from the NOVL website, or they can be redirected to NOVL's Instagram page.

Quizzes: This page contains a library of featured book-themed quizzes posted to the NOVL blog. Some quizzes promote several books at a time by offering book recommendations based on specific choices (ex. "Choose a Sport, Get a Book Rec"). Other quizzes ask questions unrelated to literature but are themed to associate with a specific Hachette YA novel (ex. "Which Bridgerton Character Are You?").

Reviews: The "Reviews" section of the NOVL website is a location for website visitors to submit book reviews of Hachette YA titles. This section is entirely text-based, as it is simply a form for users to fill out with their respective reviews.

Couchfest: "Couchfest" is an online book festival hosted by NOVL. It takes place across several digital platforms, including Instagram and the NOVL website, and features Hachette YA titles and authors. When this research was completed, the "Couchfest" page consisted of a collection of digital content from the 2020 and Spring 2021 Couchfests.

Website copy

Hachette Book Group: There is minimal textual content throughout the website. Most of the text on the main pages, such as the homepage and the landing pages for each section of the website, consists of headings and image captions. The few text blocks on these pages are no

more than a paragraph long, with diction ranging from relatively emphatic to professionally neutral (see fig. 13).

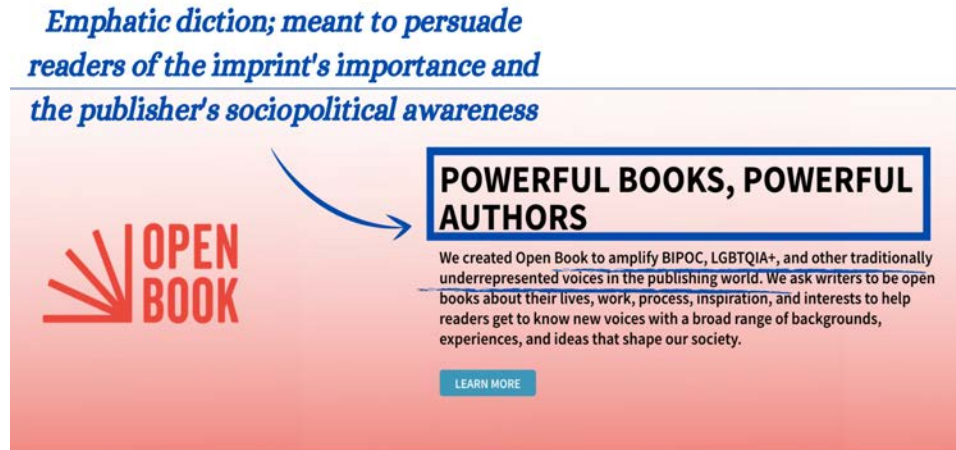


Fig. 13. Annotated imprint description screenshot from: “Hachette Book Group.” *Hachette Book Group*, <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/>. Accessed 21 Oct. 2021.

NOVL: The NOVL website also prioritizes visual content over text. This prioritization is most evident on the homepage, where the only included texts are headlines and text within images (ex., Blog post cover images). On pages with more text, the content’s purpose is primarily to describe different website features and promote Hachette books and authors. Still, there is slightly more emotional impetus behind this text.

Throughout the website, there is an apparent attempt by the writers to appear relatable through youthful diction. The best examples of this diction can be found in NOVL’s various section headlines, article titles, and original series names (see figs. 14 and 15).

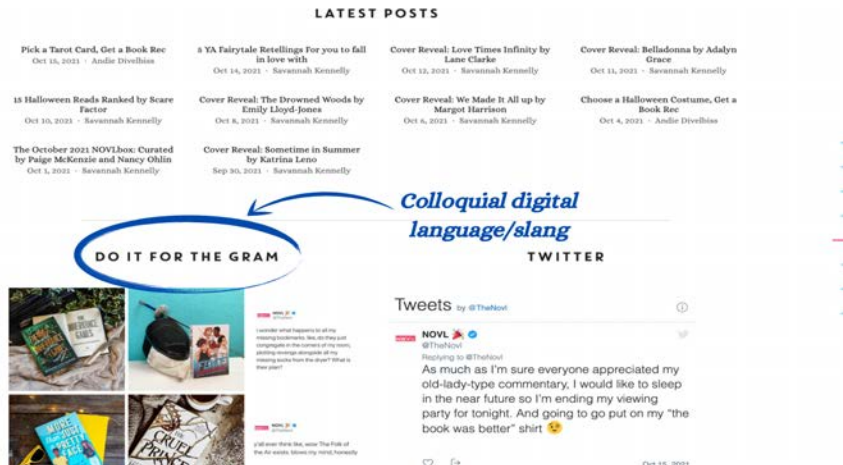


Fig. 14. Annotated screenshot of embedded Instagram gallery from: “NOVL • Booked All Week.” *NOVL • Booked All Week*, <https://www.thenovl.com/>. Accessed 18 Oct. 2021. “Do It for the Gram” is a phrase coined by young adults in the mid-2010s to describe doing certain activities so one can post about them on their Instagram account.

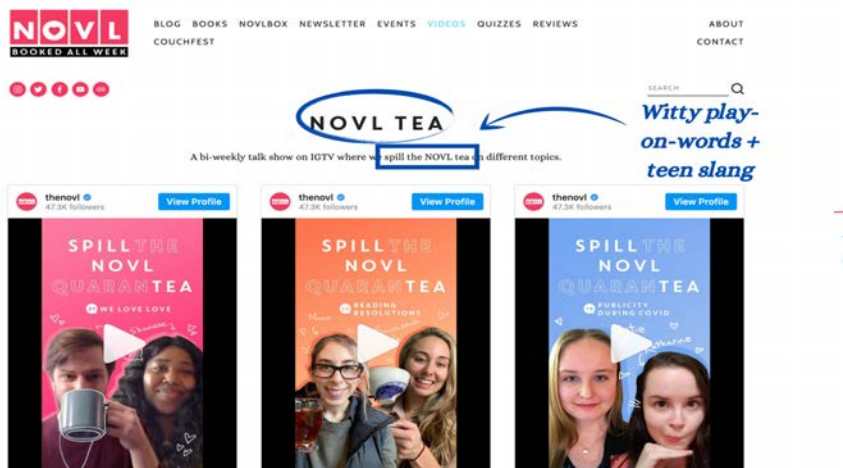


Fig. 15. Annotated screenshot of NOVL video series –from: “NOVL Tea.” *NOVL • Booked All Week*, <https://www.thenovl.com/videos>. Accessed 18 Oct. 2021. “NOVL Tea” is a play on the slang phrase “spilling the tea” and the word “novelty.” To “spill the tea” means to share exclusive information about a particular topic and usually has connotations of gossip.

Additional features

Hachette Book Group: Unlike other general trade book publishing companies, Hachette’s website includes more recreational yet promotional content. This content is still aimed toward marketing Hachette titles and authors but does so in a more entertaining manner than a strict presentation of purchasable literature. Additional digital content published on Hachette’s website includes ten video series on various book-related topics and twelve featured blogs.

NOVL: Though NOVL is included under the umbrella of Hachette’s blogs, it exists more autonomously than the rest. No other blog contains the amount of recreational digital content nor the direct emphasis on building a literary community that NOVL does. Its status as an ORC lends itself to more interaction with its visitors through such unique additional content as the NOVLbox, Couchfest, their book reviewing function, and their popular targeted quizzes, articles, and videos.

HarperCollins and Epic Reads

Logo/wordmark design

HarperCollins: The HarperCollins logo is a stylistic combination of pictorial symbols and words (see fig. 16). Each aspect of the design has a representative purchase within the context of the company’s history. The visual aspect of the logo is an abstract representation of the 1990 consolidation of Harper and Row, based in New York, and Collins Publishers, based in London and Glasgow. To create the logo, designers combined the Harper “fire” and Collins “water” colophons. Where the fire symbolizes the torch and the sharing of knowledge, the water represents the fountain and Collins’s most iconic trademark symbol.

The wordmark aspect of HarperCollins’s logo is minimalistic. It uses an unknown serif font reminiscent of text in print literature. There is also a fair amount of color within the wordmark; the designers' color choices represent the partnership between Harper and Row and Collins, much like the pictorial logo.



Fig. 16. Annotated HarperCollins logo from: “HarperCollins Publishers Vector Logo.” *Get Vector Logo*, <https://getvectorlogo.com/harpercollins-publishers-vector-logo-svg/>. Accessed 14 Oct. 2021.

Epic Reads: The Epic Reads logo is bold and artistic, created to appeal to its younger target audience (see fig. 17). Like the HarperCollins logo, it is a mixture of pictorial symbols and textual elements. The stack of rectangles to the left side of the wordmark represents a precariously stacked pile of books, with the colors coordinating with the community’s overall color scheme. The wordmark uses a stylistic font – one that resembles brush strokes or calligraphy rather than printed text.



Fig. 17. Annotated Epic Reads logo from: “Sponsors.” *TeenBookCon*, <https://www.teenbookcon.org/sponsors>. Accessed 14 Oct. 2021.

Homepage design

HarperCollins: HarperCollins organizes its homepage in a series of color-blocked sections. These color blocks maintain the color scheme outlined in the HarperCollins logo while also using a significant amount of white space. Like other general trade book publishing companies’ websites, the homepage emphasizes promoting and selling the company’s titles. It begins with a sliding gallery advertising recent releases, themed book collections, advertisements for limited-time editions of specific titles, and upcoming book-to-film adaptations. The content in this gallery changes regularly according to what HarperCollins currently wants to promote.

Other promotion-based sections on the website include sliding galleries listing recently released, upcoming, and bestselling HarperCollins titles. Each book is represented by its book cover, creating a primarily visual experience. There is also a “Meet Our Authors” section, an advertisement for HarperCollins’s newsletter, and an embedded preview of HarperCollins’s Instagram page. Finally, the website features a “Browse and Shop” section, which provides website visitors with direct links to purchase various genres that HarperCollins publishes within.

There is also a slight emphasis on interacting with the literary community on HarperCollins’s homepage. Beneath the “Browse and Shop” block is a small section titled “Roll Call” (see fig. 18). This section links educators, librarians, children's librarians or educators, and book club members to resources sponsored by the publisher that could assist them with their positions. These websites function somewhat like ORCs, but not to the extent that those spaces built around YAL do. They are less about interaction and engagement with their target audiences and more about providing appropriate resources to those groups. These pages still encourage viewers to purchase HarperCollins titles by providing recommendations, but an additional supportive element is present.

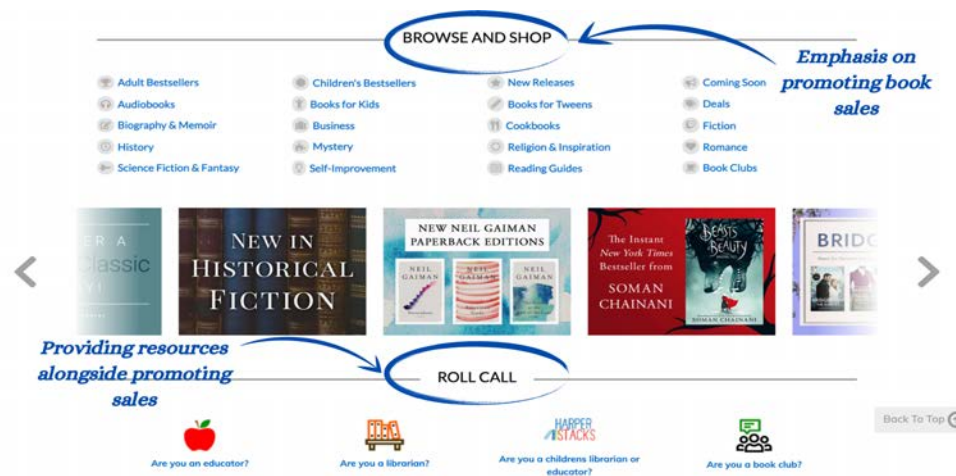


Fig. 18. Annotated screenshot of HarperCollins’s “Roll Call” series from: “HarperCollins Publishers: World-Leading Book Publisher.” *HarperCollins Publishers*, <https://www.harpercollins.com/>. Accessed 21 Oct. 2021.

Epic Reads: Though Epic Reads uses more whitespace than its parent company’s homepage, it uses the color scheme set forth by its logo throughout its design (see fig. 19).

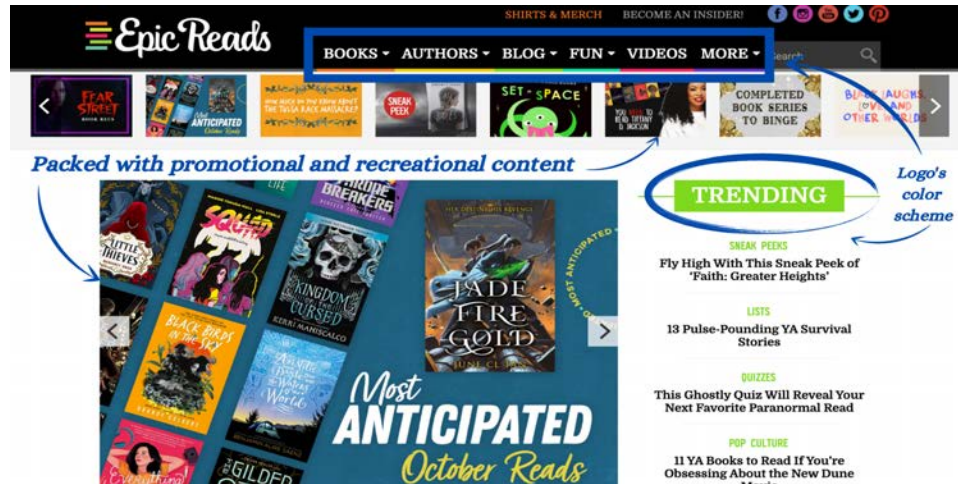


Fig. 19. Annotated homepage screenshot from: “Epic Reads | Young Adult (YA) Books & Books for Teens.” *Epic Reads*, <https://www.Epic Reads.com/>. Accessed 22 Oct. 2021.

Epic Reads’s homepage begins with two sliding galleries focused on listing and promoting digital content recently published by Epic Reads, such as themed lists of book recommendations, quizzes, literary news, and merchandise promotion. These two galleries are followed by another sliding gallery listing the “Top Trending” YA titles published by HarperCollins and its various imprints.

Other sections include “Spotlight,” which highlights featured articles and other engaging digital content, eBook sales, recent videos posted to Epic Reads’s Youtube Channel, an embedded view of the community’s Instagram posts, and the “Black Voices Matter” section. Finally, the homepage includes a “Fun Things” section with links to giveaways and quizzes and promotes the partnerships Epic Reads has with Target and Barnes and Noble, encouraging viewers to purchase HarperCollins YA titles from those stores.

Website design

HarperCollins: Unlike other trade book publishers’ websites, HarperCollins organizes its website around specific literary genres and categories. In doing so, it maintains a singular

emphasis on promoting its titles rather than additional content. Non-sales content is featured throughout the website, such as the “Are You…” resource pages, referential resources, and HarperCollins’s blogs, but selecting these objects typically takes website visitors to an external website or blog (see fig. 20). Engaging with sales-focused content simply takes viewers to another page within the primary HarperCollins website, making it easy to continue browsing for potential purchases.

Books: This section includes links to all titles published by HarperCollins and its imprints. Hovering over this word on the homepage releases a drop-down menu with four categories: “Reader Favorites;” “Browse by Subject;” “Reference,” and “Are You…” The first two sections organize HarperCollins’ titles into a multitude of genre and audience-based subcategories. Selecting any of these subcategories takes viewers to the HarperCollins virtual bookstore, where they can purchase books directly from the website.

Authors: This section is an index of all HarperCollins authors. There are no images; it is an entirely textual alphabetical list. Selecting an author’s name, however, does take website visitors to a page featuring a short biography, their collected works, and a portrait photograph, if one is available.

Kids and Teens: This section includes all content related to HarperCollins children’s and YA literature. Hovering over this word on the dashboard releases a drop-down menu with three categories: “Quick Links,” “Browse by Subject,” and “Our Blogs.” The first two sections promote book sales by organizing HarperCollins’s extensive published titles into easier-to-navigate collections. The third section contains links to HarperCollins’s three main blogs – HarperKids, Epic Reads, and ShelfStuff. Each of these blogs or ORCs is targeted toward children or young adults.

Christian: When website visitors select this tab, they are redirected to another page, where the HarperCollins Publishers logo in the top left corner changes to “HarperCollins Christian Publishing.” This page is the digital hub for HarperCollins’s Christian publishing division and includes links to further information about the company and featured book releases.

Romance: Selecting this tab on the website’s navigational dashboard releases a drop-down menu with two options: “Visit AvonRomance.com” and “Harlequin.” AvonBooks and Harlequin are HarperCollins’s primary romance imprints. Both imprints have their own websites, which visitors are redirected to if they select the links in the dropdown box.

About: This section of the website provides visitors with extensive information about HarperCollins, including contact information, a company profile, career opportunities, submission resources for authors, publicity information, services provided, bookseller and retailer resources, copyright information, and links to each of HarperCollins’s global divisions.

Epic Reads: Epic Reads organizes its website into six sections: “Books,” “Authors,” “Blog,” “Fun,” “Videos,” and “More.” Unlike HarperCollins, most of these sections are dedicated to the recreational (yet literary-themed) content produced by Epic Reads to engage its more youthful target audience.

Books: This section is a directory of all HarperCollins’s YA titles published across its various imprints. Epic Reads organizes these books into five different categories for website visitors to explore: “New Releases,” “Coming Soon,” “Bestsellers,” “By Series,” and “By List.” As with other ORCs, books cannot be purchased directly from the Epic Reads website. Instead, when visitors select a specific book, they are given a list of external vendors where the book is available for purchase (including the main HarperCollins website).

Authors: Unlike other publishing and reader community websites, this “Authors” section contains minimal information about HarperCollins’s YA authors. It includes two subcategories: “Bookish Events” and “On Instagram.” The “Bookish Events” section does not list any upcoming events; instead, it directs visitors to a Facebook page containing a list of upcoming events. Meanwhile, at the time this research was completed, the “On Instagram” section links to an Epic Reads blog post titled “15 YA Authors You Need To Follow On Instagram.”

Blog: This section contains most of Epic Reads’s digital content. This content is divided into six categories: “News,” “Lists,” “Quizzes,” “Pop Culture,” “Design,” and “Community.” Some of these categories overlap so the same article is included on multiple web pages.

Fun: This section contains two categories: “Win Books” and “Take a Quiz.” The “Take a Quiz” page is the exact same webpage as the “Quizzes” page under the Blog tab. The “Win Books” webpage also includes this “Quizzes” page, along with a list of current giveaways sponsored by the ORC.

Videos: This webpage contains a gallery of videos published by Epic Reads. Epic Reads publishes promotional and recreational video content under four different series – “Book Nerd Problems,” “Epic Book Haul,” “Epic Adaptations,” and “Epic Author Facts.” It also regularly posts book trailers for featured releases; these videos are included on this webpage.

More: This section of the website is a repository for any Epic Reads content that does not fit under one of the aforementioned tabs, including Epic Reads’s book club and merchandise. Similar to books, visitors cannot buy Epic Reads merchandise directly from the website; instead, they are redirected to an external vendor. This section also features Epic Reads’s partnerships with Target and Barnes and Noble, a list of recent book releases, and an option to browse published works by category. Finally, this section includes a link to register for Epic Reads

Insiders – the official community within Epic Reads’s broader space. To become an Epic Reads Insider, website visitors must sign up with their email addresses.

Website copy

HarperCollins: Like many of the websites included in this study, HarperCollins’s website contains minimal textual information. It prefers to use visual elements to promote its publications, such as book covers and author portraits. Most of the website’s textual content is located within the “About Us” section, under the “About” tab on the navigation dashboard. In these various sections about HarperCollins’s company profile and operations, the publisher’s formal diction establishes itself as a major international book publishing company, emphasizing its place as the “second-largest consumer book publisher in the world.” It positions itself in visitors’ minds as an acclaimed and accredited figure in the publishing industry by explicitly stating its massive “print and digital catalog of more than 200,000 titles,” along with the famous authors it has published throughout its history, including Mark Twain, the Brontë sisters, and John F. Kennedy.

HarperCollins also uses its website copy in an attempt to present itself as supportive, especially of educators and librarians, both children’s specific and not. On its list of business services, HarperCollins describes the mission of its academic services as “gett[ing] to know our customers” and helping them find titles that work best for their various educational settings. Through this and the various “Are You…” pages, HarperCollins positions itself not only as a major book publisher but also as a staunch supporter of literary education.

Epic Reads: The diction employed by Epic Reads throughout its website copy is informal and youthful, especially in the headlines of its blog posts. These headlines and their respective articles use slang popular with their target audience to appear more relatable (ex.

calling an author the “GOAT” or “Greatest of All Time,” referring to reading marathons as “binges”). Epic Reads blog posts also scatter emojis throughout their headlines and body content, adding an additional dimension to the community’s youthful tone. Once again, the more relatable these communities make themselves out to be, the more welcoming they appear to adolescent readers, and the more likely they are to attract their target audience.

Additional features

HarperCollins: Outside of its directly marketing-focused content, HarperCollins’s website contains few additional features, such as blog posts, quizzes, video series, and other more recreational content. Some slides at the bottom of the homepage appear to be articles about specific new releases and themed book lists; however, they are merely links directing visitors to purchase options for the featured titles. The homepage also features an embedded view of HarperCollins’s Instagram page.

One standout feature of the HarperCollins website is its inclusion of links to resources for educators, librarians, children’s educators, and book clubs. These links can be found on the homepage under the “Roll Call” section and the “Books” tab on the navigational dashboard. Though these resources function as additional methods of promoting HarperCollins titles, they contain other materials as well, such as teaching guides and newsletters (see fig. 20). The inclusion of links to this content on the HarperCollins website shows a commitment to causes other than pure marketing, even if these resources still promote HarperCollins titles.

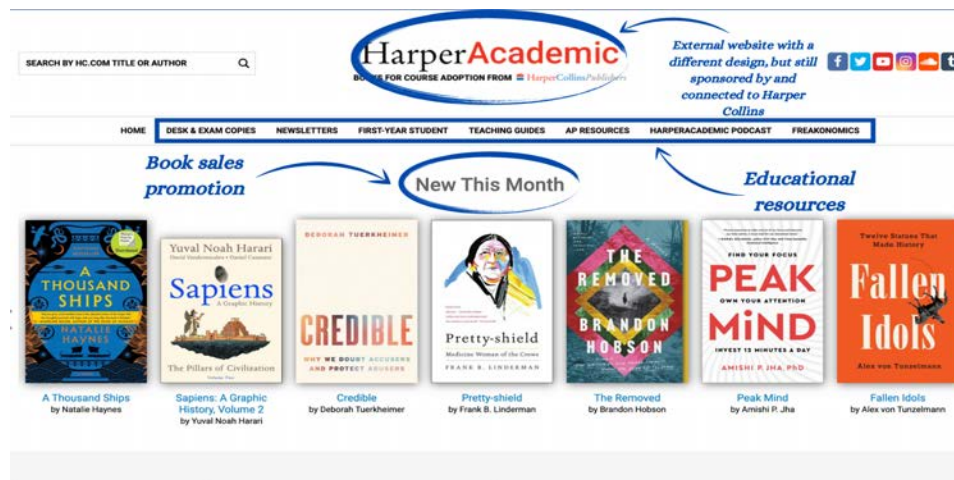


Fig. 20. Annotated homepage screenshot from: “Home - Harper Academic.” *HarperAcademic*, <https://www.harperacademic.com/>. Accessed 21 Oct. 2021.

Epic Reads: Like other ORCs, Epic Reads’s website contains an abundance of additional recreational content, including themed lists of book recommendations based on elements of pop culture the target audience is familiar with (e.g., television shows, movies, music), information about upcoming film and television adaptations of HarperCollins YA titles, quizzes, and video series. While HarperCollins’s website contains some of this content, Epic Reads goes beyond the usual basic marketing initiatives. For example, Epic Reads’s videos not only include promotional book trailers, but also book hauls, author interviews, behind the scenes looks at the publishing industry, and its humorous “Book Nerd Problems” video series.

Simon & Schuster and Riveted by Simon Teen

Logo/wordmark design

Simon & Schuster: Simon’s logo is more graphically detailed than those of the other trade publishers in this study. The image within the logo is that of “The Sower,” Simon’s colophon inspired by Jean-François Millet’s painting of the same name (Mitgang) (see fig. 21). The use of a more pictorial logo sharpens Simon’s identity as a publisher, making its logo and

their company more memorable in the minds of its consumers. Meanwhile, the minimalist typeface of the wordmark is simple, resembling a typeface one might find in a book.



Fig. 21. Simon & Schuster logo and *The Sower* by Jean-François Millet. Annotated

image.

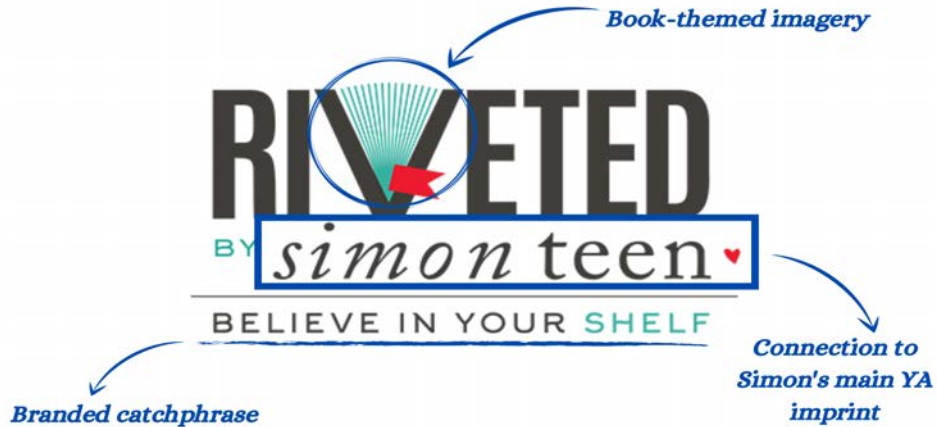


Fig. 22. Annotated Riveted by Simon Teen logo from: “Riveted by Simon Teen: Best Books for Teens & Young Adult Readers.” *Riveted by Simon Teen*, <https://rivetedlit.com/>. Accessed 14 Oct. 2021.

Riveted by Simon Teen: Riveted’s name, “Riveted *by Simon Teen*,” establishes the community’s identity as property of Simon’s primary adolescent publishing imprint. Like the logos of other ORCs, Riveted’s logo is dynamic, colorful, and attention-grabbing (see fig. 22). Where the Simon logo is in black and white, Riveted’s logo uses a branded color scheme, giving Riveted’s website an energetic and engaging appearance compared to that of its parent company.

Homepage design

Simon & Schuster: Unlike other trade book publishers, Simon’s website homepage does not feature a scrolling gallery at the top of the webpage (see fig. 23). However, it still includes some promotional content with a single bleeding header image. This header is followed by much of the same homepage features as the other trade publishers, like featured Simon titles, popular genres, advertisements for Simon’s mailing list, and a “More to Explore” section promoting additional website content. The content alternates between the direct placement of Simon titles and additional promotional content. No social media content is featured on the homepage.

Overlaid on top of the primary website content are two pop-up tabs – one advertising a giveaway and the other providing visitors with the opportunity to receive a free ebook (see fig. 23). These tabs can be closed and removed from website visitors’ view, but they are continually featured on every page of the website.

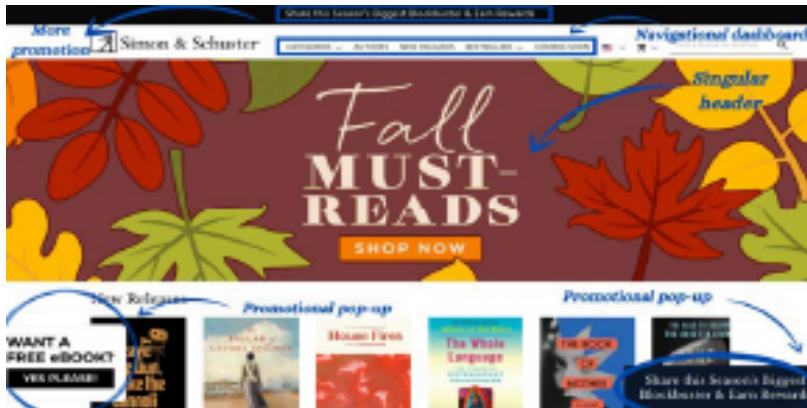


Fig. 23. Annotated homepage screenshot from: “Simon & Schuster.” *Simon & Schuster*, <https://www.simonandschuster.com/>. Accessed 19 Oct. 2021.

Riveted by Simon Teen: Before visitors to Riveted’s website can view its homepage, they are confronted with a branded pop-up opportunity to receive a free ebook; all they must do to qualify is sign up for Riveted’s newsletter (see fig. 24). Whether they accept or decline, visitors are then allowed to see Riveted’s homepage. Just as on Simon’s website, this tab can be minimized or closed; if it is merely minimized, then a smaller version remains in the bottom left corner of each page of the website.

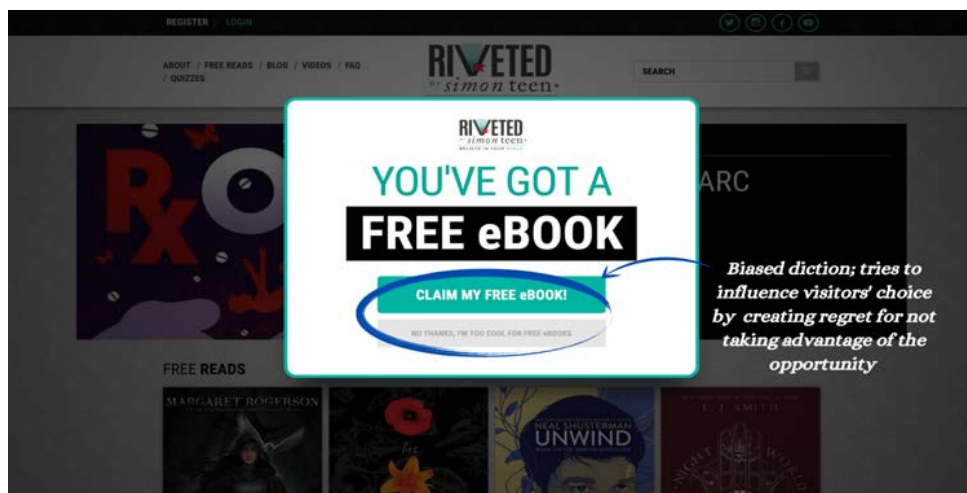


Fig. 24. Annotated screenshot of free ebook pop-up offer on Riveted’s homepage from: “Riveted by Simon Teen: Best Books for Teens & Young Adult Readers.” *Riveted by Simon Teen*, <https://rivetedlit.com/>. Accessed 19 Oct. 2021.

Riveted’s homepage is much like its logo – colorful, lively, and engaging (see fig. 25). Riveted’s homepage’s content breaks away from that of the other ORCs; rather than emphasizing recreational content or Simon YA titles first, Riveted’s homepage promotes its current free reading selections. These titles are followed by galleries of the community’s recent blog posts and videos, concluding with an embedded view of Riveted’s Twitter account. Also, unlike other ORCs, Riveted’s homepage does not advertise a single Simon YA title that must be purchased to be read. Instead, each featured title is a “Free Read,” meaning that website visitors can read the entire book without having to pay for it.

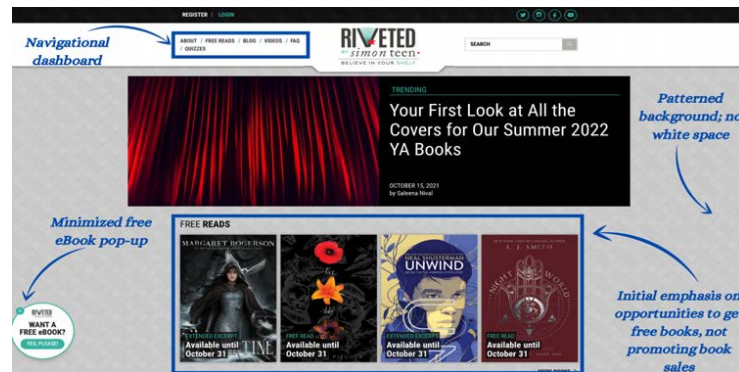


Fig. 25. Annotated homepage screenshot from: “Riveted by Simon Teen: Best Books for Teens & Young Adult Readers.” *Riveted by Simon Teen*, <https://rivetedlit.com/>. Accessed 21 Oct. 2021.

Website design

Simon & Schuster: Simon organizes its website into six sections: “Categories,” “Authors,” “New Releases,” “Bestsellers,” and “Coming Soon.” Like the websites of its fellow major trade publishers, Simon’s website focuses on promoting its titles and authors. However, Simon’s focus is more singular. Other than the three pages listed under the “More to Explore” tab on the homepage (see fig. 26), all content on Simon’s website is used primarily to encourage visitors to purchase Simon books.

More to Explore



Fig. 26. Annotated screenshot of Simon & Schuster’s “More to Explore” sections from: “Simon & Schuster.” *Simon & Schuster*, <https://www.simonandschuster.com/>. Accessed 21 Oct. 2021.

Categories: This section acts as a directory of all of Simon’s published titles. Website visitors can refine their search through various provided organizational methods, including category, author, series, format, price, age, and grade.

Authors: This section is a directory of all authors who have published books with Simon. There is only one webpage in this section. Other than a shortlist of noted authors at the bottom of the main page, no authors are displayed. Instead, website visitors can search for authors alphabetically by their last name.

New Releases: In this section, Simon promotes a selection of its recently published titles. These titles and their authors are high-profile contracts for Simon, such as Hillary Clinton’s latest book. The most promoted titles are accompanied by links to several external vendors where they can be purchased; they can also be bought directly from the Simon website.

Bestsellers: This section promotes official bestselling Simon titles. These titles are divided into two categories – *New York Times* bestsellers and *Publisher’s Weekly* bestsellers. Each section also lists each title’s place on its respective bestseller list (ex. “#10”). Other trade publishing websites and ORCs do not make this distinction.

Coming Soon: This section is a simple gallery of upcoming Simon titles. The same list of organizational methods provided on the “Categories” page is featured here for website visitors to refine their search.

Riveted by Simon Teen: Riveted organizes its website into six categories: “About,” “Free Reads,” “Blog,” “Videos,” “FAQ,” and “Quizzes.” Each section of the website only has one page; no dropdown menu is triggered by hovering over a topic in the dashboard.

About: The about section features a simple description of Riveted’s community and a brief promotion of its social media accounts. Visitors can also use this page to sign up for Riveted’s newsletter, view a selection of current free ebooks, and browse Riveted’s latest blog posts.

Free Reads: Riveted offers three types of free literary content – entire books, excerpts, and extras (such as novellas). To access this content, website visitors must register or log into a free account. This account also establishes visitors as official members of the Riveted ORC.

Blog: Like other ORCs and some trade book publishers, Riveted has a blog it regularly posts to. Popular topics include current free reads, quizzes, polls, giveaways, cover reveals, and themed lists of book recommendations.

Videos: This section displays the three series Riveted posts videos within. “Would YA Rather?” is a game Riveted staff members play with trending authors centered around the author’s book or genre. “Riveted by Simon Teen Roundup” is another method of presenting themed lists of book recommendations. Finally, “Reasons to be Riveted” is another promotional method in which Riveted staff discuss specific Simon YA titles.

FAQ: This section answers frequently asked questions about the Riveted ORC. It is the first and only web page across all the communities’ websites to label it as anything similar to this

title. This page also answers questions about how visitors can access the community's free ebooks, the difference between accessing free ebooks and registering for Riveted's Free Reads program, where Riveted can be found on social media, how media professionals can make inquiries, where to find information about its internship program, and where to find information about manuscript submissions. Thus, Riveted's website goes beyond merely addressing its members' needs.

Quizzes: This section is a collection of the quizzes and polls posted to Riveted's blog.

Website copy

Simon & Schuster: Like the other trade publishing companies' websites, Simon's website features minimal textual content. Most of it is dedicated to descriptions of featured sections, books, and lists on the homepage, along with descriptions of featured Simon titles. It is generally straightforward and neutral – not exactly formal, but not conversational either. Still, the clear focus of the website copy is promoting Simon titles and authors.

Riveted by Simon Teen: Similar to the websites of its fellow ORCs, Riveted's website copy is more casual and informal than that of its parent company. Its tone is casual and conversational, with Riveted referring to itself as “I” and “we” and readers as “you.” Riveted does not use much slang or any emojis to create this tone but relies on friendly diction and simple syntax. This choice gives the sense that those behind Riveted are friends or confidantes rather than distant publishing professionals. Once again, this tactic builds trust in the target audience, making Riveted seem more relatable and like a credible source for conversations about YAL.

Additional features

Simon & Schuster: Simon’s website contains minimal additional features, and they all can be found in the “More to Explore” sliding gallery at the bottom of their homepage (see fig. 26). Selecting any of the images in this gallery redirects website visitors to an external Simon website with resources and materials relevant to the presented topic.

Riveted by Simon Teen: Like the other ORCs, Riveted’s website contains many additional features, including Riveted’s blog posts, quizzes, and videos. Its “FAQ” section is unique to the Riveted community, though, along with its emphasis on the Free Reads program and access to free ebooks, excerpts, and extras. This program makes Riveted stand out from the other ORCs. Not only does it decline to prioritize marketing profitable titles, but it also extends its resources to audience members outside of general YA readers. Riveted remains an ORC at its core, but it also fills the gaps in digital content left by its parent company’s website.

Findings

Defining the “ORC”

I propose initially defining an “online reader community” as an interactive, multimedia, and multi-platform online discourse community consisting of readers that share a similar interest in a specific literary genre or category. This definition encompasses the wide range of functions of ORCs, describing their website activities while beginning to engage with their behaviors across the social media platforms they are present on. It also emphasizes the reader interest and interactivity inherent to and necessary for ORCs’ sustained existence – something that traditional publishing companies’ websites do not currently possess. The distinctive rhetorical strategies and goals that define ORCs are especially clear in contrast to those of general publishing websites.

This comprehensive comparative website analysis shows fundamental differences between trade book publishers’ websites and those of ORCs. General book publishers’ websites,

like those belonging to Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins, and Simon & Schuster, focus primarily on marketing their published titles. Their content does not just *revolve* around their books – their content *is* their books. Images of covers of their recently published and bestselling titles fill their homepages, with minimal additional content included. These general publishing websites focus almost exclusively on encouraging readers to purchase their titles, while ORCs take a different approach.

While ORCs center their content on their parent companies' YA titles, they take their websites a step further by emphasizing building a community around said titles. The key feature that makes room for this community to exist? The additional features included on ORCs' websites. These features are as described in the comparative analysis section. They are quizzes, videos, and articles that center on the YA titles published by a specific publishing company without always directly encouraging readers to purchase. Instead, readers are offered the opportunity to interact with the website and their fellow readers through these recreational outlets. This opportunity is rarely provided on general trade publishing companies' websites, and when it is, the content is minimal.

Though some publishers' websites contain some additional content (such as HarperCollins's "Roll Call" resources and Hachette's video series), it is not featured nearly to the extent nor as effectively as ORCs' websites. While general publishing companies that contain additional features may mention these features on the homepage or, even more rarely, dedicate an entire section of their website to them, ORCs organize their websites around such features. It is this content that draws readers into ORCs, and this content sets ORCs apart from general publishing websites.

There are some similarities between general publishers' websites and those of their ORCs. For example, both trade publishing websites and online communities place emphasis on visual content over text. However, the difference lies in what each website does with its minimal textual content. Where trade publishing websites use text specifically to promote their titles, ORCs use text to build relationships with their audience. They use casual diction, informal language, and youthful slang phrases to relate to their readers and build trust with their target audience. General publishing companies, meanwhile, do not feel the need to convince their readers to interact with their websites. The end goal for them is for the website viewer to purchase one of their books, which is reflected in their website content.

However, ORCs serve important purposes for their parent book publishing companies. Though they do not focus on directly encouraging their readers to purchase their parent company's YA titles, they indirectly encourage purchase by theming their content based on the YA titles the parent company wants to promote at that time. This themed content includes those additional features studied in the comparative analysis, including quizzes, videos, and blog posts. Not only do these features draw the audience in, thereby exposing them to the featured texts, but the relatable content creates trust within the community members; they trust their ORCs, so they are more likely to purchase the texts used to theme the recreational content.

The purpose of ORCs is not purely promotional, though. While these websites do help their parent companies promote and sell their YA titles, there is a clear focus on trying to build a true community around YAL for the readers. If these websites merely wanted to sell YA novels, their designs would look much like those of general publishing websites – minimalistic pages primarily filled with pure advertising published works, with minimal textual content and options to purchase books directly from the website. Little to no interactive content and relatable diction

would be found, as that matters less in a more sales-driven digital atmosphere. However, ORCs want to establish connections with their members. They want them to keep coming back to these websites, excited for whatever new blog post or video they might find. They want them to feel like a part of a larger group. ORCs allow readers to find people like themselves who share their interests, as shown in my analysis of these digital spaces.

ORCs Beyond YAL

The ORCs I study in this thesis all target the readers who share an interest in YAL. Currently, no ORCs for other audiences exist on this scale. While some themed websites centered on specific genres and demographics exist, such as HarperCollins's "Roll Call" websites providing resources for educators and librarians, these websites lack the interactive content that defines ORCs. Members of these demographics are not able to interact with each other nor feel like they are engaging with the website to the same extent as readers within ORCs can. Websites like HarperAcademic (see fig. 20) come close by providing their visitors with access to podcast content and newsletters, but the primary purpose of the website is still to provide them with resources and suitable HarperCollins titles for their situations. Thus, they are not ORCs.

However, some literary categories, such as children's literature, are getting closer to creating ORCs. While children's literature is often associated with adolescent literature, it is meant for elementary and middle-school-aged children, otherwise referred to as primary and middle-grade readers. HarperCollins has two children's literature-focused blogs: HarperKids and ShelfStuff. Whereas HarperKids's content targets parents seeking literary enrichment for their children, consisting mainly of articles and videos on topics related to children's literacy development, ShelfStuff is the closest thing to an ORC outside of YAL. ShelfStuff contains

many of the same additional features as ORCs, such as quizzes, blog posts, and videos. It also has a “Games” section to appeal further to its younger target audience. However, due to the age of its audience (seven years or older), many of ShelfStuff’s visitors lack the online knowledge, capabilities, and agency to interact with their community members, let alone purchase titles the blog promotes. As a result, there are still articles aimed at parents of young readers rather than the readers themselves, making ShelfStuff just shy of being an ORC.

Conclusions

As the results of my analysis show, ORCs are not the same as general publishing companies' websites. While both types of websites are capable of promoting their company's books, ORCs place an additional and central emphasis on building a community around those titles. They do so by conveying a more casual and relatable tone through their textual content and by featuring additional recreational (yet still book-themed) content on their websites, including articles, videos, and quizzes.

Though some general publishing websites also include this additional content, they still cannot be considered ORCs according to the definition I propose. The key aspect of ORCs that sets them apart from their more corporate counterparts is the interactive nature of their content. Not only do these websites publish recreational digital content, but these publications offer website viewers a chance to engage with the community through commenting on articles, taking quizzes, and participating in discussions triggered by video postings. Thus, website visitors become active participants in the community rather than passive browsers of presented materials.

While some general publishing websites include additional digital content like articles and video series, they rarely offer website visitors the chance to engage in critical discussions with their fellow readers. Instead, they forward the promotional goals of the parent company by

presenting titles available to purchase, occasionally through creative means (e.g., HarperCollins's "Roll Call" series.) Therefore, it is not the additional content that makes an ORC but the communicative elements that create an implied or explicit relationship between the website visitor, the website, and the other community members, depending on the types of content the visitor consumes.

What remains to be clarified about ORCs is why they exist primarily in YAL. As I mentioned previously, while ORCs are developing in other genres, these websites still lack the critical elements necessary to form and sustain an ORC. While children's literature may never be the place for a true ORC due to their lack of digital knowledge, experience, and agency, one wonders why these communities have not been implemented more in adult literature.

I theorize that it is the genre of YAL and the audience it serves that make this category the perfect environment for ORCs. The target audience for YAL is primarily teenagers; their prominent digital presence and technological experience make them prime targets for digital spaces like ORCs. Additionally, the formative teenage years emphasize the development of relationships and identity. Teenagers seeking belonging are, in my opinion, more likely to join an online community of peers that share their interests rather than adults with established social circles and identities or children who have yet to attain that level of critical thinking.

However, I do think that ORCs could be implemented in other genres and literary categories in the future. For example, a form of an ORC is already being implemented in children's literature with ShelfStuff. I believe that if a publishing company created a community targeted specifically at middle-grade readers, as they have slightly more digital agency than elementary readers but different literary themes than YAL, the community could be successful. Professionals within the publishing industry might also envision ways that they could utilize

ORCs beyond adolescent literature entirely, such as older demographics like adults. While ORCs targeting adult readerships would need to use their features differently, they have the potential to build online discourse communities around other genres, providing they choose genres engaging enough to sustain such spaces. I return to this idea in Chapter 4, where I propose a model for an ORC based in adult fiction – specifically, such engaging genres as adult science fiction and fantasy literature.

This comparative analysis also raises the question of how publishers and ORC members interact within social media, which is where the majority of explicit publisher-consumer communication takes place. I then extend that discussion to examine the digital and visual rhetorics ORCs use in social media spaces to encourage interaction with the content they post, create forms of participatory culture among community members, and target their intended audience(s). In the next chapter, however, I will be further determining the relationship between ORC consumer memberships and the brands sponsoring such spaces in the context of establishing ORCs as online brand communities (OBCs).

Chapter 2: Online Reader Communities as Online Brand Communities

Introduction

Despite their uniqueness amongst digital marketing strategies employed within the book publishing industry, ORCs are not the first digisocial gathering space of their kind. Before ORCs, there were OBCs – online brand communities. These communities bear many similarities to book publishing’s ORCs. For example, they both encourage consumer engagement with the brand and with other consumers. Both types of communities also enhance consumers’ identification with the brand and provide a place for them to co-develop brand knowledge.

Therefore, one could argue that ORCs are a kind of specialized subset of OBCs existing underneath this umbrella term. However, I disagree with this stance. Unlike OBCs, ORCs are not merely defined by members’ conversations about the brand sponsor’s products and their interactions within static community spaces, such as a discussion forum or an email list. Instead, ORCs extend into much more complex and multidimensional spaces, building networks for member engagement and communications across homepage websites and social media accounts on major social media platforms. This extensive and highly interactive community framework encourages higher levels of identification amongst ORC members, giving them safe places of mutual interest to exist in amongst the wider Internet ecosystem.

Member engagement within ORCs is also established through the memetic exigency present in brand-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer communications in the world of social media. Even in comparison to OBCs that have moved into the social media realm, ORCs still achieve significantly different kinds of member engagement across their online presences. For ORCs do not only resemble OBCs, but they also seem to classify as another kind of online social gathering space called “virtual discourse communities” (Kim and Vorobel 1). Additionally,

while OBCs can establish a sense of identification amongst their members, their lack of digital scope limits their abilities to do so. Thus, despite the striking similarities between OBCs and ORCs, the term “online brand community” is not necessarily an umbrella term that ORCs can be categorized neatly underneath. Instead, OBCs are more accurately considered as instead precedents to the more evolved, engaging, and expansive virtual brand discourse communities that are ORCs.

To articulate this argument, this chapter begins with an introduction to the OBC itself by defining the term, exploring the behavior that takes place within these spaces, and locating Brodie et al.’s five themes of consumer engagement necessary to establishing an OBC. Then, to understand ORCs as an evolved form of the OBC, one must first understand them within the context of OBCs. I accomplish this by examining ORCs through the lens of Brodie et al.’s five themes, analyzing how ORCs are similar to OBCs and, more importantly, where the two types of communities differ. This analysis leads the chapter to a discussion of the critical difference between ORCs and OBCs – memetic communication and participatory culture.

It is ORCs’ strategic use of the memetic and consumer engagement opportunities made possible through social media that makes them stand out against OBCs. It is also this feature that other brands, especially those within the publishing industry, must pay attention to when considering building engaging OBCs or ORCs. Therefore, this chapter also includes a brief analysis of the standalone social media accounts maintained by book publishers like Penguin Random House and Hachette. In analyzing their social media strategies, I use ORCs’ success through memetic communication and member participation as an explanation for publishers’ lack thereof. The chapter concludes with a crystallization of its main arguments, along with a preview of the next section of this thesis.

Online Brand Communities (OBCs)

The emergence and rise of the Internet as a communications medium has enabled geographically dispersed individuals with common interests to gather online in highly interactive and uniquely collaborative ways. These online gatherings result in radically new forms of interactions not just between average Internet users, but also between corporate figures and their target consumer audiences. Online, consumers are becoming increasingly active participants in interactive processes consisting of multiple complex feedback loops capable of highly immediate and real-time communication. Public discussion forums, email listings, social media accounts, blogs, and more are facilitating nascent and extended forms of transactional consumer experiences that often result in the development of potentially rewarding online consumer relationships with brands (Brodie et al.). While ORCs are enacting these strategies and engaging with these processes within the book publishing industry, they are not the first digital consumer communities to do so.

Francisco J. Martínez-López et al. refer to these gatherings as online or virtual brand communities (OBCs). Adapting the definition previously set by De Valck et al., these digital spaces are specialized, non-geographically bound, *online* communities structured around the social communications and relationships between a brand's active consumers. They also allow companies to establish a series of links with their brand audiences (Brodie et al; Martínez-López et al. 1). OBCs represent a critical element within relationship marketing, a theory that examines customer engagement habits in the marketing sphere. This "service-dominant" (S-D) logic perspective focuses on relationships in marketing, which contrasts with and transcends the stereotypical view of labeling marketing relationships as "goods-dominant" (G-D). S-D logic

recognizes that consumer behavior centers not merely on the products offered but on the consumers' interactive experiences within complex, co-creative environments (Brodie et al.).

Digital marketing strategies that utilize S-D logic rather than G-D logic are critical to engaging consumers in the tumultuous online world. The consumer engagement process consists of a range of sub-processes that reflect consumers' interactions within OBCs. The total engagement process values co-creation among participants, with each sub-process describing the nature of participants' specific interactive experiences that they co-create with other community actors. The concept of consumer engagement itself is an interactive, experiential process developed through individuals' engagement with specific objects (e.g., brands and organizations) and other brand community members. An emphasis on consumers' experiences within spaces like OBCs is the foundation of S-D logic, making it critical for OBC and ORC organizers to understand and implement in their community-building strategies.

If an OBC relies too much on G-D logic, it eliminates opportunities for engaging consumers online. Rather than prioritizing building relationships with consumers, OBCs guided by G-D logic isolate consumers by centering the products. In this way, they potentially make it impossible to build a sustainable and interactive OBC, as consumers would likely see their tactics as highly promotional, impersonal, and opportunistic. However, if an OBC bases itself on S-D logic, it makes the consumer the focal point of the community. The community then becomes less about direct product promotion and more focused on building productive and interactive relationships between the brand and its consumers.

Online consumer engagement especially goes beyond the boundaries of traditional, offline consumer involvement, such as static advertising materials like billboards and television commercials. Consumers are typically passively engaged by these marketing materials. Whether

or not they feel prompted to purchase by the advertisement, they do not interact with the marketing materials beyond the moment of viewing. Instead, online consumer engagement establishes an active relationship with the brand-object. It requires the creation of the consumer's perceived experiential value alongside the instrumental value they obtain from brand interactions. Thus, when consumers engage with brands in OBC contexts, they can develop feelings of loyalty, commitment, and empowerment in relation to the sponsoring brand. This effect makes the OBC a necessary platform to improve brand differentiation and competitive positioning in the modern business world (Brodie et al.). The strategy aligns with the consumer empowerment approach, wherein companies view consumers as allies rather than subjects in the processes of developing products, defending the brand, and creating brand value to further increase engagement (Martínez-López et al. 1).

Individual consumers typically engage with an OBC when the value of and interest in their chosen utility outweighs the level of perceived risk and potential effort exerted. They engage initially with specific inanimate object(s) of interest; in the case of OBCs, consumers engage with the brand itself. Consumers then progress to two-way communicative interactions with their fellow consumer community members. Discussions generally focus on brand-related topics, which tend to be the most prevalent areas of interest in OBC spaces. Examples include product prices and quality, brand performance, and personal experiences with overall companies and individual brand representatives. Participants also regularly engage with themes discussed in OBCs, such as brands of interest, products and services, the brands' respective industries, and participants' community roles alongside other members. Different roles within OBCs include learners and members sharing experiences or knowledge (e.g., the consumer), along with brand advocates and company representatives (Brodie et al.).

According to Brodie et al., there are generally five themes of consumer engagement present in an OBC:

1. The fundamental theme: all members of a community recognize the importance of engaging in interactive activities between brands, consumers, and other actors in the network.
2. Consumer engagement consists of a highly context-dependent, motivational state characterized by a specific intensity level at a certain point in time.
3. Transient engagement states and engagement sub-processes occur within broader, more dynamic, iterative engagement processes.
4. Engagement is a multidimensional concept consisting of cognitive (absorption), affective (emotional dedication), and behavioral (vigor) dimensions.
5. Consumer engagement plays a central role in the process of relational exchange within OBCs. Other relational concepts (e.g., participation and involvement) serve as engagement antecedents or consequences in the dynamic engagement processes taking place within brand communities.

These themes are generally present within the daily interactions and consumer engagement processes within those nascent communities I term ORCs – if one thinks of them purely as subsets of OBCs. However, comparisons to Brodie et al.’s themes also reveal significant differences between the two types of online marketing communities. These differences include how ORCs and OBCs attempt to engage their consumers, the digital and social media platforms they use, and the results of their respective attempts. Cumulatively, these differences reveal that though ORCs are very similar to OBCs, they are too advanced in their engagement strategies to be considered subsets of their antecedent. Instead, through a

combination of their themed recreational content and their extensive social media presences, ORCs are an evolved form of their OBC precedent. To reveal these differences, I will be discussing each theme in the context of ORCs.

The fundamental theme: all members of a community recognize the importance of engaging in specific interactive activities between brands, consumers, and other actors in the network.

Brodie et al. designate “specific interactive activities” between community actors in OBCs as consumer-to-consumer interactions in brand-related chat rooms and blogs. They can also consist of brand-to-consumer interactions through online feedback forms and personal communications such as email. ORCs similarly recognize the importance of engaging in these specific interactive experiences with consumers. In the first chapter of this thesis, I explained how ORCs use brand-created websites as spaces for recreational interaction with their consumers centered around the literary products they intend to promote. These websites represent an online marketing and consumer engagement strategy suited to the contemporary digital consumer. However, unlike OBCs, ORCs understand that they must take advantage of all the affordances of the modern digital world to engage with their target audiences most effectively – especially the affordances within the wild west of social media interactions.

While each ORC website does give members the chance to engage with the brand and other members through the recreational content and subsequent comment sections provided, this is not where the most consumer interaction within ORCs is possible. Instead, ORCs have expanded in recent years to create accounts on most major social media platforms, including Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Not only does this expansion enhance the interactive dimension created by ORCs’ nontraditional publishing websites, but it exponentially increases the interactivity possibilities within ORCs.

There are myriad ways for those within ORCs to engage in brand-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer interactions on social media. The comment sections of consumers' and brands' posts, replies to posts containing "mentions" or tags that draw a brand's attention, and direct messaging tools that most major social media platforms have all facilitate this interaction. ORCs' websites, however, only provide spaces for interaction in the comment sections of their recreational posts. While this level of interaction is on par with the interaction taking place within general OBCs, ORCs are not confined to these websites nor to the discussion forums and blogs of OBCs. Instead, they transcend OBCs by engaging with their community members in the unbound, highly interactive, and intensively engaging social media sphere.

Unlike OBCs, ORCs recognize the importance of utilizing social media not just in a promotional context but in an interactional context. Though some brands have realized the marketing potential of social media and created accounts accordingly, the mere presence of a brand on social media does not make it an OBC. The average communications of these branded social media accounts generally are not interesting enough to motivate viewers to brand community levels of engagement. When a brand does manage to make a viral social media post creating high levels of engagement, the focus of the ensuing online conversation often falls on the content of the post rather than the brand or product being advertised. For example, in October 2021, the pet supply company Bark Box posted a meme playing on the shared experience of one's pet getting scared by the sudden noise of a squeaky toy being stepped on (see fig. 1). Though this post received significant levels of user engagement, very few of the comments discuss the brand itself. Instead, everyone is reacting to the meme. While this engagement is still beneficial, Bark Box missed an opportunity to promote its brand more distinctly with this post.

Additionally, while some brands have noticed the advantages present in using social media for their digital marketing communications, these communications generally do not encourage the levels of consumer engagement necessary to establish a brand community on these

platforms. Even those brands that have chosen to expand outside of such a digital environment to the world of social media still do not achieve the level of consumer engagement and interaction that ORCs do. They may post the occasional meme, and their doing so does generally succeed in creating a response from their followers on the platforms they post to.

However, these brands' accounts lack the further elements necessary to exist as a true brand community. Though consumers might be able to engage with each other in the comment sections of the posts that these brands make, little motivates them to do so. The subjects of these brands often do not create an interest common or exciting enough to encourage regular interaction with the brand itself, let alone community membership. Consumer engagement requires these elements and other environmental factors to be in place within a community for it to be successful – elements and factors that ORCs possess.



Fig. 1. BarkBox [@barkbox]. “the sheer panic I feel when this happens....” *Instagram*, 28 Oct. 2021, www.instagram.com/p/CVlgUj5L0YF/?hl=en.

Consumer engagement consists of a highly context-dependent, motivational state characterized by a specific intensity level at a certain point in time.

Motivating members to engage with OBCs depends on the intensity of a specific moment within the larger online community's conversation. For example, a consumer may be motivated to engage with an OBC if they have recently released a new product that the consumer has many questions about. Similar phenomena take place within ORCs, such as members being motivated to engage with an ORC by the upcoming release of a highly anticipated book. This engagement would manifest through members expressing their excitement for the event by interacting with content related to the book on the ORC's website and social media accounts. However, in ORCs, the motivated actions of consumer members are not only dependent on the intensity levels at those cultural moments in time. Members' actions in their ORCs also depend on the types of engagement made possible by the platforms ORCs exist on and the content they post to said platforms.

Consumer engagement in an ORC is highly dependent on the social context the engagement is taking place within, especially within a community's social media spaces. Whichever platform(s) the ORC chooses to exist on determines the type and level of engagement and interactivity required to maintain an active consumer audience. For example, consumer engagement on an ORC website is characterized by active and indirect engagement. While community members partake in active consumption of content posted to the website, there is very little to no direct brand-to-consumer or consumer-to-consumer interaction. Community members may comment on the recreational content (e.g., articles, quizzes, and videos) posted to the website, but their comments are few and rarely replied to by an ORC representative. Additionally, comments that appear on the ORC website are sometimes not those posted to the

website itself but posted beneath the article's presence on one of the ORC's social media accounts. For example, comments shown beneath Epic Reads' website posts were originally made on their Facebook page.

In contrast, social media appears to promote an active and direct form of consumer engagement within ORCs. On major social media platforms – primarily Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok – ORC and consumer social media accounts regularly communicate with each other. ORC representatives interact under their ORC's branded name by making posts to the community's social media accounts and responding to comments left by their consumer community members. Those same members interact with ORCs by liking, commenting on, and sharing their posts. Community members then simultaneously interact with their fellow members by liking and responding to their comments, creating a sense of trust and solidarity amongst the group.

Even further, the type of social media platform being engaged on determines the strategy necessary to motivate consumer engagement – along with the type of engagement produced as a result. For example, Twitter's 280-character limit restricts the amount of verbal interaction between brands and community members. This limit means messages must be communicated concisely, making it necessary for ORCs to adapt their methods of community engagement. Thus, ORCs typically use Twitter to share a variety of brief but engaging messages, including comedic quips, surface-level questions for followers to quickly respond to, and links to long-form content on the community's main website. Meanwhile, Instagram's lack of such restrictions makes it a hospitable environment for longer posts from the ORC and more extensive verbal interactions in the comments. The visual nature of the platform also entices community members to spend more time visiting and browsing ORC accounts.

Still, consumer engagement within OBCs and ORCs is even more complex. Within these broader consumer engagement patterns, a multi-layered framework of short-term engagement states and consumer engagement sub-processes is constantly in place.

Within the more dynamic consumer engagement processes occurring in OBCs, multi-layered engagement sub-processes take place.

Five consumer engagement sub-processes typically occur within an OBC (Brodie et al.):

Learning: Consumers acquire knowledge that they can use to make confident purchase decisions.

Sharing: Consumers share personal and relevant information, knowledge, and experiences to contribute to the co-creation of community knowledge.

Advocating: Consumers express their engagement in the community by actively recommending specific products, methods, and services to fellow consumer members.

Socializing: Consumers participate in two-way, non-functional interactions that allow them to develop community-specific attitudes, norms, and language.

Co-developing: Consumers contribute to OBC sponsors by assisting them with the development of new products, services, sub-brands, and brand meanings.

The stereotypical OBC is capable of generating and maintaining each of these sub-processes through the member interactions it facilitates. Take a discussion forum sponsored by an OBC, for example. Forums such as these are built around the sharing of consumers' personal and relevant information and experiences about the brand to build community knowledge. Members can then acquire knowledge by learning from these sharing-based interactions and can advocate for the brand by recommending specific products and services it provides. Eventually, these interactions can move beyond knowledge acquisition to socialization, as conversations not

focused on the brand help members develop acceptable norms and attitudes specific to the community. Finally, once a foundation is established, community members can work with the brand to provide feedback on new products and services, co-developing the brand and its meaning to the community simultaneously. These processes do not have to take place in this order, but this sequence is a good hypothetical example of how they can each create and sustain consumer engagement in an OBC.

While these sub-processes are relatively easy to locate within a focused traditional OBC, such as one centered on a discussion forum model, they are difficult to generate within more complex online environments. For example, social media is too massive and chaotic to sustain these engagement sub-processes. Consumers can technically engage with brands and with each other in brands' comment sections on social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter. However, these engagement sub-processes require a space where continuous interaction can take place. While one could begin and continue a conversation with another user in the comment section of a brand's post, that post will eventually get pushed down the brand's profile by its newer posts. As the platforms that offer the most interactive opportunities (Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok) offer almost no methods for brands to archive their posts for future reference, these consumer-to-consumer interactions will eventually become buried under those newer posts. Though the users themselves can return to the conversation by accessing their notifications on whatever platform they are using, other users will not be able to see or learn from the discussion. Thus, sustained instances of the engagement sub-processes grind to a halt.

ORCs, however, provide slightly more organized spaces for its members to exist within on social media. ORCs create social media accounts with targeted purposes and audiences founded on YAL. In my experience within these spaces, those who follow these accounts

typically do not do so out of mere brand recognition as they might with a more general brand on social media. Instead, they follow the accounts as a step toward acquiring membership in the community, being motivated to do so by the potential for interaction within the space. Though ORCs' social media accounts face the same obstacles toward completing consumer engagement sub-processes due to the nature of social media, their targeting specific audiences within the chaotic mass of social media users facilitates the sub-processes once more. Furthermore, while interactions are more difficult to sustain within ORCs on social media platforms, users are more likely to work to continue those interactions due to their shared interest or passion in the subject matter.

Engagement is a multidimensional concept consisting of cognitive (absorption), affective (emotional dedication), and behavioral (vigor) dimensions.

According to Brodie et al., there are three primary dimensions of engagement present within OBCs – the cognitive dimension, which engages members' minds; the affective dimension, which creates emotional dedication to the community within its members; and the behavioral dimension that establishes enthusiastic participation within the community (e.g., vigor). All three of these dimensions of member engagement are present and can be identified within ORCs, which supports an argument toward establishing them as a subset of OBCs and shows their effectiveness as a space centered on consumer engagement.

The first dimension of engagement is cognitive engagement or absorption. This dimension refers to the process of community members building valuable relationships with each other by sharing useful information and experiences about the brand or product of interest. The information shared can be positive or negative and is open to further discussion, thereby creating positive and negative feedback loops within community communications (Brodie et al.). For

example, one community member might answer another member’s posted question about a specific product. By taking the step of actively engaging with a fellow community member to answer their question, the initial member becomes a trustworthy source of information. They become credible in the second members’ eyes, and an informal relationship based on an appeal to the first members’ ethos is formed through the exchange.

In ORCs, community members primarily build these relationships and establish these feedback loops with each other on a consumer-to-consumer basis. While members do build relationships with ORC brand names as trustworthy sources of information in the YAL publishing industry, valuable brand-to-consumer interactions are not founded on that informational exchange.

Instead, brands tend to share less consequential information, such as general information regarding upcoming publications, and participate in conversations where no information is shared (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Epic Reads [@epicreads]. “Have you ever been terrified by a book cover...” *Instagram*, 23 Aug. 2022, www.instagram.com/p/ChmvxwUNcSq/?hl=en.

Meanwhile, members of ORCs tend to build relationships with each other as they share valuable information and brand experiences in ORC spaces. For example, in Figure 3, one member answers another member’s question in the comments section of a post made by Epic Reads, HarperCollins’s ORC. The questioning member initiates the interaction by asking about the book series featured in the Instagram post made by Epic Reads, HarperCollins’s ORC. As the questioning member does

not specify whether they are addressing the Epic Reads account or their fellow community members, either entity can answer. Thus, the member who does respond is voluntarily taking the time

to answer the question and share knowledge about the featured book series. Then, even when the questioning

member appears to close the interaction by thanking the respondent, the respondent returns and offers more useful information that the questioning member clearly appreciates.

The initial act of answering the member’s question creates a sense of trust because ORC members are under no obligation to respond. Any interactions a member engages in are the result of a conscious choice they felt motivated to make. In this case, the respondent felt motivated by



Fig. 3. Epic Reads [@epicreads]. “Who wouldn't want a little ✨magic✨ added into their lives....” *Instagram*, 15 Aug. 2022, www.instagram.com/p/ChSelZeNkiS/?hl=en.

their knowledge in the product being asked about to respond to the first member's question. The willingness to answer creates a sense of trust within the questioning user as the respondent took the time to answer the question of someone who, as far as external observers know, is a stranger to them. The respondent continuing to provide information beyond the initial exchange then furthers that trust. It shows that the other user feels positively enough about the series to share so much information about it and encourage someone else to read it. The amount of information they share also suggests they are quite knowledgeable about the series, making them a more credible source for an opinion about it. Though we have no way of knowing whether the relationship between these members continued beyond this post, the questioning member will now recognize the respondent as a trustworthy source of information, thereby establishing at least an informal relationship between the two.

The affective dimension of consumer engagement within OBCs, however, relies on the communicative efforts of the OBC entity itself rather than the consumers. This dimension refers to the emotional gratification created within community members as a result of brands engaging them as participants. The gratification process typically creates feelings of gratitude, empathy, trust, safety, and belonging within members, thereby making them feel more like a part of the community (Brodie et al.). The dimension is based on the concept of social identity theory, wherein the consumer's identity as a community member reflects the strength of their relationship to the community itself (Martínez-López et al. 4).

Once OBC members see themselves as members of the group, a collective feeling of identity manifests itself in the strong bond established between members of said community. On an individual level, this identification with the brand is active, selective, and voluntary. It is often exemplified by community members joining discussion forums and signing up for their OBC's

mailing list (Brodie et al.). This affective dimension of OBCs, which is also present within ORCs, is difficult to gauge as an observer, as the process is internal to community members. However, there is an implicit sense of trust, safety, and belonging to or identification with the brand that is evident in the ways that ORC members interact with their communities online.

In ORCs, the individual members' identities are not based on their relationship to the collective community membership but on the brand sponsor behind it. For example, whenever an interested consumer chooses to follow an ORC's social media account, they are actively making the decision to engage with the brand sponsor behind it in a long-term relationship. Not only does this insinuate that the new member trusts the quality of the ORC's future content and communications, but it also suggests that they are willing to socially identify themselves as an official member of that specific publishing brand's community. This might be especially true if the community has a special name for its members; for example, Epic Reads calls its members "book nerds." Additionally, if those members take the next step of commenting on an ORC's post on social media, this suggests that they feel safe enough in the virtual space to voice their opinions and open themselves up to brand-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer communications.

Unlike the affective dimension of consumer engagement, Brodie et al.'s behavioral dimension is not concerned with the emotional reasonings behind a community member's actions. Instead, it focuses on the members' actions themselves and their effects on individual and collective community engagement. The behavioral dimension of consumer engagement in OBCs refers to the physical nature of community members' participation in the communities they identify with. Actions within this dimension include both consumer-to-consumer and brand-to-consumer interactions. These actions can also refer to both online activities undertaken by the

consumer community member and offline actions reported in the digital community (Brodie et al.).

In ORCs, such actions take place both on ORCs' websites and their social media accounts. On ORC websites, the behavioral dimension of member engagement consists of members viewing and sharing articles and blog posts, taking posted quizzes, entering giveaways, and generally interacting with the recreational content provided by the ORC. While commenting on posts is also an aspect of the behavioral dimension in this part of ORCs, it is less common on ORC websites. Meanwhile, on social media, comments and interactions within comment sections make up a large portion of the behavioral dimension, alongside liking and sharing posts, following ORC accounts, entering social media-based giveaways, and watching live-streamed events hosted by brand sponsors.

Consumer engagement plays a central role in the process of relational exchange within OBCs. Other relational concepts (e.g., participation and involvement) serve as engagement antecedents or consequences in the dynamic engagement processes taking place within brand communities.

Interaction is the beating heart of consumer engagement. While other relational concepts within the dynamic engagement processes of OBCs (e.g., participation, involvement, and online presence) are important to the construction and maintenance of such communities, they act primarily as engagement antecedents followed by engagement consequences (e.g., commitment, trust, consumer-brand connections, consumers' emotional brand attachment, and loyalty) (Brodie et al.). Though the formats of traditional OBCs, such as discussion forums and blogs, do encourage consumer engagement, they do so in somewhat static ways. Consumer participation in these types of OBCs is generally contained to a single space with defined forms of regular

consumer interaction, such as sharing experiences with the brand and its products, providing advice to other consumers, and discussing common interests relative to the brand.

Everything that ORCs do, whether on their websites, on their social media accounts, or offline at promotional events, is done to engage those who visit the spaces as members of an interactive community based on their common interest in YAL. From their community identities to the content they post, from the brand-to-consumer interactions ORCs personally initiate to the consumer-to-consumer interactions they provide a space for – every decision ORCs makes regarding their operations is to encourage interaction with and within the ORCs. Unlike traditional OBCs, ORCs are multiplatform and multidimensional, creating stronger community cohesion and identification within its members. While OBCs are capable of creating a sense of identification, their lack of such a scope limits their abilities and, in the long-term sense, their impact on their member base. Thus, despite the striking similarities between OBCs and ORCs, the term “online brand community” is not necessarily an umbrella term that ORCs can be categorized neatly underneath. Instead, OBCs are more accurately considered as a precedent to this new, more dynamic form of a virtual social discourse community – one which uses the affordances of social media to their fullest, most interactive potential.

ORCs and Social Media

Internet users and brand consumers participate in the social web – the complex network of social media platforms existing online – and the online communities existing within it because they trust other consumers more than they trust brands (Martínez-López et al.). With the rise of the social media era in the early 2000s, beginning with the launches of MySpace in 2003 and Facebook in 2005, companies had to adjust their online and offline marketing strategies to interact with consumers without making them feel manipulated (Samur). Their focus had to shift

to interacting with consumer community members, not just transmitting information to them.

This transformation entailed acknowledging the active role that consumers play in managing the brand and its identity, as consumers became not subject to the brand, but co-creators of it.

Companies interested in establishing OBCs, or merely brand relevance in the digital world, are now required to relinquish full control of their brands by handing some of it over to the consumers. If a company oversteps its boundaries and tries to control the content produced by its consumers or by the members of its OBC, it loses credibility amongst its audience. Thus, when a company uses an OBC as a space to promote its products and services too bluntly, its members negatively perceive its actions as opportunism. Consumers want OBCs to be forums for relationships with consumers and possibly the brand, not sales-oriented commercial environments (Martínez-López 3).

This sense of mistrust does not appear to be present in the case of ORCs. Since their launches, ORCs have amassed significant followings online. These followings have sustained them over nearly a decade of evolutionary advancement, allowing them to progress and adapt to suit their audiences' needs. This support has continued into the social media sphere as well, as several ORCs are achieving notable levels of consumer engagement across major platforms. For example, Margot Wood, a former community manager of HarperCollins's ORC Epic Reads, recently made an Instagram post celebrating the community's tenth anniversary. In the post, she included a screenshot of what the ORC's website looked like when it was first launched. When compared with the community's present homepage, one can see how much the community has been able to develop and expand thanks to its sustaining members (see figs. 4 and 5).

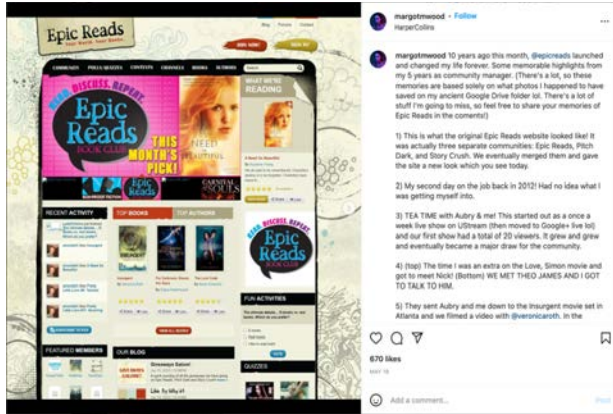


Fig. 4. Margot Wood [@margotmwood]. “10 years ago....” *Instagram*, 19 May 2022, www.instagram.com/p/CdwJdLBvO1l/?hl=en.

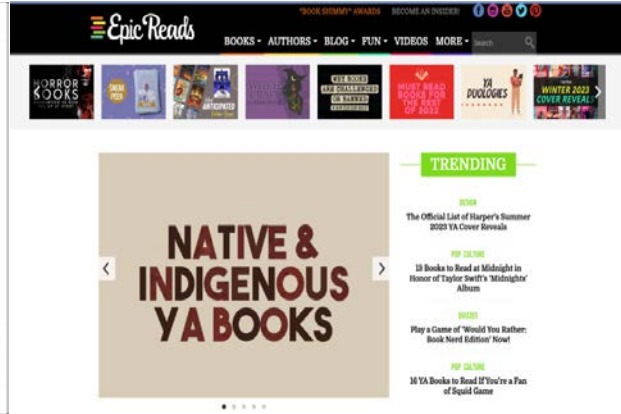


Fig. 5. Homepage screenshot from: “Epic Reads | Young Adult (YA) Books & Books for Teens.” *Epic Reads*, www.epicreads.com/. Accessed 22 Oct. 2022.

Wood also posted an image of all the fan mail she received during her five years as community manager, showing just how much the ORCs’ members emotionally connected with the community. A follower in Wood’s comments even described one of the series



Fig. 6. Margot Wood [@margotmwood]. “10 years ago....” *Instagram*, 19 May 2022, www.instagram.com/p/CdwJdLBvO1l/?hl=en.

Wood helped develop, “Tea Time,” as feeling like they were “hanging out with friends” (see fig. 6).

One possible reason is the separation of ORCs from their brand sponsors, which is characteristic of these types of brand communities. While a parent publishing company (e.g., HarperCollins sponsors the ORC Epic Reads) sponsors and maintains each ORC, it does so indirectly. Separate teams within the company manage the digital space, and often, the publishing sponsor does not receive direct credit for its role within the ORC. The sponsor's name generally is not included in its ORC's name, which makes the community feel even less like a promotional space despite members being directly advertised to on a regular basis. Even those ORCs that include parent companies' names in their own include it as a kind of asterisk, emphasizing the distinct names the ORCs have been given. These naming conventions of ORCs, combined with their distinct brand identities in comparison to those of their parent publishing companies, create a physical distance between the two types of organizations, thereby making ORCs more trustworthy in the eyes of their consumer community members.

However, despite the extensive member participation and involvement within ORCs, ORCs are still brand-controlled promotional entities used to advertise their parent publishing company's latest YAL products. Almost every article, quiz, or video posted to an ORC's website, no matter its amount of recreational content, has an underlying message of product promotion. Though these elements generally do not blatantly advertise to the community members, they are often themed around books published by the community's parent company, thereby implicitly promoting books by introducing them to potential readers. Additionally, some articles are strictly product promotion; for example, some articles recommend lists of titles published by the ORC's parent company that suit a certain theme, such as mental health or witchcraft, while others are direct lists of the company's upcoming YAL publications (see figs. 7 and 8).



Fig. 7. “27 YA Books About Mental Health & Mental Illness.” *Epic Reads*, www.epicreads.com/blog/ya-books-mental-health/.



Fig. 8. “The Official List of Harper’s Winter 2023 YA Cover Reveals.” *Epic Reads*, www.epicreads.com/blog/winter-2023-young-adult-book-covers/.

And yet, ORC members do not seem to view this behavior as opportunistic. On the contrary, these recommendations are perhaps more willingly accepted by community members due to the additional dimensions present within these online spaces. For example, as I explained previously, members of Epic Reads have connected on deeply emotional levels with the ORC. They trust the community enough to describe feelings of parasocial friendship with staffers who create content for the community and feel passionate enough about the space to compose fan mail for it. Though Epic Reads, like all ORCs, has continuously promoted HarperCollins’s YA titles with varying levels of directness through its recreational content, its membership clearly does not feel manipulated by this behavior. This is primarily because of the focus ORCs maintains on facilitating brand-member interactions within their communities.

In Epic Reads and other ORCs, alongside and within the promotional materials posted, there is still that enhanced focus on interacting with consumer communities rather than just

transmitting information to them. The websites of traditional parent publishing companies also post promotional articles similar to the ones that ORCs post – primarily articles centered around a themed list of book recommendations. However, on these websites, the list of book recommendations is all there is. There is very little additional text within these articles, leaving parent publishing companies with very little room to engage in brand-to-consumer communications. ORCs, on the other hand, begin each quiz, article, and blog post with a few paragraphs of introduction that allow them to establish a brand voice, one that is welcoming, personable, and relatable. Thus, the tone of those promotional materials, both implicit and explicit, is minimized enough so as not to hinder community member engagement typical within ORCs.

The proper term for this strategy of “selling without selling” is “content marketing.” It describes a method by which brands market products or services by creating and distributing free informational or entertaining content, especially online. The individual pieces of content – such as blog posts, social media posts, videos, and images – are designed to be valuable and interesting to consumers without overtly advertising the brand’s products or services. However, when engaged with by potential consumers over time, the content culminates in a “buyer’s funnel” leading the target audience to purchase the advertised product. Brands distribute this content across a variety of platforms to build brand awareness and credibility with their target consumer audience. Additionally, maintaining the content sustains ongoing relationships between the brand and the consumers by keeping constant communication between them. In the end, this method increases the chance that consumers will purchase the brand’s products or services (Wall and Spinuzzi 137).

However, the characteristics of ORC participation are not only defined by members' conversations and their interactions with branded recreational materials. Member engagement within ORCs is also established through the memetic exigency present in brand-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer communications in the world of social media. For ORCs do not only exist as antecedents of OBCs, but they also roughly classify under the category of another kind of online social gathering space called "virtual discourse communities" (Kim and Vorobel 1).

The development of social media has transformed how Internet users join and participate in modern discourse communities. Social media provides a new and unprecedented communicative medium for people to use to rapidly and intensively create new kinds of discourse communities. Its unique features and affordances allow and encourage users to create new types of connections, information, and social interactions in the digital world as a part of "virtual discourse communities" – groups of people sharing common interests who engage with each other through the Internet (Kim and Vorobel 1). While these communities did exist online prior to the invention of social media (by way of methods like discussion forums and blogs), social media platforms take the cohesion and group identification of virtual discourse communities to unparalleled levels, crossing national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries to form strong social networks with complex and hybrid group identities (Kim and Vorobel 1).

Though OBCs can be classified as virtual discourse communities, they do not achieve levels of interaction and networks of communication to the same dimensions that ORCs do. This issue likely results from their distinct lack of recreational content and multiplatform interaction through social media. OBCs focus mostly on engaging members with information about or in interactions regarding the overall brand or a specific product. Though brand-member and member-member interaction can be achieved in these forums, the emphasis remains on selling a

product or promoting the brand itself. Meanwhile, ORCs extend beyond the product to build virtual discourse communities through indirect product promotion, or “selling without selling” (Wall and Spinuzzi 137).

The rise of the global digital media apparatus has also created a physical and virtual world filled with an overabundance of virtual signifiers. However, individual actors in the online sphere have a significant amount of agency when it comes to selecting, modifying, and redeploying certain signs. They also possess the agency to choose what media platforms they join and what communities they engage with, along with the affective role they play in determining what content will “go viral” within and beyond those spaces. This combination results in the creation of online memes, or units of culture determined and propagated by culture as a broader system. Once generated, those actors that played a role in their virality can then use to further their own communications within and across the websites and media platforms of their choice. Thus, social media users have become both the producers and consumers of their own experiences in various online arenas. This ability classifies them as prosumers – producers of the content they consume – as the content they receive and popularize online depends on their cultural preferences and tastes (Kien 11).

Furthermore, the dominance of electronic media has resulted in an enhanced pathetic focus within digital content and media consumption. Emotions and excitement outlast cognition in this area; feeling motivates prosumerism online, while urgency to engage is linked with excitement about the subject. As a result, Internet users feel the urgent need to share the digital content generated for and served to them by their fellow prosumers. Due to the rapid nature associated with social media distribution, that shared content is reproduced and multiplied as soon as a prosumer relaunches it by sharing or creating a derivative of the original content. This

constant sense of urgency and emergency is one of the primary features of memetic exigency in digital media communications, thereby shaping the viral nature of memetic communication (Kien 57-58).

The term “meme” itself was coined by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. It has been abbreviated from the word “mimeme,” though it could also be thought of as relating to “memory” or the French word “meme.” While the term can be applied broadly to musical tunes, fashion, and technology that becomes circulated through the contemporary cultural zeitgeist, this thesis, it specifically describes memes that swim around in the human culture “meme pool” (much like a gene pool) that are replicated through imitation and adapted alongside developing culture. Examples of these kinds of memes include catchphrases, images, and videos with comedic elements whose original posting comes in an easily adapted and changeable format, making it ideal for replication and imitation. Creative content such as these memes that we enjoy today are more than mere copies of others’ ideas but are instead artistic representations of the replicative and imitative process inherent to meme theory. Even the habit of using random capitalization to emphasize certain words in an online post or the use of a specific image to convey a certain emotion are acts of replicating others’ ideas – and proof that meme theory holds in digisocial environments (Hurren).

Memetic exigency, therefore, is driven by the gratification that prosumers feel when they maintain the temporally fueled prosumption of currently popular memetic content. The whirlwind speed of digital consumption adds to the consumptive experience, as feelings of immediacy and instantaneity create the urgent need for Internet users to share the latest viral content “right now” before the trend passes and the meme becomes outdated. This sense of urgency dominates digital communication and causes memes to peak at maximum distribution

within two to three days after they appear. They descend into memetic dormancy, running out of new online users to interact with, within a week (Kien 58-59). Though some past or “classic” memes can resurface and be used by a brand in a new way, they may not be as effective as they were at their high point. Audiences could be distracted by whichever meme is currently viral or might not have been present for the reused meme’s original exigency, resulting in confusion rather than identification. Therefore, if a promotional agent or organization like an ORC wants to take advantage of a viral meme as a visual and digital rhetorical appeal to their target audience, it has to move quickly. If it waits too long, the meme will go dormant, and the memetic communication created through it will not be as impactful with its community members.

On social media platforms, ORCs regularly use memetic communication as a strategy for communicating with their consumer audience base. These communications can be seen across all major platforms and ORCs, including Epic Reads, the ORC sponsored by the major publishing company HarperCollins. Epic Reads began on Facebook as a hub for fans of YAL, but after receiving massive positive reception from consumers, the Epic Reads team launched its website in May 2012. The team behind its creation envisioned the space as “a central location where YA readers could talk to one another and discover their next read” (Kantor). Eventually, the community expanded its presence to other social media platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, and, most recently, TikTok.

Epic Reads and other ORCs “rehash” currently viral memes on these social media platforms by transforming them from their original state. They do this by taking viral memes and creating new versions related to the bookish interests of their target audience. In doing so, they

are not so much producing a user-created derivative as average prosumers do, but a brand-created derivative that communicates the original meme through the YAL-centered lens of the community (Kien 46). For example, in September 2022, a popular comedic meme was Nicole Kidman’s advertisement for AMC theaters. It is quite dramatic for a description of and advertisement for a movie theater, so online users began rehashing it by adapting the text to suit different environments. Epic Reads rehashed the meme by using it to describe a library instead of a movie theater (see fig. 9).

Because members of virtual communities like ORCs are prosumers, they have a significant hand in creating the same content that they consume. As prosumers, they determine what memes go viral, and so they influence the memetic communications used by ORCs like Epic Reads, thereby adding another dimension to the level of brand-consumer interaction taking place within ORCs. However, it is not only ORCs that are attempting to take advantage of memetic communication and exigency for promotional reasons in the social media world.

Like ORCs, the parent publishing companies that sponsor them have their own social media accounts. Previously, these accounts were used almost exclusively for direct book promotion. Their posts typically consisted only of posts advertising recent and upcoming book

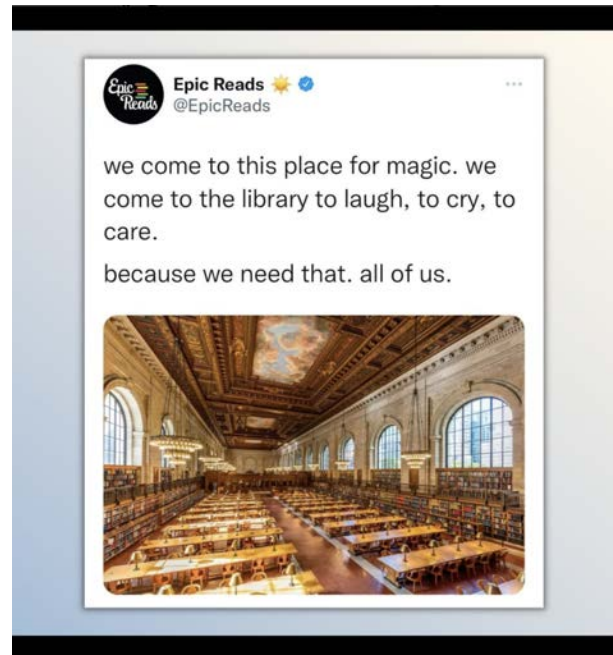


Fig. 9. Epic Reads [@epicreads]. “come one, come all!” *Instagram*, 18 Sept. 2022, www.instagram.com/p/CipqvoGsa6b/?hl=en.

releases and, occasionally, author or event spotlights. However, brands have recently attempted to expand their content to more recreational materials. For example, Hachette Book Group’s Twitter account now features posts asking its followers casual, book-related questions to entice consumer interaction. The brand also recently posted an amusing, relatable infographic representing the inside of a “book lover’s brain” – another attempt at breaking outside of its usual online marketing materials (see fig. 10).

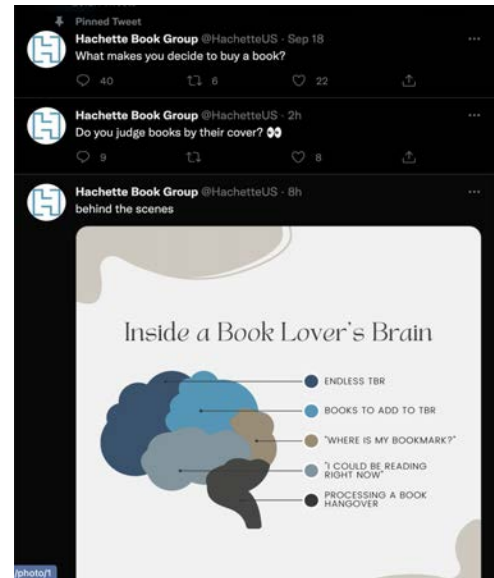


Fig. 10. Hachette Book Group [[@HachetteUS](#)]. *Twitter*, twitter.com/HachetteUS/status/1575863089509335042.

Penguin Random House has similarly tried to diversify its social media postings by posing its own book-related questions to its audiences on Twitter, alongside friendly reminders to its followers about their reading goals (see fig. 11). Due to their distinct



Fig. 11. Penguin Random House [[@penguinrandom](#)]. “If you’re reading this…” *Twitter*, 17 Sept. 2022, 2:52 p.m., twitter.com/penguinrandom/status/1571210376955547648.

---. “What is your favorite book…” *Twitter*, 16 Sept. 2022, 2:50 p.m., twitter.com/penguinrandom/status/1570847485890797568.

lack of promotional elements and their direct addresses of publishers' followers, both types of posts clearly denote an attempt to make their creators more personable to their audiences.

And yet, traditional publishing companies continue to refuse the shift to a more recreational identity that would earn them more consumer engagement and, possibly, the establishment of further ORCs outside of YAL. Though those more relatable and response-worthy posts exemplified above gain levels of engagement comparable to those earned by their ORCs' posts, they are few and far between. Furthermore, not every publishing company is even making such posts on its social media accounts. As a result, publishers maintain a distinctly professional and promotional identity, despite those companies that are attempting to create a more personable and community-like persona.

Additionally, there seems to be an element missing from those companies' more relatable online communications – the memetic element. Whereas the posts made by ORCs take advantage of the memetic exigency inherent to prosumer culture in the contemporary world of social media communications by engaging followers with recognizable variations of viral memes, traditional publishing companies do no such thing. Instead, their nonpromotional posts consist merely of simple questions for followers to respond to or friendly but impersonal statements about reading-related subjects (see figs. 10 and 11). As a result, though the publishing companies are technically posting engaging content, they are not involving their followers in the cocreation of such content. While the use of memetic communication in ORCs places community members in the powerful position of the prosumer, these publishing companies engage their followers in more of a call-and-response relationship. Consumer engagement is initiated as a result, but not a sense of community membership and individual importance.

Conclusions

While there are many different kinds of active OBCs throughout the social media platforms offered by the Internet, ORCs are an excellent example of how these communities can use memetic communication and the aestheticization of digital content to encourage consumer engagement and brand-to-consumer interactions within their online community spaces. By understanding the urgency necessitated by memetic exigency, ORCs like Epic Reads can use viral memes to communicate memetically with their community members before the meme enters dormancy, losing its relevance and, therefore, its promotional usefulness. Additionally, by using memes made viral by members of their very own communities, ORCs understand their community members' role as prosumers. They further enhance their communities' interactive capabilities, making participants feel not just like consumers within the community, but members necessary to its survival. These communicative strategies improve interactions and strengthen social bonds within ORCs, thereby helping their parent publishing companies maintain a digital audience necessary for continuing to promote their products, satisfying the economic needs of the brand, and meeting the social needs of their consumer community members.

As a result of these communicative strategies, ORCs also make themselves distinct from OBCs. While this chapter may be titled, "ORCs as OBCs," that is not necessarily true. Whereas traditional OBCs tend to restrict themselves to a singular space, such as a discussion forum or blog, ORCs create expansive communities extending beyond their website bases into the social media world, thereby creating enhanced forms of member engagement and stronger senses of community identity. Therefore, the distinct differences between OBCs and ORCs, and the clear advancements that ORCs have made by taking advantage of the affordances of the social media

world, help to classify OBCs as precedents to the evolved ORC rather than an umbrella category ORCs can be designated underneath.

Additionally, while some brands have noticed the advantages present in using social media for their digital marketing communications, these communications generally do not encourage the levels of consumer engagement necessary to establish a brand community on these platforms. Even for those brands that have chosen to expand outside of such a digital environment to the world of social media still do not achieve the level of consumer engagement and interaction that ORCs do. They may post the occasional meme, and their doing so does generally succeed in creating a response from their followers on the platforms they post to (see fig. 12).

However, these brands' accounts lack the further elements necessary to exist as a true brand community. Though consumers might be able to engage with each other in the reply and comment sections of the posts that these brands make, there is little motivating them to do so. The subjects of these brands often do not create an interest common or exciting enough to encourage regular interaction with the brand itself, let alone community membership. Engagement is generally of a singular dimension as well,



Fig. 12. Eric Smith [@ericsmithrocks]. “Sometimes I love this website.” *Twitter*, 30 Sept. 2022, 12:41 p.m., twitter.com/ericsmithrocks/status/1575888691074957319.

foregoing the cognitive and behavioral dimensions by appealing to the positive emotions created by the memes the brand posts. Even those positive emotions can sometimes be misattributed to the platform the brand is posting to rather than the brand itself, as can be seen in Figure 12.

However, general publishing companies possess brand subjects with the potential to create an interest common and exciting enough to motivate consumers to regular interactions with the brand and each other. As evidenced by member engagements with the YAL-focused ORCs I describe in this thesis thus far, a common interest in literature can be a strong motivator for the formation and sustenance of such a digital communal space. Still, due to their refusal to more extensively utilize recreational and memetic content on their social media accounts, trade publishers fail to develop an interactive digital community that can be classified as an ORC. In the next chapter, I will analyze the social media behaviors of one ORC subject to understand what strategies help it develop and sustain its interactive multiplatform network. Furthermore, I will comparatively analyze the social media behaviors of that ORC's parent publishing company. In identifying the successes of ORCs on social media, I will be able to isolate the shortcomings of the parent publishing company's methods and provide recommendations for their potential improvement in the arena of online community formation.

Chapter 3: Online Reader Communities on Social Media

Introduction

I have been a member of the Epic Reads ORC since 2013. I first encountered the community at an in-person book festival in Charleston, South Carolina, called “YALLFest,” or the Young Adult Literature Festival (the extra “L” being added to take advantage of the pun). It and other ORCs set up tents at the festivals to promote their communities to passing attendees. After I encountered the Epic Reads tent there and engaged in discussion with the staffers present, I quickly followed all its existing social media accounts and bookmarked its main website on my Internet browser. Since then, I have been a dedicated member of the community. I frequently engage with the content posted to its main website and social media accounts; checking these spaces is typically a part of my daily online routine. It was my experiences in Epic Reads and ORCs like it that triggered my interest in them as a research subject and made me feel qualified to take on the task.

This chapter then consists of a rhetorical analysis of Epic Reads’s various social media accounts. I do this by placing Epic Reads’s social media behavior in context with the existing informal book-centered virtual discourse communities on social media, including Bookstagram (Instagram), BookTube (YouTube), BookTok (TikTok), and Book Twitter. This analysis aims to understand what characteristics of Epic Reads’s social media strategies make them successful in these digisocial environments. This analysis also uncovers how ORCs use platform features and memetic communication to fit within and attract members from the virtual discourse communities already established on various social media platforms.

Additionally, through a comparative analysis of Epic Reads’s parent company’s (HarperCollins) social media behaviors, I attempt to determine what makes ORCs successful on

social media in contrast with more general publishing entities' accounts. In doing so, I examine whether general brands like HarperCollins are taking full advantage of the opportunities afforded by the social media platforms they use. Ultimately, I isolate the characteristics of a successful ORC in anticipation of proposing how an adult ORC or, at the very least, a general literature-focused account like those HarperCollins maintains could achieve similar results by mimicking Epic Reads's social media behaviors.

Methodology

This chapter consists of a comparative rhetorical analysis of Epic Reads' presence across four major social media platforms – Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter. Three of these platforms – Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok – contain named informal virtual discourse communities centered around books. These communities are denoted according to a combination of its respective platform name and the word "book," as Jactionary explains in his article (the title of which contains said platform names), "Bookstagram, Booktube, and Booktok: Reading Communities in the 21st Century." The fourth platform, Twitter, also includes a similarly named virtual reading community – "BookTwitter" – though Jactionary does not define or discuss this digital space in his post. Still, due to Epic Reads's existence on Twitter and the general platform's popularity, I elected to include Epic Reads' presence on Twitter in this study.

To unpack Epic Reads's strategies for building and maintaining its ORC in the social media realm, I analyze its accounts on each social media platform based on five criteria:

1. The number of followers per account
2. The average number of posts made per day
3. The types of posts made (ratio of promotional content to recreational)
4. How the account uses unique platform features

5. Community member/follower responses

I developed these criteria based on a combination of my extensive personal experiences within and outside of ORCs on social media and expert recommendations on measuring the success of one's social media marketing strategies. As a long-term member of and now experienced researcher into ORCs, I have obtained a general understanding of what metrics signify and constitute such an online community's success on both a social and promotional basis. Expert recommendations align with my understanding. Christina Newberry is a writer for Hootsuite, a premier consulting resource for social media marketing strategizing. In her article "16 Key Social Media Metrics to Track in 2022 [BENCHMARKS]," Newberry outlined valuable metrics for businesses and users to track to gauge their online marketing success. Though I could not include, nor could not measure on my own, each of those sixteen metrics, I did take Newberry's recommendations into account when developing my own metrics.

Additionally, because Epic Reads has existed on each social media platform for several years, resulting in an overwhelming amount of disorganized data, I focus my analyses of each account's activities only on September 2022. By selecting a single month of social media activity for my study, I could examine the ORC's social media activities more closely rather than attempting to analyze a massive amount of disorganized data comprehensively. Furthermore, as I discussed in Chapter 2, social media behaviors, viral trends, and digital marketing strategies change rapidly. Since ORCs take advantage of the most contemporary memetic trends to connect with their audiences, I must include the most up-to-date information possible in my studies of their online behavior.

Studying September 2022 also offers some particularly interesting insights into the online strategies of ORCs because HarperCollins had several large projects to promote. These projects

included the anticipated releases of the prequel novel to *They Both Die at the End* by Adam Silvera, *The First to Die at the End*, and the film adaptation of *On the Come Up* by *The Hate U Give*'s Angie Thomas. Additionally, “#BannedBookWeek” and Hispanic Heritage Month took place in September 2022, impacting the ORC's social media strategies. On both its Twitter and Instagram accounts, Epic Reads posted at least once about the importance of advocating for banned books and books by Hispanic authors, which started engaging conversations about the topics amongst community members on both platforms.

Once my analyses of Epic Reads' social media presence were complete, I also analyzed its parent publishing company's (HarperCollins) accounts on the same four social media platforms. Using the same five criteria, I studied each HarperCollins account to understand how the two digital entities – one specifically for young adults and one for more general audiences – use online communications strategies differently. The results of my analyses show that while HarperCollins is beginning to branch into engaging its audience with recreational content, it has yet to strike the delicate balance between promotional and recreational content that Epic Reads has mastered. These results then allow me to discuss why HarperCollins's social media accounts receive less online consumer engagement than its ORC's.

Based on these findings, I propose how Epic Reads's parent company, and others like it, could follow this ORC model to engage adult readers. Still, despite including analyses of HarperCollins's accounts in this chapter, Epic Reads's social media behaviors remain the main focus of this section of my thesis. As its parent publishing company, HarperCollins is included as a valuable point of comparison for corporate social media accounts within the book publishing industry and a starting point for envisioning how the digital rhetorical strategies of ORCs might work beyond the YAL audience.

Epic Reads and Bookstagram

Bookstagram – Platform Background and Definition

To successfully engage with YAL fans on social media, Epic Reads needed to align its online presences with the platforms they already existed on. Instagram is one such platform. Founded in 2010, Instagram is a social media platform centered around its users sharing photographic and video content that they can caption, edit, and tag to cultivate followings around their personal lives, hobbies, businesses, and other characteristics (Jactionary). Alongside direct messaging and in-app shopping capabilities, Instagram’s platform also includes a “Stories” feature that imitates the social messaging platform Snapchat, allowing users to share textual and audiovisual content for twenty-four hours in a space separate from their main profile. Users can also make short-form videos through the “Reels” feature on Instagram, which imitates the newer and massively popular short-form video-sharing platform TikTok.

Bookstagram, therefore, is the book community found on Instagram (Jactionary). Despite being prevalent enough to be named, Bookstagram is an informal virtual discourse community centered around literature and the publishing industry. It is the primary method for readers, authors, and publishers to connect with each other on Instagram. While Bookstagram posts might appear amongst the non-Bookstagram posts of a user’s feed, users can also locate the community by using and searching “#bookstagram” and related hashtags. Users seeking the Bookstagram community might also search hashtags such as “#bookstagrammer,” the name of a Bookstagram participant, or a combination of the community’s name and their home country. For example, a German user looking for the German corner of the Bookstagram community might search for the tag “#bookstagramgermany.”

Still, “#bookstagram” remains the most popular tag within the informal community. As of September 2022, “#bookstagram” had been used to tag over 82 million posts. Bookstagram posts are also typically denoted by their significant focus on book-related content. For example, a Bookstagram user’s account is generally devoted entirely to discussing and posting pictures of books. In contrast, an Instagram user who makes the occasional post about reading typically would not be considered a Bookstagram member.

The community is generally comprised of literature-focused social media influencers who make enough money for Bookstagram to be their full-time job, users who do not have large followings but still post content regularly, publishers promoting their products and authors, and users who do not post content themselves but follow and interact with the aforementioned groups. Those who make money from

Bookstagram do so through endorsements from publishers or other related businesses looking to advertise to the literary community (Jactionary). On Instagram, those Bookstagrammers who are popular enough to be considered ‘influencers’ typically post visually appealing pictures of books they are reading or promoting, pictures of themselves reading said books, and short videos discussing bookish topics (see fig. 1). Popular Bookstagram influencers include Jesse (@jessethereader;

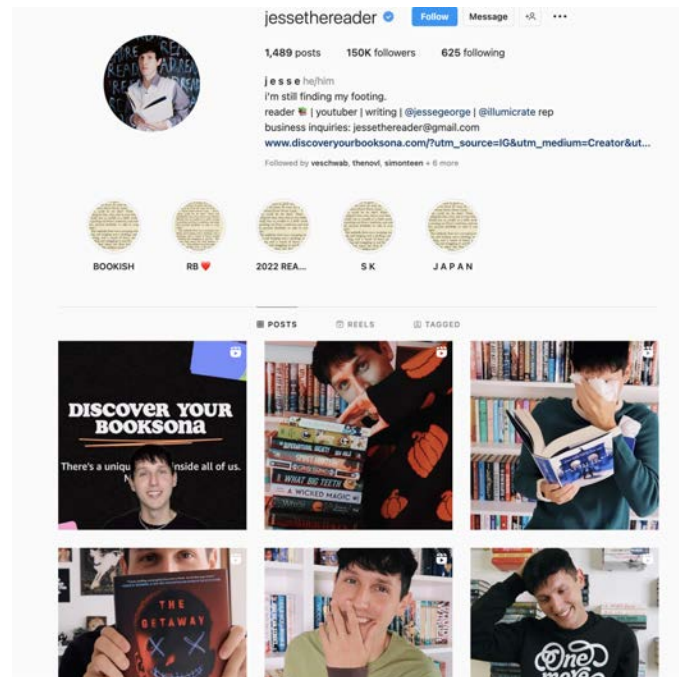


Fig. 1. Jesse [@jessethereader]. *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/jessethereader/?hl=en.

150,000 followers), Christine Riccio (@xtinemay; 142,000 followers), and Jaysen Headley (@ezeekat; 124,000 followers).

Content on Bookstagram focuses on visual appeal, primarily consisting of edited photos and videos of books. These might feature new book releases, book-related merchandise, what users are currently reading, mail from publishers (otherwise known as “#bookmail”), and similar book-related or “bookish” content. Thus, following influencers, authors, and publishers on Instagram can keep one in the loop on recent industry news, such as new releases, cover reveals, author interviews, book reviews, reading challenges, giveaways, job opportunities, and more. All of these elements make Bookstagram a “fun group of like-minded souls” – and an ideal online location for a branch of an ORC (Jactionary).

Epic Reads on Instagram

Epic Reads joined Instagram in August 2012, arguably at the beginning of the peak of YAL in the 2010s (Miller). Its tagline in its profile places them during this period: “We volunteer as tribute to be the YA community of your dreams.” This self-identifying motto references the infamous YA series, *The Hunger Games*, whose first film adaptation came out in 2012, the same year Epic Reads joined Instagram. According to the earliest available capture of Epic Reads’s Instagram profile by the Wayback Machine (an Internet Archive initiative cataloging Internet sites and other digicultural touchpoints) on April 25, 2014, the ORC’s Instagram tagline has not changed since the account was created (“epicreads”).

As evidenced by its opportune entrance to Instagram and its targeted tagline, Epic Reads has made an apparent effort to cultivate a space specifically for YAL fans on the platform. In the following subsections, I will describe the aspects of its activity on Instagram that help them strike the necessary balance between recreational and promotional content in the wider

Bookstagram community, followed by analyses of how they impact overall ORC social media methodologies.

1. The number of followers per account

As of September 30, 2022, Epic Read’s Instagram account has 729,000 followers. While these numbers may seem small compared to larger corporate accounts, this is due to the size of the brand’s audience. Though YAL is becoming increasingly present in popular culture, it is still somewhat of a niche interest compared to more general brand spaces. For context, two of the largest Bookstagram accounts – Jesse (@jessethereader) and Christine Riccio (@xtinemay) – only have 150,000 and 142,000 followers, respectively. Thus, Epic Reads has a significant number of followers for an account within the Bookstagram space.

2. The average number of posts made per day

In September 2022, Epic Reads’s posts did not appear to follow a strict schedule. It made approximately 1-2 posts every 1-2 days, posting twenty-nine times in total for the month.

3. Types of posts made

Instagram allows Epic Reads to make two types of posts: static images that can be posted up to ten at a time and videos, which Instagram calls “Reels.” In September 2022, Epic Reads posted mostly video-based content, as sixteen out of the twenty-nine posts were Reels. The other thirteen posts were single or slide-show collections of static images or GIFs. The ORC posts both promotional and recreational content to its Instagram account. Its promotional content consists primarily of trailers for upcoming book releases and film or television adaptations, stylized

quotes from published or forthcoming books, and visually engaging photographs of HarperCollins YA titles (see fig. 2).

Epic Reads also posts content that blurs the lines between promotional and recreational content. For

example, the ORC frequently posts “listicles” advertising themed lists of selected HarperCollins YA books. As September was also Hispanic Heritage Month, Epic Reads posted a slideshow listicle of recommended YA books with Latinx representation on September 22, 2022 (see fig. 3).

The post includes a list of seven YA novels that Epic Reads asserts “captures the heart of Hispanic culture and representation.” The slideshow ends with a question to viewers: “What’s at the top of your TBR list?”

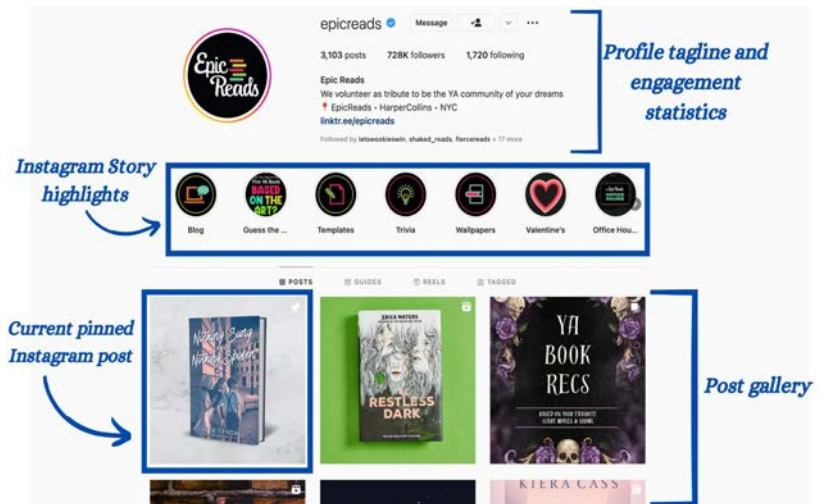


Fig. 2. Epic Reads [@epicreads]. *Instagram*, www.instagram.com/epicreads/.

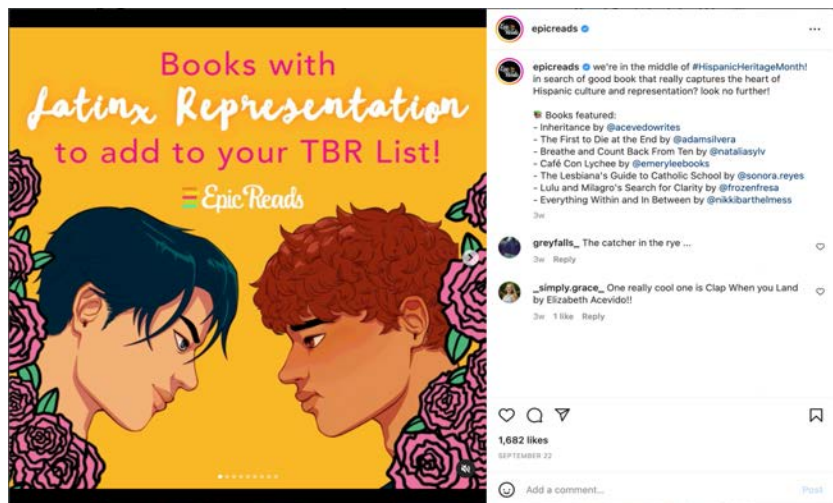


Fig. 3. Epic Reads [@epicreads]. “we're in the middle of #HispanicHeritageMonth....” *Instagram*, 22 Sept. 2022, www.instagram.com/p/Ci0Q6-4hwJ3/.

Posts such as these practice a promotional strategy called “content marketing,” which refers to a method of marketing a product or service through free informational or entertaining content. Often employed online, this method involves brands creating content that is meant to be valuable and exciting to consumers outside of the featured product promotion so they will consume it willingly. Utilizing this type of marketing across various platforms (e.g., social media, blogs, and email lists) builds brand awareness and credibility with the target audience. It maintains continuous relationships by keeping consumers constantly engaged with the brand. Additionally, content marketing increases the probability that consumers will purchase goods or services by “selling without selling” or promoting a product indirectly without making the consumer feel coerced to purchase (Wall and Spinuzzi 137).

Posts like Epic Reads’s slideshow recommending books for Hispanic Heritage Month engage in the practice of content marketing by promoting HarperCollins YA books through recreational content. Though the slideshow does directly promote specific HarperCollins YA titles, it does so in a way that engages customers with the books around the theme of Hispanic Heritage Month. This theme makes the content interesting to community members outside of promoting the included books while engaging them in an essential conversation regarding social justice awareness in literature. If members choose to purchase these books now, they are more likely doing so out of a desire to increase their awareness about Hispanic cultures than merely because the books were directly advertised to them. Thus, Epic Reads effectively engages in the act of “selling without selling” through posts such as this.

The pattern of advertising a book and prompting audience engagement with a related question is one that Epic Reads follows in much of its promotional content on Instagram. Unlike on other platforms such as Twitter, the extended word count per post gives it enough room to do

so. Thus, though these videos recommend specific HarperCollins YA books to the ORC’s members, they do so in a way that engages audience members’ interest and makes the ORC itself appear more personable and trustworthy. These videos take on the tone of a friend making casual book recommendations rather than a corporate entity advertising featured releases. Additionally, Epic Reads’s use of colorful graphics and art in these posts follows the aesthetic norms set by the wider Bookstagram community, in which average users post book recommendations with no financial motivation to do so. Therefore, as I explained in Chapter 1, these listicles classify more as recreational content despite their promotional appearance.

Epic Reads also posts various memetic materials to Instagram as part of its recreational content. These posts include original memes shared only on Instagram, credited reposts of memes posted by other creators, and screenshots of memes posted to Epic Reads’s Twitter account first. The types of

memes that Epic Reads posts depend on the memes experiencing memetic exigency at that moment. Sometimes, these posts require multilayered knowledge of topics trending online at that time. For example, on September 25, Epic Reads



Fig. 4. Epic Reads [@epicreads]. “important.” *Instagram*, 25 Sept. 2022, www.instagram.com/p/Ci7uD37h47P/.

took advantage of the online conversation surrounding the long-awaited television adaptation of the *Percy Jackson* series by Rick Riordan (see fig. 4). The chosen meme is an image of a girl

yelling into a confused-looking boy's ear at a concert. Those who make their own versions of the meme do by adding commentary to the picture in all uppercase text, giving the impression that the girl is passionately explaining the topic of their choice. In this case, that topic is the *Percy Jackson* series.

To understand Epic Reads's post, users would require both knowledge of the *Percy Jackson* series and the meme itself. However, that intersection of information is precisely what the members of this ORC possess. Epic Reads knows this, so it created this post to target this specific group. As a result, the post proved to be highly engaging. It received approximately 12,400 likes and 48 comments – the highest amount of engagement received by all posts made in September on Epic Reads's Instagram account.

4. How it uses unique platform features

Epic Reads effectively uses the posting features unique to Instagram to maintain engagement with its community members on the platform and direct members' focus toward featured content. For example, the ORC uses the slideshow feature to post multiple photos simultaneously. This feature is especially useful when Epic Reads posts themed listicles to its Instagram page, as it allows them to recommend multiple books in a single post. Epic Reads also uses Instagram's "pin" function to keep specific posts at the top of its post gallery rather than getting pushed down by the chronological order of its profile page (see fig. 2). This feature ensures that these posts are kept immediately viewable by and emphasized to viewers (Giandurco).

Epic Reads also utilizes Instagram's "Stories" feature, which refers to pictures and videos posted separately from a user's permanent account gallery. An imitation of the Snapchat story, Instagram Stories only remain on a user's profile for twenty-four hours after posting unless

one saves them to their profile page. However, Epic Reads also has eighteen collections of saved “story highlights” at the top of its account’s post gallery. Story highlights remain at the top of one’s Instagram profile as long as they want them to and can be organized into specific groupings (Sheikh). On Epic Reads’s profile, story highlight categories include “Blog” posts, interactive “Templates” for users to post to their own stories with their filled-in answers, “Trivia” questions, book “Trailers,” “Games” for Instagram users to play in their Stories, Epic Reads “Merch” drops, and more promotional and recreational content options for followers to interact with (see fig. 2).

Finally, Epic Reads uses Instagram features to facilitate real-time interaction with its community members. Epic Reads will often host Instagram “Lives,” which are live-streamed events held on the platform. These videos typically consist of interviews with published HarperCollins YA authors. For example, on September 27, Epic Reads hosted a live conversation between authors Elise Bryant and Susan Lee about their respective upcoming books, *Reggie and Delilah’s Year of Falling* and *Seoulmates* (see fig. 5). The live stream lasted 45 minutes, with the conversation focusing on a variety of topics both directly related and entirely unrelated to their books.

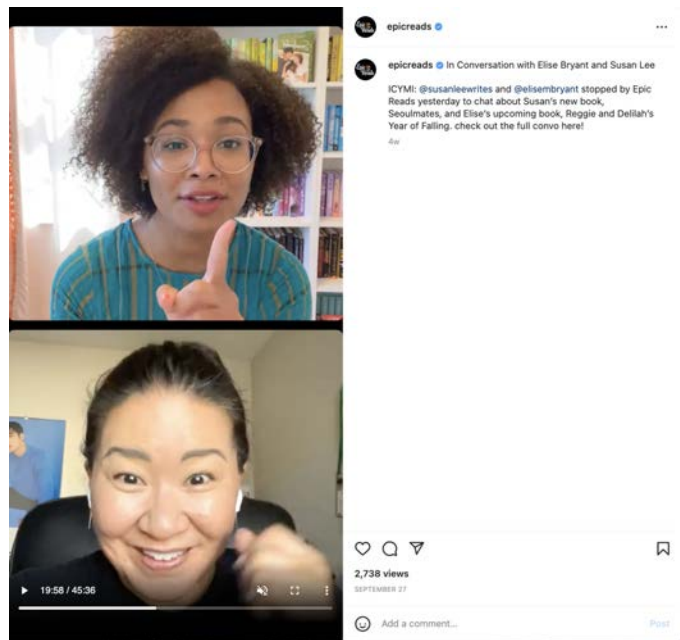


Fig. 5. Epic Reads [@epicreads]. “In Conversation....” *Instagram*, 27 Sept. 2022, www.instagram.com/p/CjBMX47pQDT/.

Though members are not always allowed to comment on the live stream, such events make them feel closer to both the ORC and the authors it supports. These streams give members the rare opportunity to engage en masse with the ORC and its authors in real-time, even giving the illusion of participating in a simple phone conversation with these generally inaccessible literary figures. While other social media platforms have live-streaming capabilities, Epic Reads primarily fosters this kind of interaction on Instagram.

5. Community member/follower responses

On Instagram, Epic Reads's community members respond by liking, commenting, and sharing its posts. They may share them on other social media platforms, with family members and friends over messaging, or to their personal Instagram Stories. While there is no way to see the number of shares per post from an outside perspective, one can view the data for other forms of engagement, such as likes, comments, and the number of views per video post.

The amount of community engagement with Epic Reads – gauged in the number of likes, comments, and followers it receives – depends on several factors. It is not just the post type that matters but the post's visibility, meaning how many users' feeds it ends up on. How much visibility a post receives depends on how Instagram's algorithm ranks the post's relevancy for a specific user. Instagram's algorithm is a set of rules that ranks content posted to the platform. It decides what content appears, and in what order, on all Instagram users' personal feeds, Explore pages, and Reel feeds. Instagram ranks posts based on specific factors, including the relationship between the content author and the viewing user, the interest of the user in specific types of content, and the relevancy of posted content to the user (McLachlan and Mikolajczyk).

For example, Epic Reads can increase its chances of its posts appearing on its members' feeds by strengthening its relationship with its members. This task can be accomplished by

encouraging members to interact with the account through liking and commenting on posts and by Epic Reads replying to their comments, as more interaction means higher visibility.

Additionally, when a member engages with Epic Reads's Instagram posts, they signify to the algorithm that they are interested in that type of content. Thus, the algorithm will show them more of the same content on their feeds. Finally, posting frequently is key to Epic Reads maintaining visibility and member engagement, as more recent posts are considered more relevant than older posts.

Likes per post for Epic Reads in September 2022 ranged between approximately 1,000-12,400. Once again, the post that received the highest number of likes was the aforementioned Percy Jackson meme. Meanwhile, comments per Epic Reads Instagram post in September 2022 ranged between 0-63. The number of comments on each ORC post truly depends on post type – perhaps more so than with likes. Commenting on a post is a more active form of engagement than liking. However, the original post must be complex or exciting enough to prompt a response.

The post that received the highest number of comments was the first book trailer for the prequel to an extremely popular YA novel, *They Both Die at the End*, *The First to Die at the End*, both by Adam Silvera (see fig. 6). The book imagines a world where a “Death-Cast”

service can provide one with the exact time of their death. The book trailer plays on the novel’s plot by presenting viewers with a fake newscast reporting on Death-Casts’ launch and ends with the newscast’s faceless viewer receiving a call from the service. Not only did the popularity of the novel being promoted draw members in,



Fig. 6. Epic Reads [@epicreads]. “📺 Death-Cast is Coming 📺” *Instagram*, 19 Sept. 2022, www.instagram.com/p/CisVBIWD0Mh/.

but the creativity of the trailer was clearly a significant factor in the post’s increased engagement. Many community members commented, expressing their excitement about the book and how impressed they were by the trailer. Some even called for the books to be adapted into a movie based on how well-done the trailer was. These responses represent a common theme throughout Epic Reads’s member engagement on Instagram. The more creative the post is, and the more popular its promotional subject is, the more likely it is to be engaged with by community members.

Epic Reads and BookTube

BookTube – Platform Background and Definition

To build a truly successful ORC, Epic Reads could not limit its social media presence to a single platform or informal literature-focused virtual discourse community. Therefore, it also

developed an active account on YouTube, fitting itself within the digital sphere of BookTube. BookTube is the book community on YouTube. YouTube, created in 2005, is a video-sharing platform for long and short-form video creators on various subjects. The platform also has a “Shorts” feature which, similar to Instagram’s Reels, imitates TikTok’s characteristic short-form videos. “BookTubers” are users whose content is (mostly) dedicated to videos on subjects related to reading. These topics include reading vlogs (video blogs), book reviews, book recommendations, discussion-focused live streams, monthly to-be-read lists (TBRs), reading goals, reading recaps, book hauls (monthly book acquisitions), and more.

Unlike on other social media platforms, creators’ accounts are not referred to as such but are instead called “channels.” Their followers are referred to as “subscribers.” Thus, one subscribes to a creator’s channel rather than following a creator’s account. BookTube creators typically have their own channels and upload content independently. However, they can collaborate with other users on their accounts or create joint accounts under new, shared identities. Furthermore, some BookTubers achieve such significant levels of popularity that they are invited to create content on ORCs’ channels, such as the well-known BookTuber @jessethereader (396,000 subscribers) posting to Epic Reads’s channel.

According to Jactionary, the end goal of BookTube is to “talk about books and make money.” BookTubers make their income from paid sponsorships, affiliate links, connections to their other social media platforms, and revenue they get from advertisements they add to their videos. However, the ability to profit from advertisements and obtain business sponsorships is only attainable once creators reach specific YouTube milestones, including a high cumulative number of hours their viewers spend streaming their content or a certain, innumerable level of online fame (Jactionary). For example, to start making money directly from YouTube, a creator

must reach the threshold of at least 1,000 followers and 4,000 viewed hours in the previous year. Once this threshold is reached, creators can apply for YouTube's Paid Partner Program, which allows them to profit from in-video advertisements and channel subscriptions (Perelli). Still, BookTube is a semi-realistic option for creators interested in literature and making some extra income, as seen by the creator group's demographic. Creator ages vary from those young enough that they are still living at home or are in college to those adults who use YouTube as a side income in addition to their full-time job (Jactionary).

As a result, there are many different kinds of BookTube accounts. The visual aesthetic and general feeling of each creator vary as well. Many utilize the same standard image of the BookTuber standing in front of clean, organized, often white bookshelves, while some channels stylize their videos with quick cuts, special effects, or other artistic effects. Others keep their videos simple or maintain more of a handheld camera style. Thus, finding one's niche as a subscriber within the BookTube community relies on knowing what types of books they like, finding a creator whose videos cater to those interests, and deciding whose opinions they can trust.

The nature of BookTube makes it a hospitable social media environment for ORCs to exist within. This informal online reading community was founded on prolonged inter-user engagement through long-form video content and interactivity within video and live-stream comment sections. The popular genres of BookTube videos – including book hauls, reviews, and literary culture – aligned easily with the recreational content Epic Reads posts on its website and other social media presences. Thus, it was relatively easy for Epic Reads and ORCs like it to attract and engage with existing BookTube audiences, resulting in a co-sustaining environment for both ORCs and BookTube creators.

Epic Reads on YouTube

Epic Reads joined YouTube on September 23, 2010, two years before joining Instagram. Since then, it has posted almost 2,000 videos and accumulated approximately 46.9 million views. While the ORC's YouTube account does not have a prominent tagline, as YouTube does not leave a space for this on one's profile, it does include a short description of itself in the "About" section of its page. It describes itself as "your video destination for all things YA and teen books," directing users to "[s]ubscribe to our channel for tons of bookish fun!"

1. Number of followers

As of September 30, 2022, Epic Reads's YouTube account had 166,000 subscribers.

2. Average number of posts per day

Epic Reads posts significantly less on YouTube than on other platforms. This is likely due to the higher production value necessary to create long-form video content. Epic Reads posted a total of fifteen videos in September 2022. Eight of these posts were full-length YouTube videos with lengths ranging from under a minute to seven minutes long. The other seven were YouTube Shorts. While the runtime of each Short is not visible, the maximum length for this type of YouTube video is sixty seconds.

3. Types of posts made

Similar to its Instagram account, Epic Read's YouTube page contains a mix of promotional and recreational content. In September 2022, these videos included original branded content created by Epic Reads staffers and HarperCollins authors, such as author interviews, trailers for upcoming book releases, listicles in video format, and behind-the-scenes looks at the book cover design process (see fig. 7). The book trailers are clearly promotional due to their

direct advertising of specific books. However, I see the author interviews, listicles, and behind-the-scenes videos classified as recreational content.

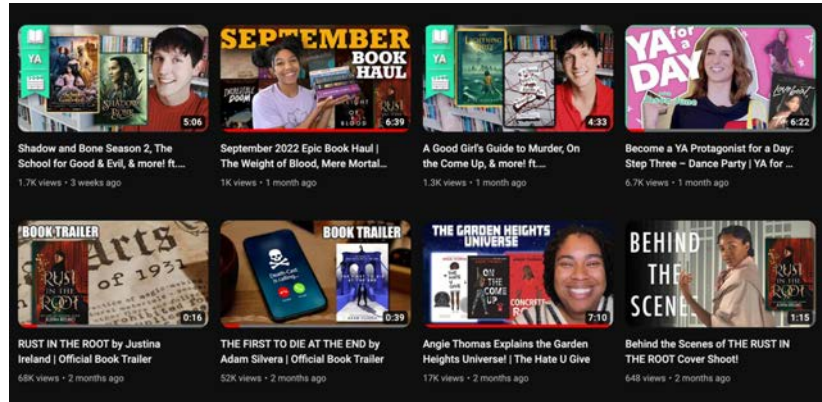


Fig. 7. Screenshot of September videos posted by Epic Reads [@EpicReads]. *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/c/EpicReads/videos>.

Though each type of recreational video can be used to promote specific

HarperCollins YA titles, the themed element of the listicles and the more personal nature of the author interviews make the videos more engaging and relatable than direct advertisements like book trailers. Themed listicles engage members in a topic external but related to the featured books themselves. For example, a listicle Short centered on books about fake dating scenarios, making members' interest in that subject the central focus of the video rather than the promotional act. Meanwhile, author interviews put a friendly face to the books being promoted, making the promotional act much more personal. Additionally, authors often talk about their personal experiences and feelings regarding their books in these videos. These conversations help members of the Epic Reads community feel more connected to them even though the authors are technically engaging in promotional activities with their interviews.

While some of these videos were posted simultaneously on Epic Reads's account on other platforms (e.g., the *The First to Die at the End* book trailer), Epic Reads does take advantage of YouTube's longer maximum video length. Videos like Angie Thomas's author interview and the "Become a YA Protagonist for a Day" series could not be posted on a platform

like Instagram due to the time limit. Additionally, users typically look to Instagram for shorter and more quickly consumable content. YouTube, however, is the perfect environment for engaging members in long-form videos.

Thus, the response to Epic Reads's use of YouTube Shorts is interesting. Though Epic Reads posts similar (or even the exact same) videos to both its YouTube and Instagram accounts, it receives significantly fewer likes and comments on its Shorts than its Reels. I suspect this is due to YouTube's identity as a platform for long-form content. Longer videos are what made YouTube popular, and they are what users generally seek out when they visit that platform. Though Reels are a similar attempt to mimic TikTok's success with short-form video content, Instagram never had that original emphasis on long-form videos. Thus, Shorts are not likely to be as successful.

Epic Reads's channel also posts original branded videos made through collaborations with recognizable BookTubers. These BookTubers did not begin as Epic Reads staffers. Instead, they started their own YouTube channels unaffiliated with the Epic Reads ORC and brand. By consistently posting desired BookTube content, such as book-buying hauls, reviews, bookshelf tours, and commentaries on news within literary culture, they grew popular enough to become household names amongst the YAL publishing community. Eventually, their accounts earned them enough credibility to be useful to ORCs like Epic Reads. For example, Epic Reads has a YouTube series titled "Epic Adaptations," hosted by well-known BookTuber Jesse (@jessethereader, 396,000 subscribers). In these videos, Jesse updates viewers on the latest news regarding upcoming film and television adaptations of YAL novels.

These video collaborations with BookTubers stand more at the intersection of promotional and recreational content. They might encourage readers to watch the adaptations

and purchase the original books. However, figures like Jesse’s status as a BookTuber first rather than an Epic Reads staff member make the videos feel more casual, relatable, and entertaining. A similar effect occurs in Epic Reads’s monthly “Epic Book Hauls,” filmed by Olivia (@iLivieSimone, 20,100 subscribers). A “haul” video is a popular genre where a creator walks viewers through a large purchase they recently made. In her September haul video, Olivia introduces viewers to YA books published by HarperCollins in that month, including *Rust in the Root* by Justina Ireland, *The Weight of Blood* by Tiffany D. Jackson, *Daughters of the Dawn* by Sarena and Sasha Nanua, *Incredible Doom: Volume 2*, by Jesse Holden and Matthew Bogart, *Each Night Was Illuminated* by Jodi Lynn Anderson, *Mere Mortals* by Erin Jade Lange, and *Creep* by Lygia Day Peñaflor.

Olivia shows each book to the camera as she describes its plot and any other characteristics of the book that viewers might find interesting (see fig. 8). For example, for *Rust in the Root* and *The Weight of Blood*, Olivia describes the multimodal elements the books incorporate, including images and encyclopedia entries related to each story. With *The Weight of Blood*, Olivia even opens the book to show readers an example of how the book incorporates images into its storytelling. Thus, though these Epic Haul videos are merely lists of

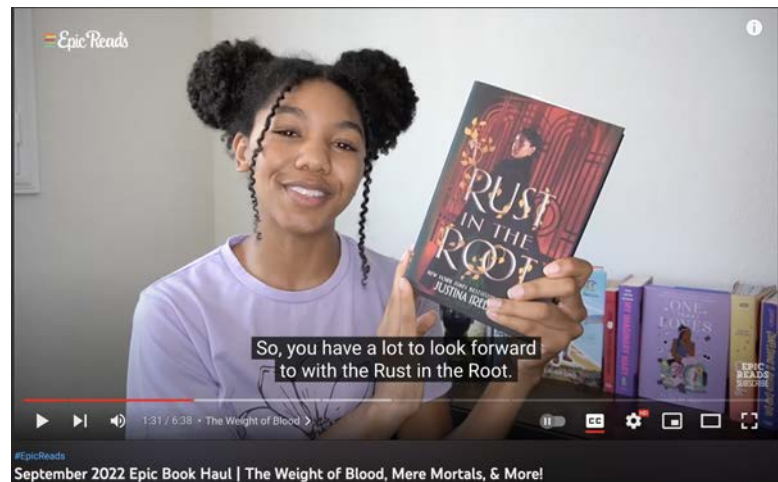


Fig. 8. Epic Reads [@EpicReads]. “September 2022 Epic Book Haul | The Weight of Blood, Mere Mortals, & More!” *YouTube*, 30 Sept. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uTaFsYhonE>.

YA titles published by HarperCollins each month, their presentation by a personable BookTube creator in this engaging format makes them feel more relatable and entertaining. Therefore, these videos shift more toward recreational content than strictly promotional.

Though YouTube now includes its Shorts feature, the platform was initially made popular by its ability to host long-form video content. As a result, the shorter video and textual memetic content Epic Reads frequently posts to its other social media accounts – which gets them more audience engagement – do not fit in this corner of its online presence. In September 2022, Epic Reads only posted one video that could be classified as memetic content. The video titled “Reading sad books be like 🥺😭🎧” shows an Epic Reads staffer lip-synching to a slowed-down fragment of the song *Good Grief* by Bastille (see fig. 9). The song represents her emotions about reading a specific book that she holds up to the camera in the video. Again, though this video is making viewers aware of a particular book published by HarperCollins, it uses an audio track the audience members would recognize and emotionally connect with. As this slowed-down version of the well-known song (it has over 258 million plays on Spotify) has been used frequently in videos across social media expressing sadness, viewers likely understand through a combination of the video’s audio and text that the person in the video feels sad about the featured book.



Fig. 9. Epic Reads [[@EpicReads](#)]. “Reading sad books be like 🥺😭🎧.” *YouTube*, 14 Sept. 2022, youtube.com/shorts/qe00vOVkVS0?feature=share.

However, though this content is recreational, I am unsure if it is entirely memetic. Memes are defined as self-replicating and evolving units of culture (Kien xi). They must be capable of replicating, but they cannot only produce exact copies. The meme must be capable of change, adaptation, and evolution as it is reproduced in new contexts (Kien 5). In the Internet sphere, memes label content that takes on distributional characteristics, breadth, and reach to make it seem like the meme has its own vital life force (Kien 6-7). When a meme goes viral, it appears to jump exponentially from its original host's site to its replicators' spaces (Kien 7). An example of a recently popular meme involves editing a screenshot of the character Sue Sylvester from the television show *Glee* as she says: "I am going to create an environment that is so toxic...." Those who replicate the meme either use it in its entirety to comment on the toxicity of different well-known situations or blanked out certain words within the phrase to create new meanings based on their unique contexts (see figs. 10 and 11).



Fig. 10. @ianamurray. "ryan murphy making glee." *Twitter*, 28 June 2020, 5:17 p.m., twitter.com/ianamurray/status/1277350529916719105.



Fig. 11. J10 [@JustinCentric]. "My mom on Facebook." *Twitter*, 27 Nov. 2020, 5:45 p.m., twitter.com/JustinCentric/status/1332455414332612613.

The Sue Sylvester meme fits the definition of a meme because it took on a life force of its own due to its high adaptability. However, I am not sure the tactic employed by Epic Reads in the “Reading sad books be like 🥺🥺” video can be classified as memetic in the same way. Though it is relatable and uses a recognizable song, it is not replicating any established viral meme. It also cannot be easily replicated as the song’s somewhat defined meaning limits the contexts it can be applied to. Thus, though the personal relatability of the video makes it engaging to consumers as recreational content, I would not consider it memetic.

4. How it uses unique platform features

Like its presence on Instagram, Epic Reads takes advantage of the unique features the YouTube platform offers. For example, the ORC organizes its posted videos into themed playlists to ease member navigation, increase continuous viewing times, and keep members from navigating to another creator’s channel. Playlist themes include original comedic series created by the ORC, such as “Book Club Problems” and its defining “Book Nerd Problems.” Other playlists are themed around specific authors and BookTubers who frequently reappear on the channel (usually titled “[Name] on Epic Reads”) along with other recreational activities, such as crafts, costumes, and makeup looks based on HarperCollins YA titles. As a result, its playlists consist primarily of recreational content for its members to peruse.

Additionally, alongside its aforementioned Shorts, Epic Reads occasionally posts in its channel's "Community" tab (see fig. 12). It only posts approximately 1-2 times a month. Its posts typically consist of book-related polls and announcements related to its recreational video series. For example, it posted at the beginning of September announcing the start of its new series "Epic Reads Investigates," where it "uncover[s] murderous and mysterious plots in upcoming book releases." Both the posted polls and video announcements are attempts to further engage audience members in recreational activities on the channel.

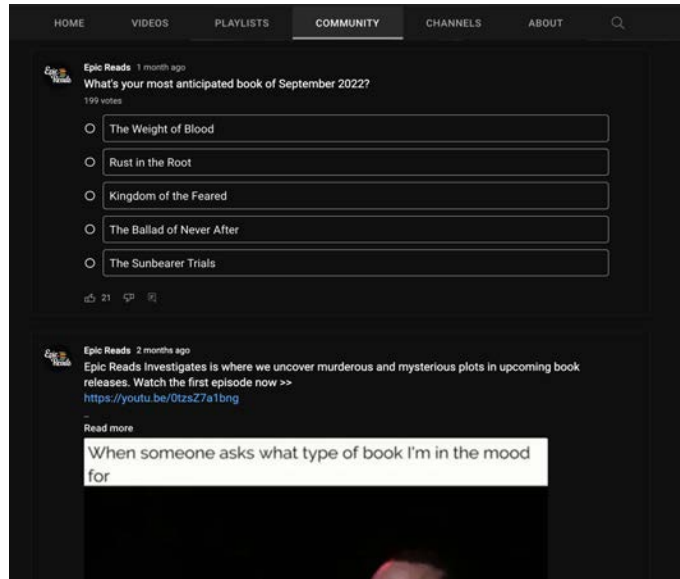


Fig. 12. Epic Reads [@EpicReads]. "Community." *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/c/EpicReads/community>.

Despite the infrequency of the posts and the diversion from typical YouTube content, these polls are still somewhat successful. Each poll gets a decent amount of engagement, typically receiving 100-200 votes per poll. Again, while this may seem like a small number, the YA community is relatively niche. Additionally, Epic Reads's YouTube account has the least number of followers of all its social media presences due to the nature of its content. These considerations, combined with the polls' departure from YouTube's usual video content, make a turnout of a few hundred votes on a side tab of the ORC's main account not insignificant.

5. Community member/follower responses

Many of the responses to Epic Reads's YouTube posts are similar to those for its Instagram posts. These responses include views, likes, and comments on videos, along with sharing videos to other social media platforms or to family and friends over direct messaging methods. Views per video posted in September 2022 ranged from under 500 to 68,000. The posts that received the highest number of likes were trailers for two highly anticipated upcoming book releases: *Rust in the Root* by Justina Ireland (68,000 views) and *The First to Die at the End* by Adam Silvera (51,000 views).

Though these promotional videos regularly receive the most views, Epic Reads is still defined by its recreational content. This is because views do not necessarily equal community engagement. Views are passive forms of engagement with a video; one only has to watch a YouTube video for 30 seconds for it to count as a view (McLachlan and Cooper). Additionally, there is no way to judge whether those views are created by people dedicating their full attention to a video. However, both likes and comments require intentioned action on the viewer's part, and the videos that receive the most likes and comments focus on recreational content. In September 2022, the video that received the most likes and comments was "Angie Thomas Explains the Garden Heights Universe." Once again, though the video focuses on and indirectly promotes a specific author's books, the author's speaking directly to the audience combined with the non-sales subject of the video defines it as recreational instead of promotional.

Epic Reads community members also respond to the content the ORC posts to its YouTube account's "Community" tab. They primarily respond by answering polls. They also occasionally interact with non-survey content by liking and commenting on posts. Still, due to the adjacent nature of the content, it receives significantly less engagement than the ORC's main video posts.

Epic Reads and BookTok

BookTok – Platform Background and Definition

To develop an effective multiplatform ORC, Epic Reads also had to take a chance on relatively new social media platforms, such as TikTok. Created in 2016, TikTok is the youngest of all the platforms included in this study. However, TikTok originally began as Musical.ly, a social media platform where users could upload lip-synch videos to clips from songs, movies, television shows, and other audio media. In 2018, the Chinese tech giant ByteDance bought Musical.ly and merged it with its popular lip-synching app, Douyin. Together, Musical.ly and Douyin became TikTok, which debuted as its own platform in August 2018. Within a month of its debut, TikTok surpassed Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat in monthly installs, receiving more than one billion downloads (Rocque). Now, TikTok has transcended the functionality of its predecessors. While lip-syncing to pre-recorded audios is still a popular activity on TikTok, creators now use the app to share original spoken, written, and audiovisual content for various genres.

One consideration ORCs like Epic Reads had to make when moving to TikTok was the uniqueness of its algorithm. Except for YouTube, social media platforms use a content-filtering algorithm to determine what content is shown on their users' personal feeds. Content-filtering algorithms account for the types of content users have engaged with in the past to recommend content and creators that might match users' interests. TikTok, however, like YouTube, uses a form of collaborative filtering. With a collaborative filter, TikTok uses the similarities between its users and the content they engage with simultaneously to provide them with similar recommendations. When a TikTok user visits its homepage, otherwise known as its "For You Page" (FYP), the system recommends new content based on the similarity between this content,

videos the user has liked in the past, and content that users similar to the targeted user have liked. Content-based filtering does not factor the interests of similar users into its recommendations but focuses purely on similarity to content the user has engaged with in the past (“Collaborative filtering”).

In June 2020, TikTok publicly shared the basic details of the specific system it uses to recommend videos to its users in an effort to be more transparent amid security concerns regarding the company’s Chinese ownership. When a TikTok user, or “creator,” uploads a video, the app’s algorithm shows it to a group of other users who are likely to engage with it on their FYPs, no matter whether or not they follow the creator of the video. The “Following” page is the app’s home for the videos posted by the creators a user follows. If members of that experimental group engage with the video by liking it, sharing it, or just watching the entire video, the algorithm then shows that video to a larger group of users. If that group responds favorably to the video by engaging with it similarly, the algorithm shows the video to an even larger group. This process continues until the video achieves virality or enters dormancy (Sung).

According to Jactionary, the book community on TikTok is called “BookTok.” Readers use this community to share videos about the books they are interested in, while specialty creators and BookTok influencers share reading-centered content to build followings they can potentially monetize in the future. Though the complexities of TikTok’s algorithm can make it difficult for both individual BookTok creators and ORCs like Epic Reads to effectively build a following for themselves, it is possible.

Epic Reads on TikTok

Epic Reads posted its first TikTok on January 3, 2020. Since then, it has posted almost 500 TikToks, gathering approximately 1.5 million likes across all its posts. Unlike its other

social media accounts, the tagline for its TikTok account is short, does not explicitly describe its community, and does not address its community members. Instead, its TikTok account description falls more on the comedic side: “I like big books and I cannot lie,” in reference to an infamous song by Sir Mix-a-Lot. This effectively sets a more casual tone for its TikTok account compared to its other social media presences.

1. Number of followers

As of September 30, 2022, Epic Reads’s TikTok account had approximately 68,300 subscribers.

2. Average number of posts per day

Epic Reads’s posting schedule on TikTok is much more irregular than on its other social media accounts. In September 2022, the ORC posted once every 1-7 days, with the waiting times between posts having no distinct pattern. It posted 11 TikToks total for the month.

3. Types of posts made

Once again, similar to its other social media presences, Epic Reads’s TikTok account consists of videos that blur the lines between promotional and recreational content. Its only directly promotional content is a video that seems to have been recreational in intent. The video shows the book *Counting Down With You* by Tashie Bhuiyan to the camera (see fig. 13). The audio comes from a video of a woman speaking to her cat as she tells him, “There are gonna be times when I have a snack, and



Fig. 13. Epic Reads [[@epic_reads](https://www.tiktok.com/@epic_reads)]. “Shh. Just let me have this....” *TikTok*, 19 Sept. 2022, www.tiktok.com/@epic_reads/video/7145189852483505450?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=6992730767156823

557

I'm not going to share it with you.” Though the video attempts to be recreational by using an entertaining audio, the audio loses its meaning when removed from its feline context. Thus, due to the misused audio track placed in the background, the focus is more on the featured book than the audio meme Epic Reads tried to employ, making the video feel more promotional than recreational. Still, one could argue that the post still counts as recreational content due to the ORC’s apparent intent behind it by following the pattern it set for its recreational memetic social media content.

Besides that accidentally promotional post, every TikTok Epic Reads made in September 2022 was recreational. These videos included listicles in video format, memes specific to TikTok used to promote particular books, memes about general bookish behavior, book giveaways, and HarperCollins YA author features. Though each video centered on bringing specific books to viewers’ attention, each one fit the mold of recreational content by incorporating an additional and nonpromotional element. The memetic videos often used memes originating from TikTok to connect to the ORCs members. For example, a video posted on September 21, 2022, utilized a meme featuring the song “Lions, Tigers, and Bears” by Jazmine Sullivan (see fig. 14). The meme uses the line, “I’m not scared of lions and tigers and bears, but I’m scared of...” and users fill in the blank. Epic Reads filled it with “running out of books.”



Fig. 14. Epic Reads [[@epic_reads](https://www.tiktok.com/@epic_reads/video/7145848770045955370?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=6992730767156823)]. “Terrified, actually....” *TikTok*, 21 Sept. 2022, www.tiktok.com/@epic_reads/video/7145848770045955370?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=6992730767156823 557.

Multiple HarperCollins YA titles are shown in the video, but the recognizable audio meme makes the video more recreational than promotional.

A similar effect takes place with the account's author features. In September, Epic Reads created two TikToks featuring the authors of anticipated HarperCollins YA releases: Tiffany D. Jackson for her horror novel *The Weight of Blood* and Adam Silvera for his *The First to Die at the End* (see fig. 15). Though both videos present physical copies of the books to the camera and begin by introducing them and their release dates, each video quickly shifts to a more recreational tone. Silvera's video takes on a casual tone as he explains how he came up with the plot behind his novel, while Jackson's turns personal as she reveals a list of horror movies she suggests readers watch before reading her book.

Thus, viewers and community members do not feel they are being advertised to. Instead, they feel like they are being given an exclusive glimpse into the thoughts of their favorite authors. A personal connection between the ORC and its community members is established through these videos as the ORC once again enacts the practice of selling without selling through its authors. Though viewers (who were not already planning to purchase these titles) may feel inclined to buy these books after watching these author features, they will not do so because they felt pressured to

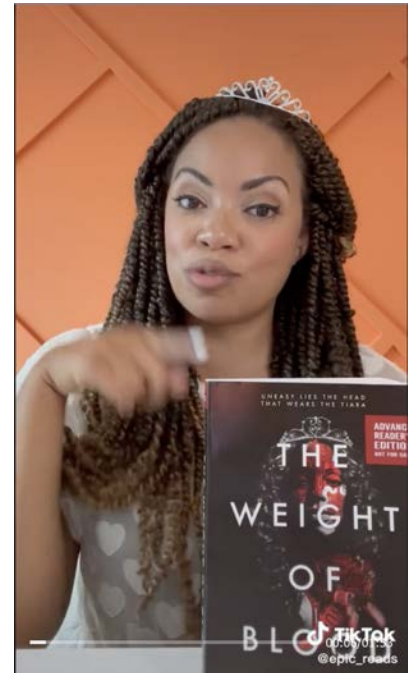


Fig. 15. Epic Reads
[@epic_reads]. “The wait
is almost over....” *TikTok*,
5 Sept. 2022,
[www.tiktok.com/@epic_re
ads/video/71399814140528
42798?is_from_webapp=1
&sender_device=pc&web_
id=6992730767156823557](https://www.tiktok.com/@epic_reads/video/7139981414052842798?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=6992730767156823557).

through direct advertising. Instead, they will buy the books because this recreational content effectively engaged them.

4. How it uses unique platform features

TikTok itself is a unique platform. While other platforms allow their users to connect with each other by sharing short text or image-based posts, TikTok focuses almost exclusively on video content. Though YouTube also focuses on video content, its emphasis on long-form videos that allow for advertising opportunities differentiates it from TikTok. The only social media platform that closely resembled TikTok was Vine, the short-form video-sharing platform shut down in 2016. As a result of TikTok's distinctiveness as a platform, almost everything Epic Reads does on TikTok takes advantage of the platform's unique features. Epic Reads uses prerecorded TikTok audios in almost every video it posts to keep up with and take advantage of viral audio memes. The ORC expects viewers to recognize these audios in their memetic exigencies, making them feel more compelled to engage with the posts. Though Instagram does something similar now with their Reels, TikTok originated this function.

Epic Reads also uses video editing effects unique to TikTok to make its videos more visually engaging. Particularly, Epic Reads likes to use a visual effect that overlays a video with a field of sparkling pink glitter (see fig. 16). It used the effect

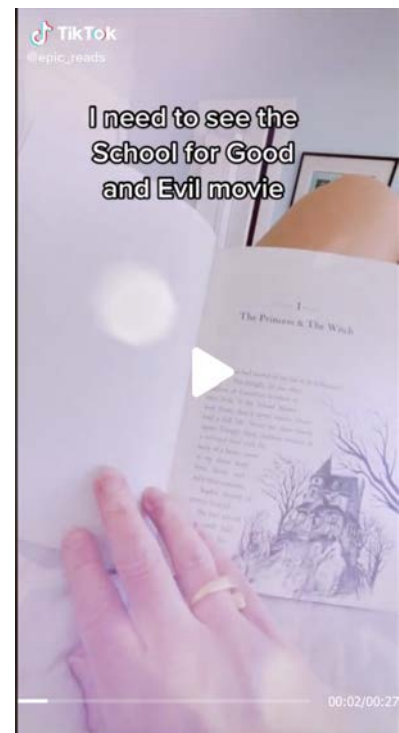


Fig. 16. Epic Reads [[@epic_reads](https://www.tiktok.com/@epic_reads)]. “hmmmm I think this is a sign....” *TikTok*, 28 Sept. 2022, www.tiktok.com/@epic_reads/video/7148456922063064362?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc&web_id=6992730767156823

557.

twice in September, applying it to a listicle and a video portraying a portal into a specific book's fantasy world. Epic Reads often uses it to add airs of fantasy and gaiety to videos that would either be dull or deficit in meaning without it. Though the effect is simple, it adds some visual interest to the video. However, there are other visual effects Epic Reads could use to diversify its content. Its repeated use of the same effect is another sign of its amateur status on the application and perhaps a further reason for the minimal engagement its TikTok content receives.

5. Community member/follower responses

On TikTok, member engagement is measured in the forms of likes, comments, and, unlike Twitter and Instagram but similar to YouTube, views. However, TikTok views function slightly differently from other platforms. Views per video on TikTok vary based on video content and the level of algorithmic exposure the video gets to both the ORCs' followers' and general TikTok users' FYPs. Thus, while Epic Reads's other social media accounts are most likely to be engaged with exclusively by the community members that follow it, its engagement on TikTok may result from a myriad of non-member TikTok users.

However, Epic Reads is still relatively new to TikTok. While it has had 5-10 years to build its community presences on other social media platforms, it only joined TikTok two years ago. As a result, its community engagement on the platform is still minimal. It has accumulated an impressive amount of likes over the past two years, but member engagement on individual videos is minimal. Additionally, while there is a distinct pattern to its posting schedules and memetic communications on its other social media accounts, its posts on TikTok are inconsistent and memetically shallow. It posts with no regularity, and its videos are rather basic in terms of creativity. Still, I expect that its community will improve as it gains more experience with the platform.

Epic Reads and Book Twitter

Book Twitter – Platform Background and Definition

Rounding out its social media presence, Epic Reads has cultivated a significant following for itself on Twitter. Twitter is an online microblogging social media platform. While it was previously infamous for its 140-character limit on its posts, called “tweets,” it recently expanded its limit to 280 characters. Twitter’s founder, Jack Dorsey, sent the first tweet on the platform on March 21, 2006. However, the complete platform was not officially published until July 2006. Unlike other social media networks like Facebook and Instagram, which are used for connections with acquaintances online, Twitter became a prime platform for the dissemination of information to the general public. Through other users and Twitter’s “News” tab, users can get up-to-the-minute updates on everything from breaking world news to pop culture minutiae (Editors).

Twitter users can attach up to four images or one video to each post. They can interact with other users in the usual ways, including by liking and commenting on their posts and following their accounts. They can also “retweet” another user’s post, which is a way of reposting that tweet to their own account and sharing it with other users. Users can also

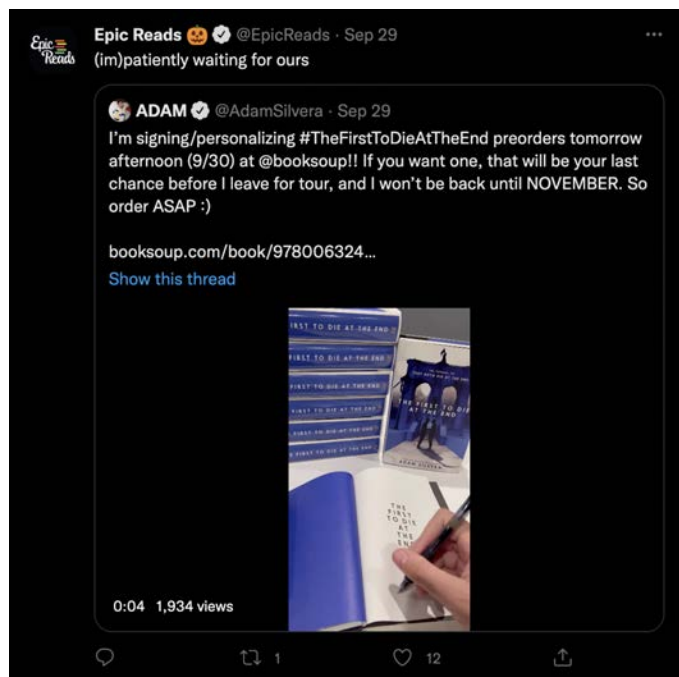


Fig. 17. Epic Reads [@EpicReads].
“(im)patiently waiting for ours.” *Twitter*, 29
Sept. 2022, 12:58 p.m.,
<https://twitter.com/EpicReads/status/1575530396552339456>.

“quote” another’s tweet, which allows them to retweet and comment on a post at the same time, making their comment visible above the retweeted post and outside the comment section (see fig. 17).

Though Jactionary does not define a book community present on Twitter in their article, that does not mean that one does not exist. While being somewhat more ambiguous due to the massive size and complexity of Twitter as a social media platform, a somewhat informal online reading community called “BookTwitter” is present. Following the template of Jactionary’s definitions, we can define BookTwitter as the book community present on Twitter. However, unlike such communities on other social media platforms, BookTwitter is not able to make itself distinguishable through its platform’s capabilities. Twitter is somewhat of a catch-all social media platform; other than its short character limit, it does not have a distinct kind of posting style. While Instagram relies on visuals and YouTube and TikTok focus on videos, Twitter users can and do post both kinds of content on their accounts. Thus, BookTwitter does not have much of a unique identity beyond its focus on literature.

Epic Reads on Twitter

Epic Reads joined Twitter in September 2010. Its current Twitter profile tagline is the same as that for its Instagram account: “We volunteer as tribute to be the YA community of your dreams.” Once again, this is a reference to the massively popular YA series *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. However, that series began in 2012, two years after Epic Reads joined Twitter, so I must assume it used a different tagline prior to the books’ publishing and subsequent popularity. Unfortunately, the Wayback Machine offers no data about Epic Reads’s Twitter presence before 2013, so the prior tagline remains unknown.

1. Number of followers

As of the end of September 2022, Epic Reads’s Twitter account had approximately 211,300 followers.

2. Average number of posts per day

For its original tweets, Epic Reads posts 1-3 times per day. It also frequently retweets itself and certain HarperCollins YA authors. However, retweets are not timestamped, so there is no way to know for certain when they were completed. As retweets are generally reactions to other users’ posts, though, it makes sense that they would be more sporadic and opportunity-based in their occurrence.

3. Types of posts made

Suiting the complexity of the platform’s identity, Epic Reads posts a wide variety of recreational and promotional content to its Twitter account. Its promotional tweets primarily consist of advertisements and release date notifications for upcoming books and book-related projects, such as film and television adaptations of HarperCollins YA novels. It may also advertise specific books by quoting or retweeting tweets of HarperCollins YA authors promoting its own books. For example, it retweeted a tweet posted by author Lygia Day Peñaflo celebrating and advertising the release of her novel *Creep* (see fig. 18).



Fig. 18. Lygia Day Peñaflo
[[@lygiaday](#)]. “CREEP: A LOVE
STORY...” *Twitter*, 27 Sept.
2022, 12:55 p.m.,
[twitter.com/lygiaday/status/15748
04843218276357](https://twitter.com/lygiaday/status/1574804843218276357).

However, ORC account and author interactions are not always promotional. Epic Reads also replies to and quotes casual tweets made by HarperCollins YA authors (see fig. 17). In these non-advertising and recreational interactions, Epic Reads establishes a conversational and personable relationship with its authors while crafting an approachable persona for its members. In these interactions, it appears less like a corporate entity and more like a fellow BookTwitter individual. Epic Reads then further develops this personality by occasionally posting casual, non-memetic tweets that sound as if they came from an average person’s account (see fig. 19). These tweets are still book-related, but they do not reference any specific current meme. Still, they add substance and personality to the account, giving it a realistic sense of life that Epic Reads’s other social media accounts cannot convey to the same extent.

Other recreational tweets posted to Epic Reads’s Twitter include links to articles, blog posts, and other recreational content featured on the Epic Reads website, such as listicles and quizzes. Recreational tweets also include several categories of memes. Epic Reads frequently posts memes that it later screenshots and posts to its Instagram or that it posts to Instagram outside of a tweet framework. It also posts some original memes exclusively on Twitter. Finally,



Fig. 19. Epic Reads [@EpicReads]. “wild how there are people out there....”
Twitter, 12 Sept. 2022, 12:09 p.m.,
twitter.com/EpicReads/status/1569357517704105985.

unlike on its other social media accounts, Epic Reads frequently uses memes and pop culture news that was not posted by it originally but that it reposts in a book-related and memetic context. For example, on September 22, 2022, it quoted a tweet from the account @abbotnocontext, which posts screenshots of the incredibly popular television series *Abbott Elementary* with no apparent reason (see fig. 20). By quoting the tweet with “me when a book ends on a cliffhanger,” Epic Reads takes advantage of the general popularity of the television show to memetically engage with its members, thereby building a stronger connection with them by catering to their current interests.



Fig. 20. Epic Reads [@EpicReads].
“me when....” *Twitter*, 22 Sept. 2022,
12:37 p.m.,
twitter.com/EpicReads/status/1572988343033466881.

Another unique feature of Epic Reads’s Twitter presence is its inclusion of important resources in its posts. Unlike on its other social media platforms, Epic Reads posted multiple times in September 2022 about it being classified as “Banned Book Month.” Though it briefly mentioned issues such as Banned Book Month on other platforms, it is Twitter’s posting flexibility that allows it to speak about these subjects more effectively on social media. Book banning is a critical topic within the publishing industry and reading community at the moment, as schools, districts, and local and state governments across the country unfairly ban books on irrational bases (Friedman). Epic Reads not just making a statement against the act of book banning but providing its members with the resources necessary to fight back against the bans is

critical. As the product of a major publishing corporation and as an ORC with an impressive audience, it has the power and the platform necessary to spread these important messages.

4. How it uses unique platform features

Twitter offers few unique features for brands like Epic Reads to use to its advantage. The platform does allow users to “pin” a tweet to the top of their profile to emphasize or highlight it. At the end of September, Epic Reads’s pinned tweet was a link to a listicle of October HarperCollins YA book releases on the ORC’s website. By pinning this tweet, Epic Reads ensures that it remains at the top of its profile no matter what else it posts, making it the first tweet other users see when they visit the page.

Epic Reads also quotes other users’ tweets, which is a feature unique to Twitter. As I previously explained, quoting tweets is a combination of sharing and replying to another’s post. Users are able to reply to the post while simultaneously sharing both the original post and their comment on it with their followers. Doing so adds more context to the act of sharing than retweeting alone and more exposure than simply commenting. Quoting also allows Epic Reads to utilize posts made by non-book-related pop culture accounts for bookish memetic communication, as seen in Figure 20.

5. Community member/follower responses

Categories of community member engagement on Twitter are similar to those on other social media platforms, including likes and comments along with the more unique interactions of retweeting and quoting the ORCs’ tweets. For this study, I only accounted for member engagement with and responses to original tweets made by the Epic Reads Twitter account. There were some tweets on the ORC’s profile that appeared to receive significant engagement numbers, but they were retweets of other accounts. It was impossible to tell which responses

came from Epic Reads’s audience and which came from the other user’s own followers. Therefore, I excluded such tweets from this study.

Despite the increased amount and variety of content on Twitter, Epic Reads receives less engagement there than on its other social media accounts. Likes range from less than ten to almost eight hundred per post, while retweets range from less than ten to almost two hundred. Additionally, Epic Reads’s Twitter generally receives no replies to its tweets. For the month of September 2022, the most replies Epic Reads received on a post was five. Surprisingly, this most-replied-to tweet was not one of its more memetic posts but was the pinned tweet linking users to the upcoming releases listicle.

Still, memetic content generally received more member interaction across all engagement categories. Epic Reads’s most popular post in September 2022 was a variation of a meme featuring stick figures who appear prepared to fight each other (fig. 21).

The meme itself is used to convey two objects, thoughts, or other entities that conflict with one another. In this case, the two conflicting entities are the ORC mouthpiece’s TBR (to-be-

read list) and their bookstore wishlist. Though the tweet only received two replies (one of which is private), it received six quoted tweets, 186 retweets, and 783 likes. Judging by replies alone would put this tweet in the middle of the pack statistic-wise, but accounting for cumulative



Fig. 21. Epic Reads [@EpicReads]. “my TBR....” *Twitter*, 27 Sept. 2022, 11:26 a.m., twitter.com/EpicReads/status/1574782414106206208.

engagement shows the relative effectiveness of Epic Reads's memetic content. its other memetic tweets are received similarly.

HarperCollins on Social Media

Epic Reads's parent company, HarperCollins, does have a presence across most major social media platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. However, it uses its social media accounts somewhat differently than its ORC does, relying more on promotional materials than recreational. Still, the effects of this contrast are complicated due to HarperCollins's recent attempts to branch into recreational engagement of their consumer audiences. This section briefly analyzes HarperCollins's social media presences across the same platforms as Epic Reads, utilizing the same criteria I set at the beginning of this chapter. In doing so, I will reveal the similarities and differences between the two brands social media strategies, along with the consequences of these characteristics.

HarperCollins on Instagram

1. Number of followers

At the end of September 2022, HarperCollins had approximately 502,000 followers on Instagram.

2. Average number of posts per day

In September 2022, HarperCollins made 1-2 posts to Instagram every 1-2 days, establishing a fairly regular posting schedule.

3. Types of posts made

Unlike Epic Reads, HarperCollins’s Instagram posts mostly consist of promotional content. It primarily posts visually pleasing images of books published by HarperCollins. These books vary across all genres and age categories. They are generally posted because it is the books’ release day, they are part of a giveaway contest, or they relate to some significant or pop culture-related calendar event. For example, HarperCollins posted an image of *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien on “Hobbit Day” on September 22, 2022 (see fig. 22). These posts mainly focus on directly promoting specific HarperCollins titles, and they generally offer little commentary beyond the posts’ context, such as general information about the book or the specific calendar event.



Fig. 22. HarperCollins [@harpercollins].

“In a hole in the ground...” *Instagram*, 22 Sept. 2022, www.instagram.com/p/Ci0J76cs_0E/.

However, HarperCollins does post some recreational content to its Instagram account. For example, it currently has a themed listicle pinned to the top of its Instagram profile recommending romances based on followers’ fall coffee orders. Additionally, one of its most significant recreational undertakings for September 2022 was when author Susan Wigg took over the account to promote her book *Sugar and Salt*. She was given access to the account and allowed to make several posts over a single day on HarperCollins’s behalf. Though the event was meant to promote her book, her posts mainly produced insights into her daily life as an author. Thus, the endeavor was more recreational than promotional.

However, HarperCollins does seem to be venturing into memetic communication on its Instagram account. On September 26, 2022, it posted a video it also posted to its TikTok account (see fig. 23). It used an audio meme popular at the time, featuring a yearning voice saying, “I want to go to there.” Internet users across multiple social media platforms have been using the audio meme to convey desires to visit specific fictional and nonfictional locales. In this case, the HarperCollins staff member in the video is expressing the desire to go to a picturesque bookstore. Though simple, the meme was effective, as HarperCollins received almost 1,300 likes and twelve comments engaging with the post.

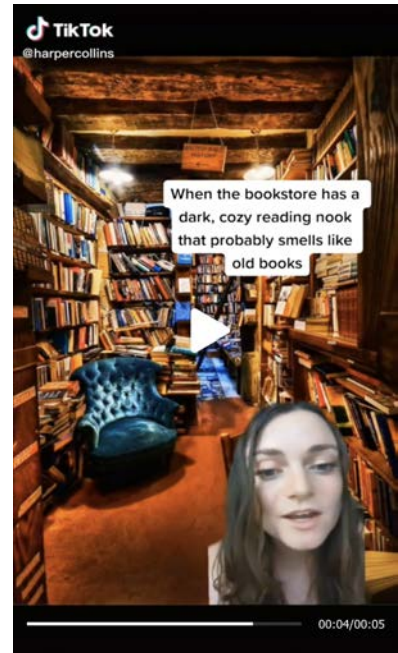


Fig. 23. HarperCollins
 [@harpercollins].
 “Bookstores have....”
Instagram, 26 Sept. 2022,
www.instagram.com/p/Ci-ZEsbPSXg/.

HarperCollins also occasionally posts non-memetic but non-promotional recreational materials. These posts specifically encourage follower engagement by asking them questions about whatever it is posting about. For example, on September 25, 2022, HarperCollins posted an image from the Jane Austen Festival in Bath (see fig. 24). In the caption, it asked its followers, “Have you ever participated in an event like this?” Again, the tactic was simple but



Fig. 24. HarperCollins [@harpercollins]. “Believe it or not....” *Instagram*, 25 Sep. 2022,
www.instagram.com/p/Ci8VsYhAJNm/.

effective. This post received over 5,200 likes and sixty-one comments, making it one of its most popular Instagram posts for the month.

4. How it uses unique platform features

HarperCollins currently has three posts pinned to the top of its Instagram profile. It also occasionally posts Reels, which typically consist of author interviews, listicles in video format, and static images with moving visual effects. Recorded versions of its Instagram Lives can also be found here, which is another feature it utilizes.

5. Community member/follower responses

HarperCollins’s followers engage with its posts just as Epic Reads’s members do. They like and comment on posts and share them on other platforms, their Instagram stories, and other digital locations. While there is no way to see the number of shares per post from an outside perspective, likes and comments are visible. HarperCollins’s comments on each post in September 2022 ranged from 1-198 comments. It received the most comments on a sweepstakes post giving away a complete set of new special editions of classic novels, where comments were used as entries into the contest (see fig. 25). Likes per post for the month ranged from 22-5,203. Two posts tied for the lowest likes at 265 likes per post; interestingly, both posts announced author takeovers of the account. The highest number of likes was received by HarperCollins’s post about the Jane Austen Festival (see fig. 24).



Fig. 25. HarperCollins [@harpercollins]. “The much anticipated annual series....”
Instagram, 15 Sep. 2022,
www.instagram.com/p/CiilpVlrTME/.

HarperCollins on YouTube

The US division of HarperCollins does not have a YouTube channel. HarperCollins UK, Harper Kids, and HarperCollins Children's Books do have channels, but they were not included in this study.

HarperCollins on TikTok

HarperCollins joined TikTok in February 2020. Between then and the end of September 2022, it made thirty-seven posts.

1. Number of followers

As of the end of September 2022, HarperCollins's TikTok account had 4678 followers. This is the lowest follower count of all its social media presences.

2. Average number of posts per day

HarperCollins makes very few posts to its TikTok account. It either posts once or not at all each week. The account made three posts for the month of September 2022.

3. Types of posts made

HarperCollins posts a decent number of memes and recreational content in comparison to promotional content on its TikTok account, but it does not post very often. In September, it made two recreational posts and one promotional post. The two recreational posts were the bookstore meme simultaneously posted to its Instagram (see fig. 23) and a post about National Coffee Day. The promotional post is a direct advertisement for its imprint's, Harper Perennial, release of its 2022 limited edition Olive Editions, which are affordable and attractive paperback releases of classic novels.

4. How it uses unique platform features

HarperCollins uses TikTok's features similarly to Epic Reads. When it does post memetic content, it uses recognizable TikTok audios to keep up with and take advantage of currently viral memes. It also occasionally uses video effects unique to TikTok to make its posts more visually interesting.

5. Community member/follower responses

Follower engagement is minimal on HarperCollins's TikTok account. By the end of September 2022, it had not received more than one thousand views on any of its videos for the month. Additionally, because the account has posted so little over the past two years, one can take its cumulative posts into consideration. Out of its total posts, the videos that received the most engagement were both about a romance novel e-book sale in February 2022, receiving approximately 298,700 and 418,900 views, respectively.

HarperCollins on Twitter

HarperCollins joined Twitter in June 2009.

1. Number of followers

At the end of September 2022, HarperCollins's Twitter account had one million followers. Not only is this a distinct difference from Epic Reads's Twitter following, it is also a significant increase in comparison to HarperCollins's other social media accounts.

2. Average number of posts per day

HarperCollins makes about ten posts to its account per day. These posts mostly consist of retweets from other HarperCollins entities and imprints – including Epic Reads.

3. Types of posts made

HarperCollins's Twitter account primarily retweets or quotes posts from other HarperCollins imprints and related accounts. Such accounts include Harper Kids, its children's

imprint, and Harper Audio, its audiobook publishing division. HarperCollins will also occasionally share Epic Reads's tweets. However, unlike Epic Reads, it posts very little original content. This could be due to the immense size of the HarperCollins company, hence its network of specialized social media accounts.

Still, HarperCollins does post some original content to its Twitter account. These posts are generally promotional, though, consisting of direct promotions of book sales, upcoming or new releases, reviews of featured HarperCollins books, and more. If the HarperCollins account does tweet original content, it is not often content it published itself. Any blog articles, listicles, and interviews it features on its Twitter profile are featured through retweets from outside sources.

4. How it uses unique platform features

While HarperCollins does quote its imprints and subdivisions occasionally, it does not appear to use any of Twitter's other unique platform features. For example, unlike Epic Reads's Twitter account, HarperCollins does not pin a tweet to the top of its profile to highlight certain content.

5. Community member/follower responses

Despite HarperCollins's impressive number of Twitter followers, follower engagement with its content is minimal. At the end of September 2022, there were no replies on any original posts it made. The only original tweets that received replies were those that contained links to recreational content, like an article or blog post, from an outside source. Thus, the content that interested the followers enough to reply was not HarperCollins's own. Furthermore, it does not make posts like that very often.

Additionally, while it sometimes looks as if HarperCollins's posts have a multitude of replies and other forms of engagement, it is really because it is retweeting a post with those numbers. For example, when HarperCollins retweeted a post made by actor Zachary Levi about a book signing for his memoir, it and its many replies, retweets, and likes appeared on its profile (see fig. 26). While it is impossible to tell how much of that engagement resulted from HarperCollins's retweet, based on previous evidence, one can assume that HarperCollins's contribution was minimal.

HarperCollins as an ORC: Why Not?

Though HarperCollins is beginning to post recreational content similar to that of its ORC, Epic Reads, and even has more followers than Epic Reads in some instances, its accounts are consistently receiving less follower engagement. Based on my analysis, I believe this issue can be attributed to a few aspects of HarperCollins's social media and general online behavior.

First, HarperCollins is not posting enough original or memetic content to its social media accounts. It makes very few original posts across its social media accounts. On Twitter, it relies primarily on retweets from its authors and other HarperCollins entities, such as Harper Kids and Harper Audio. What few original tweets it does make are direct promotions of upcoming book releases, which are proven to be far less engaging than recreational content. Meanwhile, though

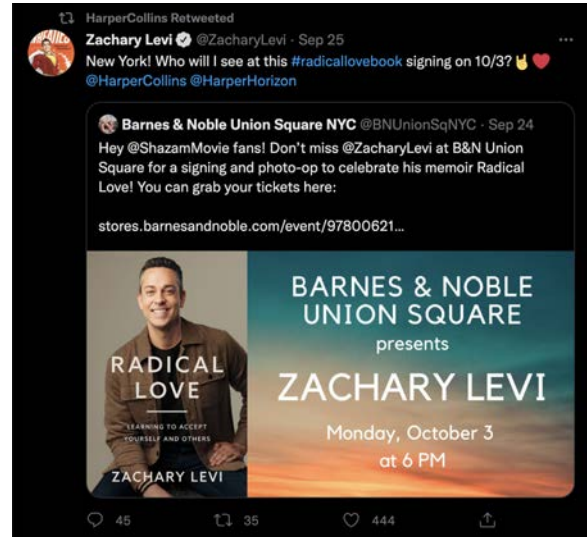


Fig. 26. @ZacharyLevi. “New York....”
Twitter, 25 Sep. 2022, 1:28 p.m.,
twitter.com/ZacharyLevi/status/1574088414168612865.

HarperCollins does post a significant amount of original content to its Instagram account, it makes very few recreational or memetic posts. Though its posts are visually appealing and occasionally engage followers in conversations relative to the subject matter, this engagement is as inconsistent as HarperCollins's recreational posts. HarperCollins also posts less than five times a month to TikTok despite how many engagement opportunities the growing platform offers. As a result, HarperCollins creates a corporate and impersonal image of itself online. While this image might be useful for professionalism's sake, it is not valuable for increasing follower engagement online.

HarperCollins is also not engaging fully with all the potentially useful social media platforms it could be. The starkest example of this is the publishing company's lack of a YouTube channel. YouTube's emphasis on longform content provides ample opportunity for engagement with the consumer audience. HarperCollins could do this by creating personable recreational content for the platform, such as the author features and book-related mini-series Epic Reads creates for their own channel. By not doing so, Harper Collins is limiting its online reach and its potential for community creation.

Finally, though Harper Collins is active on several social media platforms, it has no website to unify its online presence. Epic Reads and every other ORC has a website that acts as a home base. These websites are the center of their online networks, and they ground their digital presence. They aggregate their online content into a single source, one that solidifies their identity and acts as a point of reference for community members. Though HarperCollins has a website, as I described in Chapter 1, it has almost nothing to do with community development and engagement. Instead, it focuses almost exclusively on directly promoting HarperCollins titles. The few articles that users could engage with are pushed to the bottom of the website and

provide so little material to engage with outside the advertisement that they cannot be considered recreational content. As such, HarperCollins consumers, and any consumer outside the YAL-focused ORC I have established throughout this thesis, have no space to form a unified community in.

However, just because such a space does not exist yet, that does not mean that it cannot be created. In the final chapter of my thesis, I will propose what an ORC for the adult literature readership might look like. Using the knowledge gained from my analyses, I will describe how an ORC can develop and sustain itself outside the YAL sect of the book publishing industry, filling in the gaps in publishing companies like HarperCollins's online presences that prevent them from accomplishing this task. By the end of this final chapter and, therefore, this thesis, I intend to explain that an ORC outside of YAL is not only possible but beneficial, both to the publishing community and to readers themselves.

Chapter 4: Proposing the Next Generation of ORCs

Introduction

The culmination of my work in this thesis is the proposal of an ORC for a new literary audience outside YAL – adult literature. Due to adults’ significant presence on the Internet in general and within more targeted environments, such as the informal virtual discourse communities I discuss in Chapter 3, they have distinct potential as an audience for a new generation of ORCs. Additionally, while there is a comparative amount of interest between adult literature and middle-grade or children’s literature, adults have the digital knowledge and agency necessary to participate in such an online space that children typically lack. Thus, not only do I believe that it is possible to establish an ORC within adult literature, but I argue that there are clear benefits to such an endeavor.

Before I reach my proposal for an adult literature-centered ORC, I first detail my final definition of an ORC that I have developed throughout my analyses in this thesis. After providing that definition, I outline general characteristics necessary for an ORC’s success that I discovered through my analyses and that must be present within the new ORC I propose. Next, I argue in favor of the viability of an ORC focused on adult literature with evidence obtained through my general observations of adult readers and brand entities online. Following this section, I propose what an adult literature-centered ORC would look like using the same criteria I used for the comparative website analysis I conducted in Chapter 1. I also add an additional criterion to describe what this new ORC’s social media strategy would look like. I end this chapter with a description of the potential benefits of a successful adult ORC, looking toward the future of both ORCs and marketing strategies of the wider book publishing industry.

Final Definition of an ORC

Through the various and multi-layered comparative rhetorical analyses I have undertaken throughout this thesis, I have come to a final definition of an ORC. I define an “online reader community,” or ORC, as an interactive, multimedia, and multi-platform online discourse community consisting of and sustained by readers that share a similar interest in a specific literary genre or category. This definition encompasses ORCs’ website activities and engages with their presence across multiple other platforms – namely, social media.

Furthermore, my analyses in Chapters 2 and 3 have led me to expand upon the definition of ORCs I set in Chapter 1. The expansion is minimal; I merely added the consideration that ORCs are “sustained by” their participating members. As I have explained in previous chapters, ORCs’ behaviors are determined by their members. From the community personalities they construct to the types of content they post, ORCs must acknowledge and incorporate members’ current interests and digital knowledge to effectively encourage engagement with community content. Though ORCs could post content without engaging with member interests and trends made viral by their continued participation in them, they would not be as effective in establishing brand identity or long-term community engagement. Thus, ORCs depend on their prosumer members for both content ideas and the resulting engagement for sustenance, and the consideration must be added to ORCs’ definition.

Necessary Characteristics for an ORC’s Success

For an ORC to be successful and obtain sustained member engagement, specific characteristics must be in place. I determined these characteristics through the comparative rhetorical analyses undertaken in Chapters 1 and 3 of my thesis, as I attempted to understand the

difference between ORCs and general publishers on their home websites and their social media profiles.

Memetic communication and recreational content

First, ORCs must utilize memetic communication and recreational content across the platforms they are present on. Once again, memetic communication can be used by ORCs to further their communications within and across the websites and media platforms of their choice by using viral Internet memes in said communications (Kien 11). Recreational content, meanwhile, is content ORCs can post that does not directly advertise or encourage the purchase of any of their parent publishing company's titles. This content can include quizzes, articles, games, blog posts, and videos. These materials can engage in content marketing and indirectly promote a company's books by theming the content around them or can simply focus on general bookish behavior. In ORCs, memetic communication can be used to create recreational content and recreational content can include memetic communication.

Both memetic communication and recreational content are essential for an ORC to establish a personable image. The ability to be in touch with an audience's interests and utilize them effectively in brand communications shows the formal ORC's dedication to creating positive, entertaining, and interactive experiences for members. While informal ORCs may contain more negative interactions or user experiences due to a lack of corporate sponsorship and operation, an ORC created and maintained by a publishing company is more capable of establishing a primarily positive online community environment for its members. When an ORC dedicates a significant amount of its communications to memetic and recreational content, members are able to engage with content that they are interested in. The more recreational and

memetic content an ORC posts, the more material there is for members to engage with, resulting in increased potential for long-term member interactions and retention.

Furthermore, these types of content are essential to ORCs' successful use of content marketing and indirect book promotion in community spaces. By indirectly advertising the parent publishing company's featured titles through content whose primary purpose is to entertain and engage consumer members, ORCs build a more trustworthy image of themselves for their memberships. Members do not feel manipulated by ORCs into purchasing specific books with recreational content. Instead, they feel like a part of a community through the ORCs' creation of content explicitly centered on their interests. When ORCs provide content based on readers' favorite books and around general bookish culture, they feel like they are a part of something they can identify with. Without recreational or memetic content, that identification would not be possible.

Total engagement across major social media platforms

ORCs also need to take advantage of available popular social media platforms. If they are present on one, they must be present on them all. Through the unique kinds of content available on each social media platform, each platform targets a different audience on the Internet and allows for unique engagement opportunities for ORCs. For example, TikTok is useful for quick, short-form engagement like that involved in memetic communication and other light-hearted recreational video content. YouTube, however, is better for long-form recreational videos, such as author interviews and book hauls. Meanwhile, Twitter is better for more memetic communication and provides ample opportunities for brand-member and member-member interactions, while Instagram is useful for a combination of visual recreational materials and

inter-community communication. Thus, content posted to one platform may not be as successful on another platform.

Additionally, as I explained in Chapter 3, each of these four major social media platforms contains an informal virtual discourse community centered on literature. TikTok has BookTok, Instagram has Bookstagram, and so on. These communities are already well-established and often set the trends for currently popular books and book-related discussions on their respective social media platforms. To take full advantage of these communities' existence, though, an ORC needs to be present on all platforms containing them, especially as conversations between these informal discourse communities can overlap across platforms.

Central website as an online base

The final characteristic ORCs should possess to be effective, and what brands like Hachette that are getting close to becoming ORCs lack, is a central website or homepage that can act as a base of online operations. In terms of this website, I am referring to the ORC websites I analyzed in Chapter 1 of this thesis. These websites are critical to establishing a unified brand identity for an ORC. When a community is scattered across various profiles on different social media platforms without a distinct home base, it does not quite feel like a community. Instead, it feels like a network of distinct sub-communities with no way to communicate with each other across platforms. A home website would centralize and stabilize these brand and member communications. Additionally, such a space would act as an archive for past content, allowing members to engage with posted materials further into the future rather than it getting subsumed into the void of the brand's social media profile.

Finally, a central website would allow the ORC to develop its brand and voice by giving it space it has complete authority over. While an ORC can be constricted by the design and

interaction limitations of different social media platforms and their rules, it can control everything about its website. From how it is designed to the community interactions made possible through it, the ORC has complete control. This control would allow the ORC to develop its identity outside the constraints of social media. Additionally, it would help ORCs provide a space for members to further their identification with the community outside the influence of the wider social media sphere.

Viability of an Adult ORC

At the end of Chapter 1, I discussed how the success of ORCs could be due to their YAL-centered subject matter. I theorized YAL's primary audience's increased digital expertise, combined with the tendency to seek belonging that comes with these formative years, makes YAL an ideal environment for developing ORCs within. However, I believe an ORC created for other demographics and literary categories is possible. Furthermore, I find that an ORC designed for adult literature is not just possible but could be extremely successful.

One reason for this belief is the massive amount of conversations already taking place online surrounding adult literature. These discussions can be found across every social media platform's informal virtual discourse community, such as BookTok, Bookstagram, and BookTube. Unlike ORCs, these informal communities are not only for readers of YAL. While YAL has a fanbase within these environments, many readers in these communities engage in discussions and communications (both memetic and non-memetic) about various genres and topics related to adult literature.

For example, two of the most popular authors across these informal social media communities are Colleen Hoover and Emily Henry, two contemporary adult literature authors. Hoover's *It Ends With Us* and Emily Henry's *Beach Read* and *People We Meet on Vacation* both

achieved multi-platform virality in these communities in the last year, alongside other adult literature books from various genres. Trending adult literature books from other genres include fantasy novels such as Sarah J. Maas's *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series and *The Priory of the Orange Tree* by Samantha Shannon. Adult historical fiction is also popular within these communities, with *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* and *Daisy Jones and the Six*, both by Taylor Jenkins Reid, growing so popular that they are receiving film and television adaptations, respectively (Canter).

Therefore, individual users are already creating engaging digital content across social media platforms about the adult literature books they are interested in. If an adult ORC was made, it could capitalize on this interest to create a highly interactive community with effective engagement rates. Still, it would likely need to focus on genres within adult literature that are more likely to engage potential community members, such as speculative fiction and romance. However, I elaborate this further on in this proposal.

Furthermore, as these discussions in these communities show, social media users interested in books are already seeking connections with each other outside of YAL-centered ORCs. Not only are they reaching out to each other through those platform-specific informal virtual discourse communities, but they are also beginning to engage with each other with the help of ORCs' parent publishing companies. For example, Hachette's Twitter account is starting to receive increased engagement with their question-of-the-day style tweets. On October 14, Hachette posted a tweet asking its users at what age they began reading books. The tweet received seventy-four replies, which is far more engagement than the company typically receives on their more straightforward advertisement posts.

Hachette has also started engaging in strategies similar to the ORCs I discussed throughout this thesis. They are posting more recreational content and occasionally utilizing memetic communication on their social media profiles. Thus, they are beginning to engage more in content marketing rather than direct advertising through their social media accounts and even their website. These posts are receiving more engagement than their directly promotional content, motivating Hachette to continue this strategy. Additionally, because Hachette posts about books from all genres, the potential to establish an ORC outside of YAL is clear. Still, while the interest is there with Hachette, the company has yet to develop a space separate from its sales-focused website to unify this potential community.

Visualizing the Adult ORC

I am proposing the construction of an ORC centered on adult literature in the contemporary publishing industry. Utilizing the criteria I used to analyze YAL-centered ORCs in Chapter 1, I describe the possible design and content choices that could make for a successful ORC outside of YAL. I also added a new criterion to ensure this proposal encompasses ORCs' social media presences that I did not focus on in Chapter 1. Thus, the elements I use to describe an adult literature-centered ORC are as follows.

1. Logo and wordmark design
2. Homepage design
3. Website design
4. Website copy
5. Social media presence

Furthermore, the subject of an adult ORC must be defined beyond the community's proposed age demographic. YAL ORCs are only focused by that age demographic. They create a

mix of promotional and recreational content surrounding books from the wide spectrum of literary genres underneath the YAL category, from fiction to nonfiction. However, the adolescents that consist of YAL's target audience are more likely to engage with ORCs due to their increased presence online. To encourage engagement in an adult literature-centered ORC, it would be beneficial to focus the community on content surrounding the more recreational and entertaining genres that are already engaging social media users in those informal virtual discourse communities. Specifically, these genres will include adult fantasy, speculative fiction, and romance. These genres currently receive the most engagement online in spaces like Bookstagram, BookTok, and BookTube. Therefore, they will be most likely to draw in membership to a newly established adult literature ORC.

Logo and wordmark design

The wordmark should use a more handwriting-like typeface for its font. As I explain in Chapter 1, this type of font invokes a more casual and humanistic tone than one that resembles typed text. It is also more visually dynamic and thus helps develop the community's brand. The wordmark should also either include a colorful non-textual element that adds movement, such as Underlined's blue underline, or some sort of pictorial element to make the wordmark a logo. I would not recommend incorporating both, as doing so would overwhelm the text and make the wordmark too crowded.

As for potential names for the community, I have composed a list that incorporates bookish terminology that could be utilized.

Bound: The term refers to the process of binding hardcopy books. The name could also be used as part of a punny tagline about getting "bound up" in reading.

Literari: A play on the words “literary” and “literati,” which names persons interested in literature or the arts. Though the term is somewhat unconventional, it would help set the more mature tone needed for an ORC targeting adult readers. Additionally, while “Literati” would be a good name for the community, it is already taken by a website focused on developing book clubs for children.

Bookish: This is a popular term within the general reading community both online and off. It is one that adult readers will easily recognize and identify with, thereby making it easier to draw them into the community.

Homepage design

Like the community’s logo or wordmark, the homepage design should aim for minimalism with colorful elements and accents to draw visual attention. The adult ORC needs to strike a balance between the boldness of YAL-centered ORCs and the overly minimalistic designs of general publishing companies’ websites. YAL-centered ORCs tend to fill their homepages with patterned backgrounds and brightly colored graphics, while publishers’ websites consist of book covers on white backgrounds. The adult ORC could compromise by using a white background with engaging

visuals for their recreational content. It could draw inspiration for these visuals from the cover designs of currently popular adult fiction novels, matching the typical cover designs of the genre the content focuses on to the visual.



Fig. 1. Screenshot from “Adult Romance.” *Goodreads*, <https://www.goodreads.com/genres/adult-romance>.

For example, contemporary adult romance covers use bright colors with bold, often handwriting-like fonts and primarily hand-drawn, cartoonish, or graphic novel-like central figures (see fig. 1). Meanwhile, adult fantasy covers are typically more visually complex. They often utilize serif typeface fonts and busy, artistically detailed covers, sometimes in more muted colors with more defined color schemes (see fig. 2).

The adult ORC will also include links to their social media profiles on their homepage by featuring social media galleries and profile previews. YAL-centered ORCs such as NOVL do this to draw more attention to their multiplatform presence (see fig. 3).

Website design

Based on categories present on existing ORC websites, I propose that an adult ORC website be organized into six sections: “Books,” “Community,” “Blog,” “Fun,” “Videos,” and “Events.” Through these categories, the adult



Fig. 2. Screenshot from “Adult Fantasy.” *Goodreads*, <https://www.goodreads.com/genres/adult-fantasy>.

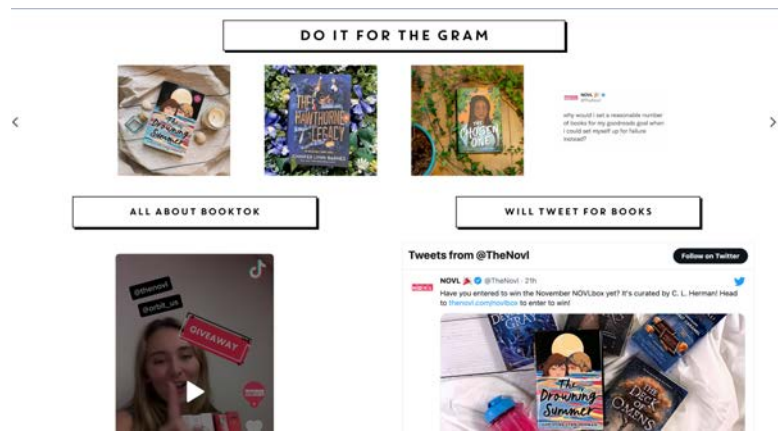


Fig. 3. Screenshot from *NOVL - Booked All Week*. <https://www.thenovl.com/>.

ORC could focus on indirectly promoting their featured titles while encouraging members' interaction with the community.

Books: This section will be a directory of all the ORC's adult titles published within the featured genres (fantasy, speculative fiction, and romance). As with other ORCs, members will not be able to purchase books directly from this website. Instead, when visitors select a particular book, they will be provided with a list of external vendors where the books are available for purchase, such as Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and the book's publisher's website.

Not selling books directly on the website is critical to ORCs' content marketing strategy and to establishing a trustworthy brand voice. Including a directory of featured adult titles on the website is appropriate and is a necessary part of such promotional strategies. Still, members should not be able to buy promoted books directly from their community. There needs to be this disconnect between the recreational and the commercial for the adult ORC to successfully establish relationships with its members.

Community: This section will focus on the social aspect of the adult ORC. Hovering one's mouse over this word on the homepage will release a drop-down menu featuring two additional pages – “Connect” and “Forum.” The “Connect” page will contain an overview of the ORC's social media presences with links to each one. The “Forum” page will locate the community's public online discussion forum, one similar to the one sponsored by the ORC Underlined. This space will still need to be moderated for inappropriate content or dangerous behavior, but it will offer a more targeted and localized space for continued community interaction than the complexities of social media can offer.

Blog: This section will be a home for all of the adult ORC's blog posts. Post topics will focus on a combination of promotional and recreational subjects, such as book cover reveals,

upcoming book releases, themed lists of book recommendations, book-themed quizzes, author interviews and features, and other topics related to reading and writing adult fiction.

Fun: This section will contain more of the adult ORC's specifically recreational content. It will link visitors to games and quizzes posted simultaneously to the ORC's blog. This section will also include any giveaways and free books sponsored by the ORC. Unlike the blog, no directly promotional content (e.g., book cover releases, articles detailing upcoming releases, etc.) will be featured in this section.

Videos: This webpage will contain a gallery of videos created by the adult ORC. While these videos will also be posted to the ORC's YouTube page, this page will act as a second method of access and video archive for website visitors. Like other sections of the ORC's website, this page will feature a mix of promotional and recreational videos, including book trailers for upcoming releases, author interviews, and more entertaining series about bookish fandom similar to Epic Reads's "Book Nerd Problems" videos.

Events: This section of the website will list any opportunities for the ORC's members to engage with the community's authors, brand representatives, and other members online and in person. Such opportunities will include featured authors' book tours, upcoming book festivals the community and its authors plan to attend, and any livestreamed events the community is hosting.

Website copy

Unlike YAL-centered ORCs, the adult ORC should not rely entirely on adolescent slang with their tone to set a more personable tone with their website copy. However, they should not go overboard on formality in their text either. The ORC should still use the text across their website to establish a personable, casual, and relatively conversational tone. Members and new

visitors to the site should feel like a person is talking to them through the content posted to the website, not a corporate brand.

The ORC could still utilize online linguistic trends to achieve this goal. Some adults who spend significant amounts of time on social media might be familiar with more consistently used and established online slang. Phrases such as “I can’t even,” another way of saying “I’m speechless,” and words like “epic,” which is used online to talk about anything huge or important, have been used on the Internet long enough to be made familiar to a wide range of audiences (Geikhman). The ORC could also use slang terms more popular with present adults when they were younger to connect with them through the nostalgia factor. However, such terms also should not be overused, as the younger end of the adult spectrum consists of those aged 18-21 years old. They are more likely to be familiar with more recent slang and might feel alienated by older terms. Emojis are typically universally accepted, though, and could be used to add a personal touch to the website’s copy.

Additional features

Like other ORCs, the adult ORC’s website will feature an abundance of additional recreational content, including themed lists of book recommendations based on elements of pop culture the target audience is familiar with (e.g., television shows, movies, music), information about upcoming film and television adaptations of the community’s adult titles, quizzes, and video series. Recreational video content will include book hauls, author interviews, behind the scenes looks at the publishing industry, and other series as proposed for the “Videos” section of the website. This is the content that is going to get potential members’ attention, draw them into the community, and encourage them to interact with it repeatedly.

Social media presence

This adult ORC will be present across each major social media platform containing an informal virtual discourse community centered around books. This will involve them creating and regularly posting to Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube accounts. The communities interested in literature already exist on these platforms; it would be unwise for this ORC not to take advantage of that phenomenon.

The adult ORC's social media presence will consist of a combination of directly promotional content and recreational posts that engage in content marketing and memetic communication. These posts will encourage member engagement with the community across platforms, such as asking the audience questions that encourage responses and making posts that start conversations (e.g., posts focused on currently popular novels, giveaways, etc.). The ORC will also engage with community members in the comments of their posts to further establish their personable image and a trustworthy relationship with their members.

Benefits of a Successful Adult ORC

There are several significant benefits to developing a successful ORC for adult literature. For example, membership in an engaging community centered on adult literature can support adult literacy and an interest in reading beyond childhood. A Gallup poll conducted in December 2021 found that U.S. adults are reading fewer books annually than in previous surveys. According to Gallup, 27% of respondents reported that they read more than ten books a year, which is an eight percent decrease from 2016 and lower than every survey prior to that by at least four points. Additionally, this decline is greater amongst groups that were previously more avid readers, including college graduates, women, and older Americans. Meanwhile, "new adult" readers aged 18 to 26 saw a more marginal decline in reading average. Their interest in reading

and establishing communities around adult literature is already having a noticeable impact on sales in the industry (Hendrix).

An adult literature-centered ORC will create a space for these “new adult” readers to gather and discuss their literary interests and passions. Readers within this age demographic are already seeking such connections both online in informal virtual discourse communities like BookTok and offline in personally organized book clubs (Hendrix). Readers interested in genres outside of YAL could benefit from the social opportunities an ORC offers. Furthermore, a supportive space filled with such readers could motivate those adults reading minimally to engage with literature again.

An adult ORC could also encourage, sustain, and create a space for civil discourse on adult literature in the digital age. These conversations are already taking place online, but it is happening within the scattered and informal virtual discourse communities on social media platforms. The limited character counts of most social media posts and the way posts are buried in chronologically ordered profiles make it difficult to maintain continuous and clear online conversations. An ORC focused on adult literature will provide readers with the necessary forum to sustainably engage in critical discussions about such books.

Finally, creating a successful adult literature focused-ORC will further marketing opportunities for the broader book publishing industry. As I have proven with my analyses in previous chapters, ORCs centered on YAL have achieved relative success within the book publishing industry. They have promoted book sales while encouraging ongoing online and offline conversations surrounding YAL. The same phenomenon could occur within adult literature if such a dedicated indirectly promotional space were created.

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Vita

Madeline Scott was born in Statesville, North Carolina, to Leigh and Andrew Scott. She graduated from South Iredell High School in Statesville in June 2018. The following autumn, she entered Appalachian State University to study English: Professional Writing, and in December 2021, she was awarded the Bachelor of Arts Degree. She began study toward a Master of Arts degree in English: Rhetoric and Composition at Appalachian State in January 2021 as a part of its Accelerated Admissions graduate program, where she also accepted a position as a graduate consultant at its University Writing Center.

Ms. Scott is an active member of Appalachian State University's student run publication, *The Peel Literature & Arts Review*, where she currently holds the position of Prose Editor. She is also the head volunteer coordinator at the Carolina Balloon Festival and enjoys visits to her hometown dance studio to participate in their adult tap-dancing class. She currently resides in Boone, North Carolina as she completes her M.A. degree, which she expects to receive in December 2022.