Off the Books: Making A Space for BIPOC Representation in Young Adult Publishing

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OFF THE BOOKS: MAKING A SPACE FOR BIPOC REPRESENTATION IN YOUNG ADULT PUBLISHING

by
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for University Honors

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ABSTRACT

OFF THE BOOKS: MAKING A SPACE FOR BIPOC REPRESENTATION IN YOUNG ADULT PUBLISHING

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The publishing industry in the United States has long been dominated by white voices, resulting in a significant lack of representation for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in the form of both authors and characters. This project aims to survey young adult BIPOC readers to explore their experiences with representation in the young adult (YA) genre and assess the impact of representation on their consumption of literature. Through assessing quantitative and qualitative answers to an online survey, the results reveal correlations between representation, enjoyment of literature, and the frequency of YA literature consumption among different BIPOC groups. These results provide valuable information on how to better address the need for more visible representation in YA publishing and encourage the YA and broader publishing industry to make space for BIPOC voices and stories.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title .............................................................................................................................i
Abstract ..................................................................................................................iii
Acknowledgments ...................................................................................................v
Table of Contents ...................................................................................................vii
List of Tables and Figures ....................................................................................ix

I. Introduction ........................................................................................................1

II. Methodology ......................................................................................................6

III. Findings ..........................................................................................................13

IV. Conclusion ......................................................................................................41

Works Cited .........................................................................................................46

Appendix A ..........................................................................................................49

Appendix B ..........................................................................................................53
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: Participant Demographics by Race and Ethnicity .........................................13
FIGURE 2: Participant Demographics by Gender .............................................................14
FIGURE 3: Participant Demographics by Year of Birth ..................................................15
FIGURE 4: Participant Demographics by U.S. Region ...................................................16
FIGURE 5: Frequency of YA Reading Among Young Adults of Color ............................17
FIGURE 6: Preferred Formats for Reading Among Young Adults of Color .....................20
FIGURE 7: Importance of Ethnicity and Race in Character Representation ......................21
FIGURE 8: Importance of Ethnicity and Race in Author Representation .........................22
FIGURE 9: Preference of Main Characters vs. Side Characters of Color .........................23
FIGURE 10: Impact of Tropes and Stereotypes on Young Adults of Color .....................28
FIGURE 11: Effects of Stereotype Presence on Reading Habits ......................................29
FIGURE 12: Likelihood of Increased Reading due to Increase of Characters of Color ....30
FIGURE 13: Likelihood of Increased Reading due to Increase of Authors of Color .....31
INTRODUCTION

Young Adult (YA) literature has the potential to shape the perspectives and beliefs of its readers, and it is therefore essential that the industry accurately represents the diverse voices and experiences of its audience. The publishing industry has long been criticized for a lack of representation and diversity, particularly in regard to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). This lack of representation not only perpetuates harmful stereotypes but also reinforces a lack of empathy and understanding between communities. This thesis aims to defend the need for increased representation of BIPOC in YA publishing and to explore how this lack of literary representation affects BIPOC young adult readers.

The publishing industry remains predominantly white, and this lack of representation is evident in the limited number of BIPOC authors and characters in children's and adult literature, as well as YA literature. Lee & Low Books conducted a Diversity Baseline Study in 2019 and found that in the publishing industry there is an evident problem with representation and diversity. 76% of authors in the industry self-reported as white/Caucasian (*Where is the Diversity in Publishing?*). Furthermore, a study by the New York Times found that out of thousands of books published between 1950 and 2018, only 5% were written by non-white authors; as of 2018, 11% of books published were written by people of color (Jean So, Richard, and Wezerek). This might seem better, however, when we consider that in 2018 there were over 1.68 million print and e-books self-published in the U.S., without even taking into account the books traditionally published, people of color are still in the minority (Watson 2020).

This is reflected in the characters these authors write about.
This is particularly significant as young adults are a large demographic of book consumers, with research indicating that adults aged 18 to 29 read more on average than other age groups (Watson 2022). While Young Adult literature is usually targeted to teens or younger readers (ages 12-17), it is actually young adults over the age of 18 who purchase the most YA books a year (more than 55%), and 78% of these buyers over 18 buyers intend to read these YA books themselves, making them the actual audience for YA literature (Curcic). These statistics suggest that it is crucial for publishing companies to pay more attention to this age demographic’s needs and wants when it comes to YA.

As a young adult of color who reads and purchases YA books, this project came from the frustration I felt from not seeing many characters of color in the books I read. There was a disconnect between me and the subjects of the fairytales and other books I read because I did not and could not relate. Growing up, I pored over hundreds of books in an effort to find accurate and holistic Hispanic representation and found very little.

Feeling a disconnect urged me to look for answers to three main questions which provided me with a starting point for the passion I have built behind this project: 1) Where were the authors and characters of color? 2) Why was there such an issue with representation in publishing? 3) What can we do to bridge the representation gap?

My hope with this project is above all to raise awareness about the issue of representation in publishing, not just in YA, but in all genres. The underrepresentation of BIPOC in the publishing industry is a multifaceted issue that requires an examination of both the lack of representation in books and the lack of diversity in the industry itself. The importance of representation in YA literature cannot be overstated, as it has the potential to shape the perspectives and beliefs of its readers. BIPOC young adults should
have access to literature that accurately represents their experiences and communities, helping them feel seen and heard in their reading experiences. I aim to reveal the importance of literary representation and how it can have a positive impact on BIPOC young adults and their self-esteem, sense of identity, and understanding of the world. The lack of BIPOC representation in YA literature perpetuates harmful stereotypes, reinforces a lack of empathy and understanding between communities, and limits the cultural experiences of its readers.

The purpose of this study is to explore the representation of BIPOC in YA literature, and to gauge the experiences of BIPOC young adults with the diversity of the publishing industry. In order to talk about BIPOC diversity in the publishing industry, it is necessary to define the scope of the BIPOC community. BIPOC (which stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) includes Black Americans/Africans, Caribbean/West Indian, Native Americans/American Indians/Alaskan Natives, East and South Asians, Pacific Islanders, Nonwhite Latinx/Hispanics, Arab and Middle East/North Africa (Smith).

In my preliminary research, I noticed a lack of academic research on the scope of ethnic and racial representation in literature in general, and a lack of insight into how representation affects readers and their consumption habits. These two topics are integral to the conversation on representation. This study surveyed BIPOC young adults to explore the frequency with which they see characters from their communities represented in books by authors in those communities. Additionally, the study aimed to assess the impact of this representation on their consumption of literature. The results of this study
will provide valuable information on the representation needs of BIPOC in YA publishing and will encourage the industry to make space for BIPOC voices and stories.

While this study is the first of its kind in its specificity and narrow scope in exploring the experiences of young adults of color with representation in the YA genre, it is not the first study employing a surveying method to explore individual reading habits. The National Literacy Trust (UK) administers an Annual Literacy Survey to assess reading levels, attitudes, and patterns among readers ages 8 to 18 (Cole et al.). In fact, their most recent report discussed the importance of literary diversity to children and teenagers (Picton and Clark). Although this source is highly pertinent to this research, it is regrettable that it originates from publishing data in the United Kingdom. This highlights the lack of resources and tangible research in the U.S. regarding publishing patterns and statistics, particularly regarding diversity in literature.

Similarly, Scholastic consistently releases a report series which describes and contextualizes data from a biennial national survey among children and their parents to investigate their reading-related attitudes and behaviors (Kids & Family Reading Report™). Additionally, the Pew Research Center surveyed American adults in 2021 to gauge which demographic groups read less than others (Gelles-Watnick and Perrin). These reports provide excellent background and reference for the methodology and analysis used in this study.

This study is highly exploratory in nature due to the limited amount of research on BIPOC representation in literature, including YA literature. As a result, there are few resources available to consult. Additionally, this study is unique in that it surveys young adults of color. This makes this study a breakthrough in the industry, as its findings will
provide a different perspective on the importance of literary representation for BIPOC young adults and how to address the lack of representation for BIPOC authors and characters in literature.

This thesis aims to defend the need for increased representation of BIPOC in YA publishing and to explore how the lack of representation affects BIPOC young adult readers. The publishing industry has long been criticized for a lack of representation and diversity, particularly regarding BIPOC, and this lack of representation perpetuates harmful stereotypes and limits the cultural experiences of its readers. This study aims to provide valuable information on the representation needs of BIPOC in YA publishing and will encourage the industry to make space for BIPOC voices and stories.
METHODOLOGY

This study aimed to gather information on young adults of color and their experience with representation in literature, specifically in the young adult genre. To gain a better understanding of BIPOC representation in YA, several research questions and objectives became the focus for this study, namely which BIPOC groups have more/less representation in young adult publishing, how a lack of representation affects young adults of color and their literature consumption, and how ethnic or racial diversity presents itself in YA literature overall. Below are the specific research questions discussed in the results, followed by justifications for each question included in the survey constructed for this study:

1. How often do participants read YA literature?

   This question is important as it allows us to determine the frequency with which young adults of color engage with the YA genre. Knowing this information will help us understand the impact of representation on their consumption of literature and gives us insight into how instrumental literature is in BIPOC young adults’ lives. A follow-up question asking why participants enjoy or choose to read was also included to offer valuable insights into the ways in which literature shapes and impacts their experiences.

2. How important is multimedia consumption to participants?

   This question is important because it assesses the role of several types of media in young adults' consumption of literature. E-books and audiobooks are becoming increasingly prevalent in today's digital age. Knowing this information will help us
understand the types of media that young adults of color are consuming and how it impacts their reading habits.

3. How important is ethnicity and race representation to young adults of color? Is this importance limited to characters in books or does it also extend to the authors writing these books?

This question is important because it examines the role representation plays in young adults' reading experiences, and whether the presence of ethnicity and race makes a difference in how they read. It also assesses whether they find it important to see characters and authors from their own ethnic or racial backgrounds in the literature they consume. This information will help us understand how representation within a young adult of color's own ethnic group affects their engagement with the YA genre.

4. Does the presence of a main character versus a side character in the participant’s ethnic group influence how likely they are to read that book?

This question also examines the impact of representation on young adults' reading habits. It determines whether young adults of color are more likely to read a book that features a main character from their own ethnic or racial background, as opposed to a side character. Knowing this will help us understand what types of characters of colors need to be prioritized in literature, and if there are different levels to representation.

5. Do young adults of color feel well-represented in the books they read? Why or why not?
This question directly asks young adults of color whether they feel represented or not. It plays on the participants' own perceptions of representation in literature. One flaw with this question was that I did not include a definition of representation in the survey, however, that serves to demonstrate the complexity of an issue like representation in literature. Perhaps out of all the questions this one allows us to look at representation with a head-on approach and informs strategies for improving representation in the YA genre.

6. What role do tropes and stereotypes play in how often participants read? Does the presence/absence of stereotypes connect to greater enjoyment from literature consumption?

This question is vital in evaluating the impact of certain racial and ethnic tropes and stereotypes on young adults' reading habits. The aim is to investigate whether the inclusion or exclusion of these elements affects young adults of color emotionally, and how it does or doesn’t affect their enjoyment of literature.

7. If more characters within the participant’s ethnic group were featured in literature how does this influence their likelihood of reading more often? How does the presence of more authors in the participant’s ethnic group influence reading consumption behaviors?

This question hypothetically evaluates the impact of increased representation on young adults of color and their reading habits. It further determines how important race and ethnicity are when it comes to choosing what and how often to read.
8. What further insights do participants provide when asked what they would do to improve representation? What implications do these suggestions yield?

This final question is perhaps the most valuable in that it allows us to gather open comments and comments from young adults of color on their recommendations for improving representation. Their suggestions will inform future efforts to increase representation and improve engagement with literature among young adults of color.

This study used a survey on Qualtrics as the data collection method. Qualtrics is one of the best survey tools available for research purposes, provided and endorsed by BYU as a platform, and it allows for a convenient and secure place to build, distribute, and analyze responses from one online location. A total of 428 responses were collected from BIPOC young adults (18-28 years old) located in the U.S., with the stipulation that participants read young adult literature. Participants for the survey were recruited from multicultural spaces on college campuses, and relevant social media groups and platforms through flyers and newsletters.

To ensure a representative sample, this study surveyed 428 BIPOC young adults (18-28 years old) located in the U.S. The sample size was initially planned to be 300, but more responses were received, increasing the sample size. The study was limited by time and funding, and as the participation rate for any study cannot be anticipated, this led to the initial decision to undershoot the total number of participants. While the initial sample size goal was to receive an equal number of participants from each separate ethnic group to allow for comparison of their quantitative and qualitative responses, this goal was not met. The sample size was determined using a sample size calculator with a 99%
confidence level, a 6% margin of error, and a 50% population proportion, resulting in a calculated sample size of 463. Given the exploratory nature of the study, this small sample size is sufficient for a first endeavor into the research question, and the study will serve as groundwork for future studies with larger numbers.

The research design for this study included both quantitative and qualitative elements of analysis, aiming to provide a thorough evaluation of the research questions and explore the personal representation narratives of BIPOC young adults. The survey questions were designed to collect demographic information, and a variety of question types were incorporated, including both closed-ended (yes/no) and open-ended questions, sliding 1-10 questions, and likelihood ranking questions. The combination of these questions provided both numerical data and rich qualitative information, allowing us to deeper understand literary representation's impact on young adults of color. A complete list of survey questions is provided in Appendix A.

The data collected from the survey was then analyzed using a mixed methods approach. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data, while a top-down content review was performed to examine raw qualitative responses provided by survey participants. Thematic and narrative analysis were also employed to generate themes from the responses and perform generic qualitative analysis. These themes and responses were used to make meaningful interpretations based on the survey responses, ultimately leading to the conclusions drawn in this thesis. While the chosen research design and data analysis methods provide a robust approach for examining the research questions, there are limitations to this approach. For instance, the sample size may not be large enough to fully represent the entire population, and there may be limitations in the
accuracy and reliability of self-reported data. However, the methods employed aim to address these limitations and provide a rigorous analysis of the data collected.

Quantitative data and qualitative responses were analyzed using Dedoose, a cross-platform app designed for mixed-methods research. Dedoose offers various analytical features and tools, including the ability to annotate and tag qualitative data, which allows for ease in organizing and categorizing responses. This better allowed me to generate themes and categories from the data and then identify patterns and relationships between responses. Dedoose also has the added benefit of ensuring data security and privacy, using encrypted technology to protect sensitive information. Overall, the use of Dedoose to analyze qualitative data was instrumental in generating meaningful interpretations of the survey responses.

This study implemented rigorous data collection methods to ensure the reliability and validity of the results obtained. Using Qualtrics as a survey software provided a secure platform for data collection with measures in place to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality. Qualtrics also implements measures to detect bots or individuals attempting to respond to the survey multiple times. While there is always a risk of response bias, we attempted to mitigate this risk by ensuring anonymity of participants and screening for duplicate responses. Future studies could use other measures such as including attention check questions to further ensure validity and reduce the likelihood of unreliable data.

Informed consent was also obtained from each respondent before the start of the survey. Ethical principles were strictly adhered to throughout the study to protect the rights of the participants. Any potential risks to participants, such as emotional distress or
the interception of data, and the option to opt out at any time, were clearly outlined and addressed. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and security of their data, which was stored on password-protected and encrypted servers and computers. Furthermore, participants were assured that information may be shared with other researchers for future studies, but all identifying information will be removed to maintain confidentiality. Overall, this study was conducted with the highest ethical standards to ensure the rights of all participants. The full informed consent form is included in Appendix B.
FINDINGS

Demographics

A total of 428 individuals participated in the survey, with the majority of responses coming from black and African American individuals, who accounted for 83.41% of the sample. The remaining responses were from individuals who self-described as two or more races (5.14%), Hispanic (4.21%), Native American (2.57%), Asian (2.57%), and NAME (2.1%). It is important to note that there were no responses from Alaskan Natives or Pacific Islanders. Future studies could aim to increase diversity in the sample by focusing on targeted outreach to these groups to ensure a more representative and inclusive dataset.

![Figure 1: Participant Demographics by Race and Ethnicity](image)

A majority of responses to the survey were from female individuals at 52.6%, followed closely by male individuals at 45.1%. There were also responses from individuals identifying as non-binary (or a third gender) at 0.5%, and a small percentage
of participants who preferred to self-describe or opted out. Future studies could explore the intersectionality of race/ethnicity and gender, as different genders may have varying perspectives on the issue at hand. Additionally, efforts could be made to ensure equal representation of all genders in research to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

![Participant Demographics by Gender]

Figure 2

The following chart shows a breakdown of participants by their year of birth, with the majority of respondents falling between the ages of 18-28. The largest percentage of participants were born in 1999, representing 22.43% of the total responses. However, it is worth noting that the distribution of participants across birth years is relatively even.
The survey conducted had participants from various regions in the United States. Of the 428 total participants, 56 did not specify their state but were verified as residing in the U.S. The remaining participants came from over 40 states across the country. The highest percentage of participants came from the West region, accounting for 33% of the total responses, followed by the South with 24%. The Northeast had 18% of participants, and the Midwest had 12%.
According to the survey results, a significant proportion of young adults of color report reading YA literature frequently. More than half of the respondents read YA at least once a week, with 16.1% reporting reading once a week, 24.8% reading several times a week, and 13.3% reading once a day. A substantial number of respondents read YA literature at least once a month, with 19.6% reporting reading several times a month and 18.7% reading once a month. These findings suggest that reading YA literature is a priority for many young adults of color, highlighting the importance of ensuring diverse and representative books are available to this demographic.
Responses from young adults of color to the question “why do you like to read?” detailed the motivation behind reading as a hobby. Examining responses reveals that the most common reasons young adults of color like to read are to escape from reality or immerse themselves in another world, experience new perspectives, learn new things, and to regulate or process their emotions—one participant described it as “emotional catharsis”. Escapism was the most common theme among reading motivation responses:

- “It gives me an escape into another world, outside of my own problems and worries.”
- “It helps clear my head and gives me a form of escapism.”
- “Escapism. I like to forget myself for a moment while I read.”
- “I like to read because it's a great way to escape the world around me. When I'm reading, I can be anyone or anything and go anywhere my mind wants me to go.”
• “I like to read because you can get lost in another world. You can experience something new and exciting, or be able to experience the same thing over and over again in a different way. You can make your own adventures with the characters in the story, or you can just sit back and enjoy what they are doing. Reading is also a great way to escape from reality for a little bit.”

• “I like to read because it's a way to escape from my normal life, and the way I see things in general. It's a way for me to relax and enjoy something different than what I experience every day.”

• “I love to read because it allows me to escape into another world. It's a way for me to make my own stories and imagine myself as someone else.”

• “I like to read because it allows me to escape the world around me. It allows me to put myself in other people's shoes and see things from their perspective, which is something I don't get enough of in real life.”

• “I love to read because it gives me a chance to escape the world around me. It's like a vacation, but you don't have to spend any money or pack a bag.”

• “I like to read because it's a great way to escape from the world. I can go anywhere, do anything, “

• “I like to read because it's a great way to escape from the real world and get lost in someone else's life. I love being able to imagine what it would be like to be someone else and do things they've done, or even just see the world through their eyes.”

• “I love reading because it allows me to escape into another world, and sometimes I just need that.”
● “I can get lost in a book and forget about everything else around me.”

● “Reading is a way to escape. It’s a way to get lost in another world, and when you come out of that world, you feel refreshed. I like reading because it transports me to new places and new times, and it helps me to be in the present moment by forcing me to slow down and focus on what is happening around me.”

Reading for young adults of color is not simply fun and enjoyable, it is a way to escape stressors in their lives, find refuge and freedom from their problems, and construct realities that might not reflect current experiences. The comforting and escapist nature of reading YA makes it even more important to find ways to welcome young adults of color and help them feel seen and understood through the characters they find in YA books.

**Section 1.1 - Multimedia Consumption**

The following percentages reflect the preferred formats for reading among young adults of color and their views on multimedia consumption. Of those surveyed, 15.4% prefer print, 14.3% prefer audiobooks, 33.4% prefer ebooks, and 36.9% prefer two or more formats.
These results suggest that multimedia consumption is essential to young adults of color, who appear to prefer e-books and multiple formats over traditional print and audiobooks. This preference for multimedia consumption may reflect the generation's reliance on the internet and digital technology. As such, offering multiple formats for reading may be crucial for publishers and authors seeking to engage with this demographic.

**Section 2 - Importance of Ethnicity and Race**

The quote from a survey participant, “I read these books with the idea that maybe there will be something that speaks to me about who I am or where I come from—something that makes me feel represented. But sometimes it feels like these books are speaking to everyone but me,” encapsulates the feelings of many young adult readers of
color. Representation in literature is essential for these readers to feel seen, heard, and valued.

Results reveal that race and ethnicity do play an important part in young adults' reading choices, particularly for those who identify as BIPOC. A significant 83.6% of respondents considered it somewhat, very, or extremely important that their ethnicity/race group is represented in the characters in the books they read. Only a small percentage (1%) reported that it was not at all important. These numbers suggest that readers are looking for representation and connection in the books they read, and that they are more likely to engage with characters who reflect their own lived experiences.

![Importance of Ethnicity and Race in Character Representation](image)

*Figure 7*

When it comes to the importance of author representation, the results were slightly different. Although the majority of respondents (76%) believed that it was somewhat, very, or extremely important that authors of their ethnicity/race group were
represented in the books they read, this number was lower than for character representation. Additionally, almost 10% of respondents reported that it was not at all important to them. This suggests that while author representation is still important, it may not be as crucial as representation in characters.

![Importance of Ethnicity and Race in Author Representation](image)

**Figure 8**

**Section 2.1 - Main Character vs. Side Character Comparison**

Survey results also found that young adults of color place a higher importance on the presence of main characters of their ethnicity/race group in the books they read compared to side characters. About 54% of participants reported that they are very likely or extremely likely to read a book that features a side character within their ethnicity/race group, whereas about 87% reported they are very likely or extremely likely to read a book that features a main character within their ethnicity/race group. The fact that almost 90% of participants are very or extremely likely to read a book with a main character of
their ethnicity/race group highlights the importance of representation and the impact it has on BIPOC young adults' reading choices. It also implies that centering diverse stories and characters can attract more young adults of color to literature.

**Figure 9**

### Section 3 - Feeling “Represented”

The question of whether young adults of color feel well-represented in the books they read is not a simple one to answer. While the percentage of yes and no responses was about equal when participants were asked directly, the answer is more nuanced. In order to understand what effective representation looks like, it is important to define representation more clearly and examine how it is executed on the page. The concept of representation also varies from person to person and group to group, so it is essential to identify what representation means to different readers.
Moreover, exposure to diverse YA literature is crucial. While many participants knew that diverse characters exist in theory, they could not provide any specific examples. This lack of awareness and knowledge of characters of color in books is a significant issue, as it is difficult to determine how well representation is done when there is no representation in the first place. Before we can gauge how well representation is executed, there needs to be representation that is visible and accessible to readers. This lack of representation leads to young adults of color feeling excluded and disconnected from literature.

Section 3.1 - Tropes and Stereotypes

The list of derogatory tropes and stereotypes used to define a variety of ethnic groups in literature is, unfortunately, long and omnipresent, and young BIPOC adults are incredibly aware of them. It is essential to address the stereotypes and themes present in literature that deter young adults of color from reading. These characters are often one-dimensional and lack real personality, character development, and cultural representation, which is a point of concern for people of color who are well aware of these stereotypes. The negative impact of these stereotypes goes beyond creating a gap between young adults of color and literature; it also affects their self-perception and worth in the world. Here are a few of the tropes and stereotypes young adults of color mentioned that they have seen perpetuated about their own race/ethnicity:

Asian

- Usually super nerdy, smart, hardworking.
● Everything comes easy to them due to inherent ‘Asian’ ability, rather than hard work (especially math and music).
● Nerdy and almost robotic because they are smart.
● Smart, studious, good grades.
● That we all become nurses, all sing well, and always eat jollibee.
● Any characters that are Asian always have two Asian parents and there’s the stereotype that they always know the language native to their parents' home country.
● Asian tiger moms is a huge stereotype.
● Asian characters are relegated to smart sidekicks. They're usually good at math and coding.
● Asian women and girls in particular are either quiet and submissive or sexualized.

*Hispanic or Latino*

● Usually the side characters or the bad guys.
● Portrayed as immigrants, although people do go through things like that not everyone with a Hispanic/Latine background is an immigrant.
● “Spicy Latina” trope.
● That we replace some English words with Spanish words every time we speak. It makes me cringe and ruins the flow of the sentence that the character was saying.
● Promiscuity - usually seen in Latinas…sometimes Latinos are subject to this stereotype, as well.
• Being a player/ladies' man…Usually men of color are portrayed as being obsessed with women and seeing them as objects. Sometimes this leads to them being predatory in books, as well.

• Delinquency and crime - a very popular trope, Latinx people of any gender are usually subject to having some sort of track record with the law or being criminals.

• Latinos are seen as drug dealers, lazy, or dumb.

• That Peruvians are ugly.

Black or African American

• Black characters tend to be the funny token characters.

• An intrinsically violent culture (‘the savage’ or ‘the brute’).

• Black characters are almost always involved in some sort of criminal activity.

• The ‘magical negro,’ which refers to a character who helps the main character overcome their problems by being wise and kind.

• The ‘strong black woman,’ which refers to any character who is independent and strong despite her circumstances.

• Another common trope is that black people are unable to be educated or intelligent—they're seen as being too dumb to learn how to read or write, or even speak properly.

• Black people are often stereotyped as violent, angry, and criminal.

• Black men are depicted as rapists or sexual predators.
- Black characters are portrayed as having over-the-top or exaggerated characteristics that show their supposed inferiority.
- People who are natural athletes, and... naturally musical.
- Portrayed as being able to communicate with animals and nature... often depicted as having a deep connection with their religion and spirituality.
- The ‘sassy black woman’ stereotype, which is generally used to describe a woman who is sassy and quick with words, but not necessarily positive or helpful.
- Black people are uneducated and unintelligent.
- That we're all from Africa. This is false! There are black people who live in every continent, not just Africa.
- That we're all good at sports. This isn't true for everyone, and it's definitely not true for me!
- Often depicted as being unable to speak "proper" English, using slang and broken grammar.

The following chart displays results suggesting that tropes and stereotypes play a significant role in the reading choices of young adults of color. When asked about the harm caused by these themes on a scale of 1-10, the majority of participants rated them as harmful, with almost half of the respondents rating them at a 6 or higher. This indicates that harmful tropes and stereotypes are not only present but also have an impact on the readers.
Moreover, the data indicates that young adults of color are likely to stop reading a book if it includes harmful tropes and stereotypes. Over 70% of respondents indicated that they are at least somewhat likely to stop reading a book if it includes such themes. This finding highlights the importance of avoiding harmful tropes and stereotypes in literature and the need for authors to create more nuanced and accurate representations of marginalized groups. Overall, the survey results suggest that young adults of color are aware of the presence of harmful tropes and stereotypes in literature and that these themes have a negative impact on their reading choices.
Section 4 - Effect of Representation on Literature Consumption

Young adults of color are likely to read more often if there are more characters and authors within their ethnicity or race group featured in YA books. When asked about the likelihood of reading more often if more characters within their ethnic or racial group were featured in literature, almost three-quarters of respondents answered with "somewhat likely," "very likely," or "extremely likely."
Similarly, when asked about the influence of more authors of color publishing YA books, over 80% of respondents answered with "somewhat likely," "very likely," or "extremely likely." This suggests that not only do young adults of color want to see more characters from their ethnic or racial group represented in literature, but they also want to see more authors from their communities writing and publishing YA books.
Few participants were able to name specific titles of books featuring characters or authors of their same race or ethnicity. In fact, less than 3% were able to mention specific characters of their same race/ethnicity that did a good job representing their group, and less than 15% were able to mention specific authors of their same race/ethnicity who did a good job representing their group. One participant said, “I cannot think of any [authors of color] for YA books. There is no representation (that I have been exposed to) that is without tropes or stereotypes and typically depicted through a Eurocentric lens.”

There could be a significant correlation between authors of color and characters of color that requires further investigation. From these results we can assume that there is a connection between an increase in authors of color and better representation. Overall, responses indicated that including more characters of diverse ethnicities and races in YA
books would motivate readers of color to read more often. However, it is not just about inclusion; sensitivity, accuracy, and effort are crucial factors that need to be considered when featuring characters of color in literature.

**Section 5 - Further Survey Participant Insights**

This section delves into the insights provided by survey participants when asked about their suggestions to improve representation and diversity in YA literature and how representation impacts their reading experience. I divided these insights into five different categories: 1) impact on story and identity, 2) impact on self-esteem, 3) normalization and elimination of stereotypes, 4) impact on society, and 5) increasing awareness. Each category in this section is supported by quotes from survey participants, which serve as evidence for these arguments.

The centerpiece of this research revolves around telling the stories of BIPOC young adults, making this one of the most valuable parts of the data I have collected, as participants shared deep, thoughtful, and vulnerable comments on the importance of representation and diversity in literature. I have kept their comments as intact and untouched as possible to best preserve their emotion and meaning. The insights provided by readers of color themselves highlight the significance of seeking their perspectives as they are the primary audience. Their feedback serves as a reminder for authors and publishers to prioritize inclusivity and representation in their work.

1 - **Impact on Story and Identity**

Representation of diverse characters in young adult literature can have a positive impact on young adults' identities, helping them to find their place in stories but also in
the world at large. It is important for young adults to see themselves represented in the books they read so they can feel confident about their identities and understand their worth in society. YA literature has the power to shape young adults' understanding of themselves and the world around them. These quotes from survey participants highlight their desire for more representation and diversity in literature, with many expressing their desire to see characters who look like them and have similar experiences.

- “Biracial characters are hardly represented in literature or media at all. It would make me feel more accepted in American Society and it would make me happy to be represented!”

- “Including diverse characters would also improve my enjoyment of literature because it would allow me to better connect with the characters.”

- “I would love to see black and latinos in fantasy just like white characters. Bipoc should be able to read about dragons, witches and fairies just like white people.”

- “I think I have only seen one character, a side character, who was the same race as me. They are one of my favorite characters in literature with that being a large reason why. I think that being able to see my race/ethnic group represented in literature would have helped me connect to my ancestors better, as well as helping my friends growing up to have better understood me.”

- “I would like to see more diverse characters in YA books because it's important to me that the books I'm reading reflect the diversity of the world. It can be hard to
get a sense of how my life and experiences compare to others', especially when reading about people who don't look like me or have had similar experiences.”

● “It's important for children growing up today to see themselves represented in books so that they can feel confident about their identity and understand how important it is for them not only exist but thrive in this world.”

● “When I read a book, I want to be able to relate to the characters and their struggles, and not just be told about them. When I see people who look like me—and who have lived through similar experiences—I feel like it's easier for me to connect with them on an emotional level, because we share something in common: our identity.”

● “Including diverse characters…would help me understand their struggles and motivations, which is one of the most important elements in any story.”

2 - Impact On Self-Esteem

When young adults of color see themselves represented in stories, they also feel empowered, and it can have a significant positive impact on their self-esteem. A few of these quotes also highlight how not feeling represented can have the exact opposite effect, leading to feelings of isolation and inadequacy. Young people want to see characters who look like them, who share their experiences, and who can serve as positive role models.

● “Including more diverse characters in YA books… would make me feel less alone when reading.”
“My first Black Disney princess was when I was like 15… Representation in all forms of media (print, television and social) lacked very much but especially in literature. Having diversified characters with different race/ethnicities would’ve had a profound impact on my identity as a Biracial Female. This would have been instrumental during my teenage years but even now as I am navigating race and gender roles in America.”

“It's important for young people to see themselves represented in the stories that they read. It makes them feel like they can be the hero of their own story, and that they can achieve anything they want to achieve. It also helps them realize that there are people like them out there, and that they might not be alone in facing challenges or feeling different from others.”

“As a reader, I would love to see more diverse characters in YA books. Mainly because it would mean that there were more positive role models for young people to look up to.”

“I'm an avid reader, but I often find myself feeling frustrated because of how narrow the range of representation seems to be. This holds true for my reading outside of YA as well—it's rare for me to read a book where the author isn't white or straight or cisgender.”

“As someone who grew up in a small town with a very homogenous population, I found it very difficult to find characters that were like me or my family. It was so
rare for me to see anyone who looked like my parents or siblings represented in books or TV shows that I felt as though there was something wrong with me.”

3 - Normalization and Elimination of Stereotypes

These next quotes reflect the importance of natural integration and normalization of stories about people of color in literature. Young adults of color brought up a crucial point: it’s not just representation, it’s essential to factor in intersectional identities, avoid tokenism, and eliminate harmful stereotypes. Readers want to see characters of color being treated equally as other characters in the book and see themselves reflected through characters in authentic and multidimensional personalities. Authors should focus on elements that add real depth to the story, rather than just including token diversity characters. Seeing aspects of cultural practices and traditions accurately represented is also an important part of representation.

- “Just more natural inclusion would mean a lot. It doesn’t have to be overt. I remember being obsessed with the Hunger Games for the tiny details of Katniss having darker skin and also being a really quiet individual who struggled to make friends, which was exactly what I was like growing up.”

- “Don’t treat them differently than the other characters in the book because it only brings light to the fact that there are still people that view people of various ethnicities/races differently. Instead, treat them the same as the other characters so it’s a 'they just so happen to be a different ethnicity/race' situation.”
• “I also really appreciate characters who struggle with the “symptoms” of being a minority; even if not a key plot point, I love seeing more awareness being spread about, say, someone who’s biracial and struggles to feel accepted.”

• “It’s just really refreshing seeing more normalization of people who are diverse, and I think the more casually we’re inserted into big stories, as if we’re totally normal, the better. Also, token characters are garbage. You can’t have 1 character cover all your diversity bases, that’s just cringey and quota-filling.”

• “My biggest pet peeve is when authors include a bunch of random ethnicity side characters just so they can say they’re being “diverse” but the characters have no personality and no actual culture and you wouldn’t even know they weren’t white besides the cringe descriptions such as “her dark almond shaped eyes” or “chocolate brown skin” or whatever.”

• “No stereotyping and giving these characters a real story like not just always being a side character. This would help me enjoy reading more and make me excited for the future generations will have so much representation in the books they are reading.”

• “I've read plenty of books with diverse characters, but they were still very white-washed. And while I'm sure there are many people who enjoy reading these types of stories, I do not feel like they can ever truly represent me or my experiences as an black American man.”
● “[Include a] Better portrayal of my culture when showing festivities and traditions.”

● “I think it would be REALLY beneficial if every publishing house had a team of diverse individuals specifically to check for harmful stereotypes in books during the editing and creation process.”

● “If the author wants to write a main character where their ethnicity/race is the main focus, they should extensively research that ethnicity/race’s culture and customs (if they are not the same one that they are writing about) and consult with people who grew up with said culture/customs. That way the ethnicity/race doesn’t get misrepresented or reflect harmful stereotypes. The author should also credit any person that they consult about such manners so that the consultee is being valued for their contribution.”

4 - Impact on Society

Representation of people of color in literature could have wider societal implications and encourage acceptance and celebration of diversity. Including diverse characters in books could help non-BIPOC readers become more accepting of other ethnic backgrounds and cultures. These quotes express that accurate representation can expand authors’ and readers’ minds, inspiring them to seek out new perspectives instead of reinforcing potentially prejudiced biases and beliefs.

● “In YA literature, there are very few characters that are not straight, white, and male. There is also a lack of non-Western characters. As a reader, I would like to
see more diverse representation in YA books. The more diverse characters there are, the more relatable they will be to young people. Including more diverse characters can also help readers become more accepting of other races and cultures.”

- “I believe that it's important for authors to try new things when it comes to writing diverse characters. This opens up the whole world of possibilities for them, who might never have thought of writing about certain groups before! They might gain new perspectives on certain topics, or even learn something new about themselves through their writing process.”

- “I would like to see more diverse characters in YA literature because it would help me understand and empathize with people who are not like me. In addition, I think that having a more diverse range of characters in books will make teens feel less alone and more connected to their community.”

- “The best books are the ones that make you feel like you're part of the story. When I read books with diverse characters, it makes me feel like they're telling my story too. And if they're not telling my story, then I can learn about someone else's life and maybe empathize with them better.”

- “I would like to see more diverse characters in YA books because I think it would be a great way to help people learn about different cultures.”

5 - Increasing Awareness
Literature that includes diverse characters is not widespread. Increasing this awareness and making diverse books accessible to young adults of color in their homes, workplaces, and classroom is necessary. Several young adults of color also mentioned that this inclusion and awareness of diversity should not be limited to race and ethnicity but other under-represented communities.

- “Making these books more widely known to young adults. I don’t really know of books with Hispanic characters because I never hear of any.”

- “I’ve always enjoyed reading, but the thing that has always bothered me about YA literature is how white and straight it is. There are a few exceptions—I’m looking at you, John Green—but for the most part, it’s hard to find much diversity in YA fiction.”

- “I would like to see more characters of underrepresented races (including mixed race) in YA books. If these books are written by an author who is not of that race, I would like extensive research to be done by the author and perhaps a team into the race and the culture that comes with it.”

- “In addition to the diversity in race, I want to see diversity in sexual and romantic orientation, ability, background, immigration status, etc. These things tend to be overlooked, or if they are represented, they are written very one-dimensionally.”
CONCLUSION

This intensive research confirms previous assumptions and findings that literary representation does matter to young adults of color. Young adult readers of color crave more representation in the books they are reading. They want to see more main characters like them, with stories centered around BIPOC narratives. BIPOC young adults acknowledge the need to feel heard, seen, and validated in order to enjoy the books they are reading. Representation can have a meaningful impact on the readers’ perceptions of themselves and their ethnic or racial group(s), creating a stronger connection to the story, and perhaps most importantly, providing positive role models to these young readers.

The results explained in section 2.1 highlight that both characters and authors matter, and that the way authors handle the treatment of their BIPOC characters, including the inclusion or exclusion of certain tropes and stereotypes, can have a significant impact on the way readers interact with literature and perceive themselves in literary and even non-literary contexts.

While there is still a long way to go in terms of addressing the representation gap, this study provides the starting point for understanding just how important BIPOC representation is and what forms of representation are most effective and desired. Responses from survey participants suggest the need for not only more representation in literature, but more emphasis and promotion for books containing BIPOC representation in the public sector. Books containing characters of color might exist, however the issue truly lies within the disconnect between the existence of these books and the general lack of knowledge their intended target audience has of them. Further analysis of the
publishing industry is required to expose why this gap exists and how it would be best to close it.

Overall, the lack of representation in publishing needs to be addressed and explored more. When young people see themselves represented positively in literature, it could boost their self-esteem, help them develop a positive sense of identity, and maybe even lead to greater success in life. On the other hand, when they are constantly bombarded with negative stereotypes and depictions of people in their ethnic and racial groups, it can have the opposite effect, leading to feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth.

The lack of representation in publishing could also have wider societal implications, as explained in section 5. When we don't see people of color represented, it reinforces the notion that they are somehow "other" or "different" from the norm. This can lead to prejudice and discrimination, as people may subconsciously or consciously view people of color as less important or less valuable than others. Representation can rewrite our society’s narrative of exclusion and homogeneity into one of inclusion and celebration of diversity.

While this study delved into BIPOC readers and their motivations, experiences, and insights on representation in the young adult literature genre, it fails to examine current publishing representation practices, which is an important aspect when it comes to definitively answering the question: how well are BIPOC individuals represented in literature?

Future studies focusing on young adult publishing could examine representation on a larger scale by looking at how representative different publishers’ BIPOC young
adult sectors are through conducting background research on BIPOC characters and authors, specifically how books presently portray young adults of color. Yet another area of interest is finding tangible correlations on BIPOC in the publishing industry (authors, editors, etc.) and books produced with BIPOC characters. This could be an important step to encourage publishing companies to hire more ethnically and racially diverse editors, authors, and employees and actively meet the increasing demand for more BIPOC representation.

The focus of this study was surveying BIPOC young adults on current issues in publishing in order to shine a light on the gaps in representation in YA, rather than finding solutions to the lack of representation in publishing. Finding solutions to this complex issue would require a more in-depth examination of the problem itself before establishing a reasonable plan of action for publishing companies to actually execute. However, based on survey responses and participant input, I have come up with three possible starting points or goalposts for publishing companies.

First is to increase the number of diverse authors to ensure that a wider range of voices and perspectives are represented in literature. As discussed in more detail in previous sections, BIPOC young adults acknowledge some correlation between more authors of color and more representation in literature. Authors of color have personal experiences to draw from when writing about their own cultural and ethnic background, creating more believable and accurate characters of color. Publishing companies could diversify authors by organizing writing programs for young adults of color, partnering with established authors to provide mentorship and community to writers of color, hosting writing residencies or funded fellowships for BIPOC writers with fewer
resources, and/or allotting a specific number or percentage of books published a year specifically to BIPOC authors or BIPOC characters.

Second is to emphasize using more sensitivity, respect, and accuracy when telling stories about BIPOC individuals. Publishing companies, specifically editors and agents, can encourage authors—especially white authors—to write more complex and nuanced characters of color. Workshops and trainings, developed and held by people of color, can instruct writers on avoiding certain popular stereotypes and tropes surrounding specific ethnic groups. This could help make stories even more authentic and centered on real BIPOC narratives. Publishing companies can also hire sensitivity readers or cultural consultants who have experience and expertise with a variety of cultures. These consultants can revise material early in the writing process to ensure that it supports and validates the group of people of color being written about. Overall, the publishing space can create spaces where their employees are not afraid to speak up about certain literary practices that are inaccurate and create discomfort.

Finally, publishing companies need to start (and keep) talking about this issue. By having frequent conversations within the publishing space and being transparent with consumers and audiences about current diversity practices, more awareness can be brought to the importance of representation in publishing. The publishing industry could promote and provide more generous platforms for their existing authors of color as to get their works in more mainstream spaces, support and source books to independent bookstores run by people of color, and publicize reading initiatives during Black History Month, Native American Heritage Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, and Asian and Pacific Islander Month. These actions can encourage everyone to do better, inspire young
people of color to pursue careers in writing and publishing, and hopefully one day everyone’s stories can be heard.
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APPENDIX A
SURVEY QUESTIONS

Name:

Date of Birth (Date selector)

Gender
- Male
- Female
- Nonbinary
- Other: ___

What race/ethnicity do you identify most with? (Select all that apply)
- Asian
- Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native American
- Alaskan Native
- Arab and Middle East
- White or Caucasian
- A race/ethnicity not listed here:
  ______________________

Where do you live? (State, City)

Email address for $5 Amazon Gift Card (Open answer)

How often do you read YA literature?
- Once a year
- Once every few months
- Once a month
- Several times a month
- Once a week
- Several times a week
- Every day

What format do you prefer to read in? (Select any that apply)
• Print
• E-book
• Audiobook

Why do you like to read? (Open response)

How important is it to you that your ethnicity/race group is represented in the *characters* in the books you read? (Slider)
• Not at all important
• A little important
• Somewhat important
• Very important
• Extremely important

How important is it to you that your ethnicity/race group is represented in the *authors* of the books you read? (Slider)
• Not at all important
• A little important
• Somewhat important
• Very important
• Extremely important

How likely are you to read a book if it features a *side* character within your ethnicity/race group? (Slider)
• Not at all likely
• A little likely
• Somewhat likely
• Very likely
• Extremely likely

How likely are you to read a book if it features a *main* character within your ethnicity/race group? (Slider)
• Not at all likely
• A little likely
• Somewhat likely
• Very likely
• Extremely likely

Do you feel like your ethnicity/race group is well represented in the books you read?
Can you think of any characters within your ethnicity/race group that did a good job of representing your group?

- Yes
- No

Name them below, and the book they are from. (Open response)
Why?

Can you think of any characters within your ethnicity/race group that did a bad job of representing your group?

- Yes
- No

Name them below, and the book they are from. (Open response)
Why?

Can you think of any authors within your ethnicity/race group that did a good job of representing your group? Name them below. (Open response)
Why?

Can you think of any authors within your ethnicity/race group that did a bad job of representing your group? Name them below. (Open response)
Why?

What are common tropes/stereotypes in literature associated with your ethnicity/race? If you can, include examples. (Open response)

On a scale from 1-10, with 1 being least harmful and 10 being most harmful, how harmful would you say these tropes and stereotypes have been to you personally? (Slider)

If these tropes or stereotypes are present and applied to the character within your group, how likely are you to stop reading the book? (Slider)

- Not at all likely
- A little likely
- Somewhat likely
- Very likely
If more characters within your ethnicity/race group were featured in YA books, would you read more often?

- Not at all likely
- A little likely
- Somewhat likely
- Very likely
- Extremely likely

If effort was put into featuring characters within your ethnicity/race group accurately and representing them well, would you read more often?

- Not at all likely
- A little likely
- Somewhat likely
- Very likely
- Extremely likely

If more authors within your ethnicity/race group published YA books, would you read more often?

- Not at all likely
- A little likely
- Somewhat likely
- Very likely
- Extremely likely

What would you like to improve in including more diverse characters in YA books? How would this impact your enjoyment of literature? (Open answer)
APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

Brigham Young University
Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Study title: Off the Books: Making a Space for BIPOC Representation in Young Adult Publishing

Researcher[s]: Elisha Fernández (Editing and Publishing student), Dr. Jacob Rawlins (Linguistics)

We’re inviting you to take a survey for research. This survey is completely voluntary. There will be no negative consequences if you decide not to participate. If you start the survey, you can always change your mind and withdraw at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?

We want to better understand the representation Black, Indigenous, and People of Color have seen in Young Adult literature/publishing and learn whether there is a connection between better/more accurate representation and the amount young adults of color read on a regular basis.

What will I do?

This survey will ask questions about your reading habits, characters you have come across in literature that represented your ethnic/racial group, and common tropes/stereotypes you have encountered. The questions may be Yes/No, multiple choice, or open response questions. The survey will take about 30 minutes.

Risks

· Some questions may be emotionally upsetting in talking about your experience with race and representation in literature. You have the option to skip these questions or quit the survey at any time.

· Online data being intercepted: Anytime you share information online there are risks. We’re using a secure and password-protected system to collect and store this data. However, by taking this survey you are assuming the risks of this data potentially being intercepted.
· Breach of confidentiality: There is a chance your data could be seen by someone who shouldn’t have access to it. We’re minimizing this risk in the following ways:
  o We’ll store all electronic data on a password-protected, encrypted computer.
  o We’ll keep your identifying information separate from your research data, but we will be able to link it to you. We’ll destroy this link after we finish collecting and analyzing the data.

Possible benefits: While there are no tangible individual benefits from this study, your responses may benefit in a contribution to knowledge about BIPOC representation in the publishing industry and open the path to future research and solutions on bridging the diversity gap. We appreciate your participation.

Estimated number of participants: 300 young adults in marginalized ethnic/racial groups

How long will it take? This survey will take you anywhere from 25-30 minutes. You are free to take breaks and come back to the survey if needed.

Costs: None.

Compensation: $5 Amazon gift, which will be sent to the email address you will provide in the survey. Compensation will be sent out in late January or early February 2023, after all data is collected.

Future research: De-identified data (all identifying information removed) may be shared with other researchers. You won’t be told specific details about these future research studies.

Confidentiality and Data Security
We’ll collect the following identifying information for the research:
- Name
- Age
- Gender
- Race/Ethnicity
- Location
- Email Address

This information is necessary to assess your eligibility and control for deception in survey responses. Your name and email address are needed to issue your $5 Amazon gift card upon completion of the survey.
**Where will data be stored?** On the servers for the online survey software (Qualtrics), and on the researchers’ password-protected computers stored on Box (a digital file sharing system).

**How long will it be kept?** Data will be kept for 5 years after the collection date.

**Who can see my data?**

- We (the researchers) will have access to identifiable data (with your name included). This is so we can analyze the data and conduct the study.
- Agencies that enforce legal and ethical guidelines, such as the Institutional Review Board (IRB).
- We may share our findings in publications or presentations. If we do, the results will be aggregated (grouped) data, with no individual results and/or de-identified data (no names, birthdate, address, etc.).] If we quote you, we’ll use pseudonyms (fake names).

**Questions about the research, complaints, or problems:** Contact Elisha Fernández via email at elishaf@byu.edu

**Questions about your rights as a research participant, complaints, or problems:**

Contact the Human Research Protections Program by phone at (801) 422-1461; or by email: BYU.HRPP@byu.edu.

Please print or save this screen if you want to be able to access the information later.

IRB #: IRB2022-417

**Agreement to Participate**

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time.

To take this survey, you must:

- Be 18-26 years old
- Identify as Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color in another marginalized ethnic/racial group
- Live in the United States at the time you take this survey
- Read Young Adult Literature

**Statement of Consent**

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free
will to participate in this study.

Name (Printed):______________ Signature ________________ Date:_______________