



## Studying Digital Media Ecology in Selected Young Adult Novels

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### Abstract

As a cultural and recreational interest, young adult novels are made via different cultural processes that produce the ecologies of digital media. However, young adult fiction is recommended, shared, organized, developed, and studied through media by young readers, influencers, authors and creators. Due to high technology and the rise of social media, young adult fiction has become a fundamental part of recreational reading via online participation and digital media ecology. In the twenty-first century, teens have tended and embedded their thoughts and cultural participation throughout digital and online contents. This article studies three young adult fictions, they are: The Boy Who Steals Houses was first published in 2019 by C. G. Drews, The Illuminae Files – co-authored by Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff, it was first published in 2015, and House of Hollow by Krystal Sutherland, published by Penguin Teen in 2021.

**Keywords:** young adult fiction, digital media ecology, online content and participatory, and recreational readings.

دراسة بيئة الإعلام الرقمي في روايات مختارة للشباب

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### المخلص

تُصاغ روايات الشباب، باعتبارها اهتمامًا ثقافيًا وترفيهيًا، عبر عمليات ثقافية متنوعة تُنتج بيانات الإعلام الرقمي. ومع ذلك، يُوصى بقراءة روايات الشباب، وتُشارك، وتُنظم، وتُطور، وتُدرس من خلال وسائل الإعلام من قبل القراء الشباب والمؤثرين والمؤلفين والمبدعين. ويفضل التكنولوجيا المتقدمة وانتشار وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، أصبحت روايات الشباب جزءًا أساسيًا من القراءة الترفيهية عبر المشاركة الإلكترونية وبيئة الإعلام الرقمي. في القرن الحادي والعشرين، وجّه المراهقون أفكارهم ومشاركتهم الثقافية نحو المحتوى الرقمي والإلكتروني، ودمجوها فيه. تتناول هذه المقالة ثلاث روايات موجهة للشباب، وهي: رواية "الفتى الذي يسرق المنازل" التي نُشرت لأول مرة عام ٢٠١٩ من قبل سي. جي. دروز، ورواية "ملفات إيلومينا" التي شارك في تأليفها أمي كوفمان وجاي كريستوف، ونُشرت لأول مرة عام ٢٠١٥، ورواية "بيت الجوف" لكريستال ساذرلاند، التي نشرتها دار بنغوين تين عام ٢٠٢١.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** أدب الشباب، بيئة الإعلام الرقمي، المحتوى الإلكتروني والقراءة التفاعلية والترفيهية.

### 1. Introduction

Commonly, reading and books are interconnected to develop the way of thinking in teen readers. The only way to increase imagination and empathy is



reading. (Dylman et al., 2020; Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2012; Nussbaum, 1995). In addition, it creates a world of experience and forms some cultural perspectives (Bloom, 1994), (Nodelman, 1992, 2008). Vlieghe et al. (2016) believes that reading fiction is “fundamental for empowering people to lead meaningful social and cultural lives” (p. 25).

Some studies have noted that teens deny reading long-form literature. This shows that young adults spend a lot of their time watching short clips or videos on social media ecologies such as Tik-Tok, Instagram, or Youtube (Throsby et al., 2017; Rideout et al., 2022; Rutherford et al., 2017). However, before the advent of the digital age, it has been cited that popular culture and digital media are a cause of concern in some recent studies. For example, during the 1970s and 1980s, there was a refuse in reading amongst teens when the age of digital entertainment starts to thrive. (see Watson, 1978; Manuel & Carter, 2015). “Teen reading habits as they relate to media use were investigated in Thomson’s 1987 book *Understanding Teenagers’ Reading*, where it was claimed many teens were spending a lot of time watching television and video recordings, rather than reading” (Amy, 2024, 19). During the 1990s, recreational reading as a leisure activity continued in teens. While in the early 2000s, teens show a notable decline in reading long-form literature, especially fiction. (ABS, 2012; Clark, 2019; Clark & Picton, 2020, OECD, 2019; Rutherford et al., 2017; Throsby et al., 2017; Schleicher).

This article argues that it is important and helpful to understand the digital practice of young adults that relate to book selection and reading by focusing on books themselves as an essential part to digital media space and cultural participation. Therefore, this paper aims to locate books closely to digital spaces and readings.

At the beginning of the 21st century, some studies have noticed increasingly that book culture is available inside online libraries and spaces, thus, they have decided to understand where the books are within this media ecology. They have declared that the culture of reading books became something old fashioned and young adults have moved directly towards reading online. (see Birkerts, 2006). Other studies have noted that the old media of reading books converged with the new digital media of reading online, and this shows the tendency towards the cultural practices of reading and participation online. (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2009).

Bronwen Thomas (2020), is a scholar in the field of communication studies and narratives, believes that “why ‘literature’ and ‘social media’ are not antithetical” (p. 1). Therefore, platforms (including Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Pinterest, and YouTube) could offer a new way to study and understand contemporary literature cultures. Throughout the cultural participation online, readers could share and increase their knowledge of learning such as literary studies.



## 2.Young Adult Fiction

Young adult fiction frequently “addresses important issues of sexuality, gender roles, agency, diversity, social justice, equality and more, and [can] provide ways of critically reading these issues in contemporary society” (Schoonens,2020, p. 16). However, writers of literature have argued that young adult fiction tends to “create a parallel between the individual’s need to grow and the society’s need to improve itself” (Trites, 2007, p.144) and other narratives of development (Fitzsimmons & Wilson, 2020, xi). Recently Hilton and Nikolajeva (2012) state young adult literature “can help teenagers to think about, and hopefully to transcend, the rigid and dysfunctional structures of popular culture, stereotyping, oppression, and injustice” (p. 15). Heath and Wolf (2016) propose that young adult fiction provides teen readers with a “sense of ownership and inclusive role” (p. 143) in the text. Amy adds:”That is, the ability to identify with young adult characters makes it possible for teens to participate and engage with texts in multiple ways(2024, 56).

Coban (2018) notices “when a reader enters the story world, they discover an opportunity to not only explore the lives presented in the text but also to be part of those lives by emotionally responding to them” (p. 45). However, the aim of young adult fiction as literature is directly at teen readers and typically reflects challenges experienced by contemporary teens. Generally, literary and cultural studies illustrate the important role and relevance of young adult fiction to teens (see for example, Gruner, 2019; Nikolajeva et al., 2012; Trites, 2000).

The emergence of young adult fiction in the spaces of digital media and public culture lies partly on the development of fanbases, and the transformative impacts of titles on publishers and imprints. Amy added:” In scholarship on the effects of digital engagement on YA publishing and librarianship, popular texts like Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* and J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series were shown to impact the practices of authors, and publisher’s economic models” (Amy,56).

However, Trites (2000) identifies “YA” has historically been difficult to define because “young adult” refers to both the intended readers, and the narrative content. Further, “young adult” has been interchangeably used as a genre and a readership (Hilton & Nikolajeva, 2012). That is, this term is used to widely categorise a group of books, such as “young adult” sections “found in libraries and bookstores or to qualify other genres of fiction in online stores, hashtags and more, for example young adult science fiction, or YA romance”(Amy,2024,57). Thus, we see that in some literary studies and educational research areas, have been realized for some time the value of YA fiction to teen readers (Cliff Hodges, 2020; Mackey, 2011). And, as Gruner (2019) notes, “YA fiction’s popularity seems to be ever-increasing despite widespread anxiety about reading’s diminishing importance” (p. 3).



### **3.Objectives of the study**

This paper aims to understand the young digital ecology that supports and stimulates recreational readings of teens and books engagement. The following objectives of this article are:

- 1.study the digital media ecology of young adult novel in cultural participation.
- 2.identify digital interests of teens in recreational readings.
3. show types of social and digital media whereas young adult novels are discussed, recommended, and engaged in relation to recreational readings. Three research questions in this article to address the objectives of the study.

A.)Within the digital media ecology of young adult novels, what opportunity for book engagement is available to young readers?

B.)What are the ways in which teens use digital media ecology of young adult fiction to tell their reading choices and identify books online?

C.)What are the types of participatory spaces of young adult texts situated in digital media?

### **4.Methodology**

In this paper, an investigative research approach is adopted to identify the ecology of digital media of young adult novels. Therefore, various digital, cultural, and social aspects of participatory culture are mirrored by the multiple aspects of this study. This will enable us to study the connection between young adult fiction and digital media ecology. Swedberg shows the main goal of explored study is to "make an inroad into an area that is currently little known" (2020,38). Using mixed methods for qualitative research through an exploratory framework allows "exploration of social phenomena without explicit expectations" (Williams et al., 2012).

### **5.Theoretical approach**

This article will show how to understand the approach of digital media ecology. The use of digital media ecology is depicted by some theoretical positions. Books and related industries are part of industries. Secondly, media ecology refers to a wide range of information systems, spaces, and various modes of communication. Lastly, digital media and participation culture are the fundamental elements of media ecologies. Therefore, these theoretical perspectives are intersected to understand the recreational reading of young teens.



## 6.The Boy Who Steals Houses

In this article I will study the young adult fiction *The Boy Who Steals Houses* by C. G. Drews(2019) via a descriptive case. Throughout plot description, and analysis we will get a full understanding of the social media and online information concerning the fiction. The article will also explore the discussions done by readers to show the emotional impact of this young adult fiction. The story begins with Sammy Lou (Sam), a fifteen-year-old boy, who tries to break into a house. He is experiencing a break into a house for shelter, and naming him as a titular “boy who steals houses”. Sam saves keys of houses he has lived and stolen as a comfortable thing.

With his autistic older brother Avery, Sam lives with him. Sam desperately tries to protect his brother. Sam Smooths the rusty corners so Avery will never fall or hurt him. Sam struggles with guilt, anger, frustration, and complication to save the life of his brother.

‘I wouldn’t need you to fix stuff,’ Sam says, the barest frustrated tremble in his voice, ‘if you’d stop ruining everything.’

The result is instant.

Avery wilts, shoulders hunched to make himself a smaller target. Sam is stupid, stupid. He shouldn’t have said that. (Drews, 2019, pp. 4-5)

This shows their relationship and how they are dependent on each other. The story also reflects their love, violence, complication, and emotional aspects. Throughout the story, we see that Sam and Avery have experienced some family violence throughout their childhood. When they have reached a close path, they seplited, but Avery is always on Sam’s mind.(Amy,2024,126)

I will provide a short overview of online and social media content related to *The Boy Who Steals Houses*.

Search terms            Overview of search results

Title Terms

“The boy who steals houses”

#TheBoyWhoStealsHouses

#BoyWhoStealsHouses

Sites: Goodreads, bookseller sites, TheStoryGraph, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, blogs, Spotify, miscellaneous websites.



“The Boy Who Steals Houses had a strong presence on bookseller sites, award sites, and book review blogs. It featured heavily on social media sites, especially Instagram and TikTok, with a small presence on YouTube, where it featured in some book reviews, book lists, and reading challenges. There was limited presence on Facebook, typically as part of library and awards promotional posts. There were over 780 reviews on The StoryGraph, and nearly 4000 reviews on Goodreads”(Amy,133).

As the individuals and fans explore The Boy Who Steals Houses online, they will show very little content. While “Title and author searches yielded many results online, but character- and content-related searches revealed only a small number of fan texts, such as drawings of Sammy Lou. The book itself features in many thematic- and recommendation- lists seemingly due to disability content in book blogs and other social media. On social media platforms, particularly Instagram, it appears in aesthetic book flatlays featuring blues and yellows reflecting the front cover or keys”(Amy,134).

Increasingly, when we study the novel, we would see that there is a strong focus on autism, this will lead us to the implication of the framing and circulation of the novel itself. Like some writers of literature in reflecting personal life and experiences, Drews was autistic. She herself represents the own voice of the character in The Boy Who Steals Houses. The hashtag #ownvoices is shared on social media “to refer to fiction written by and about people from the same marginalized community” (Booth & Narayan, 2020, p. 2). However, Corinne Duyvis( 2015) used the term “ownvoices” on Twitter as a reference to authentic’ depictions of the marginalised identities characterised in the narrative, including persons of colour, Indigenous peoples, the LGBTQIA community and people with disabilities (Booth & Narayan, 2020, 2021; Duyvis, n.d.; Rutherford et al., 2022). Rutherford et al. (2022) believes that #ownvoices movement on various digital platforms will allow readers to discuss such political views or “call to account their local publishing ecologies” (p. 574). However, “that may misrepresent communities without authentic or authoritative perspectives of marginalised communities”(Amy,2024,135).

Across the social media,The Boy Who Steals Houses, is described as an emotional book or read. Moreover, readers and reviewers have expressed their emotions towards the story. This will definitely show how the emotional themes of the novel are articulated and regarded as a good book to read.

When readers look for recreational readings, it is very significant to get emotional experiences. Drew in The Boy Who Steals Houses, successfully, creates a very great value of emotion and sadness when she discusses her themes in audio-visual media. Whiteley (2011)believes that interaction between the reader and the book he/she is reading increases the reading experience, and this



will lead to emotional reaction. Similarly, Martens et al. (2022) states when readers actively have an effective response and emotion, will encourage young adults to participate in the same spaces. However, CBCA website states, “Drew’s skill lies in encouraging the reader to make an emotional commitment to characters who are flawed and complex” (CBCA, ca. 2020, sic). Though, the emotional description of books in digital media ecology is very important.

Drews herself created a short clip on TikTok platform, it was about the grief of *The Boy Who Steals Houses*. The title was “why would you write this”, and features Drews’ hand flipping through the pages of the book with various quotes in the foreground (Drews, 2022, June 17). The video is set to the “Sound”<sup>32</sup> *Sadbooks entra al audio*, which has been used in over 1500 videos to date (as of October 2022). Set to sad piano music, *Sadbooks entra al audio* features a woman sobbing deeply and asking, ‘why would you write this book?’ The Sound was created by Mar Díaz who set music to another Booktokker’s traumatic response to a novel – a video that went viral in August 2021, and has received over 1.8M views (Hannah, 2021, August 29). “The user comments tied to this TikTok post range from “THAT HAD ME SOBBING,” to another user stating, “this book destroyed me” to which Drews replied “I try”. The capacity to be emotionally impacted by a novel here is suggested to be both traumatising and desirable. It is an effect also valued by creators and reviewers”(Amy,2024,138).

Jullian Radcliffe, YouTuber, she shared her love of *The Boy Who Steals Houses* and how it impacted her:

This book is phenomenal, it has evoked all sorts of emotions from me. I become anxious, I feel depressed when he’s depressed. I’m happy when he’s happy. I’m like so invested in this story. (Radcliffe, 2021, 0:48)

In her video, Jullian looks inspired with the story, she marks the novel 8.5 out of 10. She also acknowledges that the read may be upsetting to readers:

It’s like a love story that um is told from the eyes of an abused child. So, we can’t forget that there’s abuse in this book. So if you’re triggered by abuse, you know, then this might not be the book for you. Because as I say, it’s a rollercoaster ride. It had me feeling anxious, it had me feeling down when he was down, it had me feeling happy when he was happy. But to be honest with you, there’s more downs than happiness. So, if you’re triggered, this isn’t the book. (Radcliffe, 2021, 4:03)

## 7.Illuminae

Science fiction novel *Illuminae* was published in 2015. However, it explored the themes of horror and romance. Increasingly, high technology systems are reflected in this science fiction. The article shows the relationship between the advanced technology and the online content of science fiction novels including



Illuminae in digital media platforms. In the same way, the research also explores how readers engage with the online content to their practices.

Illuminae is set in 2575. Ezra Mason and Kady Grant are two main characters in the story, who have sweethearts. On planet Kerenza, they live on the shelf of the polar ice; which is the United Terran Authority' a colony (UTA). BeiTech Industries attacked The Kerenza colony, then a biochemical weapon was released onto the colony. However, both Ezra and Kady have been taken to various destinations, for example battlecarrier ship Alexander ( that is a part of the UTA fleet), took Ezra. After that UTA conscripted Ezra in their services to become a flight trainee in Alexander's fleet. On the other hand, onto the civilian ship (science vessel Hypatia), Kady ran away. In order to learn and know about the Kerenza' colony and the reason behind that attack, Kady joined the nonground hacking community.

The narrative of the novel is constructed through gathering information, emails, blueprints of space craft, documents, medical reports, diary, to let Executive Director Frobisher read them. Therefore, the narrative is built after what was done in a form of report, showing,

You'll find all intel we could unearth concerning the Kerenza disaster compiled here in hard copy. Where possible, scans of original documentation are included. Fun Times commence with the destruction of the Kerenza colony (one year ago today) and proceed chronologically through events on battlecarrier Alexander and science vessel Hypatia as best as we can reconstruct them. (Kaufman & Kristoff, 2015, p. 6)

Illuminae explores the events historically, it shows what was done on Alexander to reveal the existence of the 'Phobos virus.' In addition, the novel is a document of episodes within that occupied colony. Therefore, through reading this type of fiction we will see that each section or chapter is a visual representation of such a type of document inside the story. For example, each sensitive document must be stamped with 'classified' (Amy, 2024, 169). Moreover, one of the unique features of the novel is its style which identifies the exciting and difficult aspects to read. It shows how the main characters related to the artificial intelligence AIDAN. Basically, the themes of the novel take up the reader creatively engaged with the text via fanfiction, fan art, and more.

This article will explore the online and visual content of Illuminae on social media platforms and sites. However, it will give us a general overview of the fan art, and have a close look at the novel's memes. Moreover, the sharing of videos, elements, and images of culture or fan art mean that an individual is 'in the know', or 'gets the joke', which upholds ideas of community and collective experience (Jenkins et al., 2013; Jenkins & Shifman, 2014).



On the internet or social media platforms, bookish art is plentiful. However, the paper will provide us with various samples of fan art of Illuminae of social digital ecologies and commercial websites that could function as good examples of bookish converses.

Increasingly, some research has shown that there is a tendency for spaces to be noted in significance across various types of digital media platforms and sites in recreational readings, literature studies, and educational readings. Generally, young adult novels may help newcomers in digital media ecologies as an impactful and useful key to learn more about their community and be a very active part of it. Moreover, Illuminae functions as a mark across performing practices.

Illuminae as a young adult fiction, and within its fan text, fan fiction, and memes provides us in “signal-boosting [of a] fandom’s views of specific characters and narratives and acting in conversation with [...] their initial textual signifiers” (Lowe, 2020, p. 182.)

## **8. House of Hollow**

The story is about the disappearance of three sisters—Grey, Vivi and Iris Hollow, for a month as children. When they came back home, their physical structure had changed, and their father could not believe that these three sisters were his daughters. Therefore, madness leads the father to suicide. Theme of otherworldliness is set by the mystery of their disappearance in the novel. As theme of dander is portrayed in the novel, theme of beauty is also featured

Vivi, the second eldest sister, a famous musician protects herself from this danger:

She tried to banish her beauty. She shaved her head, pierced her skin, inked the words FUCK OFF! across her fingers, a spell to try and ward off unwanted desire from unwanted men. Even with these enchantments, even with a zigzag nose and a wicked tongue and unshaved body hair and the dark grooves beneath her eyes carved out by drink and drugs and sleepless nights, she was achingly beautiful, and ached after accordingly. She collected each wolf whistle, each smacked butt cheek, each groped breast, kept them all beneath her skin where they boiled in a cauldron of rage that she let out onstage on the strings of her bass guitar. (Sutherland, 2021, p. 20)

Thus we will see how these characters develop a dangerous and ethereal fiction world together with daily life of the 21st century. Moreover, the readers expect images of Victorian Scotland and forest halfway, with references to modern technology and social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Tik tok.



The three sisters are charming, and very beautiful. Grey, the elder sister, uses her talent to influence society around her. She grows to become an influencer, and fashion designer whose “couture has been described as a fairy tale meeting a nightmare inside a fever dream” (Sutherland, 2021, p. 7). “In life, nature and plants “love” her, while media posts featuring Grey and photoshoots featuring her designs draw on fairy tale themes, the ethereal, earthiness, death, Greek mythological references, and hidden things (such as animal bones sewn into outfits created by her). Small flowers grow in unexpected places around her, and all three sisters carry a scent of flowers seeming to cover the smell of something rotten within them”(Amy,2024,208).

Iris is the youngest sister in the novel. Despite the mysteries surrounding her life, she tries to practice a normal life. At school, she experiences bullying, and due to isolation from other peers, is unable to express her bisexual desire and interest.

The most important reaction to House of Hollow is its aesthetic appreciation, including cover, characters, and ambience. Publishers, bookfluencers, and authors suggest that the content of this novel is in the form of self-expression “through performative content around bodies and faces using various materials to do so”(Amy,2024,209). Moreover, the aesthetic performance doubles the basic elements of the fiction. Some of the digital media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok engaged with the aesthetic characteristics of the novel together. In addition, the novel has a very significant presence in bookish communities like BookTok and Bookstagram. This is because of the content created by fans via admiration and knowledge of the storyline.

The main themes explored in House of Hollow, including grotesque, melancholy, horror, and ejection are recreated by effective and aesthetic aspects. Moreover, the author herself presents most of the main themes via emotional and aesthetic recreations. Most of the digital media ecologies are influenced by the emotional and mood atmosphere of the story. However, emotion and mood are explored through the novel as a good read to highlight the significance of the novel to young adults. In addition, the fiction focuses on how an effective book engagement is met together with visual and audio interpretations.

The materials explored in online content in House of Hollow refer to the interaction and interpretation of digital media ecologies. Drew herself, and creators of digital content via the production of materials particularly the physical materials including cloths, flowers, and make up, enact and invite socio- digital materials engagement throughout the novel. However, Materiality means “physical environs and properties of a given space as well as the objects and/or tools located inside those same spaces” (Howard, 2018, p.5).



## 9. Conclusion

This article has investigated digital media ecology of young teens to identify the online content and recreational readings of some novels. However, the paper explored different practices of online recreational readings and cultural participation of three young adult novels. The novels are: The Boy Who Steals Houses, Illuminae and House of Hollow. Increasingly, it has shown the engagement between young adult fictions and digital media ecology, and how the recreational readings encourage teens for more pleasure and knowledge. Moreover, we have seen that most digital media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Youtube have shared online contents of young adult fiction. This will help and enhance the probabilities of teens to understand the new ideas explored by writers and authors.

In addition, this article identifies the diversity of experience practice done throughout online contents on various platforms such as facebook, Pinterest, and booktube. It shows how these practices have met some challenges and discussions via engagement of materiality of digital media contents. Moreover, specific practices are certain to some digital media ecologies such as Booktube and Goodreads. This will lead to understanding that young people participating in online media platforms or sites have preferred reading books in online content. In addition, opportunities for book engagement are available for young adult readers across online spaces or platforms.

The paper has explored that young adults have used various ways in participating culture via digital media platforms. We have also seen that digital media ecology helps in one way or another how young people connect together as readers across the online contents of young adult fiction. Some digital media platforms like Instagram, Pinterest, and TikTok are basic elements to indicate book recommendations in young adults. The digital media platforms and sites have influenced the decisions of readers to read books. Through case studies discussed in this paper, we have seen that young teens engaged with digital media platforms to share titles and practice different cultures especially when they are invited to participate in creating and circulating new online contents. Increasingly, we have seen how the digital media culture and environment are able to constitute and help reading choice, exploring the significance of the correlation between young adult novels, recreation reading, and digital media platforms or communities used for reading activity.

The paper contributes in making a concern of the significance of genre within digital media in young adult fiction. However, some distinctive genres with world building are related to fandoms. The three case studies of the young adult novels; The Boy Who Steals Houses, Illuminae, and House of Hollow among this paper have shown their world building events and distinctive genres.



Simultaneously, the texts of these novels are joined closely to a wide range of digital media experiences and cultures. For instance, images, memes, and texts of the three novels have signified how teens experience culture in online contents, and this definitely encourages them to explore more recreation readings. The paper has also identified that online contents, young adult fiction, has more of a life than other, this would lead them to find books that they are interested in and are relevant to their modern and contemporary lives.

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