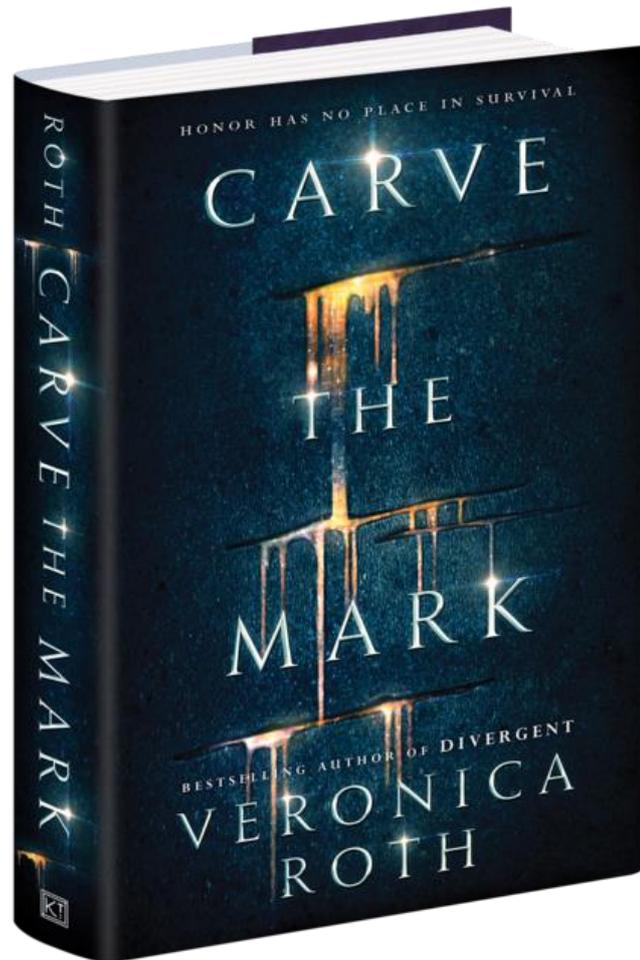


The Effect of Online Influencers on Young Adult Literature and its Audience

The Negative Response to Veronica Roth's Carve the Mark



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Introduction

Over the past decade, young adult literature has grown substantially as a genre. With major page-to-screen adaptations such as *The Hunger Games*, *The Fault in our Stars*, and *Divergent*, it has been given a bigger focus in the publishing industry, drawing the attention of new readers of a variety of ages. Moreover, the internet, specifically social media, has allowed fans of those books to communicate, causing them to create communities with varying levels of influence. The changing levels of involvement from readers, who used to be mostly passive consumers in the publishing industry, influence the rest of the publishing process. This thesis seeks to understand this changed environment by examining the influence of online reviews from young adult readers. Not only are readers better able to influence the opinions of other readers, which may result in changing book buying behaviour, they are also able to voice their opinions more directly to publishers and authors through the internet. Therefore, the young adult literature market, with its remarkably high level of reader involvement, will have to change drastically to respond to the demands of reader communities.

Through different social media platforms, readers have become active in the literary industry. Some have even acquired celebrity status, similar to bloggers, vloggers, and social

media presences in other realms (Dunkley 32-33). These online influencers, as they will be referred to in this thesis, are regular readers who create their own content on various social media platforms and have grown into leaders in opinion formation, influencing other readers in the same community (Dunkley 32). Although each influencer is expected to give his or her opinion on YA books, the development of a community has ensured that some topics and discourses have gained more significance than others. One current trend in the young adult community is a high sensitivity towards tropes and plots that could be considered discriminatory towards a minority segment of the population. This recent development has so far gone unnoticed by the academic community, but is quite active, as can be seen when searching the hashtag ‘#ownvoices’ on Twitter, which emphasizes the importance of diverse books written by diverse authors. A specific case that received negative criticism of this kind is the young adult science fiction novel *Carve the Mark* by Veronica Roth. Veronica Roth is well-known in the young adult genre, as she is the author of the *Divergent* series, a dystopian trilogy set in futuristic Chicago that became a #1 New York Times bestseller and was also adapted to the big screen. *Carve the Mark* is Roth’s second series. After being announced in May 2016, it was published in January of the following year (Sims). Roth’s publisher, HarperCollins, aimed to create new hype surrounding the release with several well-financed marketing campaigns, including sponsored advanced reader copies of the book that were sent out to several online influencers. These ARCs caused a debate between online influencers, forces from the publishing industry, and readers that went through different stages of opinion formation. This process will be the focus of this thesis.

Since the presence and influence of readers has been increasing over the years as it became easier to ‘share’ one’s opinion and become an active participant in discussions on literature through the internet, specifically Web 2.0 (John 167-168), it is important to study how online influencers have been using their newfound power in order to guide other readers’

opinions. A shift of power from traditional publishers and marketing to readers and reviewers is taking place (Dunkley 32-33). In order to understand how this is happening, it is useful to study separate cases such as *Carve the Mark*, because they can be examined in great detail and therefore provide a specific insight into the workings of social media, online influencers, and the young adult fiction community as a whole. Therefore, this thesis will concern itself with the following main question: What role do online influencers take in in shaping public opinion of a forthcoming release in the young adult fiction community? Through analysing a specific case study as well as recent developments such as the #ownvoices movement, this thesis will attempt to describe the power of online influencers in the realm of YA literature in four chapters.

Chapter one will outline academic research regarding young adult (YA) literature, marketing, online influencers, and the ‘savage other’ trope in order to be able to situate the case study in an academic context. In chapter two, *Carve the Mark* and the initial response to its ARCs will be analysed. Through an exploration of the marketing strategies used to promote the novel and the positive responses by online influencers, it will become clear that viral marketing via outside forces can be beneficial for publishers, but also comes with the risk of far-reaching negative feedback. As a continuation of the case study, chapter three will examine the effects of one influential negative review of *Carve the Mark* on the online YA community in order to illustrate that online influencers are not the sole guiding figures of opinion formation. Rather, the process is cyclical and open, guided by ruling principles in the community such as a focus on honest representation of minorities. Chapter four will examine some of these ruling principles more closely in order to situate the case of *Carve the Mark* in the bigger context of trends in the YA community. Additionally, practical examples will illustrate that the impact of online influencers and the YA audience is not restricted to the reading community, but stretches to decisions made in the publishing process as well.

Chapter 1: Theoretical framework

This chapter focuses on defining several key terms that will help place *Carve the Mark* and the negative response of its readers in context, starting with an overview of the current state of young adult (YA) literature and its definition in a scholarly setting. The inconsistencies of this definition will be shown using articles by Coats, Herz and Gello, after which an alternative definition for YA literature will be presented. An exploration of the workings of marketing in literature as well as the importance of ‘big books’ and the position of the author will follow, based on material by Thompson on contemporary marketing and publishing bestsellers. Additionally, attention will be paid to the effect of social media and online influencers on the young adult audience, for which Dunkley, Coats, and Buckingham provide theoretical context. Finally, the ‘savage other’ trope and the consequences of its use will be discussed using the work of Said, Canniford and Shankar. These four areas of inquiry, namely young adult literature, marketing, online influencers, and the ‘savage other’ trope, provide the theoretical context in which the debate on Roth’s latest novel can be analysed.

Young adult literature

Many scholars agree that young adult literature is not discussed extensively enough in literary studies research. Karen Coats, literary scholar at Illinois State University, argues that “young adult literature exerts a powerful influence over its readers at a particularly malleable time in their identity formation”, making it deserving of the same kind of attention as adult and children’s literature (Coats 316). Instead, she claims, YA literature is currently viewed as a transitional literature that only functions as an intermediate step in the process of students becoming acquainted with other literatures that are considered more advanced (Coats 316-7). In order to properly research this genre, which influences readers at an important stage in their lives, YA literature should have a “dual valuation”; not only should it be used transitionally in

education, but it should also be studied for its own cultural value as a “viable destination literature” (Coats 317). However, in order to study this genre, scholars need a proper definition that describes its distinctive qualities.

Despite the small coverage of YA literature in academic literature, there appears to be little consensus regarding the definition of the genre among the few scholars who study it, and therefore the field of young adult fiction remains inadequately demarcated. Herz and Gallo, who researched the position of YA literature with regards to the classics in the secondary way that Coats describes, consider the genre to consist of “a broad spectrum of books, including books written for adults that are read by both adults and teenagers” (Herz and Gallo 11). They note common characteristics such as a length of approximately 200 pages, a first person perspective with a teenager’s voice and vocabulary, the inclusion of issues to which teenagers can easily relate, and a plot that derives from the decisions of the main character, who is usually a teenager him or herself (Herz and Gallo 10-11). Although such a list of traits of young adult books appears to be consistent, it proves hard to work with in practice, as the definition remains vague and exceptions are numerous. Other definitions that Herz and Gallo found do not resolve this problem, with descriptions including books that are “read voluntarily by teenagers”, those who have “teenage protagonists”, or those who are “written for a teenage audience” (Herz and Gallo 11). Even marketers and publishers tend to avoid defining the genre by placing YA literature in the children’s section or developing different covers for the same books, such as the adult and children’s version of the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling (Coats 322). This illustrates that the publishing industry is inclined to place YA literature among more recognisable genres, such as children’s fiction. When the definition is not left to publishers and marketers, it is often closely connected to the educational value of reading and described as works “about adolescents and for adolescents” that “put students at the center of [...] learning experiences” (Slavner as qtd. in Hayn et al. 3). Since these definitions are given in relation to

the readers instead of the content of the stories themselves, young adult literature remains a vague subject, making it hard to treat it with proper academic care.

A possible explanation for the unclear demarcation of this field is its focus on change. This change, according to Coats, simultaneously is one of the best descriptions of YA literature. Some argue that YA literature follows a main character that goes through a change or development towards maturity as the story progresses, but this is not the sort of change Coats refers to (Coats 320). After all, there are plenty of literary texts not considered YA literature that focus on an evolving main character, such as *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens and *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, but also more recent novels such as *The Circle* by Dave Eggers. Moreover, many texts that are considered YA tend to deal with emotional and transitional issues that do not necessarily connect to the theme of maturity, such as recovery from a mental illness, and thus do not fit this definition either (Coats 320-1). Instead, the change that defines YA fiction has to do with the themes developed in the books, which are contingent with the time they are published. When studying publishing trends, Coats finds that “YA texts [...] appear in thematic clusters, revealing an intertextuality that responds to the market, which in turn responds to prevailing cultural and personal fantasies” (Coats 318). An example would be the rise in publication of monster-literature that occurred after the success of *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyer. Countless stories about vampires, werewolves, and other traditionally evil supernatural characters with a backstory flooded the market. Although these narratives are neglected by many scholars, Coats argues that this trend mirrors humanity’s inherent capacity for wrongdoing as well as benevolence and teaches readers to think ambiguously and imagine others complexly (Coats 327). The monsters are portrayed as being capable of doing both good and evil, and aid adolescents in thinking about themselves, therefore giving them hope for “ethical development” (Coats 327).

Similarly, the rise of dystopian YA literature after the success of *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins suggests a shift of focus towards corrupt regimes, moral concerns, and a fear of the future (Coste 10). Therefore, one could say that the themes treated in YA literature are dynamic, influenced by market forces and current bestselling works, as well as social and cultural discussions. Although this is, of course, the case for all popular literature up to a certain degree, YA literature is an extreme case as its readers tend to be active online, resulting in innovative, cohesive communities that are constantly in conversation about the newest releases (Buckingham 13; Dunkley 32). Due to this focus on temporary “identification, emotional mirroring, and fantasy” instead of deeper philosophical questions, it is harder to construct a lasting canon, as the popular literature changes too quickly (Coats 321). In an attempt to solve this issue, Coats defines YA literature as books without a “closed moral universe”; if the plot is critical of society and does not necessarily punish the ‘bad guys’ while rewarding the ‘good’, the book has an open moral universe and can be considered young adult literature instead of ‘simpler’ morally correct and educational children’s literature (322).

As has become increasingly clear, a solid definition for YA literature is hard to find. For the length of this thesis, a combination of the elements discussed above will be employed in the definition of YA literature that is utilised in this analysis. The definition is as follows: young adult literature is a branch of literature intended for young adults, but not read exclusively by them, in which the main character tends to be a young adult. It has a plot that comments on social and cultural events that are relevant at the time of publishing, and a world with an open moral universe. In short, young adult fiction reflects on what it means to be an adolescent across time. With this definition in mind, the role of marketing in YA literature can be addressed.

Marketing, platforms, and publishing bestsellers

Since YA literature is constantly evolving and changing as it adjusts to popular culture and trends, marketing is of vital importance for publishers in order to influence this particular audience. As mentioned, the thematic clusters that characterise YA literature make for publishing cycles containing many publications with similar themes and subjects. Books are often compared to one another and marketed as providing the reader with a similar experience (Thompson 202-204). The strong communal sense between young adults online that allows them to focus on repetition and familiarity in order to maintain the community creates a situation in which the young adult audience is actively looking out for these correspondences (Coats 324). This is why the term ‘big books’ is especially important in this industry. Big books are anticipated bestsellers, meaning that they have not yet been published but that publishers and agents expect that those books will become successful once on the market, a phenomena that is also referred to as the web of collective belief (Thompson 194-195). Usually, this belief does not rely on factual numbers. Instead, a book rises or falls on the enthusiasm of others. If publishers believe in the future success of a book, they will place higher bids on that book, which tends to lead to higher budgets for marketing in order to win back the money paid (Thompson 195). In a market as current and subject to popular culture as YA literature, publishing houses are desperate to be on top of what they think the next big book will be.

According to Thompson, professor of sociology at the University of Cambridge, there are four ways in which an editor at a publishing house can determine whether a manuscript is a big book. Firstly, positive judgement by successful editors and literary agents can be a source of validation, which shows the personal level and the importance of networking in the publishing industry in general (Thompson 205-209). A second aspect is the presence of ‘comps’, meaning comparable books. If there already are successful books on the market that share themes, plot, or voice with the manuscript, it is more likely to be taken up as a big book

(Thompson 202-204). As mentioned before, this process is especially important in the YA genre. A third important factor is the author's track record; if an author has already been published, the sales of those earlier works weigh heavily in a publisher's decision to put his or her trust in a new book by that same author (Thompson 198). Finally, aside from an author's track record, the author's platform plays an important role. A platform, in this case, is "the position from which an author speaks, a combination of their credentials, visibility and promotability, especially through the media" (Thompson 204). If an author has a pre-existing audience, sales are likely to be higher and a book has a greater chance of becoming a bestseller. Additionally, an author's platform can be a major aid in the marketing process and can even result in the making of a celebrity author, where their platform becomes the main reason for publication (Thompson 204-205).

Aside from helping an editor decide whether to purchase a manuscript, these four factors are important in the marketing of a book. Especially in the quickly changing realm of YA literature, the familiarity of certain successful authors is highly valued, as will become clear when looking at Roth's author's platform. Apart from traditional marketing, viral marketing is used. This type of marketing, occurring online, is used to create "direct connections with costumers and to facilitate online interactions between writers and readers" (Thompson 333). In these changing times, where the direction of information and feedback is no longer unilateral but a constant exchange on the internet, publishers appear to have no choice but to adjust as their role changes. This brings us to the young adult community and online influencers, who are becoming increasingly visible in the industry.

Online influencers

The intended target audience for YA literature tends to be young people from approximately fourteen years and older (Williams). This group is sometimes referred to as Generation Z, which

includes “anyone born after 1995 who has grown up with the internet integrated into their daily life” (Dunkley 31-32). This generation has a significant online presence that comes with a new way of experiencing life. Coats claims that “today’s youth generate their identities and subjectivities through an increasingly visual, iconic, and virtual web of images that has largely been stripped of traditional modes of authority” (Coats 323). Although the influence of technology on youth was often considered dangerous, with the protection of privacy being a top priority, a shift has occurred in thinking about this digital age. Currently, it is believed that the internet helps young people “create new, autonomous forms of communication and community” that do not cause increased individualism, but foster a strengthened cohesiveness among its members, who tend to be “more open, more democratic, more creative, and more innovative than their parents’ generation” (Buckingham 13). The resulting transnational community of young adults that are connected through similar tastes and opinions instead of geographic location is a new force that should be taken into account in YA publishing. After all, because of their online presence, this generation tends to be more susceptible to online marketing, hence it is important for YA publishers to understand the effects of viral marketing (Dunkley 32).

Instead of relying on traditional marketing by publishing houses, Generation Z is more easily influenced by individuals that started out as ordinary consumers but became leaders in opinion formation through creating their own content on various social media platforms (Dunkley 32). These digital influencers have gained a great number of followers who, according to Affilinet, a research company that concerns itself with performance marketing, place more trust in them than in mainstream media and ordinary marketing by companies (Dunkley 33). In fact, these influencers appear to have just as much impact on the thoughts, opinions, and consumer behaviour of their audiences as their close friends and family would (Dunkley 33).

In the YA literature community, readers and influencers use several different platforms to spread their thoughts on books, authors, and publishers, such as Goodreads, YouTube, Instagram, and various blogs. Goodreads, first of all, is a cataloguing website where readers can keep track of the books they have read, as well as add books that they might be interested in reading (“How It Works”). Each user can give star ratings and add personal reviews, which then become visible to other users. Moreover, one can join book clubs, discussion groups, and even contact authors that are also a member of the platform, showing the interactive nature of the website. Unlike Goodreads, with its specific target audience, YouTube, Instagram, and blogging websites such as WordPress are more general online platforms where readers of Young Adult literature have created their own communities. For YouTube, this community is called ‘BookTube’ and includes all channels that predominantly post videos about books and reading (Goldfield). Although BookTube is not exclusively about YA literature, many major channels with hundreds of thousands of subscribers tend to discuss and promote books from this genre¹. Since the video-format allows these ‘booktubers’ to, literally, show their face and make a name for themselves, fans are likely to connect with them on a personal level, which is only strengthened by the use of other social media such as Twitter and Facebook on which booktubers talk directly to their audience. Similar to BookTube, the Bookstagram community surfaced on Instagram. This platform enables readers to share photos, quotes, and reviews as well as comment on other people’s posts through the use of the hashtag ‘#bookstagram’, enabling users to search the website’s archives more effectively (Scott). Finally, there are numerous reviewers on platforms that allow users to set up their own internet pages and posts such as WordPress and BlogSpot. Although the level of interaction in these spheres is lower,

¹ For practical examples of what a BookTube channel might look like, one can visit the homepages of different influential BookTube personalities, such as Christine from the channel polandbananasBOOKS, counting 360.000 subscribers (www.youtube.com/user/polandbananasBOOKS), Jessie from JesseTheReader, who has 214.000 subscribers (www.youtube.com/user/jessethereader), and Sasha from abookutopia with 346.000 subscribers (www.youtube.com/user/abookutopia).

blogs are often referred to on other social media in an attempt to strengthen an opinion or show a different view on a specific book, allowing the community to enter into serious discussions.

It is clear that YA literature and its audience deserve more recognition in academic research. Aside from the fact that YA fiction is a dynamic genre that is closely connected to trends in popular culture, it appears to be ahead of other kinds of literature when it comes to online presence and a need for viral marketing. With individuals having an increasing impact on consumer behaviour and demands, research into particular case studies is necessary in order to understand the different processes occurring in this remarkably active target group.

The 'savage other' trope

Now that a theoretical background has been provided on the definition of YA literature, the importance of big books and viral marketing, and the increased presence of the reading community through online influencers, the 'savage other' trope should be introduced. This trope, which is one of the main points used when criticising Veronica Roth's *Carve the Mark*, has its roots in racial stereotyping and is closely connected to the term orientalism as coined by Edward Said, a key figure in postcolonial studies as well as a professor of literature. Orientalism, Said argues, is a broad, multi-layered discourse about the relation between the Occident, otherwise known as 'the West', and Orient, 'the East' (Said *Orientalism* 9-10). Central to this discourse is the construction of "ideological assumptions, images, and fantasies" about the Orient (Said "Orientalism Reconsidered" 90). In short, this means that ideas are formed about a certain group, specifically those people living in the Middle East, that aid in building a system that facilitates categorisation and prejudice. Specifically, orientalism allows those in the West to think of 'the other' as passive, mysterious, dangerous, backward, and savage, which enables the Occident to think of itself as the opposite (Said *Orientalism* 9-10; Canniford and Shankar 35).

Although the concept of orientalism appears to be rooted in history as part of a sociological issue, it is also present in literature. All texts have a degree of ‘worldliness’, meaning that they exist in a certain context and are part of a specific reality of thinking (Said, “The World” 33). Therefore, texts do not only comment on the world they are written in, but also become part of that world and influence anyone who reads it. For this reason, authors of texts as well as critics should aim to give a voice to minorities in order to build a future that treats everyone more equally and breaks with the prejudiced discourse that occurs in orientalism (Said, “The World” 53). Literary texts influence the world around them and should aim to reiterate just ideas and a respectful manner of thinking of others, especially when those ideas are implied in the world building and not directly commented upon by the literature itself.

An example of popular culture that uses elements of orientalism in order to construct a stereotypical image of a specific group is the representation of surf-culture. Canniford and Shankar argue that “literature, film and advertising have represented and articulated surfing as a *savage* or *primitive* pursuit in order to imbue various products with a sense of otherness and excitement” (35). In other words, typifying a particular group of people is a strategy used for marketing purposes, in order to draw an audience that is looking for a sense of ‘foreignness’ that they can exploit. Despite the fact that surf-culture appears to have little to do with the focus of Said’s research, which is people in Asia and the Middle East, Canniford and Shankar’s research shows that the concept of orientalism can be used in a broader context. The division between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is frequently found in YA literature, where it could easily become intertwined with the ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ theme that occurs in many stories set in a fantasy world. The depiction of ‘the other’ as savage and backward appears to be an easy step once the basic structure of a fictional world is laid out according to this theme, enabling this type of YA literature to subconsciously take part in racial stereotyping and orientalist practices, even though it is occurring in a fictional context.

Taking into consideration this broader sense of orientalism that allows racial stereotyping to take place in fictional worlds that have an effect on the real world due to the worldliness of texts, this thesis will move into a discussion of *Carve the Mark* by Veronica Roth and the initial response of the young adult reading community to this big book by an international bestselling author.

Chapter 2: *Carve the Mark* and the initial response

Almost a year before its release, the title and general plot of Veronica Roth's *Carve the Mark*, the first part of a duology with the same name, were revealed by Entertainment Weekly (Biedenharn). The novel, which is referred to as "the *Divergent* author's next book", was marketed as a highly anticipated release through traditional and virtual channels (Biedenharn). This chapter will focus on the marketing of Roth's book and the initial response of fans and influencers in advance of publication. Firstly, the high visibility of the book will be explained using the theory of the author's platform. Then a summary of the plot of *Carve the Mark* will be provided as general background, along with a description of the marketing campaigns that publisher HarperCollins initiated in order to create as much momentum as possible for the novel. Early reviews of advance reader copies of the novel by online influencers will be analysed, after which the possibly problematic nature of the book and its use of the 'savage other' trope will be examined using Justina Ireland's review, which greatly influenced community opinion. In this way, this chapter will attempt to answer the following question: How was *Carve the Mark* initially received when ARCs were spread among online influencers?

Veronica Roth is a young American author, currently 28 years of age, who published her debut *Divergent* in 2011 with HarperCollins (Yvette001). This novel, a YA story set in dystopian Chicago, was quickly followed by *Insurgent* and *Allegiant*, and the series became extremely successful in 2013, when it sold over 6.7 million copies according to Publisher's Weekly (Roback). Aside from being a "superstar" among children's and young adult books² (Roback), the *Divergent* series was also turned into a movie franchise. Produced by Lionsgate, the first instalment made over \$250 million at the worldwide box office (McNary). With a publishing history like Roth's, it does not come as a surprise that her new publication is highly

² A telling detail is that these two genres, children's books and young adult books, were not separated in this article, underlining the unclear position that young adult literature takes in the publishing industry.

anticipated before its plot, publication date, or even title are made public. This is a practical example of the use of an author's platform in order to promote a book. An author's platform, to reiterate, is "a combination of [an author's] credentials, visibility and promotability, especially through the media" (Thompson 87). Any news outlets that mention the upcoming novel focus on the fact that Roth is the author of *Divergent* and assume that her previous success is sufficient justification for expecting that her new release will be equally successful. Through this promotion of Roth's name and past successes, Roth has become a brand-name author, meaning that her name is so well-known and popular among YA readers that it gives a certain predictability to her sales³. However, as will become evident, this reputation does not guarantee success, as the response to a novel is not fully in the publisher's control.

Before exploring HarperCollins' marketing campaigns for *Carve the Mark*, a small summary of its plot is in order. Unlike *Divergent*, which was released at a time that perfectly aligned with the surge in dystopian stories in the YA market that occurred after the publication of *The Hunger Games*, *Carve the Mark* is the first instalment of a science fiction series that does not necessarily have any recent successful comparable books in the field of young adult literature. The story follows two main characters, Cyra and Akos, who alternatingly narrate the novel (Roth). The two characters live on the same planet, but belong to different peoples, namely the Shotet and the Thuvhe. Cyra is the sister of Rhyzek, the tyrant leader of the violent Shotet and Akos is the son of the Oracle of the peaceful Thuvhe. Everyone in this world has a 'currentgift', a special ability given to them by the magic current that streams through their universe. Akos's currentgift is immunity against other people's gifts. Meanwhile, Cyra suffers from chronic pain that she can transport to others by touching them. After Akos is kidnapped and taken to the Shotet, the two meet. Akos is able to cancel out Cyra's pain with his currentgift and Cyra slowly realises that she should rise up against her brother, who is using her powers to

³ More information on brand-name authors can be found in Thompson, pages 212-219.

maintain his dictatorship. Together, Cyra and Akos become involved with a revolutionary group of renegades in an attempt to defy Ryzek.

In terms of selling *Carve the Mark* worldwide, Roth's literary agency, New Leaf Literary & Media, took an unusual approach. Instead of publishing the original American English version first, followed by translations into other languages, New Leaf and 33 foreign language publishers decided to publish the different translations simultaneously on January 17, 2017 (Lodge). This worldwide release was possible due to Roth's existing audience; considerable advance sales could be expected, which significantly lowered the risk for publishers. Katherine Tegen Books, the imprint of HarperCollins that published *Carve the Mark* in the United States, for example, had a first print of two million copies (Lodge). This signifies that publishers are adjusting to a new literary market in which readers are constantly in conversation independent of geographical distance. After all, a simultaneous release of multiple translations of the same novel maximises the impact, as more people will be discussing the book on various social media at the same moment. Since publishers are aware of this ongoing worldwide conversation about literature, they respond to it in hopes that they can foster more sales for their publications.

HarperCollins uses this combination of relying on Roth's platform and the broad reach of the internet in many of *Carve the Mark*'s marketing campaigns. Aside from more traditional online strategies that are not necessarily rooted in social media and Web 2.0, such as the reveal of an exclusive sneak peek of chapter seven of *Carve the Mark* by Entertainment Weekly (Biedenharn), Roth's Twitter account, @VeronicaRoth, was used extensively. This account has over 575.000 individual followers⁴ and forms a direct link between the author and her fans, who can reply to her directly and show their support by 'liking' Roth's tweets. The account is run, or at the very least given the appearance of being run, by Roth herself. Roth announced a special

⁴ As of 22 June 2017

pre-order campaign for her new novel via a video posted on this personal account, (@VeronicaRoth, “So excited”). This strategy appears to mimic online influencers in order to make readers, in this case mostly adolescents, feel acquainted with the author; by using video and tweets with an informal register, Roth strengthens the idea of a personal connection between her and her audience and develops her author’s brand name⁵. Moreover, the campaign uses *Divergent*’s success in order to promote Roth’s newest work; an exclusive epilogue to the *Divergent* series called “We Can Be Mended” was promised to anyone who bought *Carve the Mark* before or on its release day (@VeronicaRoth, “So excited”). With this strategy, an active attempt is made to form a direct connection between the new novel and earlier successes, namely the *Divergent* books. Earlier accomplishments are used to solidify Veronica Roth as a brand and promote *Carve the Mark* as part of that line of success, even though the story is completely separate from Roth’s earlier works.

Roth’s brand is further reinforced by other tweets and messages on Instagram, such as pictures with handwritten quotes from *Carve the Mark* that Roth shared in the months preceding the publication of her novel (@VeronicaRoth, “ICYMI”; “I had”). Although these messages do not rely on Roth’s other works, they actively promote Roth’s author personality and work to solidify the connection that readers feel they have with the author. This can be understood as an example of what Simone Murray describes as “authorship as a performance” (Murray 327). Murray argues that the task of the author has changed from being active in promoting and marketing their books only at a certain moment in the publishing cycle to constantly playing a role that supports digital “reader-writer relationships” (Murray 323). Emma Maguire explains that this role for the author is “part celebrity, part guru, and part (imagined) close friend” and has surfaced in response to the demand of readers of the digital age that are familiar with Web

⁵ For further research done on personalization and other social media strategies that might be applied to this case of marketing of Young Adult fiction, see Strauß, Nadine, Sanne Kruikemeier, Heleen van der Meulen, and Guda van Noort. "Digital Diplomacy in GCC Countries: Strategic Communication of Western Embassies on Twitter." *Government Information Quarterly* 32.4 (2015): 369-379.

2.0 (Maguire). In the establishment of this mediated relationship with the reader, the medium used also carries meaning (Maguire). In other words, the media that an author's platform relies on also perform a role in themselves. For example, Roth posted the following message on Twitter: "ah, crap, I forgot to post a CtM quote yesterday. I SHALL POST IT TODAY INSTEAD. brb" (@VeronicaRoth, "ah, crap"). Here, Roth promises her readers to post a new picture relating to her next book, which suggests a personal relationship and trust between her and her readers. Although the quotes are a marketing campaign that is aimed at maximising the amount of sales, Roth humanises the campaign by underlining her forgetfulness. This encourages identification from her fans. Additionally, using Twitter as a medium strengthens this process of identification between reader and author, as the platform is seen as a manner of quick communication due to its character limit per message. It is also actively used by Roth's readers, which further reinforces that she is no different from her audience and therefore more reliable than faceless companies or publishers. In other words, Roth crafts her identity as an authentic fellow human being instead of an unreachable author using social media. This position of humanity increases the readers' trust in the author, which could result in higher sales.

Aside from this direct social media presence and other marketing campaigns that take place at a local level, such as posters in bookstores and author interviews, HarperCollins also decided to spread advance readers copies (ARCs) of *Carve the Mark* to multiple online influencers as early as November 2016. The reviews that followed were posted mostly on YouTube and were sponsored by the publisher. At first, these reviews from online influencers were predominantly positive and focused primarily on writing style, world building, and characters. For example, Sasha Alsberg, owner of BookTube channel abookutopia which currently has over 347.000 subscribers, gave the book four out of five stars and praises the strength of the main characters as well as the setting, describing it as a "galaxy with different cultures and worlds and people" (abookutopia). Jesse George from the channel JesseTheReader,

with over 215.000 subscribers, agrees, but focuses on how the story was character-driven with the pacing being somewhat slow at the beginning (JesseTheReader). Furthermore, he mentions that it took some time to comprehend the rules of the *Carve the Mark* universe since there was insufficient exposition (JesseTheReader). Similarly, Whitney Atkinson, who has 46.000 subscribers on her channel WhittyNovels, claimed to need a more intricate explanation of the setting and argues that the love story felt “thrown in there” (WhittyNovels, “REVIEW”). Apart from that, however, she appreciates the realistically written and likable main characters as well as their interactions and Roth’s overall writing (WhittyNovels, “REVIEW”). Finally, Emma Giordano from emmmabooks, with over 66.000 subscribers, calls Roth’s universe an “elaborate totally new world” that is “so fascinating” but remains underdeveloped due to a focus on dialogue in the overall story (emmmabooks, “CARVE THE MARK”). She continues to highlight the complexity of the characters and even compliments the book for being diverse and inclusive since one of its main characters is a person of colour (Cyra) (emmmabooks, “CARVE THE MARK”). Evidently, reviews that resulted from HarperCollins’s sponsored ARC marketing campaign focused mainly on character, setting, and writing style. Although some minor drawbacks were addressed, mainly concerning the underdeveloped setting, these reviews were quite positive and therefore helped to promote *Carve the Mark* months before its release, contributing to the hype surrounding the book.

Looking at these marketing campaigns, it appears that HarperCollins made effective use of Roth’s author’s platform and (social) media in order to promote *Carve the Mark* to a suitable audience. It could be said that marketing new YA literature through online influencers is a profitable enterprise in general. However, by using this intermediate force, the publisher also ran the risk of losing control of the information and opinions that circulated surrounding Roth’s novel. One review in particular formed a turning point for online community opinion on *Carve the Mark*. Justina Ireland, author of the young adult novels *Vengeance Bound* and *Promise of*

Shadows, did not focus on the book's writing style or the development of the characters when she posted a review on her blog. Instead, the presence of the "trope of the dark skinned aggressor", or the 'savage other' trope, is described as a problematic aspect deeply ingrained in Roth's world building (Ireland). Basing her statements on scholarly research on racial inequality, Ireland argues that *Carve the Mark* uses value judgements that support white supremacy in the treatment and descriptions of the Shotet people (Ireland). The Shotet are depicted as violent, with the ruling family being known for murdering their siblings, Cyra being mistreated by her brother, and Akos being turned into a slave, all of which stands in sharp contrast with the peaceful nature of the Thuvhe (Ireland). Moreover, the Shotet language is "harsh, with sudden stops and closed vowels, unlike the beautiful, open vowel sounds of the [Thuvhe]", they are pictured as nomads, and they partake in scarification (Ireland). Finally, Cyra herself is described as a person of colour, and her mother's hair is described as exceptionally curly, suggesting a North African heritage and appearance (Ireland).

Aligning with Said on the fact that fiction is rooted in reality, Ireland argues that "[t]hese aspects of a make believe culture of savage war-like peoples have their roots in the beliefs and stereotypes used to other people of color in the real world" (Ireland). The novel has a clear us versus them dichotomy that sets apart the Thuvhe from the Shotet, demonstrating Said's description of orientalism. Through depicting the Shotet as dangerous, barbaric, and uncivilised, they are portrayed as the enemy. Even Cyra's character development is centred on her rising "above [Shotet] genetics and culture" to fight her brother and join a rebellious force (Ireland). These markers are used by Roth, either subconsciously or not, to separate 'good' from 'evil' and follow a pre-existing storytelling tradition that uses this dark 'savage other' trope (Ireland). Moreover, by feeding into this tradition and reinforcing it, *Carve the Mark* has a negative influence on its readers and uses its worldliness, its place in reality, to condone

discriminatory thinking that “lead[s] to real world racial profiling and structural inequality in treatment of minorities” (Ireland).

This analysis of Roth’s story resulted in a negative review of *Carve the Mark* that critiqued the work at a deep level, doing the opposite of what HarperCollins intended when they distributed ARCs. Although Ireland and her books are not as well-known as Roth, this particular blog post, which has since been deleted from her website, caused a chain reaction among YA readers and online influencers and made the topic of discrimination and racism in young adult literature a major concern in discussions on *Carve the Mark*, as will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 3: Changing opinions and negative backlash

As a result of Ireland's review, awareness of the problematic nature of Roth's new novel quickly spread. This chapter will describe how one negative review changed the YA community's opinion through online influencers. Firstly, several reviews that refer back to Ireland's blogpost will be discussed. Subsequently, the influence of Ireland's review on traditional online news outlets will be examined. Then, attention will be paid to the manner in which booktubers sponsored by HarperCollins reacted to this new focus on *Carve the Mark's* discriminatory practices. Finally, Veronica Roth's own reaction to this development will be addressed, showing the circular nature that influence can have in the digital age.

The reviews that appeared on various WordPress blogs following Ireland's piece clearly illustrate the negative opinion of many YA readers. Titles such as "Why You Shouldn't Read CARVE THE MARK" and "Why I Took *Carve the Mark* Off My To-Read List" are not unusual even before the official publication date of Roth's novel (Robinson-Hatch; Brout). The blog posts often refer back to Ireland's review, signalling the quick spread of this particular viewpoint and the active position that other influencers take in spreading it. Sarah Robinson-Hatch from the blog Written Word Worlds admits to not having finished reading *Carve the Mark* and mentions three reasons, one of which is "the way this novel has been called out for racism" (Robinson-Hatch). Although the underdeveloped characters and world were also mentioned as points of critique, as they were in other reviews, the additional claim that *Carve the Mark* has discriminatory elements caused Robinson-Hatch to stop reading and actively ask others not to pick up Roth's newest novel. Many took her advice, and Brout wrote a blog post on his own website, 100 Story Reviews, in which he explains why he decided not to read *Carve the Mark*. He mentions cancelling his pre-order as he is "not putting money toward a potentially racist and problematic book when there's a wealth of diverse and genuine literature out there" (Brout). What is especially interesting is the role that this blogger takes up; he claims that he

has a “responsibility as a reader and a diverse book blogger” to learn about potentially problematic releases and avoid them (Brount). This illustrates the active position that readers took in in order to become influencers and opinion leaders. Readers are no longer passive receivers of information. Instead, they become part of a circular process of reviewing, opinion-formation, and critiquing the source material. Once readers actively take part in this process online and create a considerable following of their own, they become online influencers.

On GoodReads, too, the controversy surrounding the book did not go unnoticed. *Carve the Mark* currently has a rating of 3.71 out of five stars based on over 18.000 reviews (“Carve the Mark (Carve the Mark #1)”). Despite this relatively high average rating, the first and most popular reviews that are visible on the ‘community reviews’ section of the website tend to have lower ratings, most of them only giving the book one star. These reviews, for example by Raeleen Lemay, describe the issues mentioned by Ireland as “all of the problematic aspects of the story that tons of people have brought up”, signalling a shared common knowledge of the problematic aspects of the book among members of the online YA community (“Carve the Mark (Carve the Mark #1)”). These aspects, which remained unnoticed until Ireland’s review, have become a major deciding factor in the ratings of readers and even caused some members of the YA community to refrain from purchasing the book at all. This negative response to the release of a highly anticipated YA novel was started by one online influencer with a small audience and then spread to a bigger audience until the controversial nature of the novel became common knowledge in the target group, demonstrating the power of the online influencer. In this particular case, one negative review caused other readers to change their opinion according to that review, resulting in lower sales for the publisher of the book. This proves that viral marketing via online influencers comes with great risks for publishers, as one critical review is able to change online community opinion.

However, not all reactions were in agreement with Ireland's initial remarks. New York Times bestselling author Sabaa Tahir, for example, does not consider the book discriminatory. Tahir is a Pakistani-American and therefore part of a racial minority, which she underlines in the statement on her Tumblr account (sabaatahir). Due to the recent interest in #ownvoices books, books by authors who are part of a minority and use their voice to tell stories relating to the experience of being part of that minority, opinions from people such as Tahir and Ireland, are valued by the community, as will be discussed in more detail in chapter four. Tahir believes that "the cultural groups represented [in *Carve the Mark*] were varied and nuanced and open to many different interpretations", a claim she supports by mentioning that members of both Thuvhe and Shotet are described as having a variety of skin colours and have the capacity to act good as well as evil (sabaatahir). In her argument, therefore, Tahir uses Coats's definition of a young adult novel, namely the fact that it has an open moral universe and does not necessarily have completely 'good' or 'evil' characters, and combines that with the physical appearance of those characters in order to counter Ireland's statements. Moreover, she underlines that this is an opinion based on her own reading, which may differ from other people's points of view. "In dealing with other POC [meaning people of colour]," she urges, "not all POC opinions are immediately the ONLY opinion. We are not a monolith" (sabaatahir). In her argument, Tahir uses her identity as a validation of her opinion while simultaneously calling for a better treatment of that identity. It is obvious that the underlying issue of the *Carve the Mark* discussion is not merely literary, but extends to other realms of identity construction which both sides of this debate claim to treat respectfully. The importance of the role of identity and #ownvoices books will be considered in greater depth in chapter four, where responses such as Tahir's will be recognised as part of a bigger development in the online YA community. This development causes certain reactions to YA literature to be more easily accepted and reiterated by the community and gives certain influencers more legitimacy in stating their opinions.

With these discussions on identity and discrimination in literature occurring online, the position of traditional online news outlets on these developments in the YA community can give an indication of the power of online influencers. Although many official reviews do not mention the discriminatory nature of Roth's universe⁶, some mention the reaction of readers and influencers to the book. The Huffington Post, for instance, uses Ireland's review and the following backlash as an introduction to another problem with the novel, namely the way in which it appears to portray chronic pain as a gift (Trout). Trout speaks about *Carve the Mark* as "[a] white-savior YA novel where chronic pain is treated as a supernatural power" that can harm minority communities, and thus reiterates Ireland's claims while also adding a new dimension to the issue (Trout). Since this article was posted by the Huffington Post, a news website that publishes a combination of news articles and columns and was named one of the 25 best blogs of 2009 by TIME (McNichol), a new and broader audience was made aware of the debate surrounding *Carve the Mark*. Although the coverage of these discussions on YA literature by traditional news outlets is limited and found only in columns, this evidences the power of online influencers to shape the conversation in institutional media as well as in the online community.

Thus far, the negative response to *Carve the Mark* started with Ireland and then spread to bloggers, readers, and traditional media. Although this might appear to be the end of the process of opinion formation, the opposite appears to be the case. In fact, due to the sudden popularity of Ireland's standpoint, several online influencers who had already published sponsored reviews of *Carve the Mark* began to alter their opinion. This change in opinion occurred after their subscribers commented on their reviews in an attempt to open discussions

⁶ See positive reviews from USA Today (www.usatoday.com/story/life/books/2017/01/17/carve-the-mark-veronica-roth-book-review/96393654/), Kirkus Reviews (www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/veronica-roth/carve-the-mark/), and Entertainment Weekly (ew.com/books/2017/01/18/carve-mark-veronica-roth-review/), , as well as a mixed review by the Chicago Tribune (www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/books/sc-carve-the-mark-veronica-roth-books-0118-20170114-story.html).

relating to Ireland's post. Underneath Alsberg's video, for example, subscriber Nil Bal commented "loved your video. However, [...] I read that *Carve the Mark* is vaguely racist and relies on aspects of white supremacy? Is that true?" after which they shared a link to Ireland's article (Bal). Amitha Alex even commented "I wish they'd given this arc to a more diverse group of people so people could notice the problematic aspects" (Alex). As can be seen from these examples, fellow readers ask influencers for their opinion on this issue while also critiquing the lack of diversity among the influencers, as the majority of booktubers, approximately 93% according to booktuber Marines Alvarez from the channel mynameismarines, is white (mynameismarines). Although Alsberg herself, whose video was among the most popular of the reviews with over 25.000 views, refrained from commenting further on the problematic aspects of the book, other booktubers turned to social media to address the issues.

Giordano, for instance, was not able to adjust her review due to contractual obligations, but added a disclaimer in the video's description instead. There, she links to a new review she wrote on her Goodreads channel which discusses the problematic nature of the book (emmmabooks, "CARVE THE MARK"). Additionally, she apologises for her late awareness of these issues in *Carve the Mark* via her Twitter account @emmmabooks and recognises the importance of talking about representation and diversity (@emmmabooks, "I'll be blunt"; "But now"). Moreover, she presses that her "words are a permanent impact [she has] left on [her] platform, as is the influence that follows", which illustrates how influencers are aware of the responsibility towards their audience, also concerning issues of racism, even if that means contradicting opinions they have previously shared (@emmmabooks, "-my words"). Aside from making general statements such as these, Giordano responded directly to comments on her review. In response to a reader who was contemplating removing *Carve the Mark* from her to read list because of its use of an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy based on skin colour, Giordano

made the reader aware of the fact that “it's not POC vs. white people, the nations of Shotet & Thuve state that there are mixed races from each nation”, also adding that “people claim it's all or one of either side, which is not true” (emmmabooks, Re: raya’s channel). This nuanced opinion of the novel suggests that some influencers are willing to directly comment on the debate in one-on-one discussions with their followers, adding to Dunkley’s claims about the establishment of a personal connection between influencers and their subscribers. Through this two-way connection with their audience, online influencers altered their opinion of a book. In addition, they continue to contribute to the discussion and seek to shape community opinion both through public messages and one-on-one conversations.

Moreover, when confronted by Belu M., who asked her why she had not filmed a new video discussing the matter, Giordano referred to the discussion on diversity among influencers and answered “i do not have a voice in this discussion. i cannot tell someone if a book is racist or not [since I am white]. all i can do is link the reviews of those who have more say in this discussion than i” (emmmabooks, Re: Belu M.). Clearly, positive representation is not an issue that is called for only in YA literature such as *Carve the Mark*, but in online presence and visibility as well. The result of this trend, which will be discussed in more depth in chapter four, is that online influencers do not have complete freedom in their judgements and opinions, but are constantly forced to re-establish their place in the community by taking into account the position from which they speak, and to consider whether they have the right to speak at all.

Other booktubers changed their opinion and considered the controversy surrounding *Carve the Mark* as well. Jesse George, for example, adjusted the description of his review and commented on his own video with the following message: “I want to note that this book has problematic issues within it that I didn't pick up on while first reading it. [...] I'm sorry that I didn't recognize these issues. I'm listening and learning and will strive to do better in the future.” (JesseTheReader). Like Giordano, George underlines his accountability to the community by

admitting his mistake and linking to other sources in the community to provide his followers with more information on the issue. Whitney Atkinson, however, took it a step further. Although her video only has a little over 3000 views at the time of writing, she found a bigger audience via her account @whittynovels on Twitter, where she posted a ‘thread’, a series of tweets, voicing her opinion on Roth’s novel that was later referred to by many others, including Giordano. In this thread, she confesses that “[her] silence about [the problematic nature of *Carve the Mark*] in no way reflects the fact that [her] review was paid, but is entirely [her] own error of not even seeing there was a problem” (@whittynovels, “My silence”). She continues to describe this problem of blindness among (white) booktubers and expresses her thanks to the YA community for allowing her to learn more about the necessity of diversity and representation in literature (@whittynovels, “I don’t want”; “Is this a”). These examples illustrate a common need for booktubers and reviewers that expressed a positive opinion on *Carve the Mark* to apologise to the YA online community and claim responsibility for their ignorance. Through peer pressure and the quick acceptance of Ireland’s review into the circuit of opinion formation in YA literature, online influencers were forced to alter their opinions in order to maintain their status. In other words, due to the communicative nature of Web 2.0, community opinion on books in this genre is constantly open to revision. Only by re-evaluating their own reviews and opinions are influencers able to maintain a reputation of openness and a close connection with the community. It appears, thus, that the theory on online influencers and authors as proposed by Dunkley, Maguire, and Murray can be expanded. Not only do the personal connection and sense of trust between influencers and their audience generate popularity for the influencer, they also result in a constant negotiation of opinions. Online influencers are expected to not only influence others, but also be influenced by others; their ability to be self-reflexive is fundamental to their ability to influence community opinion.

With such a negative reaction to Roth's novel more than a month in advance of worldwide publication, some readers expected the publisher to recognise the issue as online influencers did. One of Atkinson's subscribers, for example, wondered whether the discriminatory aspects of the book would be altered in the final version, to which Atkinson replied that she doubted it, since it is "such an anticipated release [that] they might not set back the pub date" (WhittyNovels, Re: Red_Queen_of_Shadow-hunters_And_Crows). Atkinson was right. From a practical viewpoint, altering such an intrinsic part of the story would result in a huge amount of work not only for the original publisher, but also for the translators of the 33 different versions. Indeed, neither HarperCollins nor its imprint commented on the issues raised, and *Carve the Mark* was published without delay or adjustments. After publication, however, Veronica Roth addressed the matter via social media by posting an extensive message on her Tumblr. She explains her lack of an earlier response by saying that "as the author of the work in question, [her] voice is much louder than other voices on this issue and [she is] wary of drowning out the voices of people who are already discussing this" (theartofnotwriting). Subsequently, she explains her decisions concerning those parts of the novel that were labelled as problematic by others, namely physical descriptions, language, religion, and scarification, and promises to use the latter as little as possible as she understands the possible harm caused (theartofnotwriting). Afterwards, she concludes that she is "glad that people are talking about those issues" and that she "will be listening" although she will not "impose [her] authorial voice any further" in order to ensure that discussions among her readers will not be silenced (theartofnotwriting). Murray argues that the role of the author has changed due to changes in the publishing industry, the 'celebrity status' that authors are now able to acquire, and the involvement of digital media (Murray 315). Authors are able and even expected to "continuously offer pronouncements on how readers should interpret [their works]" through interviews, events, and public readings (Murray 315). However, Roth does the opposite. By

abstaining from taking further part in the discussions surrounding her novel, Roth actively sets herself apart from that contemporary norm. Instead, Roth explains what thoughts led to certain choices in her writing process, but allows and even encourages readers to form their own opinions, as the book should be open to interpretation. It appears, thus, that the role of the author in the YA community differs from the role described by Murray in the mainstream literary field. Aside from authors becoming celebrity figures that are constantly performing, they are simultaneously placing their public selves on the same level as their audiences. They use the same media and speak from the same level as their readers and encourage their audiences to participate, discuss issues in the community, and form their own opinions regardless of the author's intentions.

In conclusion, Ireland's review caused a chain reaction of responses and influenced the YA community in multiple ways. Not only did Ireland's audience respond to her claims, but many online influencers copied her opinion and spread it among their own audiences. Even online news sources recognised the issue. The possibly problematic nature of *Carve the Mark* became such an important topic among readers that it caused online influencers that were sponsored by HarperCollins to alter their opinions and apologise on social media. Eventually, even the author addressed the claims and promised to adjust the next instalment of the series after realising the stereotypical nature of parts of her novel. The process of opinion formation in the online YA community, thus, is circular. Influencers and authors are expected to listen to the community and constantly adjust their opinion, taking in new viewpoints and reviews by people from specific minorities. In order to understand why online influencers felt compelled to respond to these critiques, chapter four will analyse a larger phenomenon occurring in the YA community, namely the focus on diversity and '#ownvoices'.

Chapter 4: Effects on the YA market; diversity and #ownvoices

As several examples from earlier chapters have already shown, the widespread negative response and active discussion of *Carve the Mark* is grounded in a bigger change of taste and awareness among YA readers online. These developments have consequences that reach far beyond one case study. This chapter will attempt to place the reaction to *Carve the Mark* by Veronica Roth among current trends in the Young Adult community and describe what effects these trends have on books that are being published now and in the near future, as well as on authors and online influencers. Moreover, this chapter will discuss the implications of these changes for the publishing industry.

A term that helps to describe the relevant broader context behind the controversy surrounding *Carve the Mark* is ‘#ownvoices’. This term has already appeared several times in earlier chapters, which is proof of the intrinsic connection between online discussions on YA literature and this call for diversity. The hashtag ‘own voices’ is native to the YA industry and little to no attention has been paid to this particular term by scholars. However, important theorists such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have long spoken out about a similar issue, namely the question of the subaltern. The subaltern, according to Spivak, describes those groups that have “limited or no access to the cultural imperialism” (De Kock 45). Although this term is usually used in a postcolonial context, Spivak draws attention to the voice of the subaltern by claiming that “[t]he subaltern cannot speak” since they, specifically women, are by definition part of an oppressed minority (Spivak 308). YA readers and literary theorists appear to be working on different levels, but it appears that thinking of ways to give a voice to the suppressed, stemming from Spivak’s work in the 1980s, has found its way into the everyday lives of readers, writers, and publishers of this specific genre. This trend, which shows the importance of social media in the spreading of its message through the use of a hashtag, does not limit itself to geographic divisions and ethnic minorities. The #ownvoices trend was

initiated on Twitter in 2015 by YA author Corinne Duyvis and is used to refer to books in which “the protagonist and the author share a marginalized identity” (Duyvis). The hashtag was initially introduced to allow readers to quickly find literature of that kind online and was then eagerly taken on by the community (Duyvis). Since then, the phrase has been taken from Twitter to other platforms, with, for example, over 4.000 mentions on Instagram. This shows the importance that the community places in the identity of the author in relation to their written works.

The influence of #ownvoices is evident in the case of *Carve the Mark*. Atkinson, for example, not only notifies her readers of the tropes present in the novel in the description of her review video, but she also adds that readers should “bear in mind the consequences that Roth's writing may have on marginalized people [and] that supporting an author who writes about problematic themes potentially takes away money and readership from authors who write #ownvoices books” (WhittyNovels, “REVIEW”). She proceeds to provide links to various twitter threads that list books by different minorities, including Muslim and LGBTQIA+ authors (WhittyNovels, “REVIEW”). Evidently, not only do influencers recommend for or against reading a book, but they also urge people to pay attention to certain books in an attempt to adjust the canon. This adjustment is not merely from an ideological point of view, but also an economic one, since Atkinson considers both the income of the authors and their readership in her argument. Moreover, since the #ownvoices movement is focused on the connection between author and story, a new importance is placed on the author’s identity. This is illustrated by comments such as the following, left underneath Robinson-Hatch’s post on *Carve the Mark*: “I would honestly love to see another author, preferably a non-white author, take this premise and even this character [Cyra], and rework it to something more empowering” (Arehonda). The role of the author, thus, has not only changed in terms of virtual presence and openness, but also concerning their identity; being part of a minority, whether in terms of ethnicity, belief, or

sexuality, gives an author the possibility to express their experience as part of that minority in a way that could be beneficial to their sales.

This trend of supporting stories written by minorities has had a notable influence on the industry and the chances of an aspiring author to be chosen for publication. Among agents and editors, for example, there has been a call for #ownvoices novels. Laura Rennert, executive agent at Andrea Brown literary agency and representing bestselling YA works such as Maggie Stiefvater's *The Raven Cycle* and Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons*, specifically mentions that she is looking for "a diverse, Own Voices fantasy or thriller that draws on an underrepresented history/culture for its mythology or world-building" ("Agents"). Many other agents have expressed their preferences via Twitter (Sambuchino). Thao Le, agent at Sandra Dijkstra Agency, even said that she is "closed to submissions, but if you're an #ownvoices writer query me w the hashtag in subject. I want to boost your voice more than ever" (@ThaoLe8). Literary agents are important gatekeepers in the publishing world and their choices in representation largely determine the choices publishers have if they want to take on a debut author (Thompson 75). Therefore, their tastes hold a lot of power in the industry. Agents witnessed the call for diverse #ownvoices novels by readers and altered their own wishes according to those, thus changing the market, demonstrating that the YA community is capable of influencing the publishing industry through strongly articulating their opinion online.

The issue of identity in combination with YA literature extends further than the author, however. For example, Sabaa Tahir, the author that disagreed with Ireland's claims and used her ethnicity to back her argument, mentions that she refrains from saying anything about the controversy surrounding chronic pain. Instead, she refers to other people who "have spoken about the issue [and] are more knowledgable about issues of ableism than I am" (sabaatahir). In other words, Tahir acknowledges that she is not the right person to give her opinion on particular topics, as they are not part of her own experience. It appears, thus, that the identity

and personal experiences of influencers and reviewers have an impact on their ability to influence the community. When part of an influencer's identity corresponds to that of the characters in the story they review, their words are considered more valuable by YA readers. Even the influencers themselves stress the importance of the presence of influencers that are part of a minority. Giordano, for example, believes that "it's crucial to have reviews from diverse voices early on in the publication stage of a novel" in order to ensure that discriminatory tropes in novels are quickly and clearly recognised (@emmmabooks, "This is why"). Moreover, as became evident in chapter three, there has also been critique regarding the lack of diversity in the Booktube community. This suggests that, even though influencers have the power to affect the reception of a YA novel as dramatically as was the case with *Carve the Mark*, this does not mean that they are safe from criticism, whether this is based on their specific response to a novel or on whether they are in a position to speak at all.

Evidently, the #ownvoices movement extends beyond the particular issues concerning Roth's novel, but is closely connected to it. The focus on the treatment of minorities that is central to both has had important consequences for influencers and authors, but the publishing industry as a whole is also affected by this bottom-up change of focus in YA literature. Two practical examples will illustrate how this has happened in the recent past. Firstly, ARCs of *The Continent* by Kiera Drake faced a backlash similar to that of *Carve the Mark*. Justina Ireland discusses this novel alongside Roth's in her blog post, claiming that Drake's fictional world makes use of the same harmful trope of a savage, uneducated, nomadic people (Ireland). In the case of *The Continent*, Ireland was not the first to mention the problematic nature of its world building, and many others have voiced their issues with the book⁷. Unlike HarperCollins, HarlequinTeen, who was to publish *The Continent* in January 2017, reacted to the online

⁷ See, for example, 17-year-old Mishma's review at <http://chasingfaerytales.blogspot.nl/2016/11/the-continent-keira-drake-review.html> and the community reviews on Goodreads at https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/30075733-the-continent?ac=1&from_search=true.

criticism of this debut by delaying publication in order to change the harmful components of the story (HarlequinTeen). The publication date was moved to January 2018, a year after the original date (“The Continent”). The publisher states that this decision is a direct response to the “online discussion about racial stereotypes” concerning *The Continent*, proving that YA publishers cautiously consider the opinions of their audience on social media (HarlequinTeen). Moreover, HarlequinTeen decided to share their announcement via Tumblr, a social media platform mainly used by people in HarlequinTeen’s target group. As was the case with Roth’s use of social media, this publisher also decided to share its information on a medium that allows them direct contact with their audience on equal grounds. This suggests a move towards more personalised contact between publishers and audiences, although this is not yet as developed as the new role of the author.

The second example that indicates an effect of social media influencers on the publishing industry is an anecdote drawn from personal experience during my internship for the Literature Today Masters programme. Due to contractual obligations, no titles or authors will be named. In this particular case, a YA fantasy novel by a debut author in the USA was sold to a Dutch publishing house. After translating the novel, the Dutch publisher planned to print promotional ARCs. However, a few days before printing, they received an email from the original publisher, pressing them to adjust the translation according to a new version of the manuscript, which removed all references to skin colours, cultural indicators, or foreign language from the narrative. The old translation was not allowed to be distributed. Most likely, these sudden changes were the result of the original publisher fearing backlash from the online community in a manner similar to that of *Carve the Mark* and *The Continent*. Evidently, the recent incidents and opinions among the online YA community have caused publishers not just to react to reviews on their own books, but to take this development seriously enough to anticipate and avoid similar criticism on their upcoming novels. Running the risk of facing

negative social media attention has become enough justification for publishers to drastically adjust the world building in a manuscript.

As this chapter has shown, the social media response to *Carve the Mark* is part of a broader trend occurring in the online YA community. This trend, with a focus on #ownvoices and diversity, aims to support diverse books as well as authors that share their main character's marginalised identity. This development in the community has affected authors, influencers, and the publishing industry as a whole, and each of those groups has been attempting to adjust to the specific wishes of their audience. Similar to online influencers and authors, publishers are responding to the interests of their audiences and considering their opinions in order to ensure strong sales. In the YA literature world, therefore, it can be said that the audience is a strong, direct and active component in the decision process for what direction the literature is moving in.

Conclusion

This thesis has researched the role that online influencers play in shaping online public opinion of new releases in the young adult genre. By examining the response to Veronica Roth's *Carve the Mark* as well as trends in the online YA community such as #ownvoices, several conclusions have come to light that prove that online influencers play an important part in the YA community's reception of a novel. However, they do not hold full power over community opinion, and the roles of readers, authors, and publishers in social media discussions and the publishing process have changed as well, with a shift of power to the public.

Most importantly, opinion formation has proven to be a cyclical process that is constantly open to revision. Since readers have obtained the ability to be more proactive through the interactive nature of Web 2.0, the power that traditionally lay with publishers, authors and, to a certain extent, reviewers has diminished. Readers are able to become online influencers with a reach of tens of thousands of subscribers, therefore making their own opinion more public. Publishers have taken notice of this development and adjusted their marketing accordingly. This viral marketing via online influencers can result in additional sales, but it does make publishers more reliant; they have less control over the creation of buzz, as online influencers can also spread a negative opinion on the books that they're given. Moreover, online influencers base their popularity on honesty and correction which is dependent on the community as a whole. Due to certain trends in the YA community, such as the current focus on diversity and #ownvoices, online influencers might be forced to alter their initial opinion of a novel as their subscribers demand they consider other points of view. Therefore, there is little authority online. Readers can voice their disagreement with authors as well as influencers online, which can be damaging for the author's or influencer's reputation if they do not explain themselves or apologise for their ignorance.

The role of the author in this community has changed as well. On the one hand, an author's identity is highlighted more than ever. The connection between their work and the position from which they speak is seen as vital by the YA community, thus allowing authors to build their names around certain markers that could increase their visibility, celebrity status, and sales. On the other hand, however, authors are also expected to place themselves on the same level as their audiences; the use of certain (social) media in order to stay in contact with their readers is one aspect, but actual communication and exchange of critiques, opinions, and explanation is another. YA authors, like influencers, are reliant on this two-way communication to maintain their reputation.

Not only established authors and influencers, but also the publishing industry faces this pressure of the YA community. Literary agents as well as publishers are adjusting their tastes according to public trends such as diversity and #ownvoices. Apart from this being a characteristic of the YA genre, which revolves around changing trends and themes, it is also a sign that publishers are losing power. Trends that used to be based on sales have become specific demands from the audience revolving around representation, and the power of social media leaves the industry little choice but to adjust. Therefore, participating on social media has become important for publishers as it has for authors, although to varying degrees.

In attempting to describe the role of online influencers in shaping community opinion on a forthcoming young adult fiction release, it has become apparent that online influencers are not in complete control. They are part of a constant cyclical process of revision of opinions that involves readers, authors and publishers. A shift of power has taken place from authors and publishers not only to popular influencers, but to the YA community as a whole; due to an equalisation caused by active participation and Web 2.0, the publishing industry is changing and forced to take into account outside influencers and the unpredictability of public opinion.

Due to a lack of scholarly research done on YA literature, especially in connection to online influencers and interactive digital media, further research into this topic is necessary in order to investigate these changing grounds for publishers of YA fiction. Since publishers have been using social media as well, it would be interesting to investigate whether they are taking on similar strategies as authors, and whether personalisation will become a trend for those key figures in the publishing process as well. Practical research could be done to discover whether publishers have the ability to regain control of their marketing, and if so, how. Furthermore, the limitations of this thesis could be surpassed in order to find out whether this change in the opinion-shaping process extends to genres other than YA. Is the current status of the YA industry a future image of that of other genres? Or are literary novels and other books that are considered 'adult' reviewed in ways that divert completely from the social media approach of the YA community? With those questions, the cyclical process of opinion formation on YA literature as described in this thesis can form the backbone for further theorisation of the genre, its marketing, and the publishing industry as a whole.

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