

**Helpful, Not Harmful**  
**An Exploration of the Discussion of LGBTQIA+ Young Adult Fiction on Bookstagram**  
**by Queer and Non-Queer Creators**

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## **Abstract and Keywords**

With the online book community and society becoming increasingly aware of the importance of reading diversely, and online amateur critics playing a major role in the purchasing behaviour of their audience, Bookstagrammers have the potential to encourage their followers to read books by and about LGBTQ+ people. Especially the Own Voices label allows Bookstagrammers to easily identify authentic stories of marginalised groups. Previous research has shown that reading diversely is important for people to see themselves and others reflected, and that amateur reviewers commonly employ a personal reviewing style. However, the way that differences in personal identity, such as being queer or not, play a role in how people approach discussing books online has not been sufficiently studied. As such, this thesis examined how online amateur critics who identify as LGBTQIA+ discuss queer YA fiction on their platforms compared to how non-LGBTQIA+ amateur critics do so. This was done by in-depth interviewing 10 queer and 4 non-queer American Bookstagrammers and coding the interview transcripts using thematic analysis.

Few nuances were identified in the way queer and non-queer Bookstagrammers discuss LGBTQIA+ YA fiction on their platforms, which were mostly rooted in their personal identity. It was found that both groups prioritised reading diversely as it allowed the queer participants to recognise themselves, while it helped non-queer Bookstagrammers understand others. The interviewees' sexuality and gender identity further played a role in deciding what to read and recommend, what to mention in reviews, and what types of representation they seek in fiction. Most notably, it informed what they shared when posting and reviewing on their platform, and how open they were about their identity online. It made the queer Bookstagrammers' discussions of queer books more authentic, whereas the non-queer creators recognised it was a privilege not to have to be open about it. In short, queer creators took into account their own identity more, whereas non-queer creators were aware of their personal privilege and aimed to uplift people with a different identity from theirs.

Therefore, the present study contributed to the lack of research into the role of identity in online amateur reviewing, showing that there were potential differences depending on gender identity and sexuality. It also explored the interpersonal dynamics between Bookstagrammers, how they give and take recommendations depending on their own and others' identity, and their feelings of responsibility and pressure to read and share diverse books. These three factors motivated them to use their influence and inform other readers of good representation. Furthermore, their passion for sharing diverse books could indicate to

publishers that diverse books are profitable, thereby incentivising them to publish more. This could make queer fiction more accessible to librarians, booksellers, and educators, and by extension to queer (and non-queer) youth. As this thesis aimed to explore initial differences between the two groups, in-depth recommendations for future research are provided, as well as potential limitations.

**KEYWORDS:** Bookstagram, LGBTQ+ Fiction, YA Fiction, Online Amateur Critics, Own Voices

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## **Preface**

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor Rian Koreman for listening to what I needed from a thesis supervisor and providing much more than that, and for allowing me to explore this very niche topic that is so close to my heart. By extension, thank you to my other lecturers for providing me with the practice, skills and knowledge I needed to complete this project.

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## 1. Introduction

Following the spike of Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, books by Black authors were topping the charts and selling out (Flood, 2020). When *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling made public statements using transphobic rhetoric, and published a novel featuring a crossdressing serial killer (Macdonald, 2020), the online book community supported and recommended transgender authors instead. Overall, there has been an increase in readership of books by minority authors (Sockel, 2020). In children's books specifically, there are now more characters of colour (21% in 2016 compared to 7% in 2013), and themes of gender and sexuality are explored more often (Short, 2018). Lastly, the use of hashtags such as #BlackBooks (224 thousand posts), #QueerBooks (79.7 thousand posts), and #LGBTBooks (116 thousand posts) on Instagram (as of June 1, 2021) is climbing. These developments signal toward heightened interest in diverse and inclusive books, including diverse Young Adult fiction.

Young Adult fiction (YA) is aimed at 12- to 18-year-olds, includes all genres, and usually features a protagonist of the same age (Peterson, 2018). The 'genre' has seen a major increase in popularity since the early 2000s, with only around 4,700 published YA titles in 2002 to over 10,000 titles in 2012. In fact, YA books are among the highest selling books of all time, including *Harry Potter*, *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight*. As explained by Rubinstein-Avila (2007), though, these popular titles nearly always feature exclusively white, straight, middle-class, thin, and able-bodied protagonists, written by authors of the same identity.

There has been a notable increase in queer representation in books over recent years, as there were only 100 titles across all genres and demographics with LGBTQ+ content published between 1969 and 1997 (Jenkins, 1998), while 47 YA books with queer main characters were published by mainstream publishers in 2014 alone (Jiménez, 2015). Nevertheless, with only 1.18% of all YA published in 2014 containing queer characters (Jiménez, 2015) while approximately 5.6% of Americans – and 15.9% of Generation Z Americans – identified as LGBT in Gallup's 2020 LGBT identification survey (Jones, 2021), there is a clear underrepresentation of queerness in YA fiction.

The lack of non-cisgender and non-heterosexual representation in YA fiction carries a plethora of unique problems. In the now foundational theory by Bishop from 1990, she addressed how fiction can, and should, function in three ways. As a mirror, allowing people to recognise themselves and their identities; as a window, making people see and understand

others; as a sliding door, giving people the opportunity to visit another world through imagination. However, many groups, including queer people, are given a mirror much less frequently than others, which Bishop (1990) argued can create feelings of inferiority among already marginalised groups. Only recently has LGBTQ+ representation in books become more varied and inclusive (Logan et al., 2014), but even then, some identities – such as bisexual men or gender nonconforming people – are still under- or unrepresented (Snyder, 2020). Clearly, more and better queer representation in media is necessary, or at least more easily accessible. As YA books are commonly read by people in an important developmental stage of life and may use books to shape their identity (Kokesh & Sternadori, 2015), it is especially important for the underrepresented LGBTQ+ community to have access to media products that represent them, and represent them well (McInroy & Craig, 2017; Waggoner, 2018). This would require awareness of YA books with LGBTQ+ themes and characters, which the online book community both has the ability and perhaps even obligation to do (Pruitt, 2016).

Indeed, the online book community has been vocal about increasing diversity in books, mostly focusing on Young Adult fiction. This is because YA fiction is the most popular ‘genre’ on Bookstagram and Booktube (Kantor, 2017; Perkins, 2017), likely since its users are commonly in their teens or early twenties, also referred to as Generation Z, and thus well-versed with social media (Ahmed, 2019; Parker & Igielnik, 2020). A key term in this discussion on diversifying bookshelves is Own Voices, which was coined by queer YA author Corinne Duyvis to describe the concept of “marginalized characters written by marginalized authors” (Kirch, 2020, para. 27). Since its coinage, the term Own Voices has been increasingly searched on Google, especially in the OwnVoices or #OwnVoices format and in combination with ‘books’ (Google Trends, 2021). The increased usage of the Own Voices label online indicates that people are also increasingly interested in identifying and reading books about marginalised characters written by authors of the same identity.

Despite the positive intentions of this term, though, a part of the book community has been voicing concerns surrounding it. When author and founder of LGBTQReads Dahlia Adler was asked for Own Voices book recommendations with pansexual main characters on the LGBTQReads Tumblr page, she replied:

I think there’s something extremely problematic about making readers dig into authors’ sexualities. And I get wanting to support #ownvoices - obviously I do - but as



someone on the author side, I'm seeing it cause a lot of harm among authors who can't come out but now feel they have to. (Adler, 2017, para. 2).

To add to Adler's (2017) argument, Ellis (2017) mentioned that although the idea behind Own Voices is helpful and allows readers to identify books that best represent marginalised groups, there are complexities when it comes to LGBTQ+ representation specifically. For one, it is indeed questionable to demand queer authors to be out about their identity for their books to be considered reflective of the queer experience. Moreover, the community is too varied to identify limits to the meaning of Own Voices, and some identities overlap – as Adler (2017) also mentions, female pansexual main characters are often written by female queer, bisexual, or sapphic authors. Although they experience similar attractions, their identities are not entirely the same. Clearly, the discussions of LGBTQ+ representation in books, especially on bookish social media, require nuance and sensitivity, especially considering the power that amateur reviewers have.

As online amateur critics, members of the book community on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok play a powerful role in the popularity and sales of specific book titles, including those about and by queer people. This is because digital consumers value recommendations by Internet critics (Verboord, 2010), and reviews by fellow consumers are especially influential on people's purchasing behaviour (Chen, 2008; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). In other forms of media, like films and videogames, amateur critics have consistently focused reviews on their personal and emotional experience with the content (De Jong & Burgers, 2013; Santos et al., 2019), which therefore may reveal and explain a difference in the way personal identity, including gender and sexuality, plays a role when Bookstagram reviewers inform their audiences of queer literature.

Combining the proliferation of interest in diverse books and the significant role of amateur critics in consumers' purchasing behaviour, as well as the tendency for amateur reviewers to employ a personal reviewing style, the present study will aim to answer: how do online amateur book critics who identify as LGBTQ+ discuss YA queer fiction compared to how non-LGBTQ+ amateur critics discuss it? While amateur critics do rely on their personal experiences and emotions when reviewing books (De Jong & Burgers, 2013; Santos et al., 2019), there is a lack of research into the role that a reviewer's personal identity plays in reviewing books or other forms of entertainment, specifically in the context of LGBTQ+ identities when reviewing queer media, which the present study aims to contribute to. Moreover, with the online book community only being a relatively recent phenomenon

(Perkins, 2017), there is not much information available on the dynamics of the bookish communities on social media platforms and how they contribute to the electronic word of mouth surrounding books. Furthermore, although it is known that (queer) representation in fiction aimed at young people is important (Banks, 2009; Bishop, 1990; Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Bold & Phillips, 2019; Booth & Narayan, 2020; Logan et al., 2014), the present study aims to explore why online amateur critics find this important and how they approach it in their posts and reviews.

As amateur critics possess an influential role (Chen, 2008; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Verboord, 2010), these different voices can inform other readers, but also parties such as publishers, booksellers, librarians, and educators, about queer literature, and by extension help people diversify their bookshelves and marginalised readers access stories they can identify with. Beyond that, encouraging inclusivity is important for other reasons. Heterosexism and homophobia have been ingrained in American schools and other institutions for a long time, which makes school a difficult experience for queer children and teenagers. This results in absenteeism, dropouts, and mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and suicidality (Logan et al., 2014), as well as lower levels of literacy and voluntary engagement with books (Gangi, 2008, as cited in Hughes-Hassell et al., 2009). When children see themselves reflected in the books they read in school, they can hopefully avoid such risks.

Taking all this into consideration, the present study will first explore the currently available information on amateur critics and the value of book reviews, social media and the online book community, YA fiction, and LGBTQ+ representation in media. This will be followed by an elaboration on the research design employed, which concerns in-depth interviews conducted with 10 queer and 4 non-queer Bookstagrammers, and how the data from these interviews was analysed. The results from the data analysis are presented according to a thematic approach, and the concluding chapter will provide an answer to the research question, as well as introduce the study's limitations and potential future research avenues.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

To inform the topics relevant for this research, the following sections will discuss the role amateur critics play, including in the (book) purchasing behaviour of consumers, and the social media and reading habits of Generation Z. Then, the online book community will be elaborated on, followed by a discussion on what representation and diversity in fiction mean for readers, and specifically what reading and discussing LGBTQ+ fiction can and should do.

### **2.1. Amateur Critics and Electronic Word of Mouth**

Critics inform the general public of the quality of hedonic entertainment products such as books, meaning these critics are assumed to be opinion leaders and play a major role in determining the success of these products (Clement et al., 2007). Although this specifically referred to professional critics, amateur critics have also been reviewing media products. According to De Jong and Burgers (2013), professional movie reviewers aim to inform audiences using neutral language and a third-person, objective perspective, whereas consumer reviewers focus on recommendations by using evaluative language and a first-person perspective. Additionally, professionals give factual information and place the movie in a broad context, whilst consumers discuss the movie in the context of their personal identity. Santos et al. (2019) identified that professional videogame reviewers tend to use a detached writing style, while amateurs use emotional and occasionally extreme language. With Bookstagram being a more casual platform compared to dedicated reviewing websites, their style of discussing books on the platform is potentially similar to that of amateur critics.

Furthermore, reviews by these different types of critics are perceived differently. It has previously been confirmed that people tend to attach greater importance to consumer reviews than to reviews by professional critics (Chen, 2008; Tsao, 2014; Verboord, 2010), indicating that perhaps amateur critics such as Bookstagrammers play an equally or more influential role in encouraging sales. As found by Verboord (2010), those who positively rate the information available on the Internet find recommendations by Internet critics especially valuable compared to expert and peer critics. Since Bookstagram users regularly consult recommendations on social media and are proficient with the digital environment, it can be assumed that they rate online information positively, and thus find Internet critics to be more valuable. Consumer reviews are especially considered to be helpful and encourage purchasing behaviour when the reviews are highly positive and properly justify the high rating (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Korfiatis et al., 2012), when there are many reviews

available (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Chen et al., 2004), and when the reviewer is trusted by the readers (Hsu et al., 2013). More specifically, trust is both relevant for reviews to be considered helpful, and for the development of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) behaviour (Cheung et al., 2009; Chu & Kim, 2011; Hsu et al., 2013). Additionally, as found by Clement et al. (2007), it is especially extreme opinions and fierce discussions among critics, and the eWOM effects that stem from that, which facilitate increased sales for books. The increase in book sales following eWOM is argued to stem from herd behaviour, where consumers use cues from the 'herd' to gather information about a product (Chen, 2008). With Bookstagrammers consistently sharing posts of books, they can be strong tastemakers and encourage book-buying behaviour among people that already enjoy purchasing books.

The eWOM behaviour of posting, sharing, and following consumer reviews is led by additional factors beyond trust. Firstly, two types of interpersonal influence encourage eWOM behaviour, namely normative influence, which is someone's willingness to follow the norm or the behaviour of others, and informational influence, which concerns taking decisions based on information collected from peers (Chu & Kim, 2011; Mishra et al., 2018). Bookstagram is a suitable platform for the latter, with people using recommendation lists and posts to determine which books they want to read. Secondly, according to the Information Adoption Model (Erkan & Evans, 2016), social media eWOM grows when the communication is high in quality, credibility, and usefulness, and information adoption is high. As Bookstagrammers are avid readers dedicated to creating bookish content, it is likely that others perceive their content as high quality and credible, making their recommendations more trustworthy as well.

Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) explain that people have different motives to participate in eWOM. Some are mostly driven by economic or social incentives (self-interested helpers), others are mostly concerned for other consumers and sometimes other companies (consumer advocates and true altruists), and some are motivated by all of these factors (multiple-motive consumers). Consumers with multiple strong motives engage the most in eWOM communication, whereas consumer advocates and true altruists engage the least. This would suggest Bookstagrammers to be multiple-motive consumers, as it is an inherently social platform, it can potentially provide them with economic incentives like free books, and users have concern for other consumers as they prioritise diverse reads. Being multiple-motive consumers, it is expected that they engage in eWOM frequently.

Contradicting the idea that trust is a key driver in following reviews, Erkan and Evans (2018) found that in fact, anonymous reviews on shopping websites are seen as more influential on purchase intentions, rather than friends' recommendations on social media. Through interviews, they determined that this was because of the following four reasons. Firstly, there is a lot of information available, which is more valuable than a recommendation from one friend. Secondly, shopping sites have easily accessible information, whereas on social media it is more difficult to find. Thirdly, shopping websites are focused on and dedicated to providing reviews. Fourthly, website reviews are much more detailed and address pros and cons. However, these four findings rather indicate the power that Bookstagram can have – with the millions of posts under the Bookstagram hashtag (61.1 million as of June 1, 2021), a huge amount of information is available. It is a focused and dedicated area of Instagram, easily accessible through hashtags once someone becomes aware of the community's existence, and as such does not require much work to find. Although not everyone uses Bookstagram for reviews, the accumulation of content provides multiple perspectives, and followers can easily reach out for more information via comments or direct messages.

As such, amateur critics are effective in encouraging purchasing decisions, and the volume of eWOM correlates with the popularity of entertainment products. This confirms that online critics dedicated to discussing and recommending books can influence book purchases and reading behaviour. This gives Bookstagrammers a powerful position, especially when considering that they have access to many different dedicated reviewing platforms such as Amazon, Goodreads, and The Storygraph, as well as social networking sites like YouTube, Twitter and Instagram. However, for these creators to be influential, they need to be proficient when using these platforms. This can be assumed to be the case for Bookstagrammers, who are often relatively young and belong to the digitally native Generation Z (Perkins, 2017).

## **2.2. Generation Z, Social Media Use, and Reading Habits**

Especially present on social media is Generation Z, though researchers do not yet agree on the make-up of this generation. It is a matter of years, as some argue Generation Z starts with those born in 1997 (American Psychological Association, 2018; Bresman & Rao, 2017; Parker & Igielnik, 2020), while others take 1995 as the starting point (Patel, 2017; Yoesoef, 2020), and some go as far back as 1993 (Statistics Canada, 2015). More broadly,

Gen Z can be identified as being born in the early-to-mid 1990s up to early-to-mid 2000s (Latha & Padma, 2019; Rahmat et al., 2018).

According to the Pew Research Center (Parker & Igielnik, 2020), who analysed generational trends in the United States, Gen Z'ers are markedly different from Millennials on some points, but similar in other ways. Gen Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse, and well-educated generation yet. Similar to Millennials, they are progressive and positively assess increasing societal diversity. Additionally, Gen Z'ers are most likely to say that allowing same-sex marriage is good for society, rather than feeling indifferent or being against it, and they are the most supportive of and comfortable with the use of gender-neutral pronouns for others and themselves.

Generation Z are considered to be digital natives, as they were born after the Internet was available for public use. They are the most active generation on social media and other websites – 89% of 13-to 17-year-olds mentioned they use the Internet either almost constantly or several times a day (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). According to a survey conducted by Ahmed (2019), 99% of Gen Z'ers own a smartphone, and most use it for 3 to 8 hours daily. Almost 52% of the respondents access social media platforms several times a day, with the majority spending 5 to 10 hours on social media on a daily basis. However, they are also very conscious of this – between 70% and 80% of the respondents admitted to finding their overall Internet and social media usage excessive.

With a major part of their day spent online, it would be expected that Gen Z'ers spend less time on other common hobbies, including reading for pleasure. According to the Library Journal's Generational Reading Survey (Rea, 2020), this is indeed true – over 25% of young people state they do not have time to read for pleasure compared to under 15% of Millennials. However, this is not because they do not want to. In fact, many actively look for good books (50.8%), and they are the most likely to enjoy talking about books with others and planning which books to read in the future (49.4% and 44.6% respectively). This makes Bookstagram a great platform for them, as they can easily find people to discuss books with.

As further found by Rea (2020), Gen Z finds it incredibly important to see their own cultural background and personal identity reflected in books, while also wanting to prioritise reading about cultures and identities different from their own. However, Gen Z also finds it the most difficult to find books that reflect their own experience, potentially because they are the most racially and ethnically diverse generation. This indicates the usefulness of a platform like Bookstagram, as well as the importance of easily accessible books with a broad range of

stories. As argued by Yoesoef (2020), the current generation's world is mediated by the Internet, where they have been creating their own reading culture that is not dictated by bestsellers, but by anything they can access from their smartphones. This would also partially explain Generation Z's genre preferences, which has the most diversity of all generations – YA fiction tops the list, which explains its popularity on Bookstagram, alongside fantasy, but they also commonly show interest in romance, horror, science fiction, short story collections, and graphic novels (Rea, 2020). Additionally, although content and price are important in dictating book choices for all generations, cover art is also leading to Gen Z – with Bookstagram being such a visual platform that emphasises the cover art of books through photo and video, it is an excellent platform to encourage cover-motivated purchases as well.

Lastly, considering the way that generations find books, Rea (2020) states all generations get most of their book recommendations from friends or relatives. However, after that, Gen Z is most likely to get their recommendations from social media, with Instagram being named as the most influential, whereas older generations either browse Amazon or bestseller lists. This further confirms Yoesoef's (2020) argument that Gen Z has indeed begun to create its own culture surrounding the act of reading. After Millennials, they are second most likely to rate and review books online or recommend books to friends.

To summarise, Generation Z is the most active on the Internet and on social media, would still like to read even if they do so less, enjoys discussing books with others, is rarely influenced by bestseller lists, gets their recommendations from friends and social media, has a broad taste in genres, and likes to see both their own and other identities represented in books. As such, if the most active Internet users are also the ones who enjoy discussing books the most, and who seek diverse books, it is not difficult to explain the popularity of bookish social media communities and dedicated online reviewing platforms.

### **2.3. Online Book Community**

The online bookish (“of or relating to books; fond of books and reading,” Merriam-Webster, n.d.) community is present on almost every social media platform, where readers share book-focused videos, photos and textposts. As defined by Perkins (2017), BookTube is a “sub-community within YouTube that shares information about YA books via vlogs” (p. 352). Further explained by Perkins (2017), the community grew during the 2010s, and although YA is commonly the focus, it is available to any type of reader. Reading and enjoying books is the basis for connection between people within the community, which has

allowed reading to grow from a solitary activity into a community event and has encouraged discussion among readers. This is done through different kinds of content, including book reviews, book hauls, and monthly reading plans (Gold, 2020).

Although many platforms have decently sized bookish communities, Instagram is among the largest. As discussed by Lo (2020), BookTube centres the content of the books, whereas Bookstagram is focused on the visual, aesthetic aspects. Reviews on Instagram are shorter, which allows buzz to grow much faster since consuming a single photo takes little time. A beautiful picture catching someone's attention could be sufficient, influencing users' reading and purchasing behaviour and impacting the publishing industry at large. Nevertheless, Bookstagrammers and BookTubers tend to emphasise the community aspect. As discussed by Hammoudi (2018), adolescents are drawn to Bookstagram because they experience social pleasure from the supportive community, it allows them to branch out their reading tastes, and it has encouraged readers to pay more attention and be more engaged when reading. There are thus multiple reasons for being a part of the bookish community, and there are also different kinds of benefits that members can get from it, which draw mostly adolescents to increasingly create bookish social media accounts and discussing the books they read online (Gold, 2020).

As stated by some of the top Bookstagrammers in an article by Publishers Weekly (Kantor, 2017), although users do read and share different genres appropriate for different age ranges, Young Adult fiction is the most prominent on the platform (as also mentioned by Perkins, 2017). The #Bookstagram tag on Instagram has over 61 million tags, with #YABooks having 1.4 million hits and #YoungAdultBooks over 560 thousand (as of June 1, 2021). The users on Bookstagram and BookTube are often in their teens or early twenties, making them members of the broader definition of Generation Z born in the mid 90's up to the mid 00s. Their age partially explains the popularity of YA fiction on those platforms.

#### **2.4. Young Adult Fiction**

Young Adult fiction, commonly referred to as simply 'YA,' is rather difficult to define, as YA has a much broader readership than adolescents alone (Peterson, 2018) with over 55% of YA books being purchased by people aged 18 and over, of which 78% are purchasing books for themselves (Bowker Market Research, 2012 as cited in Publishers Weekly, 2012). Generally, though, the Young Adult section can be seen as books aimed at 12- to 18-year-olds, usually featuring protagonists of the same age (Peterson, 2018).



Although critics disagree on the exact aim of YA, the storylines often include discussions of personal identity and navigating institutions and the world, characters that reflect the teenage experience and that allow readers to develop beyond their personal experience, and themes of global issues and how to handle them (Bold, 2019).

Fiction specifically marketed toward young adults was not always available. According to Cart (2010), early 1900s teenagers were still regarded as children, and as such, they did not have a literary category aimed specifically at them. Only throughout the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century did it become clear that they had different needs and wants. Although some earlier authors could be considered writing for younger people, such as Louisa May Alcott, it was only around the 1930s that Young Adult fiction closer to its current conceptualisation became more popular, and the American Literature Association began to publish annual lists of the best books for young readers.

Summarised by Bold (2019), YA fiction became more mainstream in the publishing industry in the 1960s and 70s. The turning point was *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton, which was published in 1967, and “changed the way that teenagers read and the way authors wrote for teenagers” (p. 25). The success of *The Outsiders* showed that there was a market among teenagers for books for and about them, and that they wanted to read stories about personal and societal problems. This was followed by a revival of light-hearted romance novels, and although these were popular among teenagers, they were also highly heteronormative and enforced gender stereotypes. These books remained popular into the 90s, when genre fiction became the preferred reading material, with popular fantasy and dystopian series like *Twilight*, *The Hunger Games* and *Harry Potter* breaking records. These blockbuster series proved that YA was a profitable market, and YA novels have consistently been among the most popular books since. Realistic fiction also made its return in the YA romance and contemporary genres, most notably by authors like John Green.

The YA fiction market has been developing rapidly since. Current trends as noticed by librarians, authors, and readers include the rise of YA graphic novels and non-fiction books, a focus on current social issues like the climate crisis, and a demand for escapist fiction (Australian Writers’ Centre, 2020), as well as stories centring music and musicians, girl squads, and Black and queer teenagers (Deuell, 2020). According to Publishers Weekly, YA book *The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes* by Suzanne Collins outsold the adult literary historical fiction title *Where the Crawdads Sing* by Delia Owens by 170,000 print copies in the first half of 2020 (Maher, 2020). Over the entirety of 2020, *Midnight Sun* by Stephanie

Meyer was the second most popular book with over 1.3 million copies sold (Maher, 2021). Clearly, YA books have a strong position within the publishing industry, but it has also been criticised for lacking representation and adhering to the overwhelmingly white, heteronormative, thin, and able-bodied norm – especially earlier titles (Rubinstein-Avila, 2007).

## **2.5. Representation in YA Fiction**

According to Jenkins (1998), there were only around 100 titles with LGBTQ+ content published between 1969 and 1997, and she predicted that queer representation in traditionally published YA titles would not catch up with self-publications because mass market books had to be deemed appropriate for teenagers by adults. Although this was an understandable prediction at the time, LGBTQ+ representation in YA fiction has, in fact, boomed in recent years. In 2010, mainstream publishing houses published 11 books with queer characters, whereas in 2014 this was already 47 (Jiménez, 2015). On Goodreads, a list of 2020 LGBTQ+ YA releases currently contains over 200 books.

The changing nature of LGBTQ+ fiction is also visible in the way the queer experience is approached in fiction. As discussed by Logan et al. (2014), the many different experiences within the LGBTQ+ community have not always been properly reflected. In the 1970s and 80s, queer books focused on “homosexual visibility” (p. 31) – the focus of these narratives was on the coming-out process, and on the sexual identity itself, which created a lack of in-depth characterisation beyond sexuality. This was followed by the “gay assimilation” (p. 31) trend during the 90s and 00s, where characters would just be queer without that part of their identity playing a major role. More recently, books are focusing on “queer consciousness and community,” (p. 31) with characters being fully developed, living full lives with supportive surroundings, and their identity not always being the main storyline.

Moreover, the publishing industry and readers alike are becoming aware of the need to read diverse stories. This can be seen in the proliferation of the label ‘Own Voices,’ which was coined by queer YA author Corinne Duyvis in 2015 to describe the concept of “marginalized characters written by marginalized authors” (Kirch, 2020, para. 27). Since then, the term Own Voices has been increasingly searched on Google, especially in combination with ‘books’ (Google Trends, 2021). The label is largely used to identify books that allows readers to gain insight into the experiences of others, which helps them challenge prejudiced views (Booth & Narayan, 2020). As it has previously been shown that reading

inclusively can reduce queerphobic behaviours and generate higher levels of empathy (Blackburn & Clark, 2011), Own Voices books have the potential to encourage understanding of others as these stories are considered to be more authentic and authoritative (Booth & Narayan, 2020).

However, the concept of Own Voices also puts pressure on the shoulders of marginalised authors. Booth and Narayan (2020) argued that expecting marginalised authors to educate others with their art is unfair, as this is not expected from non-marginalised authors. By interviewing seven Australian Own Voices authors (Black and Indigenous people of colour, LGBTQ+, and disabled authors specifically), they attempted to discover how Own Voices had affected them personally. They found that all authors considered their books to be some form of education to outsiders, but not all of them perceived this as positive. Five authors were hesitantly positive about the educational quality of their work, though only two consciously wanted to educate readers about their identities, whereas three others did not. The other two authors considered this to be negative, as the focus on education could enforce them to act as role models and to write a 'moral' or 'issue' into their work, thereby devaluing the richness and quality of the story. Moreover, as discussed by Adler (2017) and Ellis (2017), Own Voices is especially complicated for queer authors, as it requires coming out even when they are not ready to do so. Therefore, although the label can encourage people to read more authentically diverse stories, it is not ideal.

Even without considering Own Voices, queer YA fiction is not sufficiently catching up. As found by Snyder (2020), in ten 2019 LGBTQ+ themed YA novels, lesbian women were well represented, whereas many other groups (including gay and bisexual men, and gender nonconforming people) were under- or unrepresented. She concluded that the increased number of books featuring queer characters and the way they are more appropriately represented is a positive development, but that more can and should be done. It is not sufficient compared to the reality of the LGBTQ+ community, who are multifaceted, intersectional people and have lives beyond their sexual identity. The lack of intersectionality is addressed by Jiménez (2015), who showed that of 14 award-winning LGBTQ+ books, nearly all were written by men, only four featured non-White protagonists, and most excluded female or gender nonconforming queer people.

Furthermore, in the US and the UK, 90% of (bestselling) YA fiction overwhelmingly reflected societal norms of cisgender heterosexuality (Bold & Phillips, 2019). YA is a reflection of contemporary Western culture, which means that characters fitting those

Western norms (white, able-bodied, thin, cisgender, and heterosexual) are constantly, and positively, represented. That also means that stories which do not fit the norm do not receive frequent positive feedback and affirmation. This creates a power imbalance that marginalises certain identities. In other traditional media such as television and film, queer characters are generally stereotyped and represented as one-dimensional, often only belong to a select few letters in the LGBTQ+ acronym (McInroy & Craig, 2017), and are consistently portrayed using harmful tropes (Waggoner, 2018).

Even when these marginalised identities are featured in books, not all representation is created equal. Crisp (2018) discussed how children's books featuring LGBTQ+ characters rely on harmful language, tropes or stereotypes. Representation may only be implied or included as an afterthought. Crisp (2018) argued that this is harmful, as it makes it difficult for young queer readers to identify the books they might recognise themselves in, and it puts an expectation on readers to gather and interpret subtextual clues about a character's sexuality. This makes them carry the work, whilst non-queer readers will not feel like representation is forced onto them. This highlights the importance of making characters queer on-page and reading more than one type of LGBTQ+ narrative – reading difficult coming-out stories is important, but equally important is reading books with queer characters thriving. Thus, even though representation is getting better, it is not always accurate or respectful, which could have harmful consequences for those consuming queer media. This requires careful considerations of those influencing young people to pick up certain books, including librarians, educators, and, indeed, bookish social media creators.

## **2.6. Reading, Discussing and Recommending LGBTQ+ Fiction**

Reading, discussing and recommending LGBTQ+ fiction is incredibly important, especially during child and teenage years, for multiple reasons. Bishop's (1990) famous mirror, window, sliding door analogy suggested that books can function as mirrors, which allows children to see and understand themselves, as windows, to see and understand others, and sliding doors, to become a part of another world through imagination. Bishop (1990) suggested that young people who cannot recognise themselves in books may feel devalued in society, and those who see themselves but not others will fail to understand how diverse the world is and may see others as less valuable. According to Bold & Phillips (2019), when minority groups find themselves represented in YA fiction, they will experience a sense of authenticity and relatability, which leads to a more positive experience with inclusive books.

Furthermore, introducing representation in YA fiction is necessary because children are more motivated to read and engage with texts that reflect their own experiences (Gangi, 2008, as cited in Hughes-Hassell et al., 2009). If queer children cannot recognise themselves in the literature they read, they are likely to be put off reading in the long run, thereby risking lower levels of literacy, reading skills, and reading motivation. Trivialising the queer experience or not properly addressing certain issues can also cause deeper harm such as school dropouts and mental health problems (Clark & Blackburn, 2009; Logan et al., 2014), which makes it important for schools to properly read and discuss queer fiction. Clark and Blackburn (2009) stated that the institutional homophobia and heteronormativity in schools can be overcome by reading a variety of different queer narratives, helping students position themselves as something other than homophobic, choosing books of high quality and allowing students to choose for themselves, and encouraging a wide range of responses to the stories. When it comes to education, representation in fiction also has other benefits. Reading and assigning books with prevalent LGBTQ+ themes can make teaching more inclusive and queer-friendly, and improve tolerant sex and sexuality education in schools (Bittner, 2012). This is especially the case when assigning recently written YA books that feature positive queer experiences. YA titles can be a source of information on identity, stimulate discussion on LGBTQ+ identities, and allow students to both learn from and enjoy reading books.

With these arguments in mind, it may be perceived as overwhelming to pick the right books to read. As argued by Banks (2009) and Logan et al. (2014), it is important to expose (queer) youth to literature that represents their diverse stories and allows them to discuss and reflect on their social experience. When selecting queer books to discuss in the classroom, certain aspects should be considered beyond those books adding to the curriculum and having literary merit (Logan et al., 2014). These include promoting social justice and equity values while acknowledging power imbalances, discouraging the perseverance of stereotypes, showing proud and resilient characters, addressing normal sexual behaviours among queer teenagers, and challenging heteronormativity.

Although these approaches to encouraging reading LGBTQ+ books and doing so in a correct and harmless manner were based in education, they can also easily be extended to discussions of LGBTQ+ YA fiction on social media platforms. The online book community foregrounding books with prominent LGBTQ+ themes could help queer people find relatable fiction, which traditional recommendation channels such as libraries, bookstores and traditional media have been failing to do (Chapman, 2013; Chapman & Birdi, 2016; Jiménez,

2015). By extension, the community could assist literacy education, and encourage younger people to enjoy the activity of reading and start discussions on the value and quality of certain queer representations.

Overall, it has become clear that representation, and specifically LGBTQ+ representation, is highly valuable, since it allows marginalised people to recognise themselves in fiction and provides non-queer people to gain more understanding and empathy toward the LGBTQIA+ community (Bishop, 1990; Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Booth & Narayan, 2020; Bold & Phillips, 2019). Being able to recognise themselves provides marginalised youth a chance to improve their literacy skills (Hughes-Hassell et al., 2009) and avoid deeper harm such as school dropouts, absenteeism, and suicidality (Logan et al., 2014). Even though queer people are still insufficiently represented in YA fiction and other forms of media (Bold & Phillips, 2019; Logan et al., 2014; McInroy & Craig, 2017; Snyder, 2020; Waggoner, 2018), it is improving (Jiménez, 2015; Logan et al., 2014). As it has been shown that amateur critics and eWOM are highly valuable when it comes to consumers' purchasing behaviour and their evaluation of entertainment products (Chen, 2008; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Clement, 2007; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Tsao, 2014; Verboord, 2010), Bookstagrammers can play a key role in encouraging people to read diversely, pushing the publishing industry to be more inclusive, and calling out harmful representation or messaging when necessary. For that reason, interviews with both queer and non-queer Bookstagrammers were conducted to examine how they experience Bookstagram and how LGBTQ+ YA fiction is discussed on the platform.

### **3. Research Design**

In the following sections, the main methodology will be explained. Information on the data collection, the sample, and interview content is also provided, followed by an explanation of how the data was analysed. Finally, the ethical implications of the present study will be addressed.

#### **3.1. Methodology**

Qualitative research aims to “understand social phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (Boeije, 2010, p. 11) by studying the people most involved in those phenomena. The way online amateur book critics discuss YA fiction is a form of meaning-making of social constructs, which can be exposed by qualitative research. The qualitative method chosen to answer whether queer and non-queer critics differ in their discussion of LGBTQ+ YA fiction was in-depth interviews. As discussed by Johnson (2011), in-depth interviewing is used to seek deeper information, and is fitting for projects where the information sought is complex. It can explore broader contexts, discover variety in experiences, and uncover underlying motivations and opinions in detail. With the wide variety of experiences in the LGBTQ+ community, in-depth interviews were considered to be the best suited method to explore this. Additionally, I was able to use my experience as a member of both the LGBTQ+ and online book community to connect to the interviewees, which facilitated building rapport and understanding their vocabulary.

The interviews were conducted via the online video conferencing platform Zoom, due to the distance and the ongoing pandemic. No significant problems were experienced, which was expected as the participants were all digital natives (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). They were asked to find a quiet area so they could share their experiences in privacy. The interviews were semi-structured, which allowed exploring similar topics with all interviewees, while also providing freedom to explore other topics when they came up. As the interviews progressed, the topic list (Appendix B) developed to be more thorough and explore interesting findings from previous interviews more in depth. The freedom to explore could have created reliability issues, but following Silverman’s (2011) argument, reliability was reached by pre-testing the topic list, taking notes during the interviews to ensure any interesting comments were further explored and during the coding to justify certain decisions, and recording and transcribing the audio to ensure credible results.

### 3.2. Data Collection

Recruitment was done in a combined purposive and snowball sampling method. Non-probability sampling was considered appropriate for the present study as the results were not meant to be generalisable (Sarstedt et al., 2017). According to Sarstedt et al. (2017), purposive sampling involves the researcher selecting participants based on the researcher's expertise. As a member of both relevant communities, my personal expertise allowed me to determine which participants would provide sufficient insight. With the initially recruited participants also having expertise on the topic, they could provide connections via snowball sampling. Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) state that this sampling method, by gaining referrals among people who share characteristics, is especially well suited for studies of a sensitive nature, such as the experience of being queer or discussing queer literature online.

When sampling participants, various criteria were employed. Firstly, the interviewees had to be based in the United States or Canada, as their native English tongue would facilitate the interviewing process, and the majority of research on Generation Z and reading diversely was conducted in North America (Ahmed, 2019; Parker & Igielnik, 2020; Rea, 2020). As such, the participants also needed to be members of Generation Z (18 to 26 years old), regularly read YA fiction (at least twice a month), and feature LGBTQ+ books on their platform (at least four times a year). Account size was not relevant. Requests for interviewees with these sampling criteria were posted at three different occasions on my main feed on Bookstagram (Appendix C). These posts reached my own audience, who shared the posts to their stories, thereby spreading the message to their audience. In addition, at the end of the conversation, interviewees were asked to recommend other creators by sending them the post with requirements and sharing the post to their stories. Others sharing the post to stories appeared to be the most fruitful method.

Specifically, the original participant request was posted on Instagram and Twitter on Saturday March 6, 2021. This sampled the three participants whose interviews helped refine the topic list (GS, SG, and MW), as well as an additional three participants, one who reached out directly from the post (JH), and two who had been found via snowball sampling (EM and BO). To reach more people, a second, slightly adapted post was uploaded to Instagram on Tuesday April 20, 2021. This post directly sampled four participants, mostly because the age limit had been changed from 25 to 26 years old. Two of them were indeed 26 (BD and MT), while the other two had not seen the initial post (JB and DW).



Although the minimum of ten participants had been met and saturation had largely been achieved, there were some topics that needed more information. A third call (see Appendix C) was posted on Monday May 10, 2021, asking for at least two additional interviewees. This post attracted four potential participants, and since having more varied insights into the additional in-depth questions would allow for better exploration of the new questions, it was decided to interview them all (MD, MM, R, and NG). The final sample consisted of mostly Bookstagrammers that I was not following initially, and two interviewees I had been following for a few weeks but had not been in direct contact with before. This allowed me to not be biased in the interview questions, as no prior assumptions about participants and their reading behaviour had been formed.

### **3.3. Sample**

The interviews were conducted with one Canadian and thirteen American Bookstagram content creators. Of the fourteen participants, ten identified as LGBTQ+, and four identified as heterosexual and cisgender. The discrepancy between groups occurred initially because LGBTQ+ Bookstagrammers showed more interest in participating. Although it is unclear why this was the case, it may stem from the fact that non-queer creators felt unqualified to discuss the topic. After the initial ten interviews, six participants were LGBTQ+ and four were not. However, based on these interviews, it had become clear that there were relatively few discernible differences in the participants' approaches to reading queer fiction and discussing it on Bookstagram. Additionally, whereas the non-LGBTQ+ group were all heterosexual, cisgender women, there was a wider – and expected – variety in identities in the LGBTQ+ group. Because these differences among the queer participants could provide interesting insights, it was decided to not specify which identities were needed for the final four interviews.

Of the 10 LGBTQ+ interviewees, seven identified as cisgender women, meaning that in total, eleven of the fourteen interviewees identified as such, and used she/her pronouns. One interviewee identified as non-binary (they/them), and two had not yet set on a specific label, though they both named what they currently used, namely non-binary (they/them) and genderqueer (she/they) respectively. In terms of sexuality, nine interviewees currently used a single label – straight (N = 4), bisexual (N = 3), lesbian (N = 1), and queer (N = 1). The other five used multiple labels in different ways. These were biromantic greysexual, biromantic demisexual, panromantic demisexual, queer asexual, and panromantic asexual. Nearly all

interviewees, including two from the non-LGBTQ+ group, did mention that they would be open to, or were in the process of, adjusting their labels to suit them best – this indicated an understanding of gender and sexuality as fluid rather than set.

Participants were all members of the broadest definition of Generation Z (Latha & Padma, 2019; Rahmat et al., 2018), being between 18 and 26 years old. This included the intended YA demographic and those a bit older, but this did not pose a significant problem, as the readership of YA is frequently over 18 years old (Peterson, 2018), and all participants frequently read and posted about YA books. The sample included a range of account sizes, ranging between 150 and 3,000 followers, meaning they had different levels of engagement on their platforms. Finally, the creators discussed queer books on their platforms more regularly than had initially been requested, since they had all recently featured at least one LGBTQ+ book on their feed. An in-depth overview of the sample has been provided in Appendix A. All participants are referred to by initials, rather than pseudonyms, as some of the interviewees specifically requested this, and the majority of the other interviewees did not mind however they were referred to. For consistency, it was decided to refer to all participants with initials – those who had not given explicit permission in the interview to use their initials were contacted about this and gave their approval.

### **3.4. Interview Content and Operationalisation**

To establish rapport, the first topic of discussion during all interviews was the participants' personal reading and social media habits, which I could discuss myself as well. These were meant to provide context to their answers and establish how they used the platform. Following these simpler questions, they reflected on their role on the platform, for example as a reviewer and an influencer (Chen, 2008; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Verboord, 2010). Based on their answers, a discussion was started regarding the responsibility that comes with having a platform, and how they considered this in the context of book recommendations. This could provide insight into whether Bookstagrammers wanted to position themselves as a safe space for queer people and share books that people can see themselves and others reflected in, as Bishop (1990) argued is necessary.

Next, their experience with representation in YA fiction (Jiménez, 2015; McInroy & Craig, 2017; Snyder, 2020), and more specifically their experience with LGBTQ+ themed YA fiction (Bittner, 2012; Hughes-Hassel et al., 2009) was discussed. This informed whether both queer and non-queer Bookstagrammers found the current amount and accessibility of

queer representation sufficient, or if the publishing industry has yet to catch up. As the theory suggested that it is the latter (Bold & Phillips, 2019; Jiménez, 2015; Snyder, 2020), and that the available representation often still relies on harmful stereotypes and tropes (Crisp, 2018; Waggoner, 2018), this was explored as well. Lastly, as it would be the most complex and personal topic, the role their gender identity and sexuality played in their reading and reviewing habits were discussed. As there is a lack of theory surrounding the way one's personal identity informs their reading, recommending and reviewing habits, these questions were rooted in exploring this in its broadest sense.

The impact of one's personal identity on their Bookstagram behaviour also appeared to be largely related to Own Voices, and as such, one question on that label was included. However, based on the findings of the first ten interviews, it was decided to explore Own Voices more deeply in four additional interviews. The new questions aimed to explore both the positive and negative implications of the label, as experienced by both queer and non-queer Bookstagrammers. This was because the Own Voices label has made it easier to identify authentic stories by marginalised authors (Kirch, 2020) and encouraged education and empathy (Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Booth & Narayan, 2020), but it has also forced authors out of the closet and caused harm (Adler, 2017; Albertalli, 2020; Ellis, 2017), and put more pressure on LGBTQ+ authors (Booth & Narayan, 2020). The questions were thus rooted in the value of Own Voices compared to non-Own Voices stories and reviews, which had come up in previous interviews as well (see Appendix B for the fully developed topic list).

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

Once the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed verbatim. The recorded audio was uploaded into the automatic transcription programme Otter.ai. The automatically generated transcriptions were corrected by listening to the recording and editing simultaneously, which allowed for thorough transcription and minimised the chance at mistakes. After transcription was complete, the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. As explained by Boeije (2010), thematic analysis results in a few categories with several subcategories to understand the overarching themes of the topic by studying the segments of collected data. Thematic analysis is especially effective to study the large amounts of text resulting from 14 long interviews in detail.

To facilitate analysis, the transcripts were uploaded in the qualitative research programme Atlas.ti (version 8) in two separate projects – this allowed the interviews from the non-LGBTQ+ and LGBTQ+ interviewees to be coded and analysed separately, and thus made comparing their responses easier. The first step of the process was open coding, which involved taking individual pieces of text and giving them a code that described the content of the text (Boeije, 2010). If a piece of text had a similar type of content to an earlier segment, it was given the same code.

The next step was axial coding (Boeije, 2010). As the open coding step showed few differences between the LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ interviewees, the two projects were merged, facilitating the creation of a single coding tree. The hundreds of codes that had resulted from the open coding were deemed too many to create coherent themes. As such, any codes that covered similar content – such as ‘reading for fun’ and ‘reading for entertainment’ – were merged, thereby reducing the number of codes. Once there were 200, still rather specific, codes left, four common threads had emerged. However, these four threads did not fully answer the research question, and as such, they were reviewed during the final step, being selective coding (Boeije, 2010). The 200 codes were colour coded according to the initial four vague themes, and within those groups, were further merged, renamed and specified. In the end, a few dozen codes were left. These were reviewed, and reorganised to better answer the research question, resulting in three final themes as presented in the next chapter. These three main themes consisted of two or three subthemes each, some of which included some more specific topics as well.

Once the coding tree was complete, the interviews were skimmed to check if the codes covered the content. Some quotations were recoded to better fit the content of the text, but overall, the merging of the codes in Atlas.ti had allowed the quotations to be recoded automatically as soon as they were merged, which meant few changes were required. Nevertheless, the coding tree was adjusted slightly, resulting in the final coding tree as presented in Appendix D. This formed the basis for the results as written in the next chapter.

### **3.6. Ethical Implications**

To avoid any ethical issues, the interviewees were kept anonymous, with additional measures during the recruitment process to ensure that those who identified as LGBTQ+ felt comfortable being out and discussing their identity in the context of books. Moreover, they were asked to read a consent form beforehand, and either sign it or give spoken consent at the

start of the interview if they agreed with the conditions. They were also given the opportunity to skip a question and end the interview at any point and were encouraged to reach out after the interview if they had any further questions or concerns. Because the participants were all over 18, they could provide consent themselves. None of the interviewees opposed to their interview being used for research purposes and the audio of the interview being recorded, and most of them preferred the use of their initials in the document or did not mind what identifiers were used.

Furthermore, there was some personal bias during the interview process – as an opinionated member of both relevant communities, I had to be aware of my own position. However, I was able to use the skills obtained during my previous experience researching personal topics, including LGBTQ+ topics, which allowed me to keep some distance and be as objective as possible in the interviewing and analysing process. I aimed to not add my personal opinions and experiences during the interview unless they were related to what the interviewee had already mentioned themselves. Although at times I was not able to avoid this, I made sure to be mindful of this throughout the interviews and returned the conversation to its focus whenever I noticed I was being too personal.

## **4. Results**

While analysing and comparing the interviews between the queer and non-queer participants, few differences appeared in the discussion of LGBTQ+ fiction on Bookstagram. The results rather highlight how LGBTQ+ YA fiction is discussed and perceived online in general, with some nuances between the two groups. As such, the following three themes are discussed in order of where the two groups showed the least nuances in their answers to where they differed the most. Firstly, it will be discussed how both groups focused on reading and recommending diverse books in real life and on Bookstagram. Secondly, their personal connection to books and Bookstagram will be addressed. Lastly, the Bookstagrammers' feelings of responsibility and sensitivity when reading, posting, and recommending (diverse) books will be elaborated on.

### **4.1. Prioritising Reading and Recommending Diversely**

Initially, the discussion focused on reading being a priority in general. This showed in their reading habits, as all 14 Bookstagrammers tried to read every day, getting to at least a book a week. They achieved this by reading different genres and formats, such as physical books, graphic novels and audiobooks. This added to Yoesoef's (2020) argument that Gen Z has begun to create their own broad and varied reading culture, and the findings from the generational reading survey (Rea, 2020) that young people have a wide range of literary interests. All Bookstagrammers kept track of the books they read and wanted to read, and three participants specifically started a Bookstagram account for that reason. This confirmed Rea's (2020) finding that Gen Z enjoys keeping track of books to read in the future, and provided an insight into the conscious nature of their reading, as well as a desire to reflect on what they have read and want to recommend. They also read for different reasons, such as for entertainment or escapism purposes. It was a way to deal with difficult experiences or stressors: "Lately as an adult with a lot of like, shit going on in life, it's a nice respite from, you know, grad school or stress, just stress in general." (EM, LGBTQ+, 26).

Another key reason was that reading about different types of people and their individual experiences had made them more empathetic, understanding, and good people. Because they enjoyed that, all interviewees expressed that they consciously tried to read and recommend a wide variety of books about and by people of different backgrounds, including queer people, regardless of their own identity. Queer Bookstagrammers seemed to be more aware of the amount, while some non-queer creators indicated that they simply 'tended to

gravitate towards' queer representation without specifying how much. Nevertheless, it was clear that all interviewees regularly read diversely and consciously tried to read queer representation. They were able to do so, and enjoyed doing so, for various reasons and in different ways.

#### *4.1.1. Reading Diversely is Necessary*

Many argued that only reading books by non-marginalised authors, or featuring one type of representation, can create bias or make one value others' perspectives less (Banks, 2009; Bishop, 1990; Bold & Phillips, 2019; Clark and Blackburn, 2009; Logan et al., 2014). Therefore, they made reading and recommending diversely a priority, approximating that they read 25 to 60% queer representation, most of which in YA. This was drastically higher than the 1 to 2% of YA books published by mainstream publishers with LGBTQ+ characters (Jiménez, 2015). All participants consciously reading diversely matched the finding that young people are more motivated to read and engage with texts when it reflects their own experiences (Gangi, 2008, as cited in Hughes-Hassell et al., 2009).

They felt that reading diversely made them more empathetic and better people, which was partially why they deemed reading diversely necessary. This has previously been confirmed by Booth and Narayan (2020), and reading fiction in general can predict a person's empathy levels, even when controlled for individual factors such as personality traits, gender, English fluency, and ability to transport the self into a narrative (Mar et al., 2009). For example, BD (non-LGBTQ+, 26) said:

I think that they have shaped me into a more loving person, a more understanding person, a more open person. [...] Life has given those things to me, and my parents have given those things to me, but books have also expanded that and helped me figure out a way to talk about how it expanded that.

Many participants theorised that being in a character's mind and following their actions and thought processes helped the reader understand a person's motivations and experiences better. MT (LGBTQ+, 26) mentioned Bishop's (1990) analogy directly, saying that, "Books are mirrors, like you can see yourself in them. But they're also windows into other cultures and experiences and getting people to understand that like, 'hey, you're not always going to be the main character, and that's okay.'" Indeed, reading fiction has been found to positively correlate with cognitive empathy specifically, which is the ability to understand other people's point of view and beliefs (Stansfield & Bunce, 2014). Getting to understand queer

people's identities was mostly mentioned by the cisgender participants, who had gotten a better grasp of the transgender experience through reading fiction. This was illustrated by SG (LGBTQ+, 22), who said:

Like *I Wish You All the Best*, you know, [...] that's a non-binary book [...] I felt it and I understood and I feel like you learn better that way than trying to read about what it means. [...] That's why they have to read that, and that's why they have to start young. Because if you just read about what you are, then it's just more of a struggle to get to understand other people.

Furthermore, both groups felt that it was important to have both focal representation, meaning that the queer identity of the character plays a major role in the story, and casual representation, where a character's queerness is not foregrounded. They thus aimed to read and recommend books with both types of representation. The interviewees provided three main reasons for this. Firstly, only having a character be queer with no other personality trait or only including queer side characters can be considered tokenisation, which could be harmful:

I think that's really annoying, and it's clearly them being like, 'I want to have people who identify with or allies of the LGBTQ [...] read the book, have people pick it up for that reason, but I also don't want to make anyone mad who is overtly against it. So I'm just gonna throw it in there casually in the background?' I hate stuff like that, it makes me very upset. (JB, non-LGBTQ+, 18)

Even if there was queer representation, relying on stereotypes or queerphobic tropes was adding to the harm that the lack of representation has done in the past (Crisp, 2018).

In fact, the second reason to include different types of representation was that the underrepresentation of queerness is unrealistic. This was largely addressed by the queer group. They felt it was strange to have zero queer characters in a story, as queer people also want to go on adventures, and they rarely have no queer friends.

Especially if you have a big cast or a lot of people, then it's not realistic to only have straight people. So many of my friends are queer. [...] So a whole book without queer people... but also, don't make it like the basic queer person. (SG, LGBTQ+, 22)

Although queer representation is improving (Jiménez, 2015), the unrealistic underrepresentation provided another example of why it is not yet sufficient (Logan et al., 2014; Snyder, 2020). As Crisp (2018) discussed, underrepresentation requires queer readers



to do more work, and highlights the importance of making characters queer on-page and writing more than one type of LGBTQ+ narrative.

As Crisp (2018) further mentioned, the most popular narrative is the coming-out story, which is often experienced as difficult by the character. This was also identified by the participants as the third reason for needing different types of LGBTQ+ representation and wanting to diversify their book recommendations – coming-out stories, however important and necessary they are, are not the sole experience of queer teenagers.

Don't get me wrong, I love stories like *I Wish You All the Best* where the main character essentially gets kicked out of their house. But they are hard to read sometimes, and I do think that there's something to be said for a happy ending. (MW, LGBTQ+, 23)

Only providing queer readers with stories about the difficult, sad parts of being queer, and potentially reminding them of negative experiences, was perceived as harmful and stereotypical. By addressing issues such as tokenisation, underrepresentation, and repetitive storylines on their platforms, actively reading books by and about different people, and sharing the diverse books that they are reading on their accounts, the interviewees aimed to spread the necessity of reading diversely to their audiences and make it more accessible.

#### *4.1.2. Reading Diversely is Fun and Easy*

The participants further prioritised reading and recommending queer YA because queer books were simply good, especially those that had been recommended to them on Bookstagram. They felt that queer stories were often written with more love and care, and that LGBTQ+ authors were excited to finally write the stories they wish they had before. This was expressed by BO (non-LGBTQ+, 21):

I feel like there's more thought put into them, because obviously under the cis, straight patriarchy- so there obviously has to be more reflection and thought put into the romance of it. [...] Like other worries that a gay couple would have that a straight couple would not have.

Since queer recommendations on Bookstagram have previously been successful, the interviewees were more inclined to trust creators who discussed queer books and follow their recommendations. This was not surprising, as trust is a major driver of consumers changing their purchasing behaviour based on reviews (Cheung et al., 2009; Chu & Kim, 2011; Hsu et al., 2013).

This general trust in other Bookstagrammers also made reading diversely much easier compared to before they joined the platform, since they identified Bookstagram as the key platform to find good LGBTQ+ book recommendations. In fact, they now mostly read books that came recommended via Bookstagram. This sometimes happened by getting a personal recommendation, but more common was the indirect route – if many people were discussing a title, the accumulation of eWOM encouraged them to pick it up or prioritise it, further confirming that the availability of many and positive reviews is helpful (Chen et al., 2004; Korfiatis et al., 2012). This was best illustrated by DW (LGBTQ+, 18), who said: “Then I see someone put it on their page, and they're like, ‘Oh, this book is really good. It has this, this and this.’ I'm like, ‘Oh, cool, yeah, I have that on my TBR. I should read it.’”

This was possible because they curated their Instagram feed to be diverse. By following queer creators of different races, body types, religions, and so on, they had easy and regular access to varied reviews and recommendations. Getting recommendations outside Bookstagram proved complicated, as these were less common, and were generally seen as less good and diverse. For example, GS (non-LGBTQ+, 19) discussed how she found books before joining the platform: “Because before I was on any kind of bookish social media, [...] I would take my grandma's book recommendations and my library's book recommendations, and, you know, neither of those sources really work to be super diverse.”

Nevertheless, even outside the platform, the participants said they noticed better access to queer fiction with more titles being published in different genres and formats, publishers giving bigger marketing budgets to queer books, and LGBTQ+ books being more easily found in bookstores and libraries. Some interviewees expressed why they thought this was the case.

We all know money talks, so the more you recommend a diverse book, the more likely people are going to see it and gonna want to buy it, and [...] it just kind of does have that effect of [...] publishers being like, ‘Oh, this book sold, we can put more money into that.’ (MT, LGBTQ+, 26)

Specifically, they noted that the marketability of the Own Voices label has allowed marginalised authors to write their stories and get them published more easily. The popularity of Own Voices queer titles has shown demand for queer stories, which has visibly encouraged publishers to diversify their published titles as well (Jenkins, 1998; Jiménez, 2015).

#### *4.1.3. Reading Diversely Promotes Inclusivity and Authenticity*

The interviewees prioritised two specific factors when reading and recommending diversely to ensure that they emphasised inclusivity and authenticity. First was that they aimed to read intersectional, meaning they wanted to see queer people beyond white, thin, able-bodied people. As such, it was deemed important to read fiction by and featuring queer people of colour, queer disabled people, and more, to avoid treating queer people as monoliths. MT (LGBTQ+, 26) mentioned: “I try to make [reading LGBTQ+ books] a priority, and also with [...] diverse queer literature. So making sure it's not just all white queer people, because we know that, you know, that imbalance is there.”

Second, when it came to telling these stories, intersectional or not, they aimed to prioritise Own Voices books and reviews. The Own Voices label allowed Bookstagrammers to easily and safely identify and share diverse reads, as they felt that representation would always be more authentic when written by someone who had been through the experience.

I don't identify as a gay man. So how am I going to comment on the accuracy of the gay man's experience? You know, I think that that's even something within the queer community that needs to be kind of handled delicately. (MD, LGBTQ+, 26)

Next to authenticity, they also felt Own Voices books were more likely to contain good and respectful representation. More specifically, knowing the author was Own Voices allowed queer readers to feel more connected to the characters, while it gave non-queer readers (and queer readers with other identities) the opportunity to get a realistic and accurate impression of said identity. This was further helped by Own Voices reviews, which most participants identified as being a key source in finding good representation. The non-queer participants mentioned that they liked referencing Own Voices reviews before recommending or reading a book.

It is really important that people who actually see themselves in the books are the ones that are saying, ‘This is a good book, this book is neat, this book is relatable and wonderful.’ [...] It is very important for other people going through that, to read an Own Voices review and say, ‘Okay, this will be good and safe for me.’ (GS, non-LGBTQ+, 19)

The label also helped readers avoid non Own Voices representation, which had occasionally been experienced as harmful. Reading harmful queer representation, as previously mentioned, can create bias in people and reinforce stereotypes, especially if the non Own Voices author relied on stereotypes to write the story (Crisp, 2018). Not having the

perspective of a queer person could make it difficult to write about the queer experience with an authentic voice.

But the fact of the matter is, you probably don't have the same kind of perspective that someone who's lived with that identity has, or if you're not close to someone with that, you might not be able to articulate it as well, even just by your own experience being around them. (MM, LGBTQ+, 20)

Clearly, reading diversely and recommending books by and about different groups of people was incredibly important to all interviewees, because they experienced it as necessary – especially to better understand other people – but also because it has become more fun and easy to do so. Additionally, it was important to be reading and recommending diversely in a conscious manner, as not all diversity is created equal. Therefore, the Bookstagrammers had different ways in which they connected to diverse, queer literature, and much of this was rooted in their personal connection to both books and Bookstagram.

## **4.2. Highlighting Personal Connection with Books and Bookstagram**

The second key finding from the interviews was that the Bookstagrammers were commonly guided by their personal connection with certain books, and the platform in general, when reading and recommending queer YA in a few different ways.

### *4.2.1. Finding Connection on Bookstagram*

The participants had many and varied reasons for starting a Bookstagram, such as having had prior exposure to Bookstagram and wanting to be a part of it, and enjoying the creativity of taking photos. However, they found that being on Bookstagram provided many other benefits too. The main benefit and favourite aspect of the platform the participants mentioned was the connection with fellow book lovers. They experienced judgement and a lack of bookish connection from their in-person relationships, so Bookstagram allowed them to do what they love and make friends in the process.

But [posting about books] was where I got started, and then I evolved from there to just get to be part of this community where I get to see and talk to other readers about things that we both love, and that's something that I didn't realize I was going to get but was really grateful for. (MD, LGBTQ+, 26)

This was a shared experience among all Bookstagrammers, indicating that the social aspect of Bookstagram is indeed a major driver of its popularity (Gold, 2020; Hammoudi, 2018;

Perkins, 2017). For the LGBTQIA+ creators there was an added layer to this social connection, as some did not have many queer friends in real life and Bookstagram provided that for them. The anonymity that some kept on their account allowed them to express themselves more. The LGBTQ+ creators who were not anonymised and could not express their identity were still able to find that connection with others via direct messages.

They also mentioned enjoying discussing books after they read them, for which Bookstagram was a fun and easy platform. This matched the findings by Rea (2020) that members of Generation Z value and enjoy discussing books with others. This again may explain the popularity of bookish communities on social media, as Gen Z's are skilled and frequent social media users (Ahmed, 2019; Parker & Igielnik, 2020) and seek that connection to discuss books. Sharing books they loved on the platform also helped find people to discuss the book with and encourage others to read it: "Because when I [read] a book that I absolutely loved or that was my favourite, I want everyone to read it so that I can talk to them about it." (JB, non-LGBTQ+, 18).

The platform having that type of function indicated an awareness that their Bookstagram presence had some form of influence, yet they did not feel comfortable with the label 'influencer' because they had a stereotypical view of it, as illustrated by EM (LGBTQ+, 26): "Those words have such a negative connotation in my brain because they usually have to do with money or ads or, you know, selling someone something." Because of these stereotypes, most interviewees felt hesitant to personally and publicly identify with the label of 'influencer' or 'micro-influencer.' Instead, they considered themselves to play different roles on the platform that did not fit a category as nicely. They mentioned wanting to spread joy, being a part of a community, or sharing less popular titles.

Nevertheless, the majority of the participants recognised that they exerted some influence. Most Bookstagrammers expressed receiving comments or messages from people who were encouraged to buy or read a book based on their post: "But I think I definitely have interacted with people who saw a book on my page [...] and they're like, 'Oh, that looks really cool. I think I'm gonna go get that.'" (JB, non-LGBTQ+, 18). Even for small accounts, posting about a book they loved was sometimes enough to convince others to read it – as (Lo, 2020) identified, sometimes a Bookstagram photo was enough for people to follow up on the recommendation. However, as most interviewees did not have large accounts, they considered that they mostly had an influence on the people they are closest to, especially in their real lives. For example, MT (LGBTQ+, 26), who works as a middle grade teacher, often

brings Bookstagram recommendations into her classroom: “Getting those ideas from Bookstagram as well, and then bringing them into the people who are physically in my life, and I think that's where that influence would more come from.” Even beyond the platform, Bookstagram encouraged people to read and buy books. That was also why they wanted to promote diverse queer literature, as it could expose others to fiction they can recognise others or themselves in.

#### *4.2.2. Recognising Self in Fiction*

Relatability and recognising oneself in fiction was a reason for the participants to pick up specific books. This was the case for YA books specifically, which all interviewees preferred over other ‘genres,’ as it was easier to relate to the characters. It was also a safe choice, as for those identifying on the aromantic asexual spectrum, new adult and adult fiction were too romance- and sex-heavy for their enjoyment. This explained YA being the most popular genre on Bookstagram (Kantor, 2017; Perkins, 2017), and it indicated that identity intersects with reading tastes. The relatability factor in books was so important that the participants would highlight it in their own reviews, and notice it in other reviews. This was mentioned by both groups but especially by the non-queer creators, who stated that if an Own Voices reviewer spoke about relating to a story, it encouraged them to prioritise it over others. A positive Own Voices review confirmed the accuracy of the representation for them.

They will recommend books and they're like, ‘I relate really hard to this,’ and when I see that I'm like, ‘oh I need to read that book,’ because it's probably not something I relate to and it's really important to me to relate to them. (GS, non-LGBTQ+, 19)

When it came to queer representation specifically, seeing oneself reflected in fiction was found especially important because it allowed the reader to develop their identity and learn about themselves through the characters. The experiences of queer characters coming out and discovering their identity allowed the (queer) participants to explore their own feelings about sexuality and gender, and for some, it even allowed them to see if a certain label fit them.

Yes, it has definitely helped me explore my personal identity more. As my labels have shifted, I've tried to find books that go under the specific labels I am thinking about identifying with, just like be, ‘Is this a character that I relate to a lot or is it quite decidedly not really for me?’ (DW, LGBTQ+, 18)

Furthermore, the LGBTQ+ participants felt that, even though they had settled on a certain label, discovering your sexuality and gender identity was a lifelong process and reading fiction helped them explore that, even after determining they were queer. This was most strongly expressed by those who at the time of the interview were actively discovering their identity:

It helps me personally to read those stories, because [...] I'm still in the process of exploring my identity in terms of gender and sexuality. It really benefits me to see different stories and to see these different experiences and kind of get a feel for like, 'Oh, yeah, I feel that way sometimes, too.' Or, 'Oh, no, I don't relate to that.' (MD, LGBTQ+, 26)

Clearly, it was seen as important to have different types of queer representation to function as a mirror (Bishop, 1990), allowing people to see themselves reflected and perhaps discover parts about themselves that they had not seen prior. There was an awareness that that is also why it is important to be exposed to queer literature in childhood, as finding out that you are queer later can be difficult. EM (LGBTQ+, 26), who had only recently come out, said: "If I had access to queer lit when I was a kid, I can only imagine how much easier it would have been, or how much sooner I would have been able to come out and feel safe and supported."

Beyond discovering and exploring identity, once someone felt comfortable with themselves, seeing that reflected in fiction allowed them to feel seen and validated. This was commonly highlighted by those on the asexual spectrum. R (LGBTQ+, 24) said:

I've read a lot of books with ace representation, and it started to be like, 'Oh, this is me.' So it really helped with exploring that identity more and finding people who identify similarly. Suddenly it's like, 'oh, I'm not weird.' There's people like me, I just didn't know there were.

As Bold and Phillips (2019) explained, marginalised people finding themselves represented in fiction encourages that feeling of identification and validation as described by R (LGBTQ+, 24) and other interviewees, and by extension allows them to have a more positive experience while reading.

Therefore, especially the LGBTQ+ participants were eager to seek specific representations of themselves, whereas the non-queer participants addressed that their identity is commonly represented and therefore easy to find. Because there was such a wide variety in queer identities, and not everyone had similar experiences, this was occasionally

found to be difficult. SG (LGBTQ+, 22) who is bisexual and has been struggling to find representation of bisexual characters in ‘straight-passing’ relationships, mentioned:

I've discovered that I was bi four, three years ago [...] because I've been in a relationship with a guy for six years, so it was random and then I just- I always thought that queer books were really cute but now it's really wanting to find myself somewhere.

Because it was so important for queer readers to recognise themselves in fiction, and for non-queer readers to know that others felt represented by a book, this was a major aspect of their discussion of books on their Bookstagram accounts.

#### *4.2.3. Highlighting Personal Connection in Reviews*

Most interviewees did not identify as a ‘reviewer,’ as they did not take it seriously enough to be considered one. In fact, they believed that Bookstagram was not the best platform for reviews, and instead captions should be short and fun, and encourage interaction. Generally, they perceived the concept of ‘review’ to be long, serious objective judgements which they did not enjoy reading or writing, matching the different writing styles between amateur and professional critics (De Jong & Burgers, 2013; Santos et al., 2019). Even those who did consider themselves to be reviewers did not use Instagram for that purpose. When asked about their role as reviewers, a few Bookstagrammers said something similar to SG (LGBTQ+, 22):

Definitely not a reviewer. Just because I suck at reviews, like a lot. [...] I get a lot of [Advance Reader Copies], so I really need to write some kind of review after I read a book because I'd feel bad. But I'm really bad at it, so I just usually write what I thought real quick. Sometimes I just do like a bullet point review.

Most participants did write some form of a review, but they struggled to determine the differences between briefly sharing their opinions and a genuine review beyond the latter being more serious.

As such, it can be said that Bookstagrammers employed a personal reviewing style, similar to how amateur critics of other forms of entertainment often focus on their experience and use emotional language (De Jong & Burgers, 2013; Santos et al., 2019). Although it was not possible to determine whether their actual reviews fit this, the participants indicated to review books (and follow reviews) in similar ways. Firstly, they indeed highlighted the reading experience, and looked for other people’s reading experience in reviews. Especially



emotional language was found to be effective, as BO highlights: “[If] a Bookstagrammer was like, ‘Oh, my God this book made me have all the feels,’ like that kind of thing, I’m like, ‘Oh, my kind of criteria.’”

Secondly, they tended to focus on specific aspects important to them personally in their reviews and book recommendations. For example, if a book included a trope they loved, a character they connected to, or a writing style they appreciated, they would foreground it. Thirdly, they sometimes had a different focus when recommending diverse books. It was especially important for LGBTQ+ Bookstagrammers to address any queer representation, and even more so when the representation reflected them by discussing the relatability of the story. Although the non-queer Bookstagrammers tended to mention the presence of representation, they were not as concentrated on it. This observed difference makes sense, as for queer Bookstagrammers, seeing their own identities reflected in fiction is less common, more difficult to find, and not always respectful (Bold & Phillips, 2019; Jiménez, 2015; Snyder, 2020).

As such, lastly, all interviewees would consider bringing up their personal identity in reviews, especially when the book represented them. They highlighted if they were an Own Voices reviewer, as this would validate their reviews and give a good measure of the representation’s value to people from the relevant community.

When it comes to Bookstagram, I try to say, ‘Hey, ya know, I’m not straight.’

Especially in reviews I’ll say, ‘I could really identify with this character’s growth and finding their sexuality and that kind of thing.’ I try to make it as clear as I can in my reviews. (JH, LGBTQ+, 18)

Whenever the participants did not share an identity with the author or character, they would highlight that they could not comment on the representation, and often referred their audience to Own Voices reviews to check out.

Beyond a personal reviewing style, many of the interviewees also indicated being selective when posting reviews and recommendations. If they did not enjoy a book, regardless of its popularity or diversity, they avoided discussing it altogether. Moreover, a few mentioned that they avoided reviewing popular books as they were already discussed enough, unless they had something to add.

But there are other popular books on Bookstagram that I read, and I’m doing like, ‘I liked it, but I don’t really have anything outstanding or something that I super felt

connected to or tied to.’ [...] A review for me is putting something meaningful out in the world. (MT, LGBTQ+, 26)

The interviewees generally felt they had a lot of freedom in deciding what and how to review compared to what a professional critic would do. Since the platform is rooted in the connection with other people, posting only positive reviews would attract other people with similar tastes and avoid disagreement (or “drama”) among creators. Furthermore, they believed professional critics had a different goal from Bookstagrammers. According to them, professionals write product evaluations to inform the public of its quality, and posting a negative review could discourage purchasing behaviour (Clement et al., 2007; Chen, 2008; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Most participants did not want to discourage anyone from reading a certain book, and as such would not post negative reviews, because they knew their posts could have such consequences.

Recommendations further strongly depended on the person and the particular book, both in terms of giving and taking them, again indicating a personal connection with books and the platform. This depended on two factors, the first being trust, which was expected considering earlier research which identified trust to play a major role in the success of reviews (Cheung et al., 2009; Chu & Kim, 2011; Hsu et al., 2013). As EM (LGBTQ+, 26) put it, “It honestly depends on the person and whether I trust their opinion. Because if in the past, they've recommended something and then I read it, and I was like, ‘This is garbage.’ I'm not going to listen to that recommendation.” Trust was more easily built when someone was friendly and shared reading tastes with the other person.

The person's reading tastes and identity also informed giving and taking recommendations. Participants would highlight different aspects of a book when recommending it to queer or non-queer friends. To a non-reader friend, they were less likely to recommend difficult or niche books compared to an easily accessible read. MW (LGBTQ+, 23) exemplified what they considered when giving a recommendation:

I would probably want to know the friend's tastes a little bit better, because there's so many different books. [...] If somebody is just looking for a book recommendation, I would more talk about it if it was an identity that they shared. Somebody that I know was figuring out gender stuff recently [...] so I recommended *Felix Ever After* because I was like, ‘I think that you will connect a lot with the main character, and what Felix is going through, because you have a lot in common.’

This approach to giving recommendations adhered to the mirror, window, sliding door analogy (Bishop, 1990) as it showed that Bookstagrammers consider whether someone will be able to see themselves reflected in a book, and it further confirmed the possibility that personal identity is important in the context of reading and reviewing online. It was especially meaningful for queer creators when others read a book they personally related to because of them, but to do so, they had to be open about their personal identity online, which was not always possible.

The 10 LGBTQ+ participants were all open about their personal identity during the interviews, but there were some differences in their openness online. Overall, most of them were open about it when necessary. Two interviewees mentioned that they did not foreground their identity, but if someone asked, they would tell them; two others mentioned not being able to express their identity to their desired extent because real-life contacts followed them on their Bookstagram. On the other hand, three participants were comfortable expressing their identity because they have anonymised their accounts, and another three mentioned actively using their platforms to express their identity. For example, MD (LGBTQ+, 26) documented her journey figuring out their identity to connect with and help others.

I think it's important for me, because [...] I feel like my whole purpose on Bookstagram and just posting in general is for me to share my experience so that other people can feel good in their own experiences or feel related to their own experiences.

Alternatively, there was some hesitance regarding acknowledging their identity among the non-queer creators. They generally felt like they did not have to specify their identity, while also acknowledging that this was a privilege. Because of this, they would be open about their identity in the context of reviewing books by and about marginalised communities that they were not a part of. They also recognised that it should not be required to be open about your identity when reviewing books – people should feel comfortable enough to do so, as they may still be figuring out who they are and the platform may not be entirely anonymous. Nevertheless, being open about personal identity online was considered to both be a part of the responsibility of being an online creator, and to carry another type of responsibility, as will be discussed in the next section.

### 4.3. Expressing Feelings of Responsibility and Sensitivity

The participants commonly mentioned experiencing different types of responsibility surrounding their presence on Instagram, and occasionally separated their feelings of responsibility from those of sensitivity. Specifically, some comments focused on the pressure that they experienced from the platform, while others identified feelings of responsibility and sensitivity surrounding problematic books and topics.

#### *4.3.1. Pressure from Bookstagram Limits Diversity*

When asked about the responsibility that they felt from being on the platform, some considered the pressure regarding how much they read, buy, and post. This was rooted in the idea that to be a ‘proper’ Bookstagrammer, they had to prioritise reading and posting over everything else. They highlighted that, although they loved the platform and they loved to read, seeing accounts with thousands of followers posting and reading constantly reinforced that idea, and thus added pressure when they could not meet the ideal. They were aware that Bookstagram was meant as a hobby, and that numbers did not matter without meaningful interaction, but it still affected them.

There is something inside of me that's like, ‘huh, you have a responsibility to post something every day.’ [...] Nobody told me I had to do that. So that's all in here. Something I came up with for myself, but I still do it and I still freak myself out when I don't follow that plan I had set for myself. I do have fun with it. It's not like I'm super stressed about it. But I will have some days like, ‘Oh, I have to take a frickin’ picture of a stupid book. and post it and it's not gonna be cute because I didn't plan it!’ (EM, LGBTQ+, 26)

This pressure was a common occurrence, especially among those with slightly larger platforms, while others were adamant that they did not experience this level of pressure (“I’m not in it for the numbers, I’m just chilling.” (GS, non-LGBTQ+, 19)).

The interviewees also experienced pressure when deciding whether specifying representation was necessary. For some, especially for the queer participants, it was important that the identity of the queer character(s) was specified when the story surrounded queer identities specifically, such as coming-out stories or narratives of self-discovery. For other types of stories, such as side characters without central storylines, it did not have to be specified. However, there was another nuance identified by queer Bookstagrammers – for them, it was important to see on-page representation. They appreciated seeing labels used for

characters even if they did not matter for the plot otherwise (for example, a bisexual character being in a straight-passing relationship still being named as bisexual). Regardless, the complexity of specifying representation indicated that being responsible was not experienced as easy. What a few participants addressed was that specifying representation or clearly attaching the Own Voices label to a book might cause people to avoid it, either by people who do not approve of the LGBTQ+ community being represented in the media – while they should be reading them to understand others (Booth & Narayan, 2020) – or by people who only want to see themselves reflected in fiction or feel that they are not the right audience for a particular book.

Even when taking into account diversity and inclusivity, the participants also experienced pressure on the use of the Own Voices label and the strictness concerning representation in books. Firstly, the strong focus on Own Voices representation homogenised diversity, meaning that people tended to view minimal representation as already sufficient. MM (LGBTQ+, 20) mentioned that although the label is currently necessary, “I hope we don't need it forever, and I think my one worry is that sometimes Own Voices [...] can homogenise all the voices in there, which can be a negative thing.” There was an awareness among Bookstagrammers that reading only one type of representation was not sufficient to understand the variety in queer people’s experiences. The single Own Voices label might complicate distinguishing representations and risk people only reading the same kind. As such, they preferred using the label in combination with specifying the representation and the author’s identity.

If Own Voices representation was the only type of representation allowed, it would also create a loss of responsibility and accountability on the part of the author and the reader. The participants theorised that authors may not feel the need to include queer characters at all, while including queer characters without centring their identity is possible and necessary. It would not be realistic and potentially harmful to ask a straight writer to only write straight characters, a transgender writer to only write transgender characters and so on. This would also put more pressure on the shoulders of marginalised authors to educate the masses (Booth & Narayan, 2020), and with marginalised authors currently still being published less, would also expose fewer people to diverse casts of characters.

What especially the queer Bookstagrammers felt passionate about, was the fact that enforcing the Own Voices label for queer representation could push people out of the closet when they are not ready to be, making the industry less inclusive. The main example given

was YA contemporary author Becky Albertalli, who wrote multiple books featuring prominent queer characters. She faced criticism as a cisgender, straight woman writing about the experiences of queer teens, which culminated in her coming out as bisexual in August 2020 before she was ready, discussing how difficult it had been to be figuring out her personal identity as she was scrutinised for her stories (Albertalli, 2020). A few of the interviewees, especially those who used labels that are also commonly scrutinised as ‘not queer enough,’ felt hurt by this, and discussed how the Own Voices label can be great for other marginalised groups but not for queerness. MD (LGBTQ+, 26) discussed the following in the context of Becky Albertalli’s experience:

If it was about race, or cultural background, and looking for Own Voices over somebody who hasn't had those same experiences of that culture, I think that's really different than forcing somebody to come out about who they are in terms of gender and sexuality in order to prioritize their book on a queer character.

Precisely because of its fluid nature, ‘queer Own Voices’ changes constantly. Where three years ago, an author or reviewer may have been Own Voices for bisexual women, they currently might be Own Voices for lesbian genderqueer people. As Adler (2017) and Ellis (2017) discussed, this is harmful and adds unnecessary pressure to closeted queer writers wanting to tell queer stories.

Many interviewees also experienced pressure to read and share popular books, as Bookstagram tends to have a few common favourites. When the same books are pushed, they are also more often picked up by other creators who are encouraged by cumulative eWOM, as suggested by Chen’s (2008) idea of herd behaviour. Additionally, posts featuring popular books were experienced to have a wider reach and attract more followers, while posts with lesser known books did not reach as many people on the platform. The participants thus believed that those posts exerted less influence on people than when they added to the “echo chamber” of the popular books. The interviewees saw this as an issue because although these popular books could still be good, they also experienced the popular books as less diverse and inclusive. They felt that their work to be inclusive often did not reach a wide audience because these posts were not doing as well, thereby limiting the spread of important information, even though they were trying to be sensitive and promote good, well-written queer representation in lesser known books.

#### *4.3.2. Avoiding and Addressing Harmful Topics*

The participants felt that avoiding recommending harmful books and addressing any harmful content of books in their reviews was part of their responsibility of being an online creator, and required sensitivity. Some aimed to be as aware of problematic content and authors as they could be, and would avoid posting books they loved because the author wrote harmful queer representation or held personal transphobic beliefs, for example. They did not want to feature a book that could be seen as harmful by someone else, and wanted to be sensitive regarding other people's identities and experiences:

I certainly feel that responsibility, because I don't want to be recommending anything that's problematic or has bad representation that I can't speak for myself. That's probably my main worry, that I'm gonna recommend something that's problematic. (DW, LGBTQ+, 18)

On the other hand, they also stated to be vocal about problematic books, tropes, and authors on their platforms. However, most of the interviewees recognised that they often could not comment on certain representation – and specifically its accuracy – as they personally did not belong to that marginalised group. The non-LGBTQ+ Bookstagrammers admitted that they did not feel qualified to comment on any queer representation unless they had seen queer reviewers discuss the representation first, but the LGBTQ+ Bookstagrammers still showed hesitation to talk about certain representation. This was because they recognised that not all queer identities are the same, and even if a character or author shared their sexuality or gender identity, their experience could still be entirely different. Since amateur critics generally rely on their personal experience when reviewing entertainment products (De Jong & Burgers, 2013), this was not surprising.

R (LGBTQ+, 24) commented: “I don't feel like I have any authority to comment on representation being good if I'm not represented by that group.” For some of the non-queer interviewees this was even the case during the interviews themselves. When asked about whether her identity played a role when she recommended queer books, GS (non-LGBTQ+, 19) responded: “I don't know. I don't feel very qualified to answer these questions because I'm not in the community.” Beyond that, both groups felt a responsibility to address this in their reviews as well. When necessary, Bookstagrammers felt the need to address that their review was not Own Voices, and that people should check Own Voices accounts to see their insights on the representation.

Lastly, the concept of trigger and content warnings was brought up a few times. This was used in a more general sense, and not specifically in terms of queer representation, but it was considered to be an important aspect of having an online platform. Generally, providing trigger warnings was considered to be the responsibility of both the reader and the Bookstagrammer, though some mentioned that it would also be good if authors and publishers took more responsibility to provide trigger warnings too. This is because it allows people to avoid books that could be harmful for them – even if the book itself is not problematic and the harm is challenged, reading about homophobia for example can still hurt someone. This is expressed by JH (LGBTQ+, 18):

Everyone should offer trigger warnings. They don't have to say out loud, they can always put it in the description or something so that people that want them can read them [...] just because someone else doesn't want them, doesn't mean someone else doesn't need them.

By avoiding harmful books, addressing and discussing harmful topics in books, and providing trigger and content warnings, a few of the participants mentioned that they hoped to create a safe space on the Internet. For example, they mentioned that even though they had loved *Harry Potter* in the past, they now refused to post anything related to it, as they wanted to support their transgender followers and make sure that they did not feel uncomfortable when scrolling through their feed or stories. This care for others on the platform indicates a sense of empathy among the Bookstagram community (Booth & Narayan, 2020; Mar et al., 2009; Stansfield & Bunce, 2014), and altruism as discussed by Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004.

Still, this sense of responsibility – or sensitivity – that they experienced also came with some difficulties. Most Bookstagrammers recognised that having a platform, regardless of follower count, meant that they had a responsibility when posting, but also that they could use their platform to educate others and encourage everyone on and off Bookstagram to read diversely. However, they knew it was impossible to force diverse books on people and forbid them from promoting harmful topics or books. People have the right to read and post whatever and whenever they wish, even if this meant supporting problematic authors or discussing harmful topics. As EM (LGBTQ+, 26) put it:

I would love to say, 'Don't post about these people anymore. Don't worry about these things anymore. That's upsetting to people. You need to be, I don't know, more sensitive, more inclusive, more- whatever, informed, go educate yourself,' but you can't force anyone to do anything.



As such, they were aware that they could not force anything upon anyone, and it was difficult to find nuance. According to the interviewees, it was difficult to have in-depth, serious discussions on Bookstagram, as creators can get defensive when they are told that some of the content they shared may be harmful. This created frustration among Bookstagrammers, including NG (LGBTQ+, 24):

But sometimes, you know, there's a book that's very problematic [...]. A lot of the times it's very outwardly racist, and you can bring that up to someone. They're like, 'well, I enjoyed it.' [...] People just do not care that they offend people. That's upsetting sometimes.

Nevertheless, they recognised that those who are offensive were commonly much louder than those who were genuinely trying to discuss important topics on their platforms, and they made the decision for themselves to be a safe space for anyone following them regardless of their identity.

Clearly, as much as queer representation is necessary for multiple reasons, and the Own Voices label can help to identify and increase the amount of good and respectful queer representation in YA fiction, sensitivity is required when discussing these books, especially in the context of LGBTQ+ identities. This extends to the Bookstagram community, who are consciously trying to read and recommend diverse books for good reasons, and are doing so respectfully. Certain queer identities are still marginalised even within the LGBTQ+ community, and only reading books about it is not sufficient. Nevertheless, Bookstagrammers – both the queer and non-queer members – seemed to be aware of these issues enough to provide a counter voice if necessary, and were ready to do so, regardless of their personal identity.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study aimed to determine how LGBTQ+ online amateur critics discuss queer Young Adult fiction compared to how non-LGBTQ+ Bookstagrammers do. This was done by interviewing 10 queer and 4 non-queer North American Bookstagrammers and analysing their insights using thematic analysis. It was found that there were few distinct differences between the two groups, as they had rather similar approaches to and motives for discussing and recommending diverse books on their platforms. They all recognised the importance of representation in YA and thus they aimed to focus on reading and recommending diversely, experienced personal connections with books and Bookstagram, and had feelings of responsibility and sensitivity when discussing books.

Nevertheless, the interviews showed some nuances that were nearly all related to how their personal identity intersected with reading and recommending queer YA fiction. Indeed, although all Bookstagrammers focused on reading and recommending diversely and highlighted that reading diversely is necessary, has become easier, and promotes inclusivity, their own identity still played a role when deciding what to read and recommend. This can be attributed to the strong personal connection that the interviewees felt with books. Queer Bookstagrammers were actively seeking themselves represented in fiction, as it allowed them to learn more about their own identity, discover new aspects of it, and feel validated (Bishop, 1990), while this was not necessary for the non-queer interviewees because their identity was already constantly represented (Bold & Phillips, 2019).

Because of this difference in personal connection to the subject matter and characters, they showed differences when highlighting queer representation in reviews or on their platform in general. Non-queer reviewers did address representation but were less concentrated on discussing it in depth, while queer reviewers were especially focused on it when it reflected themselves. This likely stemmed from not having had enough and proper representation in the past (Bold & Phillips, 2019; Jiménez, 2015; Snyder, 2020). They mostly did this by highlighting the relatability of the story. In their reviews, both groups would not comment on the accuracy or respectfulness of other groups' representation, as they could not review it authentically (Booth & Narayan, 2020), although for the queer participants this was less pronounced as they often had overlapping experiences. For that reason, queer readers found reading Own Voices books especially important, because it allowed them to feel more connected to the characters and to review the representation, while non-queer readers saw a more respectful and authentic representation (Booth & Narayan, 2020). Own Voices reviews

were deemed more authentic, so non-queer participants commonly mentioned referring people to Own Voices reviews. They did so to avoid sharing harmful books, which was found to be incredibly important by all participants, mostly to avoid promoting books that could create bias in readers (Banks, 2009; Bishop, 1990; Bold & Phillips, 2019; Clark and Blackburn, 2009; Logan et al., 2014.).

It must be noted that the responsibility the participants felt to not share harmful content on their platforms and to prioritise Own Voices books and reviews occasionally appeared to be quite strict. They wanted to get rid of the current literary canon because it is predominantly white, straight, and cisgender, but they had criteria for the type of representation people could and should read and write, which could limit readers and authors. Nevertheless, their intentions were rooted in the importance of representation and wanting to see themselves and others respectfully and accurately reflected in fiction, and they were still generally aware you cannot restrict what others read and post.

Lastly, a major difference was in the participants' openness about their sexuality and gender identity on their platform, both between groups and within the LGBTQ+ group. It depended on where they were in their journey of self-discovery, but commonly they enjoyed being open about it, or would like to be, as it allowed for connection with fellow queer creators. For non-queer creators, this was more complicated, as their identity being the norm did not require them to 'come out' and they did not feel comfortable addressing that beyond saying in reviews they were not Own Voices reviewers. However, they also recognised their privilege in that, and aimed to uplift queer creators when they could.

In short, non-queer and queer Bookstagrammers differed in their discussions of LGBTQIA+ YA fiction, as queer creators took into account their own identity a lot more, whereas non-queer creators were more aware of their personal privilege and aimed to uplift people that had a different identity from theirs. It can thus be said that an online amateur reviewer's personal identity does play a role in how they review books beyond their language use as amateur reviewers rather than professional reviewers (De Jong and Burgers, 2013; Santos et al., 2019). As this finding was previously missing in the literature, the present study has explored that there is a potential difference. It also gave a deeper insight into the interpersonal dynamics on the new phenomenon of Bookstagram (Perkins, 2017) and how the creators give and take recommendations as online amateur critics. It became clear that although they had good intentions to read and recommend diversely and felt strongly about being responsible, there was also a certain degree of pressure between creators on the

platform, and a certain level of restrictiveness surrounding what can and should be read and recommended. Finally, although it was already known that queer representation is important (Banks, 2009; Bishop, 1990; Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Bold & Phillips, 2019; Booth & Narayan, 2020; Logan et al., 2014), this research provided personal insights into the meaning of LGBTQIA+ representation to both queer and non-queer readers. It highlighted that both groups were sensitive when discussing it on their platforms, and prioritised reading it precisely because of its importance.

Moreover, the awareness Bookstagrammers had of the importance of reading diversely, and their dedication to using their platform responsibly and minimising harm, provided an indication that they could use their influence (Chen, 2008; Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Verboord, 2010) to inform other readers of the importance of reading diversely and to make identifying good representation easier. This could extend to people in positions of power. As both queer and non-queer Bookstagrammers kept highlighting the importance of representation and how they would like to see more of it, the publishing industry should follow, which in turn could allow diverse books to reach those with influential positions such as booksellers, librarians, and educators. When these powerful people have easier access to queer literature, it could encourage more and better teaching of queer books in schools. This could help queer children recognise themselves in fiction at a young age, and allow them to avoid previously found issues like absenteeism, dropouts, and mental health problems (Logan et al., 2014).

### **5.1. Limitations**

Firstly, some of the sampling criteria contained some issues. In terms of age, although interviewing 18- to 26-year-olds facilitated the interviewing progress as they were already highly educated and they were able to consent themselves, most did not meet the main target audience of YA fiction, being 12- to 18-year-olds (Peterson, 2018). Even though they were all avid YA readers, and most of them had only recently grown out of adolescence, the target audience might have had different insights. Additionally, even though they were varied in terms of sexualities, the sample was relatively homogenous in terms of gender identity, and the study could have benefitted from a more conscious sampling strategy to speak to people of different genders.

More specifically, as mentioned in the research design chapter, non-queer participants were difficult to recruit compared to queer Bookstagrammers. The few non-LGBTQ+ people

that did participate in the research were all culturally conscious, insightful, smart people who were knowledgeable about and had connections with the LGBTQ+ community. The select differences that were identified between the two groups' discussions of queer YA may be a symptom of that – it is likely that those who did not care about queer fiction would not have reached out, as one of the sampling requirements stated that they should read books with or by queer people at least a few times a year. Additionally, it may be that non-queer Bookstagrammers felt uncomfortable discussing queerness without identifying as such themselves, or felt unqualified to do so. This was also found during the interviews regarding reviews. All the participants felt that they did not have the right to comment on representation that was not their own, and this could have put people off participating in the study.

Beyond the difficulty to sample non-queer participants specifically, the snowball sampling method did not prove as successful as hoped, and the majority of the sample was sampled directly via the recruitment post. Although it was not problematic in terms of familiarity with the participants, as they were not close contacts prior to the study, it did limit the potential sampling pool. This was because the participants shared similar audiences with me due to our reading tastes, and thus the post did not reach a wide variety of online creators.

Regarding the content of the study, some topics could and should have been explored better – although the questions on reading and social media habits, as well as those on identity on Bookstagram, provided interesting information, they were not as relevant to the research question as those on responsibility and Own Voices. The research could have benefitted from a more narrow but in-depth approach, and a better focus on how Bookstagrammers discuss certain books on their platform over including why they do so. However, since this study aimed to identify early differences in the way queer and non-queer Bookstagrammers approach the discussion of queer YA fiction online, this could also be done in future research.

## **5.2. Implications for Future Research**

It was beneficial that the present study mostly identified differences rooted in the (non) queer identities of the participants, since this had been identified as still missing in the theory beyond people mentioning their personal identity in reviews (De Jong & Burgers, 2013). These nuances would have been more difficult to identify through a research methodology other than interviews – surveys or the analysis of people's captions would have been difficult, as not all LGBTQ+ people were open about their queer identity online, and the

non-LGBTQ+ participants rarely discussed their sexuality and gender identity at all. For that reason, it can be said that this research provided a basis to further explore these nuances and determining them more concretely. For example, the differences could be confirmed by analysing the text of Goodreads reviews from Own Voices and non Own Voices reviewers – whether this is for queer representation or other – and seeing whether the language they use or topics they address differ. This would require reaching out to these reviewers first, but it would be possible to determine their identity from reviews, as the queer and non-queer interviewees all mentioned occasionally addressing their personal identity in them.

More specifically, now that there is some early evidence that the online book community has a complex and in-depth view of the Own Voices label, it is recommended that this is explored further. The concept of Own Voices in general has not been studied sufficiently, as it has only existed for about six years now, but it already has a rich history. Hence, it could be valuable to further study the implications of its popularity for the publishing industry, authors, and readers. By extension, this can be said of the general impact that the online book community has. Now that there are more people calling out certain authors and publishers for the problems within specific books and the industry as a whole, it would be interesting to investigate the interplay between the online book community and the publishing industry at large.

For example, it could be studied how influencer marketing is proving profitable for publishing houses compared to traditional marketing strategies, or more specifically, to what extent the voluntary promotion by Bookstagrammers is actually encouraging purchasing behaviour of diverse literature by their followers. As the participants of this study already indicated using Bookstagram as a way to identify good representation and to expand the diversity in their reading, publishing diverse titles could be profitable. A combination of these examples could thus provide insights on the effectiveness of Bookstagrammers, both in general for publishers and specifically for promoting diversity on bookshelves.

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## Appendix A: Sample Description

<b>Initials</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Pronouns</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Followers (June 3, 2021)</b>
<b>GS</b>	19	US	She/her	Cisgender woman	Heterosexual	719
<b>JB</b>	18	US	She/her	Cisgender woman	Heterosexual	389
<b>BD</b>	26	US	She/her	Cisgender woman	Heterosexual	2400
<b>BO</b>	21	US	She/her	Cisgender woman	Heterosexual	161
<b>MW</b>	23	US	They/them	Non-binary	Birromantic greysexual	284
<b>SG</b>	22	Canada	She/her	Cisgender woman	Bisexual	1827
<b>JH</b>	18	US	She/her	Cisgender woman	Panromantic demisexual	156
<b>EM</b>	26	US	She/her	Cisgender woman	Lesbian	2841
<b>DW</b>	18	US	They/them	Non-binary	Panromantic asexual	1025
<b>MT</b>	26	US	She/her	Cisgender woman	Birromantic demisexual	304
<b>MD</b>	26	US	She/they	Queer	Queer	2091
<b>MM</b>	20	US	She/her	Cisgender woman	Bisexual	1182
<b>R</b>	24	US	She/her	Cisgender woman	Queer asexual	491
<b>NG</b>	24	US	She/her	Cisgender woman	Bisexual	2365

## **Appendix B: Complete Topic List**

### **Icebreaker questions**

- Can you introduce yourself? Pronouns, gender identity and sexuality?
- Why do you read? Why do you enjoy reading?
  - How often do you read? How much do you read?
  - What do you read? In terms of genre, themes, etc., and why?
- Why did you start a bookish account?
  - What are your favourite and least favourite aspects of it?

### **Being a Book Influencer/Amateur Critic**

- What do you get out of reviewing or discussing books online?
- What would you consider yourself? What role do you play in the book community? (An amateur reviewer, a critic, a book influencer?) What does this mean to you?
- How much would you say you noticed that your online presence has an influence on others? (For example, by receiving messages people picked up a book because of you?)
  - Do you enjoy this sense of influence? Why, why not?
- Do you experience a sense of responsibility as a reviewer on the Internet? If so, how do you consider this responsibility when reviewing and recommending books?
  - Do you recommend certain titles or genres more or less because of this responsibility?
  - Should this responsibility that you experience be a general agreement among bookish content creators?

### **Representation and LGBTQ+ Themed YA Fiction<sup>1</sup>**

- How often do you read queer YA? Which genres do you pick up most with queer representation and why?
  - Is YA the main age group in which you read queer fiction? How come?\*
  - Why do you pick up queer YA fiction? Why do you read these books?
- Would you say you are conscious about picking LGBTQIA+ YA books up, or is it more on a whim?
  - Why? Do you make it a priority to read LGBTQIA+ themed books?

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<sup>1</sup> This section was condensed in the final four interviews to allow more time for the section on Own Voices. Questions with an asterisk behind them were only included in the initial ten interviews, as these had reached saturation quicker than the other questions of this topic list. However, some of them may still have been asked in the final interviews when the topic was relevant.



- What has your experience with queer YA been so far? Have there been any negative experiences with certain books? \*
  - What does LGBTQIA+ representations in YA fiction mean to you personally?
- Where do you get your recommendations of LGBTQ+ themed books from?
  - What makes you follow a recommendation?
  - Is it easier to find (good) queer book recommendations now you are on bookish social media?
- If I asked you to recommend me a queer YA book right now, how would you do so? Can you give me an example? \*
  - Do you think this differs from the way you would recommend a non-LGBTQ+ book? \*
- Do you prefer knowing about queer characters or themes going in, or being “surprised”? Do you think it should always be specified by publishers, authors, or in the blurb? Why, why not? \*
- Do you think people need to read queer YA fiction regardless of their identity? Why?
- Has reading LGBTQ+ YA fiction ever taught you something new? \*
  - Has it ever encouraged you to participate in a form of activism, or to donate, or to discuss social justice and LGBTQ+ rights in general? \*

### **Personal Gender Identity and Sexuality**

- Are you open about your identity online? Why or why not?
  - Do you think it’s important to be out about your identity in combination with reviewing books?
- Do you think your identity plays a role when deciding which books to read and recommend online? How does it influence it?
- What is your view on Own Voices books and reviews? Is it important to take into account? <sup>2</sup>
  - Is an Own Voices LGBTQIA+ book more valuable than non-Own Voices? Why or why not? What makes it different?
  - *Who can write what types of story, in your opinion?*

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<sup>2</sup> This section on Own Voices was only two questions long, namely the main question, and the question regarding the value of Own Voices books. However, based on findings from the earlier interviews, it was decided to focus more on this part of the interview for the last four interviews. As such, the italicized questions were later added.

- *What place does representation written by non-Own Voices authors have? Are there any limits on what kind of representation non-OV authors can write?*
- *What do you feel are good aspects to the Own Voices label? Do you feel there are any negatives to the label?*
- *Are non-Own Voices reviewers still trustworthy when reviewing an Own Voices book or specific representation? Are there any limits on what kind of representations non-OV reviewers can address in their reviews?*
- *There is a pretty significant focus on the Own Voices label on Bookstagram, what do you think are the complications of this? For example, for authors, reviewers, recommendations, and so on?*

## Appendix C: Participant Recruitment Post

All three times the participant call was posted, five slides were used to provide the necessary information. The blue slides were used during the final call. The purple slide was used for the first call and has been included to show the differences.

Please help me complete my MA thesis!

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# CALLING US- AND CANADA-BASED BOOKSTAGRAMMERS AND BOOKTUBERS

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Details on the next slides!



## The Research



The purpose: I'm studying the discussion of LGBTQIA+ themed YA fiction on bookish social media, focused on Bookstagram and Booktube.

I am looking for: 2 more creators fitting the requirements - either LGBTQIA+ or non-LGBTQIA+

The interview: one interview lasting between 45 and 75 minutes, via video call - preferably this week still.



Requirements for participating can be found on the next slide!

## Requirements



- You are based in the United States or Canada;
- You are between 18 and 26 years old;
- You regularly read YA fiction;
- You feature LGBTQ+ books on your social media platforms (at least four times a year);
- All identities are welcome;
  - You need to be comfortable talking about your gender and sexuality. You will be kept completely anonymous to ensure your safety and protect your identity.
- Account size doesn't matter!

## Who Am I?



Name: Evi  
Age: 22  
From: The Netherlands  
Pronouns: she/her  
Occupation: MA Student in Media & Creative Industries

I have been a member of the online book community since 2018, and love to read light fantasy, speculative fiction, and hard-hitting contemporary in MG, YA and adult books. As a member of the LGBTQIA+ community myself, I am always looking for different representations of queer people in fiction, which inspired the topic of my thesis!

## How To Join



If you fit the above criteria and would like to participate, please send me a DM!

Any additional questions before making a decision to participate? Feel free to message me.

If you do not fit these criteria yourself, sharing it or tagging others would be incredibly appreciated!

## The Research



The purpose: I'm studying the discussion of LGBTQIA+ themed YA fiction on bookish social media, focused on Bookstagram and Booktube.

I need: 12 to 16 bookish content creators to interview.

The interview: one interview lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, via video call.

Requirements for participating can be found on the next slide!

## Appendix D: Final Coding Tree

### Coding tree

#### *Prioritising Reading and Recommending Diversely*

Reading diversely is necessary

To become a better, more empathetic person

To understand other people

To see focal and casual representation

Avoiding tokenisation

Underrepresentation is unrealistic

Coming-out narratives are necessary but not exclusive

Reading diversely is fun and easy

Diverse books are simply good

Using Bookstagram to find queer recommendations

Curating a diverse feed

Getting less diverse recommendations outside Bookstagram

Having better access to queer books now

Marginalised authors are getting more chances

Reading diversely promotes inclusivity and authenticity

Prioritising intersectional queer books

Prioritising Own Voices stories

Own Voices is more authentic

Own Voices has good representation

Prioritising Own Voices reviews to identify good representation

Non-Own Voices representation can be harmful

#### *Highlighting Personal Connection with Books and Bookstagram*

Finding connection on Bookstagram

Having different reasons for starting

Creating connections with others as main benefit

Lack of bookish connection outside Bookstagram

Taking recommendations from many users

Enjoying discussing books

Recognising influence over audience

- Not enjoying the label 'influencer'
- Mostly experiencing real-life influence
- Using influence to recommend diversely

#### Recognising self in fiction

- Preferring YA as a safe genre
- Relatability is important
  - Highlighting relatability in reviews
  - Being motivated to read when relatable to others
- Developing personal identity via fiction
  - Queer identities are fluid
  - Exposure to queer fiction should happen young
- Feeling validated in fiction
- Actively seeking self reflected in fiction

#### Highlighting personal connection in reviews

- Not identifying as a reviewer
- Employing a personal reviewer style
  - Highlighting reading experience
  - Highlighting specific aspects they love
  - Having different focus for diverse books
  - Bringing up personal identity
- Selective reviewing
  - Not reviewing books they dislike
  - Not reviewing popular books
- Recommendations depend on personal identity
  - Trust
  - Reading tastes
- Openness about personal identity online
  - Recognising openness should not be required

#### *Expressing Feelings of Responsibility and Sensitivity*

- Pressure from Bookstagram limits diversity
  - Feeling pressure to be active
  - Specifying representation or not

People may avoid representation if specified

Too strongly focused on Own Voices

- Homogenizing diversity
- Losing responsibility of readers and authors
- Forcing people to come out

Pressure to share popular books

Avoiding and addressing harmful topics

- Avoiding sharing problematic books
- Being vocal when criticising problematic books
  - Not commenting on representation when not Own-Voices

Sharing trigger warnings

Feeling it can be difficult to do right

- You cannot tell others what to do
- Difficulty to be nuanced on Bookstagram