

The Dystopia Boom: Popular Young Adult Dystopian Literature as an Insight into Contemporary
Adolescent Concerns

Context

Dystopian fiction is a well-established literary genre that includes classic novels such as *1984* by George Orwell and *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. The word dystopia is derived from Greek words meaning literally “a bad place,” but its connotations extend further; most dystopian literature deals with a technology, trend, or government that has become oppressive to most inhabitants of a society (Ryan, 2014)¹. Dystopias often serve as social commentaries, reflecting the fears of both authors and readers about some aspect of society or government that could become toxic or oppressive (Ryan, 2014).

The dystopian genre had its major beginnings in 1736 with the publication of Gulliver’s Travels (Claeys, 2013). Since then, it has grown exponentially; according to WorldCat, an online library network that provides access to thousands of libraries across the world, there were around seven dystopian novels published in the 1800s; in the 1900s, over 300; and in the 21st century there have been over 4,600 dystopian novels published already, including 17 this year (2020a).

Moreover, it is evident that the young adult (YA)² subgenre is hugely popular, with YA dystopian works like *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins selling millions of copies and sparking blockbuster film adaptations. In contrast with the 20th century, during which only 34 YA dystopian novels were published, the 21st century has already seen the publication of over 1500 YA dystopian works (WorldCat, 2020b).

There has been little academic research into why YA dystopian literature has become so popular, although there are a few theories. Elissa Nadworny, an education reporter for NPR,

¹ In this paper, I will be using APA style rather than MLA because my research can be considered a combination of literary analysis and social science, for which APA is the appropriate style, and because my research is highly dependent on currency, which is a noted strength of APA style.

² YA literature is aimed at adolescents between 12 and 18.

postulated that teens resonate with dystopian literature because it wrestles with issues of individuality and identity and emphasizes teen angst (2017). Some hypothesize that YA dystopian fiction is popular simply because it is written from a teenager's perspective, or because the dynamics of YA dystopian worlds reflect real-life high school drama (The Artifice, n.d.). Others, such as YA author Moira Young, believe that teens read dystopian novels simply because they are entertaining (Young, 2011).

However, as analyses of 20th century dystopian literature illustrate, what makes classic dystopian works so popular is often their function as social commentary. The same could hold true for 21st century YA dystopian fiction; while the opinions discussed above could be contributing factors, one overlooked component of YA dystopian literature's popularity could be its reflection of or commentary on modern adolescents' fears about *politics and society*--not just their fears about their own identity or high school drama. Many adults believe that teenagers do not know or care about the world around them. However, the popularity of dystopian literature among young adults--especially when considered in the context of the dystopian genre's history of acting as social commentary--could indicate otherwise.

The current popularity and large-scale growth of the YA dystopian genre make it a culturally relevant area of focus, while the identification of major themes in YA dystopian literature, when compared with data about the sociopolitical concerns of contemporary teens, offers insight into the possible relationship between the two, potentially providing an explanation of the massive popularity of YA dystopian fiction.

This research hopes to investigate this popularity by analyzing some prominent works of YA dystopian fiction in order to answer the question: What are the major sociopolitical themes

of popular 21st century YA dystopian literature and do they correspond with the most prevalent societal and political anxieties of teenagers today?

Literature Review

In order to answer this question, it is essential to first understand the history of the dystopian genre as a vessel of social criticism, as well as the existing research on YA dystopian fiction. Additionally, the sociopolitical concerns of modern teenagers must be investigated so that this information can later be compared to the themes identified in YA dystopian literature. Finally, it is necessary to discuss how experts identify literary themes in order to provide context for the methods used in this research.

Dystopia as Societal Reflection, Commentary, and Critique

As discussed above, the word dystopia means “bad place.” Beyond this, however, dystopian works serve as social commentaries, isolating a problem with society and theorizing about its future consequences. Dystopian works, although fictional, are rooted in the author’s “concern or fear about a potentially dreadful future” and therefore “express anxiety over the effects of advances in biotechnology, depletion of natural resources, or growing lawlessness” (Barton & Hudson, 2012), because these problems exist in the author’s own time. In fact, dystopian scholars such as Robert Baker see dystopias as “speculative forms of history,” because they “describe a set of future developments traceable to present conditions” (1990). The social ills of the dystopian author’s time are inextricably linked to his or her work; the work “gives shape to the values, biases, and beliefs of the period in which it was written” (Baker, 1990).

Thus, dystopian fiction is a remarkable lens through which to take a snapshot of society and analyze the events or ideas that were most concerning to its members during that time period.

20th Century Dystopian Literature and Its Role as Social Commentary

The use of dystopian fiction to explore society's problems can be clearly seen in the many scholarly analyses of 20th century dystopian books. These analyses approach the same texts from widely varied perspectives and provide a range of critical analyses on the political or philosophical themes of major dystopian works.

Much of the existing research mentions the cultural worries that motivated famous dystopian authors such as Aldous Huxley, who wrote *Brave New World* in 1931 (Booker, 1994). Robert Baker, in his book *Brave New World: History, Science, and Dystopia*, writes that, "like so many of his contemporaries Huxley regarded English--for that matter, European--culture as having entered a period of decline. His satirical novels are animated by a sense of crisis, social disintegration, and imminent collapse" (1990). Baker describes the book's important themes as "the rise of a society organized around mass consumption; the increasingly ominous developments in the field of genetics; and the political dangers posed...by the scientific specialist...empowered by bureaucracy" (1990). Baker's analysis of Huxley's text provides an example of how the societal worries of an author are embedded in the dystopian worlds they create, allowing perceptive readers to understand the author's real-life concerns through the medium of fiction. Baker's research provides a clear precedent for qualitative analysis of dystopian fiction.

Other analytical works, such as University of Michigan professor Ejner J. Jensen's *The Future of Nineteen Eighty-Four*, consist of essays analyzing Orwell's dystopian fiction from angles ranging from psychopolitics to gender (1984). In a similar vein, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, written by prolific dystopian scholar and professor M. Keith Booker, offers analyses of well-known dystopian works such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1994). Booker discusses the reality of religious zealotry as a root of the fictional oppressive theocracy Atwood envisions, again illustrating the connection between contemporary cultural problems and dystopian literature.

Other books, such as *The Last Man in Europe: An Essay on George Orwell* by Alan Sandison (1974), or *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* by Gregory Claeys (2013), also 20th century cultural influences on dystopian authors. While the contents of these scholarly books cannot all be discussed in this brief literature review, they support what is evident from Baker and Booker's analyses: that 20th-century dystopian works often reflected contemporary cultural, societal, or political issues that concerned the author.

Existing Research on 21st Century YA Dystopian Literature

As previously noted, the 21st century thus far has seen the publication of more young adult dystopian fiction than the preceding two centuries together. Moreover, the YA dystopia subgenre is booming financially. *The Hunger Games* trilogy, by Suzanne Collins, for instance, has sold over 50 million copies (Scholastic Press). The wild popularity of this and other YA dystopian series ensures that, in the future, there will be much analysis of this subgenre; current research has only begun to explore this area.

Nevertheless, there are several interesting analyses of 21st century YA dystopian novels. For instance, Megan Peters argues that, although *The Hunger Games* drew praise from feminists for its strong female protagonist, it is problematic in regards to female sexualization (2013). Although Peters does not specifically discuss what this reflects about contemporary cultural concerns, her thesis reflects society's current emphasis on female empowerment. A paper by Steven Beckett discusses Ayn Rand's creation of an archetypal female heroine that now appears in many YA dystopias, and how this has provided YA readers with a Randian view of American society (2019), offering another example of how dystopian literature and culture influence each other.

Other authors discuss emerging themes in YA dystopian fiction; Devin Ryan offers a brief discussion of common YA dystopian themes, such as over-reliance on technology and the importance of the natural world (2014). These themes connect back to real-world issues as perceived by YA authors and, by implication, young adults themselves. Other dystopian themes, such as hedonism and totalitarian government, appear in both classic and modern dystopian literature, according to Lucie Pavlova (2016), illustrating the cultural endurance of these concerns. Each of these sources adds credence to the idea that the major themes of dystopian literature can often reflect common sociopolitical anxieties. However, these sources only scratch the surface of this subgenre; there is very little research on 21st-century YA dystopian literature, and almost none that specifically relates this subgenre to adolescents' real-life sociopolitical concerns.

The Current Cultural and Political Concerns of Young Adults

In order to begin breaking this new ground, analysis of YA dystopian novels should be augmented by comparison with third-party survey data. Since this project is meant to investigate the thoughts of contemporary adolescents currently reading YA dystopian literature, the survey data must be recent. Therefore, the data explored in this literature review will be from within the past five years.

According to the Pew Research Center, 70% of teenagers view anxiety and depression as major problems amongst their peers (2019), indicating an overall sense of worry amongst teenagers. As Philip Kendall, the director of the Child and Adolescent Anxiety Disorders Clinic at Temple University, notes, this may be due to the fact that today's teenagers have grown up plagued by school shootings in a post-9/11 world and thus "may have anxiety tied to an environment filled with dire warnings about safety" (Zraik, 2019). In fact, 57% of teens are worried about a school shooting occurring at their school (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Survey data reveals that contemporary adolescents have opinions on many modern sociopolitical problems; 57% of teens are afraid of climate change and 52% feel angry about it (Kaplan, 2019). 34.7% of teens are "very or extremely" worried about societal discrimination (Polakovic, 2018), and 40% say poverty is a major problem (DeSilver, 2019). 51% of teens have a positive view of socialism, while only 45% view capitalism positively (Newport, 2019). 65% of teens believe that freedom of speech is more important than protecting someone from being offended (Knight Foundation, 2018).

When asked for their views on President Trump, 46% of teens strongly disapproved, 18% disapproved, and 12% somewhat disapproved. In contrast, 8% of youth indicated they strongly approved, 8% approved, and 9% somewhat approved of President Trump (Metzger et al., 2020).

54% of adolescents strongly or somewhat agree that they are “more comfortable with women having traditional roles in society, such as caring for children and family.” 35% of teen boys say that society “most values strength and toughness” in boys; 72% say they feel pressure to be physically strong, and 33% feel pressure to dominate others . 33% think society expects boys to hide their feelings of fear or sadness (Undem & Wang, 2018).

Finally, adolescents are engaged in political action about topics they care about: 12% of teens have “taken part in a peaceful protest, march, or demonstration” (NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2016). As these recent surveys show, today’s teens are concerned about many aspects of politics and society.

Identifying Themes in Dystopian Literature

The literature review thus far has established, in essence, that the themes of classic dystopian literature often reflected their authors’ concerns about politics and society; that there is much uncharted territory in the analysis of the YA dystopian subgenre; and that teens are very worried about a number of problems relating to modern society and politics. In order to synthesize all these elements, it is important to define the concept of literary themes in order to create a framework with which to approach the project.

The term *theme* refers to a “significant, recurring, or developed idea, concept, or argument” in a work of literature (Barton & Hudson, 2012). Themes can be explicit or subtle; some works have a dominant theme while others contain several interwoven themes (Barton & Hudson, 2012). According to Barton and Hudson, themes can be found through analysis of five main aspects of a book:

- 1) any major statements or speeches made to others by the book's main character(s)
- 2) major statements or speeches made to the book's main character(s) by supporting characters
- 3) the internal thoughts of the protagonist (revealed by a first person narrator or an omniscient third-person narrator)
- 4) The major actions and choices of the protagonist(s)
- 5) The major actions, beliefs, and thoughts attributed to the novel's main antagonist(s)

According to Barton and Hudson (2012), the central ideas of a novel--its themes--are conveyed by the words, beliefs, thoughts, or actions of the protagonists, antagonists, and supporting characters, and, depending on the context of the plot and story, are portrayed by the author in a positive, negative, or neutral light.

Methods

In order to determine the themes of 21st century YA dystopian literature and whether these themes are related to the major sociopolitical anxieties of the adolescents for whom these books were written, I performed a thematic analysis of ten popular YA dystopian novels. I used a qualitative, non-experimental process; although more subjective than quantitative research, as discussed in the limitations section below, a qualitative process allowed a more holistic, contextual understanding of the themes in YA dystopian literature.

I analyzed ten³ YA dystopian books from the 21st century, choosing the books based on their popularity within the genre. This was measured by placement on Amazon's list of Best

³ I chose to read only ten books due to the time constraints of my research.

Sellers in Teen & Young Adult Dystopia, which is frequently updated,⁴ since this indicates widespread relevance and resonance with young adult readers and is therefore an ideal sample to analyze. I chose the top ten books on this list, except for when two books from the same series both appeared in the top ten, in which case I chose only the first book in the series so as to not skew the sample with one author's work. When the bestseller was a boxed series I chose only the first book of the series for the same reason. Finally, there was one book in the top ten written in the 20th century, which was not included as my research focused on 21st century books. This method resulted in the following list of books:

Starsight by Brian Sanderson (2019)
Divergent by Veronica Roth (2011)
The Rule of One by Ashley and Leslie Saunders (2018)
Scythe by Neal Shusterman (2016)
The Maze Runner by James Dashner (2009)
The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins (2008)
The Selection by Kiera Cass (2012)
The Darkest Minds by Alexandra Bracken (2012)
The Unknown by J.W. Lynne (2019)
Rebel by Marie Lu (2019)

Since the sources discussed in the literature review are primarily scholarly books, and do not include a discussion of their methods, I created my own approach by adapting and expanding on Edwin Barton and Glenda Hudson's method in *Contemporary Guide to Literary Terms: With Strategies for Writing Essays About Literature* (2012), discussed in the literature review. I analyzed five aspects of each novel--major statements or speeches made to others by the book's main characters, important statements or speeches made to main characters by supporting

⁴ Since this list is frequently updated, someone repeating my research could find different books on this list. As of December 15, 2019, however, the books I chose were highest ranked on this list.

characters, internal thoughts of the protagonist, major actions and choices of the protagonist, and major actions, beliefs, and thoughts attributed to the novel's main antagonist.

I identified only sociopolitical themes; for instance, when the books contained romance, I did not record this as a theme, in order to focus the research project more narrowly on political and societal issues. Moreover, I did not analyze the books with a list of themes in mind; rather, I hoped to discover which themes would emerge from the books organically, and only then compare them to the survey data discussed in the literature review.

I created a separate Google Document for each book. As I read, I recorded emerging themes, color-coded them according to which of the five aspects they appeared in, recorded whether they were presented in a positive, neutral, or negative light, and isolated illustrative quotes. Although this process was subjective by its very nature, the themes I identified emerged clearly from the five aspects discussed above.

After I finished coding all the books, I created a master list of the themes that emerged, organized it from most to least frequently occurring theme, and color-coded each theme as overall positive, negative, or neutral, based on a combination of its portrayals in each book. This master list combined similar themes from each books into larger, generalized categories.

In order to discover if YA dystopian themes aligned with available data on teen sociopolitical concerns, I compared the themes with the survey data presented in the literature review, which was drawn only from the past five years, as survey data from many years ago would not necessarily reflect the thoughts of contemporary adolescents who are currently reading YA dystopian literature.

This method allowed me to capture the major themes of each story, compare them to survey data, and focus my analytic efforts in a systematic way which, despite the somewhat subjective nature of literary analysis, could assist future researchers in replicating my methods.

Limitations

Before discussing the results of this research, it is important to address its limitations. One notable limitation of qualitative content analysis is that it is somewhat subjective; there is no way to ensure that someone repeating this research would arrive at exactly the same codes for each book. A quantitative approach, such as creating a computer program to count the occurrence of certain words in the books, was considered, but ultimately rejected due to the difficulty of quantifying a novel's theme. A qualitative approach, while more subjective, allowed a more complete, authentic, and contextually-based understanding of the major themes in YA books.

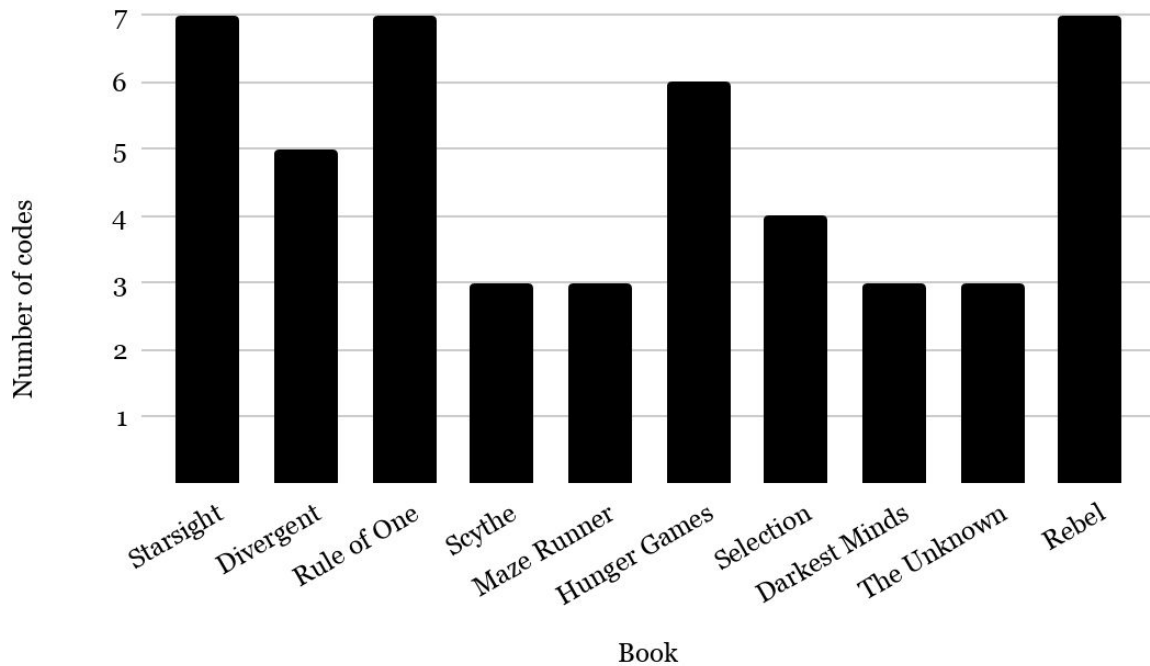
Another limitation was the time frame in which this research was conducted, which allowed only ten books to be coded. Nevertheless, this small sample of best-selling books provides a snapshot of insight into the relationship between YA dystopian literature and contemporary adolescent concerns.

Results and Discussion

The number of sociopolitical themes in each book ranged between 3 and 7, as shown in Figure 1, with an average of 4.8 themes per book.

Figure 1.

Books (in order of popularity) vs. Number of Codes



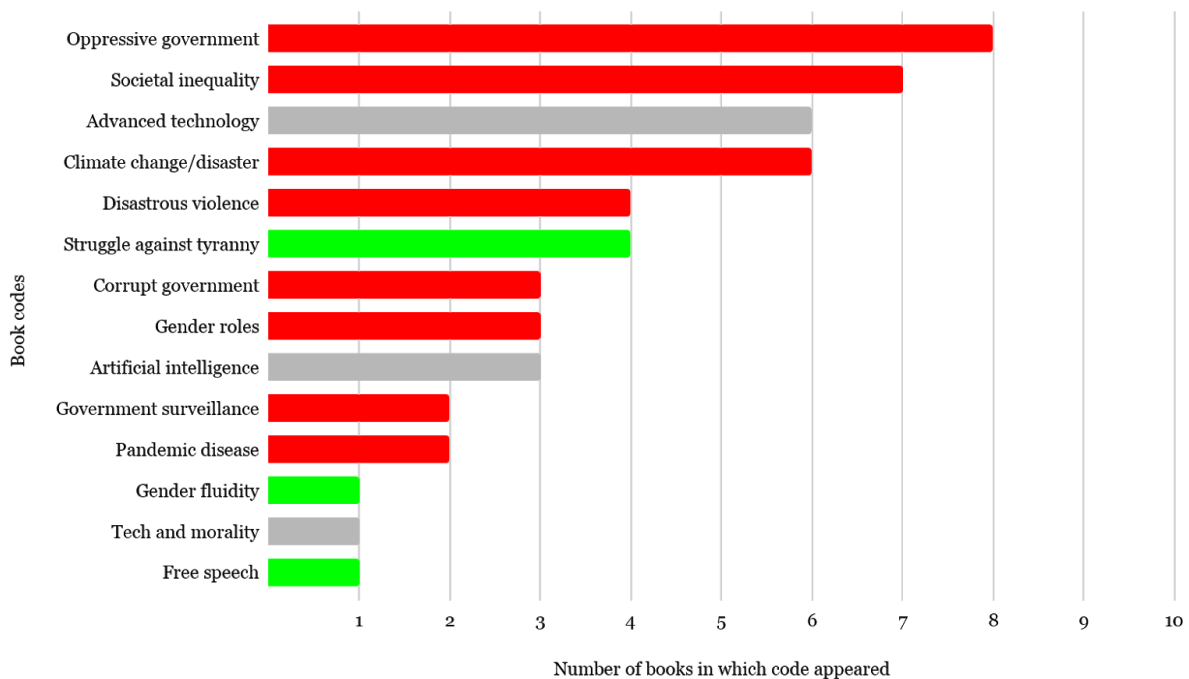
As Figure 1 shows, the books with the most themes were not necessarily the most popular. However, of the books that dealt with their themes in the most depth--*Starsight*, *The Rule of One*, *Scythe*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Rebel*--most were towards the beginning of the bestseller list, while *The Selection*, *The Darkest Minds*, and *The Unknown*, in which the sociopolitical themes, while important, functioned as somewhat of a backdrop for a romance-focused plot, were at the bottom of the list. *Divergent* and *The Maze Runner*, which had some depth to their themes, were towards the top of the list. However, there are many contributing factors to the popularity of these books, including marketing, name recognition of the author, and association with a movie franchise, which could all have affected the place of each book on the list. Regardless, the fact that each of the top ten bestsellers contains at least three sociopolitical themes indicates that their engagement with current sociopolitical concerns

could be a part of the popularity of the genre; below, a more in-depth exploration into each of the major themes will shed more light on this connection.

The individual codes that appeared in one of the books, *Rebel*, by Marie Lu, can be seen in Appendix A as an example of the end result of each book. However, in order to answer the first part of the research question--what are the major sociopolitical themes of popular 21st century YA dystopian literature--the individual codes from each book were synthesized into a cohesive master list of 14 broader categories. The themes were color-coded (red for negative themes, gray for neutral themes, and green for positive themes). The frequency of each of the 14 themes is shown in Figure 2⁵, and is also summarized in a table in Appendix B.

Figure 2.

Book codes vs. number of books in which each code appeared



⁵ In order to fit in the chart, the names of some of the themes were shortened; the full version of each theme name is used below in the discussion of each theme.

In order to investigate whether the sociopolitical themes that appear in YA dystopian literature correspond with survey data about contemporary adolescents' sociopolitical concerns, each theme from Figure 1 must be analyzed and compared with the survey data discussed in the literature review.

The theme of oppressive government occurred most frequently, appearing in eight books. This theme was particularly prominent in *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), in which the central government, the Capitol, forces children to fight to the death each year in the Hunger Games, and in *The Rule of One* (Saunders & Saunders, 2018), in which the totalitarian government strictly enforces a one-child policy. The narrator of *The Rule of One*, a secret twin who must evade detection, describes this oppression:

We are controlled to the point we can't even choose how many children we have...It's impossible to fight back; the government made sure of that long ago. Civilians are not allowed to own weapons...the people can fight solely with their raised voices, and I've only ever heard them silenced.

Interestingly, *The Rule of One*, one of the most recently published novels on the list, was also the most directly political; the main antagonist of the book is a political leader who mentions his state's "Big Fence" and describes Mexicans as "lazy, useless degenerates that do nothing but suck up our state's resources, begging for handouts...trying to infest our country with their cocaine, meth, and the latest dirty drugs" (Saunders & Saunders, 2018). This character, clearly meant to reflect President Trump, is an example of how YA dystopian fiction acts as a commentary on sociopolitical issues teenagers are concerned with in the real world--as discussed in the literature review, a 2020 survey of teenagers found that 46% strongly disapproved, 18% disapproved, and 12% somewhat disapproved of President Trump (Metzger et al.), and thus *The Rule of One* might resonate with these adolescents.

The second most frequently occurring theme--societal inequality, discrimination, and prejudice--also corresponds to survey data; 40% of teens say poverty is a major problem (DeSilver, 2019) and 34.7% of teens are “very or extremely worried” about societal discrimination (Polakovic, 2018). This theme occurred in seven books; for instance, in *The Selection* (Cass, 2012), there is a caste system that prevents social mobility and fosters discrimination, and in *Starsight* (Sanderson, 2019), some alien species are second-class citizens with few rights. In *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), the poverty of the protagonist, Katniss, and her home district, in comparison to the wealth of the evil Capitol, is a major theme. The relationship between this theme and the survey data again supports the hypothesis that the popularity of YA dystopian fiction could be due in part to its reflection of teenagers’ real-life concerns about society.

The next most frequently occurring theme, advanced technology, appeared in six books. This theme, overall, was portrayed neutrally--i.e., in some books it was portrayed positively and in others negatively, while the previous two themes were universally negative. In *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), the Capitol’s advanced technology is used to kill children and silence dissent. In *Starsight* (Sanderson, 2019), however, advanced technology--such as holograms and light-speed travel--is a good thing. There is no recent survey data available about adolescents’ opinions on advancing technology, despite the fact that it is certainly a current sociopolitical issue, especially in regards to automation. While there is survey data about adults’ opinions on this topic, there is a clear gap in the survey research when it comes to adolescents, which should be addressed because the frequency of this theme indicates that teenagers may think about this issue.

Two related but distinct themes also arose, both of them portrayed neutrally; first, moral and philosophical questions posed by technological advancement, which appeared in one book, and second, questions and potential dangers posed by artificial intelligence, which appeared in three books. The first of these themes occurred in *Scythe* (Shusterman, 2016), which is set in a technologically advanced society in which death has been eliminated. *Scythe* wrestles with the philosophical results of achieving immortality; the protagonist states that “2042 is the year we conquered death, and also the year we stopped counting. Sure, we still numbered years for a few more decades, but at the moment of immortality, passing time ceased to matter” (Shusterman, 2016), illustrating humanity’s loss of purpose once immortality was achieved. Moreover, the zero percent death rate strains the Earth’s resources, and so a select group of people known as Scythes are tasked with choosing people to kill, who will not be revived, even though the technology is available, in order to prevent overpopulation. *Scythe* explores the morality of this system, providing insight into possible moral and philosophical enigmas that could arise from the advance of technology, and while there is no survey data about adolescent perspectives on such issues, the popularity of *Scythe* indicates that perhaps teenagers are interested in considering the philosophical problems that could come with advanced technology.

The second code related to advanced technology, the questions and potential dangers posed by AI, is evident in *The Unknown* (Lynne, 2019), in which the protagonist learns that AIs “convinced multiple countries that they were being attacked by other countries. The AIs didn’t fire a single missile, but they convinced humans to do so.” While artificial intelligence is a current sociopolitical issue, there is no large-scale survey data available that illustrates teens’ opinions on this matter, indicating another area for future research.

Tied in frequency with the advancing technology theme was the near extinction of humanity or destruction of Earth from causes such as climate change or natural disasters, a theme that was universally portrayed negatively. In *The Maze Runner* (Dashner, 2009), sun flares kill millions. In *The Rule of One* (Saunders & Saunders, 2018), the Earth is destroyed by climate change; the protagonist states that “humankind is everything and everyone’s most dangerous predator. Blindly killing its own planet, slowly wounding it over the centuries. Forcing my generation to mop up the blood” (Saunders & Saunders, 2018). This sentiment is reflected in survey data; 57% of teens are afraid of climate change, and 52% feel angry about it (Kaplan, 2019). Once again, this highly prevalent theme clearly corresponds to a real-world issue that adolescents are concerned about, which was the expected result based on the history of the dystopian genre.

The next theme, disastrous violence or conflict (both domestic and international), was negatively portrayed in four books. For example, in *The Unknown* (Lynne, 2019), the protagonist states that “after the Third World War, large areas of the Earth became unsafe for humans to inhabit.” Once again, there is not recent survey data on whether adolescents are worried about war, even though this is a current sociopolitical issue.

Another theme that appeared in four books was the struggle against tyranny or defiance towards tyrannical government, which was presented positively. In *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008), Katniss and Peeta, the last remaining competitors in the Hunger Games, decide to both kill themselves in defiance of the Capitol’s orders. Katniss says: “I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can’t own” (Collins, 2008). The idea

of speaking out against tyranny seems to resonate with some adolescents; 12% of teens have “taken part in a peaceful protest, march, or demonstration” (NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, 2016), attempting to push back against what they perceive as tyrannical or oppressive government action. Politically active teens might resonate with this theme in *The Hunger Games* and other YA dystopian novels.

The next theme, corrupt government, occurred in three books and was portrayed negatively. It differed from the oppressive government theme by its implication that the government started out as good but was gradually diverted from its original purpose. For example, in *Rebel* (Lu, 2019), the country is a meritocracy, in which each person’s “Level” in society is automatically increased or decreased based on their actions. However, this system became flawed, making it harder for those with low Levels to move up in society, resulting in stark class divides and rebellion. In *Divergent* (Roth, 2011), the protagonist sums up the idea of corrupt government, stating that it “was formed with good intentions, with the right ideals and the right goals. But it has strayed far from them.” This was another code that did not have corresponding survey data, indicating a need for future research.

A different theme that also appeared in three books was societally enforced gender roles and stereotypes, which was portrayed negatively. For instance, in *Rebel* (Lu, 2019), the protagonist feels constricted by society’s definition of masculinity, stating that “real men...don’t spill their insecurities to their friends...Real men suck it up and change the subject until their hearts wither to dust inside them.” This perspective closely mirrors existing survey data; 33% of teenage boys believe that society expects boys to hide their feelings of fear or sadness (Undem & Wang, 2018). Additionally, 54% of adolescents agreed that they are “more comfortable with

women having traditional roles in society, such as caring for children and family,” 35% of teen boys said that “society most values strength and toughness in boys,” 72% felt pressure to be physically strong, and 33% felt pressure to dominate others, illustrating several different stereotypical gender roles. This theme offered one of the most striking examples of the close relationship between survey data and dystopian themes, and serves as a compelling example of the value of comparing the two.

An opposite but related theme, gender fluidity, appeared in one book, *Starsight* (Sanderson, 2019), and was portrayed positively; an alien with an androgynous appearance respected and was consistently referred to as ‘they’ by the protagonist. There was no survey data on this topic, nor on two other themes that appeared in two books each: pandemic disease⁶ (portrayed negatively) and government surveillance (also negative).

The final code, which appeared in only one book, but was counted as a separate code since it differed from all of the larger categories, was the necessity of free speech. This was portrayed positively; in *Rebel* (Lu, 2019), the protagonist states: “Let the people protest without punishment....Because, sometimes, being patriotic means calling out the problems rotting away your country.” This idea is valued by teenagers; 65% believe that freedom of speech is more important than protecting someone from being offended (Knight Foundation, 2018).

Overall, the survey data, where it exists, and the book themes do show a substantial overlap, indicating that there is a relationship between the two that could help explain the huge popularity of YA dystopian fiction, which aligns with the historical role of the dystopian genre as social commentary as discussed in the literature review. However, there were several themes

⁶ Although, given the COVID-19 outbreak, there will certainly be survey research of adolescents on the topic of pandemics in the future.

from the books--those related to AI, advancing technology, gender fluidity, government surveillance, pandemic disease, corrupt government, and oppressive government--that did not correspond to the survey data, as well as several survey findings⁷--about capitalism, socialism, and school shootings--that did not match any of the book themes, indicating that more research should be done on these topics.

Dystopian scholar Robert Baker, in his analyses of classic dystopian works by George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, wrote that dystopian fiction “gives shape to the values, biases, and beliefs of the period in which it was written” (Baker, 1990). The results of this qualitative research suggest that perhaps the same is true for young adult dystopian fiction, as many contemporary sociopolitical concerns of teenagers are reflected in the books they read.

Implications

This research has important implications for teachers, authors, and scholars. Teachers should consider discussing popular dystopian fiction with their adolescent students as a way of teaching them to analyze literary themes and engaging them in dialogue about sociopolitical issues. Authors of YA dystopian fiction should learn what teenagers are worried about and incorporate that into their work, both to help their readers wrestle with these ideas and to make their writing more resonant with their audience. Finally, scholars, such as those whose work was discussed in the literature review, should consider analyzing not only dystopian books for adults but also those aimed at a younger audience.

⁷ These survey findings are not repeated here for the sake of brevity, but are listed in the literature review.

Future Research

As alluded to in the discussion, the lack of survey data on adolescents' opinions about major topics that appeared in the dystopian novels clearly indicates areas in which surveys are needed, as the popularity of these dystopian novels indicates that teens are engaging with issues such as artificial intelligence, gender fluidity, and advancing technology. While there is survey data reporting the opinions of adults on these topics, there is none on what teens think, providing ample room for survey research. Finally, the connection between YA dystopian literature and real-life sociopolitical issues illustrated in this research suggests that future researchers should continue to analyze YA dystopian fiction in order to discover more insights into the sociopolitical concerns of contemporary adolescents and how these are reflected in popular literature.

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Appendix A

Rebel by Marie Lu (2019)

Narrator: first person, alternates between Eden and Daniel

Important Characters

Protagonist(s): Eden

Supporting Characters: Pressa, Daniel, June

Antagonist(s): Dominic Hann

Major Themes

- **Key:**
- Themes identified in protagonist's speeches/statements to others
- Themes identified in speeches, statements, and actions of supporting characters
- Themes identified in protagonist's internal thoughts
- Themes identified in protagonist's actions and choices
- Themes identified in the major actions, beliefs, and thoughts attributed to the main antagonist
- Theme portrayed in a positive light
- Theme portrayed in a negative light
- Theme portrayed in a neutral light

Note: for each instance of a theme identification, note the page number and a relevant quote if possible. Themes are not ranked in order of importance.

1. Constant struggle against tyranny

- a. Pg 0, State of the Union, Nation of Antarctica, 2050. "Let us never forget the struggle between global tyranny and democracy that led us to found this free nation of Antarctica, where every person has the chance to work their way up from nothing, and where technology, not human ego and error, governs how successful you can become."
- b. Pg 241, Daniel: "I find myself wondering if there is ever a time in history of peace, if we can ever find a way to escape the cycle of destruction we bring upon ourselves. If there is, I sure as hell haven't seen it."
- c. Pg 357, "Because, sometimes, being patriotic means calling out the problems rotting away your country."

2. The necessity of free speech

- a. Pg 356, Daniel: “Sometimes, sir, the only way to make your government listen is to force them to.... I know what it’s like to live in a place where people have no choices. What happens in a world like that, when you’re unable to speak out against something you think is wrong?...The Republic was founded on a system of fear. People allowed the first Elector to come to power because they were afraid of everything and everyone else. They turned in on themselves, closed their borders, and gave up their freedoms in exchange for security. And then, one day, we woke up realizing that we’d handed over so much that we’d given ourselves up too.”
- b. Pg 357, “Ross City no longer rewards the very principles it was founded on. It’s a place where people are forced to conform to what this council thinks is right or wrong. They can’t speak up about their frustrations and hardships. The Level system was supposed to be a system that encouraged good behavior and success. Now it’s just a system that holds half of the city’s population back....Let the people protest without punishment. Let them have a chance to help their families....Because, sometimes, being patriotic means calling out the problems rotting away your country.”

3. Technological advancement

- a. Pg 6, “Ross City is the capital of Antarctica, one of the most advanced nations in the world. Compared with the Republic of America, it’s an absolute utopia. Its towering skyscrapers are stacked to the heavens, sealed securely inside a biodome that keeps temperatures comfortable and simulates a regular day-night cycle during the long summer and winter months...I live in one of the wealthiest sectors--the Sky Floors, the top half of the skyscrapers where there are sunlight and stars and fresh air, where the buildings are interconnected like a web by long walkways covered in green ivy. Up here, each floor is made up of luxury homes, shops, fancy restaurants, schools...not a single crack in the pavement, not a flower or shrub out of place.”
- b. Pg 8, “A virtual Level hangs over the head of every person in the hall. LEVEL 64. LEVEL 78. LEVEL 52 .Interactive virtual buttons drift above the potted plants lining the halls...All of this--the labels on the classrooms, the points you can earn for watering plants or taking tests, the Level that each of us belongs to--is part of Antarctica’s Level system. Everyone in Antarctica has a chip embedded under their skin, right behind their left ear. Through that chip runs a technology that overlays virtual images over your vision.”

4. Surveillance

- a. Pg 9, “Everyone in Antarctica has a chip embedded under their skin, right behind their left ear. Through that chip runs a technology that overlays virtual images over your vision. It tracks what actions you make throughout the day. It assigns

you a Level based on those actions. And then that Level floats over your head, so that everyone can see what it is.”

- b. Pg 17, “I sigh, give up, and turn on the geolocation tracking on him. That’s another feature of Antarctica’s Level system. You can at least find out where someone is.”
 - c. Pg 126, Daniel: “AIS has a system where we can replay and pull your memories up as a virtual scene...it’s all stored away in your chip. When we activate your system in here, it allows us to see the memory as you did, while trying to pick up on clues that you may not have noticed.”
 - d. Pg 129, director of the Antarctic Intelligence Service: “You are obliged to aid us in this investigation as we need it. That includes your past memories, including your thoughts and any dreams you might have had recently.”
5. Meritocracy, designed to create a utopia, malfunctioning (corrupted government)
- a. Pg 9, “Everything you do here earns you points that go to your Level...The higher your level, the more privileges you’re allotted. At Level 7, you earn the right to use the city’s public bus, train, and elevator stations. You’re allowed to rent a home. At Level 10, you’re permitted to shop for fresher produce, as well as eat certain types of foods and walk into certain restaurants. To even set foot up here, in the Sky Floors where Daniel and I live, you need a Level of at least 50. This is how Ross City uses its Level system as an incentive. It’s meant to encourage people to do good and discourage them from being bad. Apparently, it’s the fairest government ever designed, created after Antarctica realized that the rest of the world was stuck suffering in the same cycles of tyranny and dictatorships over and over again.”
 - b. Pg 57, “The Level system starts to break down here, where the majority of people have hacked accounts. Numbers and names don’t float over most heads. And when violence and murder break out, there are no points deducted, no alarms sent digitally to the police...People down here will do it for you, hacking your system so that you Level up--but for an exorbitant price. If you can’t pay that price back after your Level goes back down to normal...well, a lot of desperate people go missing all the time, their disappearances uninvestigated by an uninterested country.”
 - c. Pg 105, Daniel: “These Sky Floor bastards always try to maintain order by giving themselves all the advantages.”
 - d. Pg 188, Hann: “The smoke from the factories turned my son’s lungs black and shriveled. His grades fell in school, and his Level fell because of that. I began to cough blood...The infection in my lungs cost me my job. That lowered my Level further. They punish you for not working, you know. This government. And the lower my Level fell, the harder it became for me to qualify for work...So my wife

took out a loan with the illegal businesses that run down here, made a deal with them in order to pay for our son's illness. She agreed to something we couldn't possibly pay back...I came home one day to find her body in our ransacked apartment...They left a note, demanding payment by threatening our son. So I did the only thing I could. I offered to work for the gang, to pay off the debt...It didn't matter in the end. My son died a couple of months later...I don't blame the Undercity...People are businessmen. They step in when no one else will. There's a need for services like illegal loans down here, for the people forgotten by your government...No, I blame this entire damn system, the Levels and the floors and the hierarchy of this place that made it impossible for us to get out of our predicament. I blame the fact that the President sells the Undercity the dream that, if they only worked hard enough, they too could Level themselves up to the Sky Floors."

e. Pg 239, "No matter how strong the country, no matter how invincible one might seem...there is always a tipping point. Always something that can pull the entire house down."

f. Pg 240, Daniel: "But this is no battle from an outside force. This is the consequence of a flawed system, something that had been rotting underneath a glistening exterior. From the screens in the AIS lobby, we can see the police pushing the Undercity crowds back, clubs out, guns sparking. People falling...Smoke rises from the lowest streets, hazing the still-glittering lights on the higher floors."

g. Pg 257, Daniel: "Maybe this place was always a dystopia."

6. Gender stereotypes/roles

a. Pg 13, "I think about telling her everything that just happened...But the words lodge in my throat, refusing to come out. Real men don't press flowers into their books. They don't spill their insecurities to their friends...Real men suck it up and change the subject until their hearts wither to dust inside them."

b. Pg 269, Daniel: "It is not weakness to open your heart. It does not make you less of a man to ask for help. To turn to someone when you're vulnerable. To need a shoulder to cry on."

7. Class division/inequality

a. Pg 14, "Maybe she's right. I don't fit in up here, in the Sky Floors where everything's perfect until it isn't. My heart belongs to the lower floors, the part of this place that hosts things like drone races and gambling. The part that Ross City doesn't advertise. The Undercity."

b. Pg 16, Daniel: "I *am* currently in the pockmarked streets of the Undercity, after all, perched in the shadows on top of a crumbling neon sign overlooking a crowded street. This is the lowest rung of Ross City, the ground floor, where

sunlight never reaches and where neon signs advertise the rusty jumble of cheap storefronts lining either side of the road.”

- c. Pg 20, Daniel: “The Undercity is a far cry from the gleaming luxury of the Sky Floors. This is where the poorest people in Ross City are. Spilled garbage and rusted scooters stripped of parts litter the intersections down here...My gaze settles on a few homeless people crouched against the walls, begging idly for spare change. Level 0 hovers over their heads. People with Level 0 have no rights at all. They can’t rent housing. They can’t take the trains. They barely have the right to rest in the streets. You can work your Level up, of course. That’s the whole point of this system. Over time, some people in the lowest floors have been able to level up into the Mid Floors and get access to better food, housing, and transportation. But pulling yourself up that way takes an overwhelming amount of work. Most never make it out.”
- d. Pg 25, Daniel: “We wouldn’t have to feel sorry for her if the Level system was fair...People like this work for Hann [crime lord in the Undercity] because they don’t have a choice.”
- e. Pg 28, “If your Level is below a 7, you’re not allowed access to regular health care. Antarctica claims it’s because if your Level is that low, you can’t be trusted not to use the drugs for illicit purposes.”
- f. Pg 188, Hann: “He got sick...So did I. It was a common side effect in our neighborhood, located so close to the factories on the outskirts of the city. The smoke from the factories turned my son’s lungs black and shriveled.”

Appendix B

Master list of themes compiled from 10 popular YA dystopian novels

Code	Number of books in which code appeared	Overall positive, negative, or neutral portrayal of code	Example of code
Oppressive government	8	Negative	<p>“We are controlled to the point we can’t even choose how many children we have.... It’s impossible to fight back...the people can fight solely with their raised voices, and I’ve only ever heard them silenced....</p> <p>The official lie of the Family Planning Division [in the case of twins] is that the illegal multiple goes up for adoption to infertile couples...but the second-born is not given life. They become a piece of property. Owned by the government, brainwashed, raised in coastal work camps never knowing who they are.”</p> <p><i>(The Rule of One)</i></p>
Societal inequality, discrimination, and prejudice (whether de jure--legal--or de facto)	7	Negative	<p>“Our caste was just three away from the bottom. We were artists. And artists and classical musicians</p>

			were only three steps up from dirt. Literally.” <i>(The Selection)</i>
Highly advanced technology	6	Neutral (some positive, some negative)	“Some people reset to twenty-one, which was the youngest genetic therapy could take a person.” <i>(Scythe)</i>
Near extinction of humanity and/or destruction of Earth from natural causes (climate change, natural disasters)	6	Negative	“Humankind is everything and everyone’s most dangerous predator. Blindly killing its own planet, slowly wounding it over the centuries. Forcing my generation to mop up the blood.” <i>(The Rule of One)</i>
Disastrous violence or conflict (domestic and international)	4	Negative	“After the Third World War, large areas of the Earth became unsafe for humans to inhabit.” <i>(The Unknown)</i>
Constant struggle against tyranny and/or defiance towards tyrannical government	4	Positive	“I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of every tribute they can’t own. That Rue was more than a piece in their Games. And so am I.” <i>(The Hunger Games)</i>

Originally good government that has become corrupt	3	Negative	“Maybe Dauntless was formed with good intentions, with the right ideals and the right goals. But it has strayed far from them” <i>(Divergent)</i>
Societally enforced gender roles and stereotypes	3	Negative	“I think about telling her everything that just happened...But the words lodge in my throat, refusing to come out. Real men don't press flowers into their books. They don't spill their insecurities to their friends...Real men suck it up and change the subject until their hearts wither to dust inside them.” <i>(Rebel)</i>
Dangers of artificial intelligence and/or questions posed by AI	3	Neutral	“Until this war, I don't think <i>anyone</i> realized how dangerous AIs have become...They <i>caused</i> the war....They convinced multiple countries that they were being attacked by other countries. The AIs didn't fire a single missile, but they convinced humans to do so...There's very little left.” <i>(The Unknown)</i>
Government surveillance	2	Negative	“The unavoidable surveillance cameras inspect every person... The cameras can sweep through a crowd of a thousand people and

			know in an instant if a face doesn't belong there." <i>(The Rule of One)</i>
Pandemic disease	2	Negative	"Then came the sickness. As the ecosystem fell apart, it became impossible to control the sickness--even to keep it in South America. The jungles were gone, but the insects weren't. People call it the Flare now. It's a horrible, horrible thing." <i>(Maze Runner)</i>
Gender fluidity	1	Positive	"This one had androgynous features. I couldn't tell if they were male or female...from their appearance or voice." <i>(Starsight)</i>
Moral and/or philosophical questions posed by technological advancement	1	Neutral	"Immortality has turned us all into cartoons." <i>(Scythe)</i>
The necessity of free speech	1	Positive	"Let the people protest without punishment....Because, sometimes, being patriotic means calling out the problems rotting away your country." <i>(Rebel)</i>