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Consuming Identities: Response, Revision, and Reimagining in Adolescent Transactions With Branded Young Adult Fiction

Abstract

While children's and young adult literature has always been a product marketed and sold for profit, the past two decades have seen a dramatic upsurge in young adult literature that is transmediated and commercially "branded" (Sekeres, 2009), positioning these books as only one product of many sold in a franchise. Despite the popularity of branded young adult fiction, little is known about how adolescent readers are navigating and valuing the myriad commercial products that are part of their reading experiences. The growing popularity of young adult literature, its increasing commodification as branded fiction, and concomitant concerns about its diminishing literary quality and implicit consumerist socialization of youth make the present an especially important moment to learn more about the literacy practices of adolescents engaging with branded young adult fiction. This dissertation study investigated how a group of Hispanic youth read between and across print, media, and material branded young adult fiction texts, critically analyzing how participants made sense of these texts through social interactions and considering the ethical and political implications of their engagement in the literature. Drawing from intersectional, feminist research traditions, this qualitative study is grounded in a conceptual framework of critical, sociocultural perspectives of literacy, resource orientations toward youth culture and identity, and transactional theories of reader response. Eleven ninth grade students participated in a weekly afterschool group in which they collectively engaged in an inquiry into branded young adult fiction. Additional data were collected through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, survey, and artifact analysis. This research provides insight into possibilities for branded young adult fiction to occupy multiple and contradictory spaces in adolescents' lived worlds. Participants' transactions with these texts reflected the ambiguous positioning of print novels within franchises, contested traditional notions of reader, author, and interpretive authority, and suggested pedagogical opportunities for conceptualizing reading and reader response as embodied and materially situated. As participants engaged with branded fiction, their negotiations offer new understandings of the agency enacted by youth as they, through their entanglement with popular culture and prevailing consumerist forces, take critical positions, audition different identities, and create and inhabit multiple worlds.

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CONSUMING IDENTITIES: RESPONSE, REVISION, AND REIMAGINING IN
ADOLESCENT TRANSACTIONS WITH BRANDED YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Nora Ann Peterman

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CONSUMING IDENTITIES: RESPONSE, REVISION, AND REIMAGINING IN
ADOLESCENT TRANSACTIONS WITH BRANDED YOUNG ADULT FICTION
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ABSTRACT

CONSUMING IDENTITIES: RESPONSE, REVISION, AND REIMAGINING IN ADOLESCENT TRANSACTIONS WITH BRANDED YOUNG ADULT FICTION

Nora A. Peterman

Vivian L. Gadsden

While children's and young adult literature has always been a product marketed and sold for profit, the past two decades have seen a dramatic upsurge in young adult literature that is transmediated and commercially "branded" (Sekeres, 2009), positioning these books as only one product of many sold in a franchise. Despite the popularity of branded young adult fiction, little is known about how adolescent readers are navigating and valuing the myriad commercial products that are part of their reading experiences. The growing popularity of young adult literature, its increasing commodification as branded fiction, and concomitant concerns about its diminishing literary quality and implicit consumerist socialization of youth make the present an especially important moment to learn more about the literacy practices of adolescents engaging with branded young adult fiction. This dissertation study investigated how a group of Hispanic youth read between and across print, media, and material branded young adult fiction texts, critically analyzing how participants made sense of these texts through social interactions and considering the ethical and political implications of their engagement in the literature. Drawing from intersectional, feminist research traditions, this qualitative study is grounded in a conceptual framework of critical, sociocultural perspectives of literacy,

resource orientations toward youth culture and identity, and transactional theories of reader response. Eleven ninth grade students participated in a weekly afterschool group in which they collectively engaged in an inquiry into branded young adult fiction. Additional data were collected through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, participant observation, survey, and artifact analysis. This research provides insight into possibilities for branded young adult fiction to occupy multiple and contradictory spaces in adolescents' lived worlds. Participants' transactions with these texts reflected the ambiguous positioning of print novels within franchises, contested traditional notions of reader, author, and interpretive authority, and suggested pedagogical opportunities for conceptualizing reading and reader response as embodied and materially situated. As participants engaged with branded fiction, their negotiations offer new understandings of the agency enacted by youth as they, through their entanglement with popular culture and prevailing consumerist forces, take critical positions, audition different identities, and create and inhabit multiple worlds.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|------------|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS..... | iii |
| ABSTRACT | v |
| LIST OF TABLES..... | ix |
| CHAPTER ONE: Adolescent Engagement with Branded Young Adult Fiction | 1 |
| Significance and Story of the Question | 1 |
| Research Questions | 8 |
| Review of the Literature..... | 9 |
| Young Adult Literature and Research in Adolescent Literacy..... | 9 |
| Young Adult Literature: Identity, Agency, and the Readerly Imagination | 20 |
| Research in Branded Young Adult Literature..... | 27 |
| Conceptual Framework..... | 31 |
| Branded Fiction and the Intertextual Multiverses of Transmedia Entertainment..... | 31 |
| Literacy as Socially and Materially Situated | 40 |
| Adolescent Identity, Agency, and Youth Cultural Production | 45 |
| CHAPTER TWO: Methodology & Data Analysis | 48 |
| Logic of My Inquiry..... | 48 |
| Research Context and Collection of Data..... | 51 |
| Data Analysis | 59 |
| CHAPTER THREE: Youth Transactions with Branded Texts and Contexts..... | 62 |
| What literacy identities and practices did youth bring to this inquiry? | 62 |
| Notions of Pleasure and Labor in Transactions with Texts | 66 |
| The “Extra” Details: Affordances of Different Types of Texts..... | 74 |
| “Books are just books”: What counts as reading? | 78 |
| Literacy Role Models and Cultural Mediators..... | 84 |
| Deciding What to Read, Watch, and Purchase | 89 |
| CHAPTER FOUR: Public/Private Transactions with Branded Young Adult Fictions | 94 |
| Social Readings for Social Currency..... | 94 |
| Social Readings and Brand Ambivalence..... | 97 |
| “Doing” Branded Fictions: Repetition and Rereading as Interpretive and Performative Acts..... | 100 |
| Emotional Response as a Performance of Fandom | 103 |
| Distinctions Between Public and Private in the Desirability of Material Texts | 106 |
| “Girly-Girls” and Gendered Branding..... | 113 |
| Performing and Assessing Group Legitimacy with Material Texts..... | 116 |
| CHAPTER FIVE: I want to feel part of it: Reimaginings in/of Branded Worlds. 123 | |
| Play and Creative Resistance in Branded Worlds..... | 123 |
| Revising and Remaking Branded Worlds..... | 128 |
| Branded “Whitewashing” and Contesting Racial and Ethnic Homogeneity | 130 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| Realistic versus Reality: Navigating the Parasocial | 139 |
| CHAPTER VI: Conclusions and Implications | 150 |
| Embodied Readings and Reimaginings of Branded Worlds | 150 |
| Implications for Policy and Practice..... | 150 |
| Implications for Research: Lingering Questions and Future Directions | 156 |
| Concluding Thoughts | 161 |
| APPENDICES | 164 |
| Appendix A. Selected Young Adult Fiction Brands | 164 |
| Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol | 166 |
| Appendix C: Individual Interview Protocol..... | 170 |
| REFERENCES..... | 174 |

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Inquiry Group Members and their Fandoms – p. 66

CHAPTER ONE: Adolescent Engagement with Branded Young Adult Fiction

Significance and Story of the Question

Research on adolescent literacies has focused both on traditional notions of literacy learning within classrooms and adolescent literacy practices outside of classrooms. Increasingly, the field has also attended to issues in digital technologies and to the intersections of adolescent literacy, identity, and youth culture. This shift has blurred the historical boundaries separating conceptualizations of in-school and out-of-school literacies (see Alvermann, 2007; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004; Schultz & Hull, 2008; Young, Dillon & Moje, 2002), highlighting the fluidity and hybridity of these practices. Given these shifts, research in the field of adolescent literacy must investigate not only the myriad contexts where literacy, youth cultural production and identity converge, but also attend to the agency enacted by youth in traversing these spaces and in making sense of and representing their selves and their worlds (Moje & Luke, 2009). One such critical area of inquiry focuses on the growing popularity of young adult literature, its increasing commodification as branded fiction, and the literacy practices of adolescents engaging with these texts across real and imagined locations.

My own interest in this topic grew from my prior professional experiences as a Reading Specialist for out-of-school youth in Philadelphia, primarily teaching students who were reintegrating from juvenile and adult correctional placements and who were court-ordered to attend my classes. Students were assigned to my classroom if they scored below an eighth grade reading level on the school entrance exams, and almost all of my students entered my class expressing a belief that they “couldn’t read” or were “illiterate”, perhaps repeating statements that they heard from administrators, teachers,

counselors, and peers when they were excluded from attending the advanced GED preparatory classes. It was difficult to escape this rhetoric within our school context – every student’s test scores was posted publically in the lobby next to their photograph on a large cut-out mountain, depicting their journey on an upward progression from “Illiteracy” toward “Valuing Learning and Knowledge”, “Achieving Literacy” and finally the summit of “Turning Around Our Lives”. As their test scores improved, students’ photos were moved higher on the mountain and labeled accordingly. These labels, and the TABE scores that they received upon entering the school, were my students’ official academic identities, and it was deeply disturbing to witness the ways in which my students echoed these reductive categories when talking about themselves and their future possibilities.

In reality, my students were richly diverse individuals who were deeply engaged by and in various reading and writing practices out of school, such as regularly reading the newspaper while riding public transit, creating and reviewing YouTube videos, composing poetry and music lyrics, participating in Yahoo chat forums, posting on Facebook, and drawing portraits of people, cars, and personal tags. Many of my students also discussed what they characterized “obsessions” with the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* series of novels and films. Some of these students had read the respective novels, while others were fans of the film adaptations of the stories. Still other students had never read nor watched either iteration of the texts, but were conversant in the plot because of interactions with their friends and online. For example, one of my students, who had not read any of the *Twilight* novels nor watched the films, carried a backpack with Jacob’s

face on printed on it, regularly posted on a fan website devoted to Jacob (and Taylor Lautner, the actor who portrayed his character), and wrote stories in her journal about werewolves.

I was intrigued by my students' engagement with these texts, and I wanted to know more about how they navigated these stories and took them up in their lives. I was also troubled by their assumption that these practices did not count as "real" reading or part of being "literate". It became clear that by exclusively labeling my students by their reading scores, the school marginalized and rendered these literacies invisible. This dissonance profoundly troubled me, and I entered my doctoral studies at the University of Pennsylvania with a commitment to research that takes youth culture seriously and values the diverse identities and literacies of adolescents. This dissertation study reflects my continued hope to contribute to a reframing of the dialogue surrounding youth such as my former students, and to constructively make problematic the liminal spaces between adolescents' sanctioned and unsanctioned literacy practices, and between in- and out-of school.

Why branded young adult fiction? Why now?

The field of adolescent and young adult literature is reflective of broader forces shaping the overarching field of adolescent literacy, such as increased corporate influence in education and the development of new digital technologies, and one such outcome has been the development of branded young adult fiction. Children's and young adult literature has always been a product that is marketed and sold for profit. In recent decades, however, we have witnessed a dramatic upsurge in young adult literature that is

transmediated and commercially “branded” (Sekeres, 2009; Taxel, 2011), positioning these books as only one product of many that are sold in a franchise. More specifically, branded fiction books are defined by Sekeres (2009) as “created synergistically, tethered to other products, and drawing upon literacies other than reading words on printed paper...books are simply one product among many that attract the consumer to the brand” (p. 400). As such, young adult branded fiction is comprised of a variety of texts, including print novels, media texts (e.g. films, television shows, interactive websites), and material objects. These material texts are commercially produced products that contribute to and reflect the “brand” in potentially all spaces of an adolescent’s lived world – artifacts include clothing, accessories, cosmetics, housewares, school supplies, and toys and games.

Despite the widespread popularity of branded young adult fiction, there is limited empirical research about how adolescents approach and make sense of the print, media, and material branded texts that are part of their reading universes. Existing scholarship on branded fiction largely focuses on products created for younger audiences (e.g., the American Girls Collection, Curious George, Disney Princesses, Hannah Montana), examining the literacy practices of children and tweens as they play with toys and games associated with these brands (see Edwards, 2011; Mackey, 2011; Sekeres, 2009, 2011; Wohlwend; 2009, 2012a; 2012b). However, the market developments in branded fiction impact adolescent readers as well. Novels such as Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight*, Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games*, and John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* are all fictional texts that have been accompanied by blockbuster films generating millions of dollars in

revenue, as well as the production of commercial products that adolescents (and their parents) can purchase. For example, a *Twilight* fan may signal her affiliation with the series by brandishing a Team Jacob umbrella, a reproduction of Bella's engagement ring, Glow-In-The-Dark Edward Face Soap, or even amber-colored contact lenses (Erzen, 2012). School supplies are a large market for branded teen merchandise as well, with items such as themed backpacks, notebooks, binders, pens, and laptop computer cases available for purchase.

As the popularity of branded fiction franchises increase, so do concomitant concerns about the diminishing literary quality of commodified literature, the implicit consumerist socialization of youth, and the relative impact on adolescents' reading and engagement with a range of texts and literacy practices (see Brooks, 2008; Brooks & Kelly, 2009; Bullen, 2005; Erzen, 2012; Glenn, 2008; Johnson, 2010; Taxel, 2011; Zipes, 2001). At the same time, the purchasing power of adolescents has drastically increased in the past two decades – youths spend over \$30 billion yearly and also influence the spending patterns of their families, constituting an \$200 billion in spending power (The Future of Children, 2008; Rand Youth Poll, 2014), and they are the most brand-conscious in history (Schor, 2004). Adolescents often purchase branded fiction products independently and are less likely to have their use of these purchases monitored by their parents or teachers. There are fewer interactions with adults in these cases, and a greater investment in peer relationships (The Future of Children, 2008). Thus, there currently exists a complicated combination of forces influencing the proliferation of branded young adult fiction, as youth buying power shapes industry, and industry markets to youth. Are

youth passive consumers of fortune, or savvy in their choices that are often based on critical reviews of the market? Such questions are often found in discussions about readers' choices of literature, yet we know relatively little about how youth position themselves as readers and consumers of branded texts, nor how these books and their associated products are negotiated in order to create particular identities.

This question becomes even more pressing when we consider the relationship between the hyper-commodified and hyper-homogenized dimensions of young adult fiction brands. The lack of cultural diversity is an issue that every scholar of children's and young adult literature encounters, but the erasure of difference becomes even more pronounced when these texts are transmediated for television, film, and merchandising (Thomas, 2014). The majority of these brands feature extremely attractive White, straight, cis-gendered teenagers in either suburban or uber wealthy urban settings (Wee, 2010). As a teacher and researcher, I questioned what this means for the adolescents engaging with this literature whose cultural identities are portrayed problematically or excluded altogether: While branded young adult literature is immensely popular with adolescents, there is nothing to suggest that all teens, regardless of racial, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, etc., are interested in or engage with these brands in the same fashion.

Yet within the field of adolescent literacy, empirical research on adolescent reading practices with young adult literature has primarily focused on the interactions between the reader(s) and the printed text. While this research has attended in many cases to the different literary genres from which adolescent readers draw, few if any

studies have considered or taken into account the branded fiction products that are also potentially part of many adolescents' reading universes and their influence or effects on adolescents' engagement and reading practices. Many adolescents access a variety of branded fiction texts, and solely focusing on their engagement with the printed novel ignores the possibility for the story and reader to be shaped by other associated products.

Moreover, individuals who read only the print novel are making a choice to do so in an environment where they are at least aware of the other texts associated with the brand (Johnson, 2013). Our understanding of how adolescents are making meaning when they read is incomplete if we do not also consider about how living and engaging with branded products may influence how youth are making sense of the associated stories and the characters. In contrast to assumptions that adolescents are “dupes” who consume branded fiction products (see Taxel, 2011), the literature suggests that adolescents bring individual beliefs and purposes to their reading of young adult novels that are connected to the broader social and cultural contexts in which these texts are situated, spaces in which norms and values can be resisted and renegotiated. Why then would we assume that their readings of commercially produced media and material objects be singularly passive?

This qualitative study therefore examines broadly the convergence of adolescent literacies and the production, appropriation and consumption of branded young adult fiction. In this dissertation, I investigate how a group of Hispanic high school students engaged with transmediated young adult fiction franchises, examining the ways in which these youth discursively constructed value and desirability as they navigated branded

material texts that influenced their reading experiences. Using an intersectional feminist analysis, I discuss possibilities of individual and communal agency that may be enacted in their readerly transactions with commercial products and suggest that as students engage with these texts across real and imagined locations, their negotiations suggest new pedagogical possibilities for conceptualizing reader response and literacy learning as embodied and materially situated.

Research Questions

More specifically, this qualitative study investigated how adolescents who read branded young adult literature and purchase its associated products read between and across these texts. Through this work, I attempted to deepen my understanding of how readers may enact agency in (re)constructing identity, their lived contexts, and youth culture through transactions with branded fiction. I focused on the following question and sub-questions:

1. How do adolescents read between and across branded young adult fiction texts?
 - a. How do they talk about these texts and their respective stories and characters?
 - b. How do social interactions around branded fiction shape the ways in which adolescents make sense of, and take up, these texts?
 - c. How do adolescents talk about identity and enact agency through their engagement with these texts?

Review of the Literature

This review of the literature on adolescent reading practices with popular young adult fiction novels suggests that adolescents draw upon a range of literacy practices and are engaged in agentive identity work as they negotiate and transact with these texts, demonstrating a problematic contradiction in the field that must be interrogated further. It argues that rather than assuming that adolescents' engagement with branded fiction products is subject to passive reception of consumerist socialization, it is necessary to examine the individual and communal agency that may be similarly involved in readerly transactions with these texts. Moreover, this literature review problematizes the binary that positions adolescents as either passive or agentive by demonstrating the complex social processes that inform adolescent transactions with young adult novels, and possibly branded fiction texts. It focuses on areas of research connecting discussions of adolescent literacy and young adult literature, and questions how commodification might complicate or inform adolescents' readerly transactions with texts.

Young Adult Literature and Research in Adolescent Literacy

Research in adolescent literacy. Much of the early research in adolescent literacy was situated within what Snow and Moje (2013) refer to as the “inoculation fallacy”, a belief by educators and policy-makers that reading instruction ended in the elementary grade years, and that investment in early literacy programs would “vaccinate” students against reading difficulties and failure later in their academic career. Consequently, work in adolescent literacy focused on remediation and cognitive strategies, approaching adolescent learners from a perspective that sought to understand

and address school failure (Lesko, 2001). Over time, research in this area evolved and extended into two general streams of inquiry. One strand of research in adolescent literacy focuses on school contexts, broadening to develop a more inclusive and complex understanding of adolescent reading and writing in schools. Rather than focusing on remediation and reading “failures”, educators conceptualize adolescent literacy as an important topic that needs to be better understood in order to serve all learners. Much of this research focuses on reading and writing instruction in English classroom (e.g., Allen, 1995; Atwell, 1998; Alvermann, 2008; Appleman, 1993; Ball, 1999; Benson & Christian, 2002; Burroughs & Smagorinsky, 2008; Cziko, 1996; Irwin & Knodle, 2008; Romano, 2002; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, Hurwitz, 1999). In addition, research in school contexts focuses more specifically on content-area literacies, such as developing students’ understanding of discipline-specific norms for reading and writing. This research suggests that educators teach literacy across the curriculum and incorporate instruction in reading and writing strategies in every school subject that reflect the discourses of the different academic disciplines (e.g. Bigelow & Peterson, 2002; Brozo & Simpson, 1999; Bruce & Wasser, 1996; Bruce, 1996; Langer, 1995; Unsworth, 2001).

Concomitantly, scholarship in out-of-school adolescent literacy has investigated the home literacy practices of students and the ways in which these are connected to culture and identity (see Alverman, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps & Waff, 2006; Dimitriadis, 2009; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004; Hull & Zacher, 2004; Kinloch, 2009; Kirkland, 2009; Mahiri, 1998). It is important to note, however, that while much of the research on in- and out-of-school literacy is conducted separately, scholars acknowledge

the limitations of an artificial divide in studying adolescent literacies. They note a marked chasm between adolescents' engagement in out-of-school literacy practices and classroom practices of reading and writing, cautioning against "dueling discourses" (Leander, 2007) and suggesting that "if schools are not the only – or perhaps even the primary – source of literacy competence, adolescents' multiliterate practices firmly establishes the argument that schools are out of touch with the everyday literacies that many young people find relevant" (Alvermann, 2007). This scholarship calls for educators to use knowledge about students' out-of-school literacy practices in order to better understand their engagement with literacy and learning practices in the classroom (see Alvermann, 2010; Alvermann, Hagood & Williams, 2001; Alvermann, Moon, & Hagwood, 1999; Beach & O'Brien, 2008; Hill & Vasudevan, 2008; Mahiri, 2004; Moje, 2000; Morrell, 2002; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Vasudevan, 2007, 2008).

Moreover, the concurrent development of new digital technologies not bound by classroom or bedroom walls has further complicated the divisions between in-and out-of-school contexts in research, with Schultz and Hull (2008) arguing that youth are "never really either simply in school or out of school: their identities and practices travel across these spaces" (p. 243). Researchers continue to investigate this fluidity in adolescents' emerging literacy practices, such as through instant messaging (Lewis & Fabo, 2005), manga and anime (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003), video games (Gee, 2003), fan fiction (Black, 2007, 2008), and digital composition (Kirkland, 2009). Again, this research views youth culture and adolescent literacy as inextricably tied to identity, adopting a resource-oriented, ethnographic stance that investigated how educators might

make connections between popular culture and academic literacies, and considering the pedagogical implications of participatory culture (see Alvermann, 2007; Elkins & Luke, 1999; Ito, 2008; Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, 2007, 2010; Lam, 2000; Young, Dillon & Moje, 2002). This scholarship also positions the convergence of youth culture and critical literacy as an opportunity for adolescents to resist and challenge dominant norms and institutions and to critique popular culture while engaging with it simultaneously (e.g. Alim, 2007; Haddix & Sealey-Ruiz; Hill & Vasudevan, 2008; Kinloch, 2009; Moje & Van Helden, 2004; Morrell, 2008; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2010; Vasudevan, Schultz & Bateman, 2010).

Overview of research in adolescent literacy and young adult literature. The study of young adult literature is relatively new (and sparse) within the field of adolescent literacy (Alsup, 2010; Christenbury, 2007; Hayn & Nolen, 2012; Kaplan, 2010). Young adult literature (also referred to as young adult fiction, adolescent literature, or juvenile fiction) is generally understood to include fiction that is written for, marketed to, and read by adolescents and young adults (Elliott-Johns, 2012). However, much like the research in the broad field of adolescent literacy, one's definition and evaluation of young adult literature is inherently subject to ideological conceptualizations of both childhood/adolescence and what constitutes literature (Stevenson, 2011). For example, some scholars and practitioners look to the age of the main character to determine whether a novel is for "young adults", while others believe that all young adult literature necessarily addresses the difficult negotiations of identity that adolescents experience as they mature (Elliott-Johns, 2012). Questions of what "counts" as literature also arise,

particularly as youth increasingly engage with nontraditional texts such as graphic novels and digital media (Garcia, 2013).

Much of the existing research in the field primarily focuses on the text itself, rather than the transactional occurrences of the text in use (Alsup, 2010; Christenbury, 2007; Hayn & Nolen, 2012; Kaplan, 2010). This scholarship generally analyzes the literary elements of a given text, often comparing a young adult novel to the classical or canonical works of the curriculum, interrogating embedded assumptions about issues of culture and adolescence, or discussing issues of censorship (Coats, 2011; Hayn & Nolen, 2012; Hunt, 1996). Other research in this vein examines trends in content and style, such as the evolution of contemporary realistic fiction, multicultural literature, graphic novels, dystopian science fiction or crossover novels (Kaplan, 2012; see also Kaplan 2006, 2007, 2010). While most empirical research on young adult literature is located within a school context (either the classroom or an afterschool club), these studies of reader transactions with young adult literature draw from a variety of perspectives within the field of adolescent literacy (Pearce, Muller, & Hawkes, 2013). Many scholars investigate questions of adolescent text selection, motivation, and engagement in order to suggest pedagogical strategies to support struggling or reluctant readers, thus positioning young adult literature as a scaffold or bridge in remediating adolescents' academic literacies. In contrast, my study is situated in conversation with the above-referenced research on intersections of adolescent literacy, youth culture, and identity. This scholarship investigates the ways in which adolescent readers make sense of young adult literature, examining the connections between reading, identity and criticality.

Whatever their intellectual and pedagogical locations, however, all of these scholars point to the immense (and increasing) popularity of young adult literature amongst teenagers and young adults. While the publishing industry is generally experiencing dramatic challenges, young adult literature continues to grow in audience and sales (Martens, 2011). Withers and Ross (2011) reported that between 1995 and 1997, publication of young adult novels decreased from 5,000 to 3,000 titles. By 2009, however, publication had increased to over 30,000 titles, and sales of young adult novels exceeded three billion dollars. Much of this growth and is attributed to “blockbuster” titles, such as the Harry Potter and Twilight series, that drew attention to the young adult genre and attracted new readers (Pearce, Muller, & Hawkes, 2013; Taxel, 2011). It is within this context that branded fiction has become increasingly pervasive, as publishers continue to actively court loyal young adult readers relying on commodified, serialized publications to maintain and extend their audience (Taxel, 2011).

Market values and the commodification of young adult literature. The proliferation of branded young adult fiction is reflective of wider economic shifts in the marketplace. Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, independent publishers began to merge with larger publishing houses as well as transnational conglomerates such as the News Corporation, Disney, Viacom, and Bertelsmann. As these conglomerates gained control over the “culture industry”, serialization, spin-offs and merchandising of young adult fiction became a common practice in order maximize profits through transmedia production (Martens, 2010; Taxel, 2011). Positioning the Harry Potter books as paradigmatic, Taxel (2011) argued that “the Potter phenomenon” represents a

comprehensive transformation of the publishing industry in which books are branded and merchandised in a self-replicating cycle of consumerism, wherein book series promote associated films, television programs and merchandise, and films, television programs and merchandise promote the associated books (p. 282). This recursive relationship is described by Hade (2001), who has suggested that “publishers understand that they are not in the book business; rather they sell ideas they call “brands,” and they market their brands through “synergized” goods designed to infiltrate as many aspects of a child’s life as possible” (p. 159). The publishing of young adult literature is now characterized by the production of series and sequels, cross-media merchandising, and even the branding of authors themselves (Taxel, 2011).

But how do adolescent readers of branded fiction engage with transmediated texts and make sense of the multiple artifacts associated with a printed novel? Increasing commoditization of young adult literature and attendant cross-promotional merchandising has heightened concerns about the promotion of consumerist values amongst children and adolescents. Situated within a larger discussion regarding the so-called “commodification of childhood”, many researchers have examined the reductive instrumentation of children’s literature as consumer capital (McGuigan, 2010; McRobbie, 2005). This scholarship is generally modeled after previous research on the hybridization of entertainment and advertisement, such as the reciprocal relationship between licensed merchandise and films or the product placement and registers of consumption in television programming (Bullen, 2009; Kenway & Bullen, 2008; Detora, 2005). However, children’s and young adult literature is a relatively new area of study within the

field – it was frequently overlooked in early analyses of the multifaceted interactions through which youth are socialized into consumer society. Bullen (2005) has suggested that this omission occurred because children’s literature has traditionally been positioned within a Bourdieusian inalienable cultural field, in that:

“It has been perceived to be above the values of the market. Although the children’s book industry has never operated independently of the market...children’s literature is policed by a range of adult and institutional gatekeepers, including the state, education departments, publishers, teachers, librarians, parents and authors. Although the interests of some of these stakeholders are clearly market-related, the relationships between actors in this cultural field do not operate in the same way as they do in children’s popular culture” (p. 498).

Unlike the film and television texts that are frequently assumed to be pleasurable entertainment, children’s and (to a lesser extent) young adult literature is often positioned both as serving higher educational and moral purposes in transmitting literary values and literacy instruction (Bullen, 2005, p. 498). This tension was examined by Striphas (2006), who suggested that books are positioned as “sacred products” and assumed to contribute to youth’s moral, aesthetic and intellectual development. Accordingly, he argued that “what makes a ‘good’ book good – or, rather, what makes *books* good – is their purported ability to transcend vulgar economic considerations for the sake of these loftier goals” (Striphas, 2009, p. 6).

However, it is also important to note that despite persistent assumptions to the contrary, the commodification of children's narratives is hardly a new phenomenon. One of the earliest manifestations of "spin-off" merchandising occurred in 1744 when children's publisher John Newbery sold his book, *A Little Pretty Pocket-book*, alongside toys including balls "for Little Master Tommy" and pincushions "for Pretty Miss Polly" (Bernstein, 2013, p. 459). Widely recognized for his pioneering role in constructing the notion of children as a distinct market, Newbery specified that both the book and attendant toys were "Intended for the Instruction and Amusement" of children and promoted "good morals and values" (Bernstein, 2013; Sekeres, 2009).

While Newbery thus defined children's literature in relationship to play, many other well-known authors subsequently explored the possibilities of branding their stories and characters. Popular children's literature commodities included Elsie Dinsmore paper dolls, Lewis Carroll's approval of a *Wonderland* Postage-Stamp Case (Mackey, 1998; 2010) the myriad products of Beatrix Potter's *Peter Rabbit* franchise, such as a plush Peter Rabbit doll, Peter Rabbit wallpaper, and Peter Rabbit games, and Kewpie dolls and wallpaper associated with Rose O'Neill's comic strip (Sekeres, 2009). L. Frank Baum further extended the commercialization of children's narratives by adapting and re-telling *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in a stage musical and hand-colored film, in addition to marketing toys and games as related tie-ins (Hearn, 2000; Mackey, 2010).

Although this historical context has been largely overlooked in addressing more recent developments in the commercialization of children's literature, Robin Bernstein (2013) has called for a reconceptualization of the field of children's literature that

acknowledges and foregrounds this fundamental relationship between children's literature, material culture, and the actions of playing, arguing that "the history of children's literature exists not in opposition to but in integration with, the histories of children's material culture and children's play" (p. 459). Ahistorical beliefs ignoring this triangulation ultimately erect arbitrary and counterfactual barriers that dangerously mask the market-driven powers that influence the publishing and distribution of this literature.

This is not to suggest that recent scholarly critiques of branded fiction are misplaced. While mass-produced, nonbook commodities are historically entangled with children's literature, the scale and scope of franchised adaptations, tie-ins and commodities has exponentially increased in the past few decades (Mackey, 2010).

Although fans of branded fiction novels welcome the myriad products and opportunities for interacting with these texts, researchers have expressed concerns that the earnings potential of transmedia products is prioritized by publishers over literary quality. Zipes (2001) has cautioned that while the publishing industry is progressively more "driven by commodity consumption", it "at the same time sets the parameters of reading aesthetic taste" (p. 172). These two purposes are not easily reconciled in transmedia branding – profitable young adult fiction properties require the rapid production and launch of multiple products, and the integrity of an individual text is less important than its capacity to expand the potential audience and strengthen the total franchise-brand awareness (Aarseth, 2006). Reflecting the new industry norms, Sekeres (2009) argued that:

“Publishers and marketers also want children to be consumers as well as readers.

Therefore, in marketing terms, a book that is a stand-alone product is valuable for

its intrinsic purpose, but a book that is tied in with many other products has added value—it can enhance brand awareness, dispose children to want to buy other products in the brand, and promote a broader conception of story and character through all the brand products” (p. 403).

The market-driven logic of transmedia branding has amplified fears that rampant commercialization of children’s and young adult literature repositions reading as an act of consumerism (Erzen, 2012; Taxel, 2011). This perspective is further reinforced by a seemingly concomitant increase in literary content promoting commercial consumption by adolescents, and reflected in critical content analyses of many popular young adult brands that examine the consumerist values embedded within these texts. For example, Glenn (2008) considered themes of entitlement, conspicuous consumption, and empty relationships prevalent throughout the *Gossip Girl*, *A-List*, and *The Insiders* young adult novels. Similarly, Johnson (2010) addressed the implications of commodity consumption and brand names in the *Clique*, *Gossip Girl* and *A-List* series, while Bullen (2005) examined the phenomena of deliberate product placement within serialized young adult novels and its relation to adolescent consumer identity.

But what is the “value” of these branded books to the adolescent reader? What ideological work is performed between branded fiction and the readers who take up these texts? Although limited research currently exists that examines branded fiction in particular, we can draw from bodies of literature exploring how adolescents agentively make sense of young adult fiction and take up these texts in their lives in order to inform our understandings of branded fiction as well.

Young Adult Literature: Identity, Agency, and the Readerly Imagination

Much of the empirical research identified for this review connects adolescent readings of young adult novels to negotiations of identity(ies). One prevalent theme in the literature explores the ways in which personal identification with the characters, plot, and setting in a given novel inform readers' responses to the text. For example, Hallman (2009) described how adolescent mothers identified with young adult literature, constructing and reconstructing their sense of self as teenagers, as students, and as mothers as their discussions illuminated new potentialities and autonomy.

Similarly, Vyas (2004) drew on Cherland's (1994) study of the relationship between literacy, identity and agency in order to investigate the connections between literacy practices and bicultural identity construction in an after-school literature club. The participants of this study, first and second generation immigrant high school students of Asian descent, engaged in bicultural identity craftwork through their reading and discussions. For example, the students' reading of and interpretation of the club literature served as a means by which they combatted feelings of alienation, made choices about negotiating parental pressure, and constructed strategies for managing intergenerational differences (Vyas, 2004). These readers were not passive recipients of information or values – they actively connected with or rejected certain aspects of the texts, and challenged homogenizing labels of “bicultural” or “Asian”.

Interestingly, this agentic work occurs even when there is no obvious or explicit characteristic with which the reader can identify. Using a cultural studies framework, Nylund (2007) described the experience of an adolescent gay male (‘Steven’) reading

Harry Potter stories. The author argues that popular culture and the mass media, such as *Harry Potter* novels, are texts through which people construct identity(ies). Nylund further argued that these manipulation of these texts be utilized as a therapeutic tool by clinicians. Although the discussion of therapy is not salient to this review, Nylund extensively described the ways in which Steven inserted himself into the narratives of the *Harry Potter* books and found affinity for his own sexual identity through self-identifying with embedded queer readings and messages in the books. As such, Steven took up the text in a way that aligned with his individual purposes and values.

In conjunction with the identity work described above, much of the current literature focuses on the given context and communal practices that adolescents engage in while reading young adult literature, attempting to draw connections between these factors and readers' self-perceptions and sense of agency in specific communities. One such study was conducted by Glazier and Seo (2005), who investigated how reading and discussing multicultural young adult literature created spaces for minority students to "find their voices" in the classroom. They argued that these students made personal connections with the text and talked about the text in relation to other people and life situations, thereby gaining voice and a new sense of legitimacy. However, the authors also noted that reading multicultural texts stifled the voices of majority students to some degree, suggesting that because the "majority students...could not readily see themselves written into the pages of the text", they were unable to make connect with the text and were silenced in classroom talk. However, it is important to note that these findings problematically imply that meaning was solely embedded in the text, rather than in active

reading and response by students. As such, this study is limited by a circumscribed conceptualization of “voice” and a failure to recognize that resistance to a particular text is also an agentive stance.

In contrast, Bean and Moni (2003) made connections between adolescent transactions with young adult literature and critical literacy, proposing a critical discourse instructional framework with attendant literacy questions for facilitation of discussions of young adult literature with students. They argued that “students develop and understanding that the worldview represented in a novel is not a natural one, and it can be challenged and resisted. Such analyses move beyond responses that are efferent and aesthetic to place the reader in a position of power in relation to the texts” (Bean & Moni, 2003, p. 847). Another framework was by Jacobs (2006), who studied the engagement, personal interpretations and artistic responses to young adult fiction of incarcerated boys ages thirteen to seventeen years old. Using qualitative and quantitative methods to compose detailed case studies, Jacobs concluded that engaging in artistic response allowed the participants to engage with and understand literature while simultaneously making connections to and reflecting about their own life experiences and situations.

While not suggesting a specific instructional model, other research highlights the importance of addressing the social and relational facets of reading through group discussions. Park (2012) described a yearlong qualitative study examining the participation of urban middle school girls in an afterschool book club. She that reading is a critical and communal practice and suggested that in reading *Speak* (a young adult novel by Laurie Halse Anderson) together, the study participants’ public conversations

were more important than private readings. Park (2012) noted that “in a reading community, readers’ literary interpretations as well as their feelings and stories become public” and argued that this communal aspect of reading enabled students to shift their perceptions of themselves and of each other (p. 205). Similarly, Hill (2009) read *The First Part Last*, a young adult novel by Angela Johnson, with adolescent students in a high school Health education class. Utilizing pre- and post-surveys to collect data as well as notes from class discussions, Hill found that students critically examined issues of teen pregnancy and teen parenting through discussing the text, and that many students critically interrogated their own beliefs and assumptions.

Moreover, individual characteristics such as emotional maturity and previous life experiences undoubtedly inform the myriad ways in which adolescent readers take up young adult fiction. For example, George (2008) compared the responses of adolescents and adult participants to young adult novels in faculty-student book clubs. George collected extensive qualitative data over the course of four years, including field notes of classroom observations and audio recordings and transcriptions of club meetings, and then coded for themes based upon the measures used by the Newbery Committee. George noted that the adult participants most frequently engaged in textual analyses of the novels, such as evaluating character development or various literary devices employed by the author. In contrast, the adolescents made personal connections to the texts and contextualized elements of the novels by situating their interpretations in discussion of salient issues in their own lives. George (2008) cautioned that the values and interpretations that adult readers ascribe to a text do not necessarily coincide with

that of teens, arguing that “if children and adolescent literature as genres are defined as literature written for and about young people, then young people may, indeed, serve as the “more knowledgeable others” when discussing the experiences of young characters in literature with the adults in the community of readers” (p. 61). As such, George reminds teachers and other adults of the need to perceive adolescents as agentive individuals, not simply passive recipients of knowledge.

However, it is not simply a reader’s age that distinguishes her response to text – readers of the same age and other demographic characteristics differ in how they take up the cultural scripts that are embedded in young adult novels. For example, Behm-Morawitz, Click, and Aubrey (2010) compared the experiences and responses of teenage and adult *Twilight* fans to the romantic messages embedded in the text. The romantic relationships between Bella and Edward and Bella and Jacob have been widely criticized for providing unhealthy relationship models that subjugate female power (Ames, 2010; Clasen, 2010) and are repeatedly described as a “how-to manual for an abusive relationship” (Voynar, 2008 in Ames, 2010, p. 40). However, Behm-Morowitz et al. found that adolescent readers did not have uniform responses to the novels’ characters and relationships, but rather their reactions and interpretations differed according to their ideologies and age. Perhaps most importantly, while teens reported high levels of “immersion” in the series and desired a romantic relationship similar to that of Bella and Edward, they simultaneously critiqued aspects of their relational dynamics. For example, one adolescent expressed disdain for Bella’s dependence on Edward and her depression when he did not spend time with her, complaining that “every time he goes on one of his

hunting trips, she gets all depressed, even though she knows he's coming back" (Behm-Morowitz et al., 2010, p. 144). Such findings challenge arguments that adolescent girls blindly accept the gendered discourses embedded with young adult novels – adolescents' identification with romantic and feminist ideologies while reading, as well as their relationship satisfaction and their desired relationship characteristics, are complex and contradictory.

These seemingly incongruous findings are further reiterated throughout the literature. Although much of this research focuses on gendered issues of femininity and romantic relationships rather than other issues of culture and identity, this work demonstrates the complexities of adolescent transactions with young adult fiction, and the inadequacy of ascribing uniform purposes and values to the readers of these texts. For example, Smith (2000) utilized ethnographic methods to study the reading purposes and engagement of a racially and culturally diverse group of middle-class, sixth-grade girls in an afterschool reading club. Defining engaged response as "the construction of meaning through sharing stories, real-life critique, and predicting what will happen next", Smith argued that the girls' responses to the novels expressed aspirations to be perceived as mature and autonomous as well as desires for knowledge about dating, desirability and illicit sexuality (p. 31). Such findings are consistent with frameworks of reading that positions adolescents as passive recipients of the norms and values embedded in novels.

However, Smith (2000) also noted an ambiguity in the girls' responses that was marked by sometimes conflicting ambivalence towards boy-girl relationships and sexuality, arguing that "these combined purposes of agency and desire illustrated the

fluid and often contradictory identities that these early adolescent girls were constructing, and informed the girls' response to the reading, as reading itself became a source of pleasure, play, desire" (Smith, 2000, p. 35). Smith's findings were echoed by DeBlase (2003), who studied the role of various literacy practices in the lives of five eighth grade adolescent girls and examined their transactions with canonical classroom texts, popular literature and other popular texts (e.g. magazines). DeBlase considered how the girls took up varying social messages about gendered identity that were embedded in the different texts, attempting to understand their feelings about and perceptions of the literature with which they engaged. Her findings suggested that traditional femininity was reproduced as the girls negotiated multiple and conflicting voices in the texts, however this discursive reproduction was not passive. Rather, while "gendered discursive positions served to produce and reproduce femininity...accommodating these gendered subjectivities is not necessarily a coherent process. Girls struggle with the different and contradictory discourses available to them and adopt only parts of femininity as it is offered" (DeBlase, 2003, p. 833). Given the complexities of the girls' overlapping transactions with both literary and cultural texts, DeBlase's findings also speak to the possibility for adolescents to enact interpretive agency while reading young adult fiction with normative social messages. Rather than identifying mutually exclusive outcomes, the work of both Smith (2000) and DeBlase (2003) suggests that responding to texts is a messy process in which adolescents may experience pleasure in reading young adult fiction while concomitantly accepting and resisting their embedded cultural scripts.

Research in Branded Young Adult Literature

While empirical research on branded fiction is limited, initial work seems to support the conceptualization of adolescent transactions with branded fiction as similarly complex, contesting the binary between consumerist and agentive practices. It is important to note that adolescents' transactions with branded young adult fiction extend to media texts and material objects, however an analogous concept is at work here. That is, by purchasing, reading and manipulating branded fiction texts, adolescents are similarly reconstructing and performing identity in an ideological, social process.

The place of the book within this conceptual framework is therefore uncertain, an ambiguity that is duly taken up in the literature. For example, Mackey (2004) examined the possibilities for reading to move beyond the traditional boundaries of a printed novel, arguing that "reading outside the book" entails positioning books alongside other media (e.g. digital media) in a variety of ways. Mackey described the literacy practices of two adults and then discussed an interpretation of a children's text that is situated within a so-called "textual multiverse", arguing that reading a conventional novel and engaging with digital media such as video games and internet websites are not mutually exclusive. Rather, these texts coexist as a related phenomenon that recursively support each other. Although this study focused on the interpretation of adult readers, the concept of "reading outside the book" is a useful framework for thinking about the relationship between branded fiction novels, associated products, and the experiences of adolescents reading young adult fiction.

However, this understanding of adolescent reading is further complicated by the commodification of these texts and their implicit consumerist imperatives – the production of branded fiction positions reading as an act of consumption. One of the first studies to deliberately take this up is the work of Sekeres and Watson (2011), who investigated the literacy practices of tweens and early adolescents engaging with *39 Clues*, a multimedia series produced by Scholastic. The series includes interconnected printed novels, a series website, social networks, gaming, competitive play, and collecting and design of trading cards (both physical and virtual). Sekeres and Watson investigated the positionality of the printed books in relation to the other associated components of the series and the ways in which the website’s design constructed the context for specific literacy practices on the part of participants. They also examined the marketing strategies (particularly the cross-marketing contained within the products themselves). The authors found that participation varied depending upon the reader’s access to each component of the series and discussed the supportive social interactions between readers in the context of competitive gameplay. While it is only one study, their findings demonstrate the complexities of reader interactions between and among branded fiction texts, and the resistance of readers to follow a proscribed formula of participation. The merchandising strategies of the publisher created the necessity for readers to continually purchase associated products, yet Sekeres and Watson also described the unexpected ways in which readers collaborated to share resources. Reading in this context was directly connected to both the consumption of branded products and the subversion of the commercial aims of the publisher.

Mackey's "textual multiverse" and the accompanying issue of consumerist socialization was also examined by Erzen (2012), who immersed herself in the *Twilight* fandom community. Using interviews and participant observation in various fan contexts, Erzen studied how girls and women who read and love the *Twilight* books construct identity and belonging. Erzen's analysis concentrates on issues of gender and romance and discusses various literacy practices, including reading and re-reading the novel, participation in online fan communities, convention attendance, and consumption of associated merchandise. Although Erzen's research is somewhat limited in the context of this review in that it includes fans of all ages, not specifically adolescents, and focuses on arguably a specialized group of readers (devoted fans), rather than adolescents as a whole, we can still learn from the diverse ways in which they consume and read across the myriad branded fiction products available.

In particular, Erzen's work makes visible the liminal boundaries between texts, author and reader, arguing that "It's now impossible to determine where grassroots culture ends and commercial culture begins...the erosion of the distinction between popular and high culture, the changing relationship between physical and virtual spaces, the social interactions occurring in them, and the ways identities arise out of consumption and production mean that niche media has started to blend into the mainstream" (Erzen, 2012, p. 117). The *Twilight* fans in her study were clearly susceptible to the marketing campaigns and commercial products that are central to the fandom community. Nevertheless, their passions and intentions also shaped their participation in this community and the development of myriad branded texts.

The extent to which adolescent readers are both consumers and producers of branded fiction reflects these complicated boundaries and shifting norms of participation. This ambiguity is further complicated by adolescents' access to authors and publishers, and the responsiveness of authors and publishers to fans. It is not unusual for suggestions posted that are posted to fan websites to be incorporated into a transmedia storyline. For example, Martens (2011) examined the serialization, licensing and merchandising of popular young adult novels into other modes such as television, film, and interactive websites, connecting these multitextual sites with "unofficial" spaces as well, such as online fan fiction. As publishers conceptualize books as transmedia products, the relationship between "independent" adolescent transactions with branded products and commodified authorship become blurred (Martens, 2011, p. 117). For example, Martens (2010) investigated the methods through which the publishers of *Twilight* have commodified readership, arguing that publishers exploit teen labor by profiting from user-generated (reader-generated) content on their proprietary websites. However, I suggest that these adolescents are also actively influencing and changing the branded products that are created for their consumption, positioning themselves as both readers and makers (as well as exploited labor). In his discussion of convergence culture, Jenkins (2006) argues that it can be defined "top-down by decisions being made in corporate boardrooms and bottom-up by decisions made in teenagers' bedrooms. It is shaped by the desires of media conglomerates to expand their empires across multiple platforms and by the desires of consumers to have the media they want where they want it, when they want

it, and in the format they want” (para. 3). This seeming paradox further problematizes clear distinctions between agency and consumption in reading transactions.

Given these directions, the present is a particularly important moment to learn more about how adolescents are approaching the multiple and diverse texts that are a part of their lived worlds, and what values they are ascribing as they navigate them. In taking up this question, I sought to learn more about the agency that may be involved in readerly transactions with branded fiction products, rather than assuming that adolescents are passive recipients of consumerist socialization. Exploring adolescent literacies through branded fiction deepens our understanding of the rich contexts through which youth are negotiating identities, taking critical positions and reimagining their possibilities for the future.

Conceptual Framework

Branded Fiction and the Intertextual Multiverses of Transmedia Entertainment

The term “branded fiction” refers to a genre including books that are created and sold as one of many products under a single brand name (Sekeres, 2009, p. 400). As introduced earlier in this dissertation, young adult branded fiction is comprised of a variety of texts, including novels, media texts (such as films, television shows, and internet websites), and material objects. The material objects of branded fiction are commercially produced products that contribute to and reflect the “brand” in potentially all spaces of an adolescent’s lived world – these objects include (but are not limited to) clothing and accessories, household items (such as linens, bath products and decorations), school supplies, and toys and games. Each type of branded text (print, media and

material) informs the others, and their relative importance to one another is dependent upon the context of interaction for each individual reader (Mackey, 2004).

This intertextual framework of young adult branded fiction draws heavily from bodies of scholarship on transmediation and transmedia entertainment. Transmedia as a stand-alone term literally means “across media”, referring broadly to the range textual relationships that exist within an entertainment franchise (Jenkins, 2013). As initially articulated by Marsha Kinder (1991) in her research on children’s television, transmedia can be understood as “a set of narrative and nonnarrative media elements that are spread systematically across multiple platforms. Narrative elements include things like plot, setting, and characters, while nonnarrative elements tend to be modes of participation [...] or design features” (Alper & Herr-Stephenson, 2013, p. 365). Describing popular children’s media franchises like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (TMNT) as entertainment “supersystems” of transmedia intertextuality, Kinder (1991) explained:

A supersystem is a network of intertextuality constructed around a figure or group of figures from pop culture who are either “fictional” [...] or “real” [...]. In order to be a supersystem, the network must cut across several modes of image production; must appeal to diverse generations, classes, and ethnic subcultures, who in turn are targeted with diverse strategies; must foster “collectability” through a proliferation of related products; and must undergo a sudden increase in commodification, the success of which reflexively becomes a ‘media event’ that dramatically accelerates the growth curve of the system’s commercial success (p. 122).

Kinder's research on transmedia intertextuality examined the blurry relationships between narrative and commercial purposes within these supersystems, suggesting that the commercial synergies of multimedia, print, and merchandizing contest traditionally clear-cut distinctions between "primary" and "secondary" texts, and between vertical and horizontal intertextuality. This work was subsequently extended in Jenkins's (2006) theorization of "transmedia storytelling" as a narrative approach that is distributed and participatory, and entails systematically spreading the elements of a story across multiple media platforms of varying interactivity for the purpose of creating a "unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (par. 3). Jenkins argued that each of these texts reflect the unique affordances of their respective medium in order to contribute to the development of the larger story world. Accordingly, the horizontal intertextuality of transmedia storytelling requires each text to be independently accessible, allowing various levels of interactivity across media platforms and cultivating a layered or "additive" understanding of the fictional realm (Herr-Stephenson, Alper, Jenkins, & Reilly, 2013).

This delineation distinguishes transmedia storytelling from other ways of thinking about the relationship between transmedia practices and the myriad contexts, audiences, and purposes that characterize convergence culture. Foregrounding the assumptions, objectives, and consequences embedded therein, Jenkins (2011) conceptualized these situated forms as transmedia "logics", an eminently useful approach to making sense of the multiple and overlapping terms that are often referenced in transmedia studies (e.g., transmedia branding, transmedia play, transmedia performance, transmedia ritual,

transmedia activism, and transmedia spectacle; par. 8). For example, research characterizing transmedia narrative systems as “hyperserials” (Murray, 1998), “overflow”(Brooker, 2001), and “screen bleed” (Hanson, 2004) have positioned the flow of content as originating in a primary text and successively distributing across multiple media platforms in order to extend and sustain audience engagement with this text. In contrast, Rose’s (2011) research conceptualizing transmedia storytelling as “deep media” emphasized the role of participatory and interactive media platforms and their possible consequences for the scope and directionality of producer-audience communications. This approach has examined how new digital technologies (e.g. Twitter; Tumblr blogs; podcasts) cultivate deeper audience engagement in the storytelling process by inviting critical feedback and creative direction, with implications for disrupting and transforming the traditional influence of authorial and commercial interests.

Mimi Ito (2005; 2006; 2010) proposed another constructive framework for analyzing transmedia forms and practices in her ethnographic research on youth engagement with customizable, interactive media texts. She investigated how Japanese children mobilized media and a collective imagination through Pokémon, Yugioh and Hamtaro “media mixes”, describing a new media ecology that fosters activist and participatory agency in transmedia audiences. This new citational network of content is characterized by “convergence of old and new media forms; authoring through personalization and remix, and hypersociality as a genre of social participation” (Ito, 2005, p. 79). Additional related but distinct concepts of storytelling across multiple media

platforms include “cross-media narratives” and “transmedia narratives” (Miller, 2008) “transmedia intertexts” (Lemke, 2008), and “slippery texts” (Mackey, 2011)

Situated within this body of literature, I am conceptualizing branded young adult literature as a form of transmedia entertainment that involves intersecting logics of transmedia storytelling, branding, franchising, and play. For the purposes of this dissertation, I use the terms branded young adult fiction, young adult fiction franchise, and young adult transmedia franchise interchangeably. However, it is important to note that although branded fiction can be understood as a transmedia franchise, the reverse is not true: Branded fiction signals the inclusion of books within its intertextual genre, but many transmedia franchises do not include printed texts, nor are books required of transmedia storytelling.

In fact, empirical research in transmedia studies increasingly challenges artificial distinctions between print novels and other types of texts (Jenkins, 2012). This direction of research provides critical understandings of how such taxonomies serve to maintain textual hierarchies privileging hegemonic constructs of reading and literacy. An early example is the work of Marjorie Siegel (1995), who drew on semiotic theory in order to explore the generative learning possibilities of instructional strategies involving transmediation processes. Examining transitions from single sign to crossing sign systems, and from sign systems to metaphor, Siegel’s research suggested that classroom engagement with transmediation makes visible and intensifies critical inquiry processes, as well as creates opportunities for students to invent new connections, questions, and meanings. She cautioned, however, that the potential of transmediation as a learning

experience may be trivialized and subverted if educators continue to privilege academic values of verbocentrism rather than inviting the ambiguity engendered by crossing sign systems and encouraging a more expansive appreciation of the semiotic processes this entails (Siegel, 1995, p. 456).

Nevertheless, the concept of branded fiction, and the deliberate inclusion of books, affords an important perspective in understanding how youth read and negotiate texts including commodified literature. Although young adult fictions exist across a variety of modes, the novel is still an important text for many youth who engage with these franchises. One consideration is that traditional print texts (and books in particular) inarguably remain privileged in formal schooling contexts, and although rarely considered a literary equal to the traditional canon of English literature, branded young adult fiction novels are uniquely positioned amongst other popular culture texts in the classroom. Adolescent literacies associated with youth culture are frequently criticized or ignored in schools, despite research that has demonstrated the innovative, critical, and intellectual capacities of youth engagement (Maira & Soep, 2009).

However, unlike other transmedia texts, branded young adult fiction novels are seemingly connected with traditional academic reading practices, and are therefore more likely to be viewed by teachers and administrators as an instructional resource. This may be especially salient for racially and/or linguistically diverse groups of students whose literacy practices and cultures are consistently devalued in schools. However problematic it may be, youth engagement in reading books and other texts may influence their present and future access to academic opportunities and achievement. It is therefore critical that

we learn more about how students are transacting with branded young adult fiction in and out of schools, and to consider implications for reading practice and policy.

In addition, researching youth transactions with branded fiction signals a commodity-based perspective of transmedia production, one that examines tensions and contradictions between neoliberalism and the collaborative and participatory aspects of contemporary convergence culture. Aligned with Derek Johnson's (2013) scholarship on media franchising, this stance repositions the elements of a fictional world as *property* that is distributed across multiple texts and platforms, illuminating the relationship between branding, narrative, and creativity represents. The large, multinational corporations dominating the media industry are unescapably entangled in the creation of transmedia entertainment. At the present, there is enormous economic incentive for companies to create franchise properties—and the current environment of increasing media conglomeration suggests that commercial interests will only expand. As corporations accumulate and consolidate media holdings, they gain compounding opportunities to produce and advantageously market a range of transmedia texts across new platforms (Rogers, et. al, 2016).

Within this context, prevailing corporate logic and industry practices often contradict ideal forms of transmedia storytelling, in that the revenue generated by certain media platforms and texts inevitably influences how elements of a narrative world are coordinated and distributed in practice. To that end, it becomes necessary to consider how young adult fiction franchises are an important subset within the larger umbrella of transmedia entertainment. These franchises have radically expanded the young adult

literature publishing market, and in turn, the anticipated profitability of these novels has recursively positioned books as an almost-obligatory product in new media entertainment created for the teen market (Mackey, 2011). In deliberately focusing only on transmedia productions that include print novels, I am not suggesting the singular importance or textual necessity of books, but rather to acknowledge the continued privileging of print texts by academic and corporate structures.

Johnson (2013) argued that the notion of franchising as an analytical lens draws necessary attention to multi-layered and multi-sited negotiations of power and local agency in transmedia production. In a published interview with Henry Jenkins, Johnson suggested that the negative subtexts commonly associated with a franchising metaphor are productively salient:

Calling something a “franchise” is not a neutral declaration: it prompts us to think about the media in the same terms that we think about McDonald’s. There is a recognition of the industrial basis for that culture and its hyper-commercial, systemic mode of multiplication and maintenance over time. Often that comes with an implied critique as well, where acknowledging something as a “franchise” product suggests that its existence is based on market calculation more than creative expression (quo. in Jenkins, 2014, par. 10).

Furthermore, an important characteristic of branded fiction is that an individual does not need to read the connected book(s) in order to participate in the larger affinity group for the brand. Rather, the mutability of transmedia texts provides multiple points of access and spaces for individual and communal meaning-making (Jenkins, 2006). Given these

characteristics, it is important to note that while there is no specific textual hierarchy, the different types of texts that comprise branded fiction each allow different affordances and limitations in adolescent reading (Mackey, 2004). In this intertextual context, “the story itself is no longer discrete or sequential because there are many other voices and intentions populating its pages and many other products that add to it”, and this fluidity thereby creates spaces for individual appropriation and repurposing of texts that may subvert the intentions of publishers and merchandisers (Sekeres, 2009, p. 412). As such, Dena’s (2008; 2009) construction of “transmedia fictions” or “transfictions” as opposed to “storytelling” or “narrative” is also salient in my approach to branded fiction. By differentiating the concept of fictions from storytelling and narrative, I am intentionally looking across both the narrative and the non-narrative modes of sharing a transmedial world.

In many instances, branded young adult fiction originates with a novel (or series of novels) that is subsequently merchandised into further media and material texts. However, this is not exclusively the case – the novel is not necessarily the primary text from which other products are developed (Sekeres, 2009). Many brands stem from a popular television series, movie, game, or clothing line, with books and other related product lines released after the original text proved sufficiently profitable. Moreover, the themed identity and themed identity content of a potential brand might be conceived *a priori* of any particular text, in order to capitalize an anticipated audience or market. Accordingly, the multiple texts constituting a young adult fiction brand may be jointly developed and then distributed across media platforms to maximize profits. Even

established works of children's literature, such as *Curious George* and *The Cat in the Hat*, have recently been re-marketed with commercial tie-ins such as dolls, stickers, and pajamas (Bernstein, 2011). Consequently, "unbranded" young adult novels can be read with an expectation of its eventual commodification.

Literacy as Socially and Materially Situated

This study is grounded in critical, sociocultural perspectives of literacy that collectively view reading and writing as a diverse repertoire of practices with contextualized meanings, purposes, and consequences (Gutiérrez, 2008; Pahl & Rowsell, 2010; Street & Kress, 2006). Rather than viewing literacy as exclusive skills or schooled knowledge, the definition of literacy itself is framed as a contested phenomenon and dependent upon one's beliefs and assumptions about what constitutes knowledge and culture (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2000; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Heath & Street, 2008; Street, 2011; Willis, 2008).

Historically, literacy skills were ascribed specific social, political, and economic value and were assumed to be directly related to social evolution and modernity (e.g. Goody, 1977; Goody & Watt, 1963; Havelock, 1963; Ong, 1982). This "Great Divide" theory of literacy attributed specific cognitive, moral, and cultural consequences of literacy, (also referred to as the literacy thesis), that created a dichotomy between orality and writing and linked the development of written language to rational and scientific advances in society. For example, Goody (1977) differentiated between "literate" and "nonliterate" communities and individuals by arguing that "literate" cultures where writing was the basis of communication were characterized by the development of

enlightened knowledge, including complex, scientific, rational, objective and abstract thought as well as the development of morality and civilization. In contrast, non-literate societies, in which orality was the basis of communication and knowledge, was limited to simple, irrational, intuitive, emotional, subjective and concrete thinking. Moreover, these cultures, lacking the modernizing influence of literacy, were considered to be amoral, uncivilized and less-godly (Farrell, 1977; Scribner & Cole, 1978).

The reductive assumptions of the literacy thesis were challenged by Scribner & Cole (1978), whose ethnographic research with the Vai of Liberia investigated the “multiplicity of values, uses and consequences which characterize writing as a social practice” driving purposes of actual practice (p. 71). Their ideas were taken up by Street (1984) in his work in Iran, in which he found that different literacy practices were valued in varying contexts, such as the marketplace, religious settings, and formal schooling. Street (2003) thus critiqued the dominant, cognitivist conception of literacy as an “autonomous” model in which the prevailing definition of literacy is erroneously perceived to be neutral, unchanged and uninfluenced by political and social forces within a society. He noted that this assumed neutrality is more accurately described as a dominant political ideology that perpetuated certain social norms as “truth” (Street, 2003). In contrast, an “ideological” model of literacy recognizes that the meaning and effects of literacy depends on the social, cultural and historical context in which it is embedded, thereby reflecting its varying instantiations throughout different societies and cultures (Street, 2003; Street & Leftstein, 2007). In contrast to Goody’s (1977) distinction between writing and orality, literacy is therefore understood as “existing in the

relations between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals” (Barton and Hamilton, 1998, p. 7).

This conceptualization of literacy has been extended by scholarship in new literacy studies (Collins & Blot, 2003), critical literacy (Horton & Freire, 1990), multimodality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000), and new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). These strands of research approach literacy as socially situated in a particular place and time, adapting to new shifts in textual production, new media, and digital technologies. Critical, sociocultural theories of literacy presume that reading and writing is a cultural behavior. Since there are no definitive boundaries for what “counts” as literacy, multiple literacies can inform an individual’s construction of meaning in any given context (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 14). Positioning literacy as a social practice suggests an inherent understanding that writing and words have symbolic or representational meaning that can only be understood in a cultural. Thus when ascribing meaning to a text, one must consider both the immediate context as well as the underlying social and conceptual framework from which it evolves (Street, 1995, p. 165). The determination of what “counts” as literacy and its attendant consequences is influenced by hierarchies of power within a society (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 1999; Cope & Kalantzis, 1993).

For example, this is signaled in the purpose and questions guiding this dissertation, which position both reader and text as broadly construed in order to examine how youth are bringing together knowledge of a written text and material objects in order to make sense of an overarching narrative. Framing reading as a cultural behavior or

practice instead of a singular skill or ability allows for the possibility of multiple forms of engagement that are connected with identity, agency, and subjectivity. Drawing on complementary bodies of literature in both New Literacy Studies and theories of multimodality, I am also conceptualizing literacy as a critical, social practice wherein textual modes inform each other with varying affordances (Street & Kress, 2006).

Within this framework, the term *text* refers to symbolic resources, or sets of “signifying practices and discourses available to us in local and larger discourse communities”, including printed novels, websites, multimedia, and material artifacts (Glenn, p. 4). As such, the interconnectedness between novels and their accompanying texts creates an immersive world in which each aspect recursively informs the others. The reading of these texts is not a linear process, but rather part of an evolving and complex network of interrelationships (Rosenblatt, 1985, p. 101). As adolescents navigate this universe of products, the distinction between different texts blurs.

Reading within this framework is thereby participatory, collaborative, and distributed. Accordingly, this study examines what counts as a text within these specific discourse communities and questions the positioning(s) of the printed book. Using a theory of artifactual literacies, Pahl and Rowsell (2010) have linked artifacts to literacy, multimodality and culture, framing literacy as a materially situated, everyday location (p. 13). Their work has examined the ways in which artifacts create communities, particularly the process through which individuals access the material and invoke multimodalities in specific contexts to sediment identities. The multimodal creation and manipulation of these artifacts is an ideological, social process, and while branded

material texts are mass-produced commodities, they are also embedded within a specific social and cultural context through which adolescents actively construct meaning.

Accordingly, branded fiction products are integral in constructing meaning in that:

The conflation and intersection of Discourses become modalities in texts, which, alongside practices, provide a formative picture of the meaning makers not only their pathway into literacy but also how they make meaning in certain contexts and engage in practice. The theory provides a lens on how producers sediment identities and what identities they sediment (Rowse & Pahl, 2007, p. 59).

While Pahl and Rowse (2010) have primarily focused on artifacts made by the child, the diverse ways in which adolescents can consume and read across the myriad branded fiction products available to them reflects the inherent ambiguity in ascribing specific, constant values to the different types of texts in this arena.

Mackey's (2004) concept of "reading outside the book" is a complementary framework for thinking about the relationship between various branded fiction texts and adolescent reading, particularly as it contests the positioning of adolescents as passive recipients of the consumerist values embedded within the production of branded fiction (Taxel, 2011). Rather, we can look to the varying and contextualized processes through which adolescents manipulate commercial artifacts to agentively make meaning and construct identities. Further complicating this idea is the fact that few adolescents exclusively purchase branded products associated with a single novel. Rather, an individual might take up aspects of both *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, constructing a plurality of sites of the self (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998, p. 31).

Moreover, this research similarly assumes that adolescents do not read in isolation, drawing from Rosenblatt's (1985) argument that we must view the reading act as an event in "a particular social and cultural setting, and as part of the ongoing life of the individual and the group... as aspects or phases of a dynamic process, in which all elements take on their character as part of their organically-interrelated situation" (p. 100). In other words, transactions with branded products are given meaning through the social practices by which youth engage with these texts. However, this framework also examines the social conditions underlying these reading processes, extending Rosenblatt's transaction theory by more directly attending to critical dimensions of power and identity (Brooks & Browne, 2009; Cai, 2008; Lewis, 2000; Naidoo, 2010). Consequently, the unit of analysis in my research is not the texts of branded young adult fiction. Instead, meaning is constructed in the practices through which participants engage with these texts.

Adolescent Identity, Agency, and Youth Cultural Production

Moreover, in positioning adolescent literacy as inextricably tied to youth culture, my research necessarily seeks to understand the ways in which adolescents are ascribing meaning and constructing identity through their literacy practices. Rather than positioning youth as "cultural dupes" (Shepler, 2005, p. 131), this perspective aligns with resource-oriented conceptualizations of youth culture and of adolescent identity as fluid, plural, and creative (e.g. Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012; Maira & Soep, 2005; Moje, 2002; Moje & Van Helden, 2004; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011; Schultz, Vasudevan & Throop, 2007). Within this framework, adolescent literacy practices shape identities that are

hybrid, metadiscursive, and spatial, “a matter of self-construction amidst unstable times, mores and global consumerism, with media and digital flows connecting macro- and micro-cultures in a postmodern landscape” (Lewis & Del Valle, 2008, p. 317). Identity can be understood as a socially mediated and embodied practice of interpersonal authorship, continually written and rewritten across various contexts, interactions, and histories of participation (Moje & Luke, 2009; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Conversely, adolescents are co-writing others’ life stories as well (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. 7). These interactions are characterized by both the shifting positions and the shifting positioning of youth as they navigate relationships, authority, and access to texts (Holland, et al, 1998; Moje & Luke, 2009).

The scope and nature of such interactions has broadened and evolved in combination with shifting flows of globalization, rapid developments in digital technologies, and new configurations of public/publics. Moreover, youth interactions are also occurring within the broader context of convergence culture, including conditions of cultural, economic, and social convergence (Jenkins, 2006). James Gee (2000) conceptualized youth identity within society’s “new capitalism” as “shape-shifting portfolios” in which their essential qualities and skills are flexible and changing depending upon the needs of various contexts (Gee, 2000, p. 414). This framework was subsequently extended by Young, Dillon and Moje (2002), who included embodiments, practices, and Discourses of race, class, ethnicity and gender as essential components of adolescents’ portfolios. Young and colleagues found that adolescents construct their identity by consciously auditioning a variety of practices and experiences, shape-shifting

their portfolios to adapt to various contexts (Young et al, 2002). Studies of adolescents' digital literacy practices similarly examined how adolescents understand and attempt to audition various identity kits online (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004). For example, Lam (2000) investigated the participatory internet practices of an adolescent Chinese immigrant who interacted with a group of transnational peers online, developing a range of discourse practices and identities that contributed to a sense of "cultural belonging" (p. 457). Specifically, the youth acquired "the global English of adolescent pop culture", which contributed to the development of literacy practices that could reduce a sense of marginalization in school (Schultz & Hull, 2008, p. 244).

This fluidity is where I situate my discussion of agency and subjectivity, also drawing on the work of McRobbie (2005) in understanding agency as a reinventing of identity(ies) through multiple discourses. This is complementary to existing theories of consumption in the field of Cultural Studies, which assume a nuanced portrayal of human agency and of the production "in use" of popular culture (McGuigan, 2010; McRobbie, 2005). To that end, this study is guided by an interactional ethnographic perspective of popular culture as "relation and system of relations" (Flores, 2000, p. 20), rather than bound by products and processes of branded young adult fiction. My logic of inquiry positions youth as active agents in a recursive production of culture – it is both consumed and produced by the audience, and neither the author nor the audience exercise full control over their imaginative investments (Jenkins, 2006; McRobbie, 1994). In the next chapter, I extend the discussion of my logic of inquiry, describing my methodology, data collection, and analysis in greater detail.

CHAPTER TWO: Methodology & Data Analysis

Logic of My Inquiry

This study draws from intersectional, feminist, research traditions (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Ellsworth, 1992; Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) that values the experiences and identities of research participants and collaboratively generates knowledge. An intersectional analytic approach provides a framework for studying, understanding, and responding to the ways in which an individual's multiple identities, such as race, gender, economic class, sexual orientation, language, and nationality, are layered as "intersecting systems that converge and collide and operate simultaneously" (Collins, 1998, p. 182) with particular social, economic, political, and historical consequences. It is important to note that while the term "intersectionality" is often popularly (and problematically) invoked as a reference to any "oppression" writ large, an intersectional, feminist lens brought to bear in research is necessarily attendant to the complexity of lived experiences, experiential knowledge, and institutionalized practices in order to identify and transform overlapping systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). This perspective also aligns with understandings of transformational resistance in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Latin@ Critical Race Theory (LatCrit), acknowledging that "educational structures, processes, and discourses operate in contradictory ways with their potential to oppress and marginalize coexisting with their potential to emancipate and empower" (Solorzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001, p. 315). In adopting this framework for my research, I attended to the multiple, co-constituting identities of the students who participated in this study without ascribing primary importance to a single aspect of their experience (e.g. raced, gendered, classed,

etc.). Instead, I began with an assumption that all of these mattered, and mattered differently across different times and locations, allowing for multiple interpretive possibilities.

To that end, in designing this study, I was also mindful of Ellsworth's (1992) essential query: "How can I take a critical, feminist stance in my research that values the experiences and identities of my research participants and generates knowledge through shared inquiry and dialogue" (p. 91)? Central to my research, therefore, was a privileging of uncertainty and improvisation in developing relationships with participants and learning from their perspectives and experiences. I attempted to adopt an inquiry stance throughout this research, both perspectival and conceptual, that Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) characterize as embracing a "dynamic and fluid way of knowing and being" in the field of literacy education. This understanding necessarily framed our inquiry over the course of the study as the importance of social interactions and public texts emerged during my data collection.

Given the multiple paths through which sought to know study participants, I also adopted what Street (1995) has termed an "ethnographic perspective" in my research in order to collect and analyze my data (Street, 1995). If we conceptualize literacy practices as socially situated, it naturally follows that a qualitative, ethnographic stance provides a more complex and effective means for answering questions about the nature and practice of literacy (Szwed, 1981, p. 20). It explores cultural meanings in language and discourse, and does not establish artificial barriers between orality and writing (Street, 1995, p. 175). Through participant observation, ethnographic researchers can evaluate the ways in

which reading and writing are “activities having consequences in (and being affected by) family life, work patterns, economic conditions, patterns of leisure, and a complex of other factors...accounting for the readers’ activities in transvaluing and reinterpreting such material” (Szwed, 1981, p. 21). As such, this work is responsive to the fluidity of adolescent literacies across multiple contexts while concomitantly attending to embedded issues of power and privilege that shape the ways in which these practices are enacted and interpreted.

In situating my research and practice within a sociocultural framework, I am consequently aligning myself with specific assumptions about what constitutes knowledge and scholarship that help define my interpretive frameworks in research and practice. Such assumptions preclude me from taking up positivist approaches to understanding literacy that assume that there is a single, universal truth or answer to be reached (Kincheloe, 2008). In attempting to quantify and measure literacy, such research renders local knowledge and practices invisible or invaluable, a deeply problematic stance that serves to reproduce hierarchies of power and privilege within education and society (Collins & Blot, 2003). In contrast, I attempt to adopt an “ethnographic perspective” that cultivates an emic understanding of literacy within a given site of practice (Street, 2003; Street & Heath, 2008). This stance constructs literacy as “activities having consequences in (and being affected by) family life, work patterns, economic conditions, patterns of leisure, and a complex of other factors...accounting for the readers’ activities in transvaluing and reinterpreting such material” (Szwed, 1981, p. 21). As such, I can seek to understand the complexity and multiplicity of literacy as a

context-bound construct that varies is social meaning and form (Green & Bloome, 2007; Kalman, 2000).

In addition, engaging in qualitative research requires that I interrogate the biases and assumptions that I bring to my work, examining the ways in which my personal history and sociocultural location (including racial, gendered and classed) influence the questions I ask and the ways in which I interpret the world around me (Anderson & Herr, 1999; Luke & Gore, 1992). This reflexivity is ongoing and recursive as my positionality (and positioning) changes over time. There is, and must be, uncertainty in my work, and I intentionally attempted to maintain an open and questioning stance throughout my research and practice with students.

Research Context and Collection of Data

This research study was conducted at Unidos Community Academy, a charter public high school located in a large Northeastern city. The school is operated by a nonprofit organization that provides a range of social services to Hispanic communities including education, economic development, and advocacy programs. Of the approximately 750 students enrolled in grades nine through twelve, school demographic data identified the student body as approximately 98 percent Hispanic, just over 1 percent African American, and less than 1 percent Asian. Almost 90 percent of the student body were eligible for free or reduced lunch, and more than 20 percent are English Language Learners.

Unidos Academy is considered a high-performing charter school within the district, and it has continued to expand into serving earlier grades and cyber education

since its founding. The high school's graduation rate is consistently higher than 90 percent, and more than 20 percent of twelfth grade students have passed at least one AP exam by their senior year. The annual retention rate of the high school is 92 percent, and 46 percent of graduating seniors matriculate college the next fall. Attendance is determined by lottery, and there are more applicants than available seats for the ninth grade.

One of the reasons that I was drawn to this research setting was the sense of local ownership and pride that is encouraged within the school. The high school is located on a busy commercial boulevard in a former industrial neighborhood with one of the highest concentrations of poverty and occurrences of violent crime in the city. However, in contrast to pervasive assumptions equating “urban schooling” with stereotypes of Black and Latino students in dysfunctional and under-resourced classrooms, the students I observed described Unidos Academy as a place where they felt safe and valued. Upon entering the building, visitors are required to sign in with a security guard, who checks identification, inspects bags, and then scans every visitor with a magnetic wand. However, there are no metal detectors in the school, and students are only required to scan their school ID badges when entering the building for attendance records – their belongings and persons are not searched. Unlike many schools that increasingly rely on law enforcement models of school security, it was not unusual for me to encounter students sitting with school security personnel while eating lunch or hanging out during free periods. The school curriculum prioritizes inquiry and project-based learning, and students selected from a range of high school “majors” including Liberal Arts,

Entrepreneurship, Visual Arts, Engineering, Teacher Education, Dance, Music, Criminal Justice, and Technology.

As a public charter high school, Unidos Academy is, somewhat confusingly, a purportedly secular institution operated by an organization founded on Christian faith-based principles, and the mission statement for the school identifies the preparation of spiritually sensitive students as one of their core purposes. This unofficial religious orientation of the school context likely influenced students' participation in this study. The teachers in the school ascribed to a wide range of religious beliefs and political ideologies. I never heard an adult in the building direct an explicitly religious or intolerant statement to a student or to another adult, and teachers and administrators immediately silenced students making obviously homophobic (and other) slurs.

However, the degree to which teachers engaged in critical conversations about issues of religion, gender, and sexuality varied widely, and was not incorporated into any formal lessons that I observed. Many students in the school spoke openly about their own views, and I observed numerous conversations in which students questioned teachers and other adults about their belief in Jesus Christ, church attendance, and other related subjects. While I was aware of this religious orientation when I began to participate within the school community, my research activities sometimes sparked unintended moments of dissonance within the classroom that I did not expect. For example, I began collecting data through a questionnaire that I introduced to ninth-grade students during English Seminar class. Although this questionnaire did not ask for students' names, they had the option of specifying their race/ethnicity, age, and gender. As a matter of course, I

provided students with the option to identify their gender as male, female, or other, and this “other” category provoked a barrage of questions, criticism, and debate in every class section. Instead of simply informing students about the questionnaire and my larger research project, I ended up co-facilitating class discussions about the different ways of thinking about gender and gender identities.

I entered Unidos Academy in the fall of 2014 to discuss my research with the vice principal of the school and meet cooperating teachers. Prior to beginning my formal research project, I began participant-observation in the ninth-grade Advisory and English Seminar classes, offering additional literacy support while gradually getting to know students. I also participated in the school’s “Homework Zone” two days per week, an open study hall that was offered during 9th period and afterschool in the library. The school librarian and a history teacher rotated duties monitoring the library during HoZo each week, and I joined them in working with students who attended.

I began formal research activities after winter break, employing a two-phase sequential exploratory design (Creswell, 2003) beginning with a survey examining the extent to which tenth grade students engage with branded young adult fiction texts. In the first phase of my research, I continued participant-observation in ninth grade English seminar and Advisory classes. I also continued to provide afterschool literacy and study support to students in every grade during “Homework Zone” in the library. In this phase, I began to recruit ninth grade participants for a grade-wide survey about students’ interactions with texts, particularly branded young adult fiction. This questionnaire was accessed online anonymously and required assent for participation. I then analyzed the

survey responses to shape the second phase of my study, which included focus group meetings, inquiry group meetings, individual interviews, classroom observations, and documentation of student artifacts. These participants were recruited through voluntary selection, and participation was open to any ninth grade student who wished to participate in an afterschool group (Maxwell, 2005). Informed consent from both students and their parents was obtained for this research phase.

In the second phase of the study, eleven ninth grade students participated in a weekly afterschool group in which they collectively engaged in an inquiry into branded young adult fiction driven by their own perspectives and questions. The meetings took place within the school library and lasted approximately one hour. Participants in the group included 10 females and 1 male ranging in age from 14 to 16 years old. All of the participants in this inquiry group identified as Hispanic and/or Latin@ with Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican or Brazilian heritages, and although of these students spoke both English and Spanish, their verbal and academic use of both languages varied. Participation in the afterschool group was voluntary and open to any ninth grade student who was interested in the topic. I did not define any specific practices or dispositions that “counted” as reading or engagement with branded young adult fiction, instead choosing to invite students to construct (and reconstruct) their own understandings of these terms as part of our collective inquiry (see Table 1).

Table 1. Inquiry Group Members and Fandoms

| Name | Gender | Age | Race/Ethnic. | YA Brands |
|-------------|---------------|------------|---|---|
| Marilyn | Female | 14 | Puerto Rican & Brazilian; Latina | The Hunger Games; Divergent; Harry Potter; The Fault in Our Stars, The Maze Runner |
| Rosa | Female | 15 | Puerto Rican | Twilight; The Fault in Our Stars |
| Marena | Female | 15 | Hispanic; Mexican & Puerto Rican | The Vampire Diaries; The Fault in Our Stars; The Hunger Games |
| Lucy | Female | 14 | Hispanic; Puerto Rican | The Fault in Our Stars; The Hunger Games; Twilight; Divergent; The Maze Runner |
| Anna | Female | 14 | Hispanic | The Hunger Games; Immortal Instruments Divergent; The Maze Runner; The Perks of Being a Wallflower; Marvel Avengers |
| Sophia | Female | 14 | Hispanic; Latina | Divergent; The Vampire Diaries; The Fault in Our Stars; If I Stay; The Hunger Games |
| Inez | Female | 14 | Hispanic; Puerto Rican | The Hunger Games; The Maze Runner The Fault in Our Stars; Harry Potter; Divergent |
| Brooklyn | Female | 14 | Puerto Rican; Puerto Rican & African American | The Fault in Our Stars; If I Stay; Twilight; The Hunger Games; The Longest Ride; The Vampire Diaries |
| Tiffany | Female | 15 | Hispanic; Dominican & Puerto Rican | If I Stay; The Fault in Our Stars; Twilight; The Hunger Games |
| Cassia | Female | 14 | Latina | The Vampire Diaries; The Hunger Games; Divergent; The Perks of Being a Wallflower |
| Xavier | Male | 14 | Puerto Rican | The Maze Runner; The Hunger Games; Divergent; Marvel Avengers; Twilight |

Members of the afterschool inquiry group also participated in focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews in the first and last months of the study. Additional

data derived from participant-observation in ninth-grade English Seminar and Freshman Advisory classes, survey administration, and documentation of student artifacts including personal possessions, artwork, and media texts, as well as a group Tumblr page co-created by participants during the school year. All focus group, inquiry meeting, and individual interview sessions were audiotaped and transcribed, supplemented by researcher field notes taken during and after each meeting or class. In undertaking my research, I wrote daily field notes throughout every phase and activity of the study, including focus group discussions and classroom observations. These notes were primarily descriptive, although I also noted questions that arose throughout the research as well (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). At the end of each week, I drafted a short reflexive memo in order to understand and question what I observed (Maxwell, 2005). Data were triangulated and intended to provide multiple dimensions of understanding in examining how branded fiction was taken up by participants over time and across contexts. I engaged in reflexive review and inductive coding of the data throughout the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), with participants offered the chance to provide “member checks” in the form of follow-up discussions and group review of coding and analysis (Maxwell, 2003). I provide additional details about data collection in below.

Inquiry meeting and focus groups. I held weekly, semi-structured inquiry and focus group meetings afterschool. These meetings included guided discussions regarding participants’ reading interests and practices, as well as collaborative engagement on a group Tumblr account (selected by the participants) to document and extend our inquiry. Focus group sessions focused on a range of issues and activities, identified by both

participants and myself. Every meeting lasted approximately 90 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed every week.

The inquiry and focus group discussions provided multiple affordances in exploring my research questions. First, this method acknowledges the social and relational foundations of participant's attitudes and beliefs. In sharing opinions and beliefs, the participants and myself were able to learn from each other and generate new understandings together (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 149). The social nature of group meetings also facilitated more relaxed and natural interactions, however I still retained the capacity to guide the discussion and explore salient research issues as they arose. Again, the design of these groups was necessarily emergent, as much of this work was shaped by the individual interests and questions of the participants themselves as we worked together throughout the school year. I also needed to be mindful of the power dynamics within the group – dynamics that influenced both in my role as the group leader, as well as the relationships between participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 150). Participants interact with each other outside of our group meetings, and their actions and words influenced by the many social and academic contexts that they navigate on a daily basis.

Individual interviews. I also conducted interviews with every member of the focus group. This included two formal interviews with every participant in the focus group, as well as additional informal member-check conversations in which I could follow-up on an observation or clarify a question that emerged from my data. Every formal interview was audio-recorded and transcribed, however informal conversations be

documented solely in my fieldnotes. The formal interviews were semi-structured – that is, I prepare topics and questions, but the discussion were guided by the ways in which the participant responded. While my own biases as a researcher are impossible to eliminate, the semi-structured format of my interview help to ensure an emic understanding of the data, in that “the participant’s perspective [on branded fiction texts] unfold as the participant views it...not as the researcher views it (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 144). Again, the perspectives and questions that participants shared during these interviews then informed the design of our inquiry and focus group meetings.

Participant observation in students’ classes and library. In addition to the focus group meetings and individual interviews, I triangulated data through participant-observation in participants’ Advisory and English Seminar classes. Although the focus groups and interviews provided me with rich personal data, participant-observation in the classroom allow me to come to know the students participating in this research more deeply, and to observe their everyday literacy practices across multiple contexts.

Collection of artifacts. Given that my research investigated the material culture of branded young adult fiction, I also collected and analyzed participant artifacts throughout my data collection. These artifacts might include individual possessions (e.g. branded fiction products), writing samples, and artwork that participants share and/or produce during the focus group meetings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred in two phases. I coded for themes throughout my data collection and at its conclusion. While I was broadly thinking about issues of identity,

agency and consumption, all of my codes were generated inductively through grounded coding. I also specifically attended to intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status in analyzing my data. More specifically, data analysis occurred in three phases. Phase One occurred during the collection and review of the grade-wide questionnaire. The coding strategy grew from the questions that guide this study as well as the more specific topics and questions that emerged from within the collected data. Although the questionnaire was anonymous, I was present in the classroom while many of the students were completing the form. This meant that although I could not connect specific individuals to their respective responses, the conversations and questions that occurred helped me gauge interest in the study and develop more knowledgeable relationships with students. To that end, part of this first phase of data analysis helped me to identify potential focal participants for the inquiry groups as well as to determine initial codes; and emergent themes, topics, or patterns that may be salient during the second phase of data collection.

Phase Two of analysis occurred concomitantly with the inquiry group meetings and interviews. Audio-recordings from the interviews and group meetings were transcribed and then coded using inductive methods. Reflexive review and coding of the data from the interviews and focus groups took place alongside ongoing analysis of field notes collected during classroom observations. Bringing interview data analysis to the preliminary coding scheme for the observational data facilitated an exploration of confirming and disconfirming evidence of emergent themes. In addition, additional student artifacts, including their branded young adult fiction possessions, fan fiction

stories, artwork and media texts, were produced and collected during focus group meetings. This additional data provided another dimension of understanding in examining how branded fiction is taken up by adolescents over time and across contexts.

The third and final phase of data analysis occurred at the conclusion of my data collection. At this point, I reviewed and reanalyzed the data corpus. The center of gravity in the data corpus for this project focused on the social behaviors and interactions of participants during weekly afterschool inquiry group meetings, where they collectively investigated popular young adult fiction franchises. In the following chapters, I examine how these students constructed value and desirability in their negotiations of branded material texts, describing telling cases (Mitchell, 1984) of community positions and positionings that enabled analysis of focal students' literacy practices and developing identity potentials (Castanheira, et al., 2007).

CHAPTER THREE: Youth Transactions with Branded Texts and Contexts

What literacy identities and practices did youth bring to this inquiry?

Shifting trends and new directions in youth engagement with young adult literatures and media are well-documented in the literature, including surveys of the genres and themes popular amongst teens as well as analyses of how and why specific trends evolve over time and contexts (see Kaplan, 2012; Kearney, 2014; Koss & Teale, 2009; Martens, 2016; Yampbell, 2005). Young adult transmedia franchises are an especially generative area of scholarly focus, as the combined attributes of mass-accessibility and hyper-intertextuality affords researchers both immediate and sustained insight into youth cultural production. Falconer (2010) discussed the affordances of this plasticity in her analyses that “YA fiction, having once been dismissed as an ephemeral and transient genre, has, by its very emphasis on transience, become a kind of cultural lightning rod, attracting to its conductive space questions and debates about what it means to be human in the twenty first century” (p. 88). Contemporary scholarship in this direction has examined the audiences and appeals of supernatural fiction, especially stories about vampires (e.g. Click, 2010; Grant, 2011; Hawkes, 2010; Kellner, 2011), dystopian fiction (e.g. Ames, 2013; Hintz, Basu, & Broad, 2013; Hintz & Ostry, 2003; Morton & Lounsbury, 2015; Springen, 2010), graphic novels (e.g. Aldama, 2012; Letcher, 2008; Moeller, 2011; Muller, 2010), environmental threat (e.g. Bland & Strottman, 2014; Curry, 2013), and the Holocaust (Pearce, 2013).

Given these trends, it was unsurprising that participants entered into this study expressing their affinity for the most popular branded young adult fiction franchises in

the marketplace, including *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Maze Runner* trilogies (dystopian fiction), the *Twilight*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Vampire Diaries* series (supernatural fiction), and *The Fault in Our Stars*, *Paper Towns*, and *If I Stay* (romantic fiction). Although many dystopian franchises address environmental threat, none of the participants voiced analogous interests in branded fiction about environmental concerns, nor did they profess interest in branded texts about the Holocaust, such as *The Book Thief*, an acclaimed novel by Marcus Zusak that was subsequently released as a film for mass audiences. As a group, participants engaged with almost all of the most successful and widely recognized young adult fiction brands in circulation at the time of the study. (See Appendix A for an annotated list of the branded young adult fiction franchises that were discussed in the inquiry group). However, despite their overlapping brand affinities, the data illustrate fluid and hybrid practices of these youth as they individually and collectively approached and transacted with texts.

What texts (and what kinds of texts) influenced students' engagement?

As described in the previous chapter, I introduced this dissertation project to the Unidos student body as a study of how teens read and engage with branded young adult fiction texts and franchises. I emphasized that participation was open to anyone who wanted to join, and I intentionally refrained from defining any specific strategies, practices, or dispositions that constituted reading or engagement. Instead, I wanted to learn more about how youth characterized their transactions with branded texts, so that we might collectively inquire into notions such as reading, participation, and fandom. Consequently, the students who joined our inquiry group expressed a wide range of

literacy identities and interests that influenced their transactions with branded young adult fiction. Throughout the project, participants negotiated conflicting views about the comparative merits of a range of popular brands, including personal connections or identifications with specific characters, interpretations of narrative events and settings, and predictions for future franchise developments. However, the most frequently debated topic concerned their favored textual modes and expected practices for engaging with branded fictions, namely, the affordances and limitations of entering branded story worlds by reading print or watching film and television texts.

Students articulated passionate rationales in discussions about the relative merits of “reading versus watching” branded texts. This topic inevitably arose during every inquiry group meeting, while I also observed that participants’ arguments remained consistent in other contexts as well, including individual interviews, English Seminar and Advisory classes, and informal conversations with participants before and after school. Generally, Marilyn, Anna, and Inez were passionate about reading a branded novel before transacting with other transmediated texts, while Lucy, Xavier, Marena, and Sophia were vocal advocates of branded film and television media texts. Other participants in the group, including Brooklyn, Cassia, Tiffany, and Rosa, were slightly more fluid in their positions, depending upon the brand under discussion. (I provide a more detailed analysis of students’ positions and positionings later in this chapter.) It was not uncommon for informal discussions about the particular print and media texts of a given franchise to abruptly become mired in a circular exchange where participants took turns emphatically and repeatedly arguing their same position. For example, in a

discussion about the main characters in the *Divergent* series, group members who were already familiar with the franchise led a conversation about the friend, family, and romantic relationships depicted in the narrative. Tiffany shared that she had not read or watched any of the series, which garnered an immediate response from the discussion leaders:

Marilyn: Please, please.

Marena: Who didn't watch it?

Nora: Tiffany and Xavier.

Sophia: No, ya'll need to watch it, it's too good!

Tiffany: I'ma watch it.

Sophia: You all not living if you don't watch it!

Tiffany: I'ma watch it.

(IG, 6/5/2015)

Once Tiffany restated her intention of watching the *Divergent* film, the conversation shifted. Students began to talk about another teacher at Unidos Academy who reportedly shared his dislike of Tobias "Four" Eaton, the heroine's romantic interest throughout the series, because his character seemed "boring" (Fieldnotes, 6/4/2015). Sophia, Marena, Anna and Marilyn all expressed their dismay when they heard his opinion, gasping loudly and dramatically, while Anna shouted, "Mister, how DARE you?" (IG, 6/2015). Marilyn speculated that perhaps this teacher had not read the branded novel, which could possibly account for his "mistaken" perspective of the story world.

Marilyn: Maybe that's why, yeah. Movies are always like not as good as the book. The book is always better.

Xavier: No one reads.

Marena: But in this thing—

Xavier: No one reads. No one reads.

Inez: I read.

Nora: *(to Sophia)* You didn't read the books, right? But you still love Four in the movie.

Anna: Oh my God, yes!

Sophia: He's the only reason why I watch it.

Marena: Ex. Act. Lee. *(laughter, drawing out the word)*

Anna: Wait, you wouldn't watch it if he wasn't in it?

Xavier: No one reads, ok?

Inez: I read.

Lucy: *(gesturing to Inez)* She reads.

Marena: Probably not the same way

Inez: I read.

Xavier: You do?

Inez: Yeah. *(laughs)* (IG, 6/4/2015)

Two distinct conversations occurred simultaneously in the excerpt above. The first conversational thread concerned Four's transmediation and characterization from print to film, while in the second thread Xavier repeatedly attempted to establish his view of reading within the group. (It is also interesting to note that Xavier was well aware that many other members in the group read branded novels, despite his repeated assertion to the contrary.) Similar exchanges between group members occurred regularly throughout the study, and these conversations raised questions within the group about how various media platforms support their sustained engagement with a brand. Participants negotiated and analyzed the affordances and transactive possibilities of these texts, and they collectively identified key distinctions between reading and viewing practices.

Notions of Pleasure and Labor in Transactions with Texts

Of the affordances that participants examined, the most frequently recurring questions addressed the possibilities of imaginative engagement and immersion in branded worlds. In the excerpt below, participants reflected and negotiated conflicting

notions of readerly imagination as pleasure and as labor. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the same inquiry group members who primarily identified as readers of branded print novels also consistently made connections between their reading and experiencing imaginative pleasure. For example, Anna shared that one of her “favorite things about reading” was the opportunity to imagine the story world however she wished (Fieldnotes, 4/2015).

Inez expressed a similar belief in her interview when she explained why she liked *The Maze Runner* novel better than the movie:

Inez: Watching *The Maze Runner*. That was pretty—I liked the book more.

Nora: Why?

Inez: ‘Cause when you read a book, you have your own imagination. And when you see the movie it’s not as how you planned it to be. Especially the part where he found out the codes and the names, and he was running ‘cause he found the exit to it, where—I think it was the Grievors—where they go in and come out.

Nora: Yeah.

Inez: So that, I didn't picture it to be like that. I thought it was just like literally you jump off a cliff and it's invisible. That's how I imagine it to be. But no, it was like a wall.

Nora: I haven't seen the movie yet.

Inez: But it was like a wall instead.

Nora: Hm, that's interesting.

Inez: Yeah. It was still pretty good.

Nora: What about like the casting and stuff? Do you like the characters or—?

Inez: Yeah, they seem pretty good to fit in.

Nora: They fit with like what you had imagined and stuff?

Inez: Mm-hmm. Yeah. They picked the right actor, Dylan O’Brien. (Interview, 4/2015)

Inez enjoyed the interpretive agency afforded by reading branded novels, since “you have your own imagination” to fill in the gaps of a story world (Iser, 1978). Her comments demonstrated that she interpreted the other texts of a branded story through these imaginary constructions, evaluating whether and to what degree they “matched”

what she “planned”. Likewise, this imaginative possibility was essential to Marilyn’s enjoyment of transacting with branded fictions as well. Marilyn suggested that viewing a branded movie before reading the novel, or even seeing the promotional materials for a film, reading about casting decisions or engaging with fan artwork and fan fiction texts, could potentially “ruin” the experience for her (Interview, 4/2015). Moreover, she frequently cautioned others that transacting with any other branded text prior to the print novel could inhibit “coming up with your own world” (Fieldnotes, 4/2015). For example, during her individual interview Marilyn lamented having watched *The Walking Dead* on television before reading the graphic novel:

Marilyn: I watch *The Walking Dead*, but I didn't know it was a comic book. So I watched it before I read any of the comics and I thought it was pretty cool. And I felt like, after I watched it, I felt like I didn't have the need to read the book, which is kind of upsetting to me.

Nora: Can you tell me more about your choice to read, why you want to finish the book before you watch the movie or show?

Marilyn: I feel like it's a lot more interesting after I read the book. It's easier—one of my biggest reasons, is ‘cause it's easier for me to criticize. (*laughs*) And another reason is, after I watch something I feel like my mind is just like “you visualized [it] now, you don’t have to read about it”. And when I'm reading it's kind of like, “Oh my God, what does it look like?” Or a “can-you-imagine” type of thing going in my mind. And once you see the movie it's just like, “Okay, it's there.”

Nora: Yeah. That happened when I read the *Twilight* series. I read them late...And I already knew the casting was out, you know? So I knew that Robert Pattinson was Edward. And even in my head, he kind of just looked like him.

Marilyn: And didn't the book seem a little bit more boring when you're kind of knowing what it's gonna look like already? It's just like the conflict's still there and it's still kind of interesting, but once you know what they look like it's like that curiosity in your mind isn't there anymore. (Interview, 4/2015)

Marilyn’s comments demonstrated an active struggle for interpretive agency in her transactions with branded fiction texts. Although commercially produced films and

television series contribute “official” content and information about a branded story world, Marilyn’s perspective aligned with Jenkins’s (2006) conceptualization of transmedia storytelling as participatory and distributed, in that she did not perceive commoditized transmediations as more or less valid than her own imaginative work. Instead, she observed that reading a branded novel “makes it easier” for her to criticize the interpretations and visual representations that are constructed across other media platforms, thereby implicitly ascribing an equal legitimacy to her own independent and “unofficial” readings. However, Marilyn’s comments also recognized the inherent power of commercially circulated images to define and circumscribe meaning, despite her own efforts to subvert this process. She observed that once exposed to these commodities, “that curiosity in your mind isn’t there anymore”, inevitably limiting the imaginative pleasure she could derive from independently imagining a story world in future transactions.

In contrast, group members who preferred to watch branded fiction film or television media positioned the imaginative labor of reading as prohibitive to their enjoyment of a transmedial world. Like Anna, Inez, and Marilyn, these participants did not dispute the legitimacy of their peers’ independent interpretations. However, they collectively argued that the pleasure in film and television viewing is that they do not *have* to use their imagination in order to enter the story world. In the words of Tiffany, “they already show you everything” and thus a branded media text “saves you the trouble” of constructing the story world (IG 4/23/2015). To that effect, a common refrain from participants who preferred branded television or film texts was their perception of a

direct relationship between size and effort in transactions with print texts. Lucy, Xavier, Marena, and Cassia frequently pointed out the length of branded novels and series to support their argument that these texts require too much time and “too much work” to be enjoyable reading (IG 4/23/2015; Fieldnotes, 5/2015). In our conversations during interviews, inquiry group sessions, and class time, these participants continued to return to the topic of pagination, frequently speculating on the number of pages in a book or series, comparing the size and heft of a branded novel to other “weighty” texts such as the Oxford English Dictionary, and complaining about the expected length of time it would take them to read such a text from beginning to end. Rosa articulated this connection during an inquiry group meeting when she shared, “I watch, I watch the movies first. And then if the book is too long, I don’t read it cause, I don’t really read. *(laughter)* Anyway, I don’t like reading it enough. I buy books but they’re just sitting there. I mean, sometimes I read a thing if it’s got pictures in it so I can see it in my head” (IG 4/2015). Xavier concurred with Rosa’s perspective, affirming “That’s me. Picture books is all for me. I just want to see it—I don’t want to waste all my energy when they already giving it to you” (IG 4/2015).

To some degree, this data is in conversation with persistent concerns shared by researchers, educators, and parents about deleterious effects of corporate branding and commoditization on the imaginations and creative productions of youth (see Bickford, 2010; Hannaford, 2012; Hill, 2011; Linn, 2004, 2008; Sutton-Smith, 1997). For example, psychologist Susan Linn’s (2004, 2008) research on youth engagement with popular entertainment franchises focused on the ways in which children’s interactions

with media images and products inhibited their development of creativity and imagination. Linn found that youth become “stuck” in repeated interactions with commoditized representations of their favorite characters and stories, and that the aggressive marketing and widespread distribution of these products has socialized young people to desire books, movies, television series, and toys that can do the “work” for them. Jill Bickford (2010) extended Linn’s work by focusing on the reading practices of youth in libraries, arguing that that while reading is an especially crucial influence on a child’s maturing imagination, this capacity is compromised by commercially sponsored texts and franchising that “takes” away the opportunity for readers to independently imagine a storied world. Bickford (2010) found that as books “spark” a child’s imagination:

Even heavily illustrated picture books leave some details to the imagination. Each reader will bring her own voice and interpretation to the story—unlike the case with books adopted from television or movies, which simply trigger the child’s memory and lack any opportunity for imagination” (p. 56).

Bickford’s work advocated for libraries (and librarians) to support the collection of “quality” literature rather than franchised texts, despite the immense popularity of these books. While both Bickford and Linn raise important considerations, data illustrated an alternative interpretation that arose during a subsequent inquiry group discussion about the recently released *Mockingjay* film (in the *Hunger Games* franchise). In the conversation excerpted below, Xavier began to explain to the group why he did not read any of the novels in this series:

Xavier: Cause books are too long to read.

Sophia: The books be like, 500 pages long, the movie's just like an hour.
(*laughter*)

Anna: Yeah but it doesn't give you all the details like the book does.

Sophia: Yeah but the movie's just better, like you sitting there, you actually watching it-

Xavier: (*overlapping*) And you, it interests you! There's things going on that you'll see! In a book you're just gonna have to read it and gonna have to put it together in your head.

Sophia: Exactly, and then you be like, I'm gonna read this part tomorrow.

Marena: And what if you had to stop at a good part? You'd just have to stop reading.

Nora: But couldn't you have to stop watching it though?

Marena: Then I'll stop watching it.

Xavier: You could pause it. (*laughter*)

Nora: But isn't it like the same thing?

Marena: No, with a book it's like you lose the mental image, and then you have to regain it.

Anna: Yeah. But when you're reading a book, you have to have an imagination, you can't just read the book like, "Oooh this happened" – you have to have imagination. You can see, oh the character's like this, or like this is the setting.

Rose: Images. Images. I watch, I watch the movies first. And then if the book is too long, I don't read it cause, I don't really read it. (*laughter*) Anyway, I don't like reading it enough. I buy books but they're just sitting there.

(IG 4/2015)

In the above exchange, Xavier, Sophia, Marena, and Rosa collectively suggested that reading the printed novel for *Mockingjay* would entail a laborious process. Again, participants initially focused on the bulk and page-numbers of the printed text, evaluating its approximate length, the time it would require to read, and then comparing this perceived effort to the enjoyment that they expected to gain from their transaction. Anna attempted to dispute their argument by suggesting that accessing "all the details" of the story through the novel was a potential benefit not available by watching the movie. However, her strategy was not successful—instead, the other participants in this

conversation viewed these additional details as yet another element requiring their further effort. Sophia and Xavier both countered Anna's argument by suggesting that the values in watching the movie was the capacity to see everything as the story unfolds, and without having to labor at "putting it together" in their heads. Anna conceded this point, although her response also reiterated that it is necessity of "having" an imagination that added value to her transactions with novels.

However, comments by Sophia and Marena offered an additional interpretive layer in the data. Sophia invoked a scenario in which she would have to finish reading her novel the following day; Marena affirmed Sophia's concern and then inserted the possibility of having to stop "at a good part". When I questioned how this would be different than having to stop watching a movie, Marena clarified that she would only lose her mental image and "have to regain it" when reading, adding another dimension to Xavier and Sophia's earlier comments about how movies "show" the story to an audience. This subtle but salient distinction revealed the ways in which students connected issues of time and imaginative labor with their understandings of the specific literacy practices supported by different modalities. Although the participants who chose not to read branded novels critiqued the length and the requisite imaginative labor of these texts, many of them also shared feelings of frustration and disappointment when they could not read a complete book in one sitting (Fieldnotes, 5/2015). The above interaction similarly implied a belief shared by Marena, Xavier, Lucy, and Sophia that optimal transactions with print texts entailed their reading from cover to cover in one sitting in order to be transported by their emotional involvement in fictions (Gerrig,

1993). As a result, the labor they associated with reading was related to their having to re-immense themselves into the narrative world over multiple readings, while watching movies provided an immersive experience without interruption.

Rather than interpreting this critique solely as evidence of the diminished imaginative and creative capacities caused by youth consumption, we can instead further contextualize their perspective through Tosca's (2015) notion of transmedial desires. Extending earlier work theorizing transmedial worlds (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004, 2009, 2013), the concept of transmedial desires suggests that although transactions with various media platforms afford a range of pleasures, "transmedial desires are not media specific, but [...] they may ultimately refer to the essence of fictions and our engagement with them as audiences" (p. 42). In other words, this interpretive lens is focused on how meaning is constructed within an overall story world, rather than in separate textual modes.

The "Extra" Details: Affordances of Different Types of Texts

Moreover, Anna's above reference to "all the details" of a branded narrative demonstrated another distinction collectively addressed by the group. Both "readers" and "watchers" agreed that the printed texts in a young adult fiction franchise include details that movies and television productions either omit or change outright. However, they disagreed on how and why this mattered to the audience. These conversations echoed wider debates in the field regarding the definition of transmedia storytelling, the parameters of media adaptations and media extensions, and the relative importance of continuity and multiplicity (Jenkins, 2006). For instance, Marilyn often voiced her

frustration when details that resonated with her in a novel were left out the branded movie, describing how it is these details that afforded her the opportunity to connect deeply with characters and storylines. She made a similar argument during her interview, noting key distinctions between the fans of branded novels and the fans of branded movies or television series as she observed and interacted in digital fandom communities:

Marilyn: There are the people who just watch the movies and you can kind of tell that they focus on superficial conflict, and people who've read the book that'll be...they'll go into every little thing that happened – oh, they can't believe this happened! Like for me, um, when I watched *The Fault in Our Stars*, I was very upset 'cause like I knew that there was—when they went to France and stuff like that, I knew a lot more happened than them just like having sexual interactions, you know what I mean? It was just very upsetting and I've ranted about that. (Interview, 4/2015)

In contrast, others in the group believed that not every detail in the book really matters. For example, Lucy stated that media texts include “the best parts—like your favorite parts” of a branded story world (Interview, 4/15). Xavier echoed this sentiment as well, suggesting not that not only do movies depict “the stuff that really matters” in a story, popular television series like *The Walking Dead* or *The Vampire Diaries* will likely improve on the story and “make it better...more interesting for people so they will keep watching it” (Interview, 4/2015). Comments such as these indexed participants’ understandings of branded fiction as both a story and a product that must be designed and modified to appeal to a market of consumers. Brooklyn similarly argued during her interview that the “main points” of a brand are included in both print and media texts:

Nora: So, *The Hunger Games*, *Twilight*, *Divergent*, they're all movies that are also books that you didn't want to read. Why didn't you read the books?

Brooklyn: I feel like it's, I don't know, so long that if I already saw the movie, I don't need to read the books.

Nora: Do you feel the movies are probably better than the books or—?

Brooklyn: No, I think the book, ‘cause they have more details and stuff and they leave parts out.

Nora: But you still don’t want to read the books?

Brooklyn: I don't know, I just don't read too much. Like the movies, they'll say what's the main point that you need to know and then the book is just extra.
(Interview, 5/2015)

Brooklyn’s response also revealed an interesting contradiction informing her approach to branded and transmediated fiction texts. Although she chose not to read the print texts associated with some of her favorite brands, Brooklyn speculated that these novels were probably of “better” quality than the related films, because they include more details about the fictional realm. However, when she expanded on this statement, Brooklyn characterized these details as “extra” and unnecessary. She framed the many texts in a young adult fiction brand as offering multiple points of access to the story world, and suggested that each makes a contribution in their own right without requiring transactions with the others (Jenkins, 2011). The young adult fiction brands that I referenced at the beginning of our interaction excerpted above all originated as novels, and were subsequently transmediated into film. However, Brooklyn’s responses demonstrated a horizontal intertextuality at work across print and media. Unlike branded fictions such as *Hannah Montana*, the novel may have been distributed first, but it is not considered the “primary” text of a brand (Jenkins, 2011). Instead, Brooklyn’s comments positioned both novel and film as contributing to the overarching branded narrative, so that the extra details in a book are viewed as additional brand knowledge—but not a source of interpretive authority.

This concept of a branded world was also invoked during an interview with Marena. Marena explained her vehement declaration that she would never voluntarily read the novels of a young adult fiction brand, since the most important parts of a brand are included in the movie or television show, and without the drawbacks of reading:

Marena: Because what's the point of it if you watch the movie and you read the book and like there's changes in it? I don't know, Miss, it's just I feel like it's not important. Like if you didn't watch one or the other, it's the same thing anyways.

Nora: The book and the movie are the same thing?

Marena: They're the same thing, and so what's the point of reading both if you already know what happens next?

Nora: What if there's changes between the two?

Marena: Well, then I guess if you don't read then you don't even know that there's changes. (*Laughs*) But you won't actually need to know, exactly. The important parts will still be in it. (Interview, 4/2015)

Although Marena acknowledged that there are likely to be differences between the print and media texts, she also expected that these differences would not drastically change an overarching branded world. Marena's comments revealed an understanding of how transmedia franchises "work" as a commercial and creative production. Her perspective indexed the complex transactions that occur in the production of transmedia franchises as corporate interests attempt to regulate the integrity and continuity of intellectual property while simultaneously encouraging the interactivity and participation that sustains brand loyalty in an audience (Johnson, 2009; 2012). Marena and other participants transacted with branded young adult fiction within the larger industrial context of commercial transmedia production, and they consequently assumed that although texts are modified and revised in transmediation from one form to another, there must be some degree of fidelity to what is "important". However, unlike Marilyn's so-

called rants about revisions from print to screen, Marena's comments also suggested her willingness for important elements of a fiction to be predetermined by the media producers who are actively courting her brand loyalty.

“Books are just books”: What counts as reading?

Over the course of the semester, every group member maintained their individual arguments for and against the different modes of transacting with branded texts, despite frequent and recurring debates about reading versus watching branded narratives. In our final interviews and group meetings, they rearticulated many of their same beliefs and strategies for engaging across branded texts. Many of these participants began to shift their arguments by expressly mentioning and allowing the viewpoints of other group members, although they subsequently qualified such statements by reiterating that these could be true for other people, not themselves. For example, Marilyn amended some of her earlier declarations when she reflected on the importance of both reading branded novels and watching branded media:

I feel like to me personally, it's very important. But I feel like to other people it's based on your opinion and how you view things. Like if you're more of a watching-movie person it's extremely fine, but if you're more of a reading person it's also fine. I feel like it's kind of a mutual thing. It's kind of like an if-you're-that-type-of-person-type thing. (Interview, 6/2015)

Marilyn's reflection amended some of her earlier declarations, describing multiple possibilities of meaningful engagement with branded fictions. At the same time, she theorized these practices as literacy identities, referring to the different “types” of

reading- and watching-movie persons. Likewise, when I asked Lucy about the importance of reading and watching various texts within a branded fiction franchise, she began to revise her initial position:

Lucy: (*laughing*) Um, I don't think it's important to read books. (*laughs*) Because you're gonna see it in a movie and—but no, it depends on the book. Like if it's not boring and it's not, I don't know, it's like, you know... I don't know how to explain it, like if it's like interesting throughout the whole thing, then I'll be like it depends. For other people, not for me though.

Nora: Not for you?

Lucy: Not—never for me. To read the book. I just feel [for] other people, so you can get a better understanding of it. Or at least read the background of it or read something about it before you just watch the movie.

Like Marilyn, Lucy declared her own unequivocal position while recognizing the affordances of other perspectives. Lucy's description of reading branded novels as something for "other people" and "never for me" appears to reiterate her adamant refusal to read. Yet I often observed Lucy reading during unstructured times during the school day, and we informally conversed about a wide range of popular young adult fiction novels (Fieldnotes, 4/2015). As such, her statement demonstrated a contradiction between what I perceived and Lucy's own beliefs of what "counted" as reading. In a later conversation, Lucy similarly self-identified as someone who does not "really read", but then went on to share the following experiences:

Lucy: And then I did also start reading [*My*] *Sister's Keeper*. I read like three chapters and I gave up. (*laughs*) It was way too big. I was like I'm not gonna continue because even if I get interested, I'm getting mad because it's so long and I'm not gonna read it [...] For *The Selection*, I read up to Chapter 17 and it was only 20 chapters, and I don't know.

Nora: Do you wonder like what happened?

Lucy: I do. I feel like on some serious stuff I just—but I can't really read anything that's really not interesting for me. Like even when people send

me long text messages, I just look at it and I skim and I'll be like, "Okay." I don't know.

Again, Lucy referred to the length of a print text when discussing how and why she chooses to (not) read, even as she described what I considered engaged reading of novels. When Lucy stated that she never read a branded novel, that did not necessarily signal that she had never read any *part* of a novel. Rather, "reading" signaled to her traditional, school-based practices requiring a complete reading of a text from beginning to end in order to receive credit. Other participants expressed other definitions of reading, and our inquiry group discussions helped illuminate the variety of practices that were actually engaged by each participant as they "read" or "watched" a text. Over time, participants began to tease apart their understandings of what counted as reading, and why.

For example, I also frequently observed Cassia seemingly engrossed in reading a story online during the "free reading" or sustained silent reading time in her English class. Cassia clarified that she was "wasn't really reading" since these stories were fan fiction based on *Twilight*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *Divergent*, and other branded fiction. Cassia explained her preference for this genre over the officially published novels:

Cassia: 'Cause they, um, they, update more often. It's like more interesting. And like they come up with these characters and they're cool characters like you wish they was on the TV show. And um, it's just imagination stuff, more creativity.

Nora: What do you mean they update more often?

Cassia: So, they'll post all these chapters and then once you finish it– (*sighs loudly*). But then they'll update more and put more chapters in. Books are just books.

(Interview, 4/2015)

Cassia's response suggested that she preferred to read fan fiction because it constructed a desired narrative with revisions to the storyline and characters on the show.

She also noted that fan fiction allows the continued progression of a story even after the official production branded texts concluded. Books are clearly bounded, and even television series like *The Vampire Diaries*, eventually come to an end (or at least adapt to the departure of featured actors and actresses). In contrast, Cassia's reading of fan fiction prevented her from having to mourn the end of a branded world. While Cassia valued the narrative agency afforded in fan fiction over print books, she did not consider this to be a "real reading" practice.

Likewise, Xavier frequently stated that he did not read branded novels, yet he did engage in a range of reading practices. For example, Xavier described reading about *The Hunger Games* and *The Maze Runner* online, which allowed him to participate in conversations with peers about details that are changed or lost in the transmediation from print to film. For instance, he noted that he could easily find details about "the set up. I mean, the part like the way that society is set up" on social media and other websites. Xavier suggested that this was also true in respect to branded films and television shows – if one read the novel, it wouldn't be necessary to watch these as well.

Xavier: And if there's a part when like someone hit somebody in the movie, they gonna make a meme, with scenes from the movie and then put words in there, like "she whapped that..." I remember I was watching the movie, but then when I was going on Instagram, it was like they put the whole movie on Instagram. So it was like, they record it and say "Oh, did you think she just whapped her ass, da, da, da, da," and put it on Instagram. I was like, "Oh, okay, so now I know what happened in the movie." I just saw it on Instagram.

Nora: So does that happen a lot with these types of franchises, like with *The Hunger Games* or *Maze Runner*?

Xavier: Yeah. Like in the beginning when *Maze Runner* first came out, I saw *Maze Runner* like two or three weeks later than the movie came out. So when the people saw it in the beginning, they came to school, "Oh, did you see this part of the movie, da, da, da?" you know? I already knew what was gonna happen. So

then when I went to the movie, I was like, “Oh, this is the part that she was talking about. Oh, this is the part that I saw on Instagram, that was that meme. (Interview, 4/2015)

Xavier pushed back against any textual hierarchy in branded young adult fiction, noting the expansive possibilities for entering and learning about a branded world. Marilyn and Sophia echoed Xavier’s perspective, even though Marilyn considered herself a “reader” and Sophia identified as a “watcher” of branded text. For instance, during a conversation about my weekend plans to watch *Insurgent* (the second film installment in the *Divergent* franchise), Marilyn “ranted” about the film in great detail, describing numerous aspects of the movie that she found offensive. She was especially irate about the depiction of certain characters, offering detailed descriptions of “the way they show Christina [a supporting character played by an African American actress] is so racist in this one, I really don’t like how different they made her from the book” and Tris’s new hairstyle “and she just looks kind of too mannish now” (Fieldnotes, 5/2016). As the conversation progressed, Marilyn clarified that she had not actually watched the movie in person, nor did she have any plans to do so in the future. Instead, she formed her interpretations by reading the detailed reviews, reactions, and video clips shared by other *Divergent* fans in her digital fandom communities. Marilyn approached the *Divergent* movie from a stance that was similar to Xavier and Lucy’s approach to novels—she was able to access content and information about the transmediated text without actually watching the movie, thereby allowing her to maintain her engagement as a knowledgeable participant within related communities of practice.

However, when Marilyn did believe that there were important discrepancies between the novel and the movie, this consideration entered into her interactions. For example, she noted that within the *Hunger Games* fandom on Tumblr, “I ask them about Finnick and if they knew, you know, what’s going on with Finnick and the like capital and stuff like that, ‘cause when I ask things like that I can know if they really read the book or not ‘cause that’s not shown in the movie.” She similarly searched for material texts that required knowledge of the printed book in order to recognize the brand, stating that “At times I want like something like an insider-type thing that people who only read the book would get, like an inside-joke-type thing...It’s kind of more like an I-know-what-I’m-talking-about-type thing” (Interview, 4/2015). The multiple purposes and meanings attached to these material texts, therefore, reinscribed the relationship between value and their social function.

In contrast, Sophia described going to see *The Fault in Our Stars* with her sister, who “always reads the book first” (Interview, 4/2015). Sophia claimed that after this experience, she “had basically good as read” the novel too, because of her sister’s reaction to the film adaptation.

Sophia: If we just come home from a movie, my sister will be the one who actually reads the books, then the movie, because she can’t watch a movie without reading the book first. And she will be the first and she’ll be like, “Well, this part wasn’t in the book.” Me and my sister say we didn’t read the book and [...] we just laugh ‘cause she be really mad that she read a part in the book that she really wanted to happen in the movie but it doesn’t happen.

Nora: And so she not only is upset about stuff that’s missing but also stuff that they add too?

Sophia: Mm-hmm. Like, “Oh, I love that part,” and she’s like, “It’s not part of the story!”

(Interview, 4/2015)

Sophia's description of learning new details about *The Fault in Our Stars* branded world from her sister included both content that was removed and content that was added to the story world in its transmediation from print to screen. Although Sophia explicitly favored watching branded film and television, such conversations illustrated the value and meanings that she likewise assigned to her transactions across media adaptations (Jenkins, 2006). Like Marilyn, Sophia indicated that it was not necessary to directly read a text in order to draw on its contents and generate new interpretations and understandings. Moreover, Sophia's comments implied her appreciation of multiplicity (Jenkins, 2006) in transmedia production. While she and her sister discussed variations in content between novel and film, their negotiation was focused story development and not the continuity or integrity of one media form over another. As such, multiplicity afforded multiple points of access to the story, extending her understandings and deepening her overall engagement with the brand.

Literacy Role Models and Cultural Mediators

This data also revealed that Marilyn and Sophia relied on trusted sources for extending their knowledge of young adult brands. Sophia trusted her sister, with whom she established a system of shared literacy practices for collaboratively accessing branded texts. Marilyn engaged with peers in her online fandom community, many of whom she had previously vetted through strategic interactions she calculated to evaluate their knowledge and stance towards a range of branded story worlds. Many other group members described similar relationships with trusted friends and family members that influenced their engagement with branded fictions, reporting that they decided whether

and what to read, watch, and purchase in dialogue with these partners. While participants recognized other influences that shaped their reading engagement, including social media trends, television and online advertisements, and their own research, many of them concurred with Xavier when he stated that none of these would override the judgment of a trusted friend (Fieldnotes, 4/2015). The data revealed that many of these relationships involved someone who was older and who participants said they admired. These individuals thus functioned as role models and cultural mediators through their shared literacy practices. For example, Marilyn connected the development of her literacy practices and readerly identity to social interactions with “a really cool” friend who introduced her to her favorite young adult brands:

Nora: How do you hear about these, books? Like *Fault in Our Stars*, *Allegiant*, *Divergent*, like *Hunger Games*, how do you choose? How do you hear about them?

Marilyn: So I heard about *Hunger Games* and *Divergent* from this girl that I talk to. She's like kind of very hipstery and a really cool person and she would be like, “Oh, I'm reading this book, I'm reading this book.” And like at the time I wasn't really that into reading. Like I'd read, but I'd read very little. And she used to recommend a lot of books and one day, in the summer, I had no Internet or anything, so I started reading. (*laughs*) Then I got really into reading and I read the books and, um...

Nora: Wow. How old were you? How long ago was that?

Marilyn: It was like a year ago.

Nora: Wow. That's a change.

Marilyn: Yeah, it was funny 'cause my mom couldn't pay the bill and (*laughs*) we had no Internet. [...] I was just like, I'm gonna read. (*laughs*) And then at first, it's kind of boring, and then I fell in love with it.

Nora: Oh. That's—what a good story.

Marilyn: Yup. My conversion into the reading religion. (*laughs*)
(Interview, 4/2015)

Marilyn viewed this relationship as pivotal in constructing her own literacy identity. She described her interactions with this friend in an informal literacy autobiography, framing her story as a hero narrative that culminated with her conversion into a religion of reading. Other participants highlighted the role played by family in shaping their interests and engagements with young adult fiction brands, as well as their literacy identities more broadly (Gadsden, 1998). Parents influenced how participants defined themselves as readers and as consumers, in many instances communicating a moral economy of the family and actively mediating transactions with franchise texts. Rosa described one example of this relationship:

Rosa: I don't read a lot. I don't read a lot. I don't read a lot, so—I mean, I asked for the books from my mom, but my mom says no.

Nora: Why does she say no?

Rosa: Because she knows that I don't read.

Nora: So does she think it would just be a waste of money?

Rosa: (*overlapping*) I watch the movie *Twilight*.

Nora: I love *Twilight*.

Xavier: The books are extremely long. The movie is good. The books are too long.

Rosa: Anyway. I asked my mom for the books. My mom knows that I don't read a lot. So she went to buy the book for me. But then she stumbled upon a graphic novel. And I was wanting to read it and I got two books. And the book—the graphic novel—it's like it's broken in two pieces, and when you put it together, it makes a whole picture. I'm going to bring it in next week. I'm going to bring the two books. I'm going to bring the two books, so you see how it makes a picture. (IG, 4/2015)

In the scenario above, Rosa positioned her mother as an important influence on her habits and orientations towards reading. Her explanation suggested that her mother shapes a consumer and moral economy for the family and illustrated her role in regulating and facilitating Rosa's purchasing habits. Rosa's comments also framed her

mother as a literacy mentor, both as someone who knows and understands Rosa's literacy autobiography ("she knows I don't read") and as a knowledgeable guide who will actively support Rosa's continued literacy development (recognizing and purchasing *Twilight* graphic novels).

In addition to their parents, other adult family members were similarly involved in mediating branded texts with participants. For example, Inez described the influence of her cousin in a conversation comparing the book and movie texts of *Insurgent*:

Inez: The book wasn't as cool, but it was pretty good. And then the movie, they only had like really, really, really good parts.

Nora: Oh, so you saw the movie too?

Inez: No, but I was told, because my cousin – she's a book nerd, and oh my God, I'm just like her. [...] She's older though. She's in her 30's but we're really close. Like I always stay over on the weekends, and then we always go to Barnes & Noble's all the time.

Nora: Oh, so fun.

Inez: Yes. Checking out everything, what they have on the shelves. (Interview, 4/2015)

Inez's literacy identity was influenced by her relationship with her cousin and their mutual engagement with reading. Even though she had not seen the *Insurgent* movie, Inez still shared an authoritative opinion about the text and its transmediation from print to screen. Inez's response also referred to a host of practices and activities that defined their relationship as well as their shared identity as "book nerds", illustrating some of the ways in which her engagement with branded young adult fiction was situated within a wider context of social participation and discourse. Similarly, Brooklyn went to see branded movies with her aunt and her cousins, and they talked as a group about the films beforehand as well as afterwards. Brooklyn shared that although she and her

cousins mainly decided what to view through independent discussions and negotiations with each other, her aunt took a more active role in the conversations after watching the movie together:

Brooklyn: We'll talk about it.

Nora: What are some things that you talk about?

Brooklyn: Um, like after the movie...my aunt will tell us what's the message, like she'll go to each person in the car and ask us, um, how do we feel about the movie and what's the message.

(Interview, 5/2015)

Brooklyn's aunt encouraged her (as well as her cousins) to engage critically with branded young adult fiction and to question the implicit values embedded in these stories. For Rosa, Inez, and Brooklyn, family members were critical participants in their engagement with branded texts, influencing how they accessed branded texts, the nature of their engagement, and the meanings and purposes that they ascribed in their transactions. Moreover, these relationships informed students' literacy identities as readers and critical consumers, illustrating ways that dominant assumptions about "adolescence" may disregard the importance of family relationship and family cultures (Gadsden, 1998). This is especially important when considering the families of low-income youth of color, who are disproportionately placed at risk by dominant narratives in education that create low expectations to become self-fulfilling prophecies in classrooms, schools and research (Foley, 1996; Foster, 1994; Gadsden et. al, 2009; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009). Delinquency and deficit discourses, or what Vasudevan and Campano (2009) have referred to as "ideologies of (in)ability" reinforce hierarchical organizational structures that become instruments of educational and social reproduction (p. 322). As such,

researchers and practitioners must interrogate the complexities of risk status, not to deny that inequity exists but rather because , “it is the manipulation of the concept of risk that makes many uneasy, not because they do not think that many students are placed in vulnerable situations but because they fear the rhetoric of risk supersedes any effort to understand the issues that make students vulnerable in school; the social conditions and, often, marginalization that contribute to their vulnerability out of school; and the possibilities that must sit in school and that have the potential to interrupt and erode the conditions that create the vulnerability, hence risk, in the first place” (p. ix). Discourses and ideologies mediate claims about risk, success and failure of students from nondominant communities, and accordingly researchers and educators must critically examine “the intellectual history of the constructs or descriptors employed, their history of use...the consequences of their use on the target population” (Gutierrez, et. al, 2009, p. 224). As such, the data revealed the necessity of understanding youth engagement with branded young adult fiction from within their wider, intergenerational experiences, what Gadsden (1998) theorized as “family cultures” of literacy and learning.

Deciding What to Read, Watch, and Purchase

The distinction between reading as it counts in school and reading as practiced independently is important when we consider the appeal of young adult literature to teachers of English Language Arts. One of the strongest arguments for the inclusion of young adult literature into formal school curricula derives from an expectation that the popularity and accessibility of these texts can motivate and engage reluctant or otherwise marginalized readers (Alvermann, 2001; Franzak, 2006). Scholarship aligning with this

perspective is generally divided between perspectives focused on using young adult literature as a tool or bridge into school-based reading practices (e.g. Lenters, 2006; Worthy, 1996), and perspectives concerned with issues of diversity, representation, and relevance in the literary canon taught in schools (e.g. Hughes-Hassel & Rodge, 2007). Of course, these perspectives also frequently overlap – for example, Bean and Moni (2003) have made similar arguments for inclusion of young adult literature to facilitate the instruction of critical literacy, noting that “issues of reader voice, positioning, inclusion of diverse literatures, and an expanded literary canon are all important elements in the messages about reading and responding to literature that students take from their school experiences (p. 849). Nevertheless, there is an underlying assumption across all of these strands of research that regardless of purpose, adolescents are more likely to make personal and intertextual connections with young adult literature, and that these connections will influence their text selection, motivation, and engagement as learners (Alsup, 2002; Alvermann, 2002; Ames, 2013; Bach, et. al, 2012; Brozo, 2002; Hill, 2014; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Sprague & Keeling, 2007; Moley, Bandre, & George, 2011). In other words, we assume that given the option, adolescents are more likely to actually *read* and engage with these texts.

It was unsurprising, therefore, that many of the participants in this study were introduced to various young adult fiction brands by teachers who assigned popular novels in their class or incorporated these texts into other classroom activities. For example, Ms. Crystal, the lead teacher in students’ English Seminar class, offered regular opportunities for students to engage in independent reading. Ms. Crystal’s classroom library included a

number of branded young adult fiction novels that students could select, and she also offered the option for students to read fan fiction stories online during this time. Mr. Chase also introduced branded fiction movies into his Advisory classes, showing *Divergent* and *Catching Fire* (the second installment in the *Hunger Games* series) during class time. Lucy was expected to read *The Hunger Games* and *Catching Fire* in her English class, while Xavier and Cassia were required to read *The Maze Runner* during the summer before entering high school. However, although they were students were fans of these brands, none of them completed the assigned reading. Echoing the arguments that he made during our inquiry group meetings, Xavier explained that although he intended to read the *Maze Runner*, the release of the movie offered an attractive alternative:

Xavier: When they told me I had to read the movie, I mean when I had to read the book, I was gonna read it ‘cause I had to read it for school. But then when I was watching TV one time and I saw the commercial, I was like, “I don’t have to read that book...”

Xavier: And then I didn't read the book, I didn't read the book for the summer, and then when the movie came out, I just watched the movie and it was way interesting and I was like, “Damn, I should have read the book, seen how it was.” Movie came out, it was too late to read the book. And I remember when the books were out everybody was like, “Oh, did you read this book? Did you read this book? Did you...?” And then like when the movie was coming out, everybody was like, “Well, I'm gonna read the book before the movie come out.” I'm like, “I wanna read the book too,” and then I was like, “I'm not gonna read that book.”

Nora: Why not?

Xavier: I don't know, it was just that it was three books and then they were all long and I was like, “I'm not reading...”

(Interview, 4/2015)

Nora: Did you even think about picking them up or you just were not even interested?

Lucy: Well, for *Divergent*, it was our eighth grade book and I basically had to but I still didn't. Just copied off of somebody at the time.

Nora: Why didn't you read it?

Lucy: 'Cause it's so much work.

Nora: Okay. Did you just copy off of like someone else's work that they were writing, or look stuff up on the internet, you know, how there's summaries and SparkNotes...

Lucy: (*Laughs*) Yeah. I just looked to the person right next to me or asked my boyfriend. He also read it.

(Interview, 5/2015)

Cassia was also a fan of the *Maze Runner* film and shared her excitement for the upcoming release of the next installment. Nevertheless, although she began reading the *Maze Runner* novel during her summer break, stating that she did not finish it because it was “just really long” and “I was busy with other school” responsibilities. Although Cassia felt that the book “would probably have more secrets than maybe they gave out in the movie”, she did not intend to return to finish the first novel, nor read the second. Cassia was, however, excited to see the movie when it was released. Moreover, although Cassia was also a fan of the *Twilight*, *Hunger Games*, and *Divergent* series, she similarly avoided reading these branded novels in English class because they “just looks like big book[s]. A collection” (Interview, 4/2015). Cassia's response was especially unexpected because her English teacher initially suggested that I recruit her for this research study on the basis of her strong reading in class. However, Cassia clarified that she was enthusiastic reader when she was given a choice in both what and how to read.

However, even participants who adopted a readerly identity within the inquiry group claimed that they did not necessarily read branded young adult fiction novels when these were incorporated into formal school assignments. Instead, participants articulated distinctions between their voluntary engagement with texts and the requirements and expectations of teachers. The next chapter addresses these distinctions in greater detail

and explores data illustrating the ways in which social interactions informed the purposes, values, and practices of students as they transacted with branded fictions.

CHAPTER FOUR: Public/Private Transactions with Branded Young Adult Fictions

Social Readings for Social Currency

Rosenblatt (1994) characterized reading as “at once an intensely individual and an intensely social activity, an activity that from the earliest years involves the whole spectrum of ways of looking at the world” (p. 1089). However, despite a theoretical recognition of the complex and varied nature of reading, many of the reader response pedagogies favored in academic contexts continue to position both the reader and the act of reading as individual and private. Notions of “social” reading generally refer to *contexts* rather than *activities*, for example, seeking to understand the ways in which the social context of an individual influences their construction of meaning. In contrast, the data presented in this chapter coheres with a growing body of research that frames reading as a social activity that communally constructs meaning (e.g. Dressman, 2004; Park, 2012; Twomey, 2007). Drawing from ethnographic research in a first grade classroom, Ann Haas Dyson (1999) studied how children appropriated popular cultural texts in order to build and negotiate peer cultures in a range of social and academic settings. Characterizing the students in her classroom as “scavengers of form and theme”, Dyson found:

Through their social actions, including their words, they establish their identities as knowledgeable people, socially included friends, and powerful actors; and, embedded in their actions is knowledge, not only about cultural texts, but also about the larger society - its ideologies (e.g., gender), institutions (e.g., sport,

transportation, family), and not-all-together consistent values (e.g., belonging, competence, and winning) (p. 370).

Although older than Dyson's students, the participants in this study similarly read branded fiction texts in community with friends, family members, and other peer groups. The data demonstrated that while participants approached academic reading assignments as a solitary endeavor, they primarily framed their transactions with branded young adult fiction texts as social activities. For example, many group members routinely viewed branded film and television media with groups of friends and family. Tiffany shared that she planned group outings to see newly released films with her friends, noting as well that the same group of people attended every time. She scheduled many of these outings far in advance and she regularly communicated with these friends about news related to the franchise, such as the announced release date, updates in casting or other changes in production (Fieldnotes, 5/2015).

Likewise, Marena described "strict rituals" that she performed every week when watching *The Vampire Diaries* on television. She shared that her cousin was a fan of the television series as well as branded novels, and that they watched every episode together "no matter what", adding that "even if it's a re-run that week, we still have to watch it and talk about it" (Fieldnotes, 5/2015). In addition, Marena and her cousin did not live in close proximity, and as a result they often watched "together" but in separate locations, talking and sending texts to each other before, during and after the episode. They also interacted on social media, most frequently by sending and tagging brand-related images through Instagram. Lucy and Anna similarly described interacting and viewing branded

media with friends, although their gatherings usually took place in someone's home. Both girls framed their experiences hosting or being invited to attend a "watch party" as a highly-anticipated event that signified particular social cache, or as Lucy explained it:

I'm just really friendly to everybody, I've always been this friendly. But to come over to my house or to somebody else's house is different. A lot of people get into it and they get excited about watching, but they can't all come over to someone's house. So if I invite you over it's a different thing. (Fieldnotes, 4/2015)

Lucy's explanation demonstrated one of the ways in which knowledge of popular culture can provide social currency amongst teens, echoing previous findings in the literature (e.g. (Bush, et al., 2005; Finders, 1996; Hagood, 2008; Hill, 2011; Savage, 2008; Marwick, 2015; Ringrose, 2011; Rohm, Kaltcheva, & Milne, 2013). Other activities, such as shopping for branded products online or searching for celebrity gossip and news about franchises developments, were more spontaneous (and more likely to be unsanctioned internet use during class), but served to further reinforce social bonds. This connection between branded fiction and social standing may suggest other, less desirable consequences as well. For example, Savage (2008) examined how popular and corporate culture influences the subjectivities and discourses of youth, arguing that social currency is acquired, maintained, and lost by youth depending upon their adherence to popular norms and ideologies. Savage cautioned that youth who do not observe these proscribed discourses often experience social exclusion and other negative consequences. Bush (2005) focused similar research on the media habits of African American teens and found

that their interpersonal influence and self-esteem were closely tied to word-of-mouth behaviors and high media habits.

Social Readings and Brand Ambivalence

Participants reflected on their negotiation of similar social affordances and constraints in transacting with branded young adult fictions over the course of our inquiry group meetings and interviews. While all of the participants identified as fans of varying brands when entered into the study, they also discussed their engagement with branded fictions that they did not like or enjoy. For instance, the group generated substantive critiques of the hyper-serialization of many young adult fiction brands, appraising novels, films, and television series with judgments about repetition between installments or unnecessary productions and plot developments. In stark contrast to perceptions of adolescents as cultural “dupes” passively internalizing corporate ideologies, participants drew explicit connections between their negative evaluations of branded texts and the market logic and industry practices of production. For instance, Sophia vociferously shared her frustration with the narrative development of *The Hunger Games*. She critiqued the *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay* movies (the second and third franchise texts) as “just them going back to the arena and doing the same thing again. Even in the capital, it was just like another arena, it got to be too much. It could have been done with the first one” (IG, 4/2015). Lucy agreed with Sophia’s appraisal and extended her critique to the novels as well:

I felt like it was good. It's just sometimes I get really bored when, I don't know, I just feel like sometimes writers just draw it out so much, it's just like “ughhh.”

(*makes sound of disgust*) I feel like all these books are coming out like as series books and not just publishing a single book, so if you know that your story's gonna be like in three books and each book they draw things out, sometimes like this could just be one book and this could be—it's like all this stuff for nothing.

Cassia similarly critiqued *The Vampire Diaries* for “totally unnecessary and weird” plot developments the longer the series aired, while Inez shared her “disgust” with filmmakers for splitting the final *Twilight* and final *Hunger Games* novels into two films respectively “just to make more money” (Interview, 4/2015). In these and other similar instances, participants addressed the ways in which the creation of a branded story is potentially influenced by contradictory and conflicting forces—what is most profitable will not necessarily drive the creation of better narratives.

However despite these critiques, participants' comments also implied their continued engagement with the brand. Sophia, Cassia, Inez, and their fellow group members agreed that even when they were frustrated, bored or simply disliked certain stories, they still felt an imperative to “keep up” with popular branded content that was valued by their peers and families (IG, 4/2015). In these instances, participants acquired knowledge of a branded fiction from digital sources including Tumblr, Instagram, Vine, YouTube, and fan websites and reviews. However, they were just as likely to engage with branded print and media texts regardless of their lack of enjoyment. On the surface, this appeared similar to their transactions with the brands that they liked, but the nature of this engagement was distinct. For example, Marilyn and Anna both stated that they might skim the contents of a branded novel instead of reading (and re-reading) the entire text,

and Lucy responded that she would still watch a popular branded movie or television show, but she might not give it her full attention or watch it again in the future. Sophia eventually watched the movies and was knowledgeable about the events and characters depicted in *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*, as well as how these texts contributed to the overarching story world. Other participants demonstrated a similar orientation in their engagement between and across branded texts. For example, Inez “forced” herself to read all of the *Divergent* novels (Interview, 4/2015), and Cassia claimed that as a fan of *The Vampire Diaries*, she was still expected to read and/or watch *The Originals*, a spin-off franchise: “Basically, you have to even though it’s kind of weird” (Interview, 5/2015). Marilyn explained that since *The Maze Runner* “did not capture my interest”, she read reviews and fan responses online so that she would not “have to” read the entire trilogy of books or watch the movies. Moreover, Marilyn read about both the novels and the films in the series, so that she would still be able to participate in conversations about changes that occurred in the transmediation of the story (Fieldnotes, 6/2015).

The data demonstrated that participants’ knowledge about branded fictions afforded social currency through which participants strategically formed and strengthened peer groups and distinguished themselves from others. It is important to emphasize that group members discursively constructed value through informed participation. These texts became shared cultural references that circulated ideologies of identity, including gender and sexuality as well as race, class, and nationality. They were never neutral—youth transactions always involve interpreting how these texts “reflect models and ideologies abroad in the culture, and...reinforce them and refract them back

into the culture” (Buchbinder 1994, p.74). However, participants’ strategic transactions and positionings reflected feeling pressure to *engage* with branded fiction texts, but not necessarily to pretend enjoyment. In other words, participants suggested that social currency was not dependent upon liking the same texts or sharing the same opinions as peers, and they allowed critiques of branded content. Rather, their reflections revealed how branded fictions became a common cultural reference in their various social groups, to the extent that a refusal or an inability to engage with these texts could invite snubbing from peers and social isolation.

One exception emerged in Xavier’s stance and positioning towards the romantic fiction brands that were popular amongst the girls in the inquiry group, including Gail Forman’s *If I Stay* and John Green’s *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Paper Towns*. Xavier observed that although he might have heard of them, he was unfamiliar with specific details or stories. Xavier referred to these young adult fiction brands as “chick flicks”, explicitly identifying these as gendered texts. Consequently, I interpreted his disinterest and refusal to engage with these texts as another example of how branded fictions become cultural referents. In this case, Xavier’s outright rejection of “chick flicks” effectively identified him as a knowledgeable, *male* participant within the larger social discourse.

“Doing” Branded Fictions: Repetition and Rereading as Interpretive and Performative Acts

As participants distinguished between engaged transactions versus disinterested interactions with branded fiction, they frequently referred to the significance of

repetition. The act of repetition was essential in defining how fans of branded fiction franchises transact with these texts—participants reported reading branded novels and watching branded media over and over again. Moreover, this repetition was intentional and expected. The data suggested that youth bring a multiplicity of intents and intensities in reading across branded fiction texts. The ambiguity in their engagement raises questions about how socially-mediated rereading and rewatching practices form, and are formed by, the identities and cultural contexts of youth. Conversely, their engagement also raises questions about the ways in which youth may silently resist consumerist ideologies through the seemingly passive consumption of texts.

Lisa Glebatis Perks (2014) began to address this complexity in her theory of “media marathoning”, in which she suggested that contemporary media engagement is increasingly disposed towards “marathoning” media texts including television shows, movies, and serial novels. She examined how repeated engagement is framed differently depending on one’s social location (e.g. as rewatching, binge-watching, marathoning) and argued future research should be directed towards understanding why audiences marathon certain media texts, and what work these marathoned texts do in return. One possible framework for understanding these practices is drawn from the work of Eliza Dresang and Kathleen Campana (2014) and their research on “transfiguration” and intratextuality in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. Dresang and Campana argued that Rowling employs a "self-citational intratextuality" within and across the seven volumes in the series, in which a specific entity or detail included casually in one text might play a significant narrative role later in the story, and the reader must discover these entities and

their meaning independently. Dresang and Campana (2014) theorized this closed system of intratextual repetition as “transfiguration”, positing that unlike intertextual references to classical or canonical texts, transfiguration within the Potter series widely invites rereading for pleasure and discovery (p. 93).

While transfiguration may allow adolescent readers to experience a sense of engrossment and pleasure, this does not fully account for the range of purposes and meanings that participants ascribed to their repeated readings of texts. The data suggested that in addition to supporting adolescents’ imaginative and emotional engagements in a narrative, their rereading can be understood as a way of being and doing fandom (Black, 2009). For example, Xavier stated during his interview that fans of young adult branded fiction “will just read it over and over a lot, or the same with a movie, to watch it a lot. They’ll probably want to get all the stuff, like whatever is hot to put up a poster or something” (4/2015). Anna claimed a similar belief during a conversation about fans of *The Hunger Games*. Anna expressed her own affinity with the brand and described reading the novels “a bunch of times, I read them a lot” as well as interacting with fans on Instagram and purchasing branded material products from Amazon.com. Conversely, Marilyn established her disinterest in *The Maze Runner* series by refusing to read the novel more than once. Participants’ further responses during individual interviews and in conversation with each other character framed the rereading and rewatching of branded texts as performative rather than interpretive practices. From this perspective, rereading and rewatching is also an act of consuming, connecting the consumption of content to the consumption of material commodities. These practices thus

functioned as sign vehicles (Goffman, 1959) of participants' affinity and commitment to a brand, and as identity markers connoting particular understandings and orientations towards the brand that are shared with other fans.

Emotional Response as a Performance of Fandom

This sense of shared understanding was further underscored by participants' emphasis on responding to branded texts through an embodied emotional response, whether in reading a novel, watching a film or television series, or interacting around material artifacts. This was especially true of the girls in the group. For example, Marilyn characterized her responses to branded texts as one of two extremes, saying that she would "rant when I'm upset and fangirl when I'm happy. There's no in-between" (Interview, 4/2015). Marilyn shared her "rants" with friends, teachers, and especially on her Tumblr, where she described "pages and pages of ranting" about various plot developments and characters. In contrast, she shared that "fangirling" included activities such as:

Cry and happy cry, and be like "Oh my God, this is so great!" And just talk about how it's so great, about dumb little things, like, "God, it's so great!" And just kind of repeat and repeat. Repeat all over the floor, eat cookies, and cry and question your life. (Interview, 4/2015)

Other participants echoed these sentiments, although perhaps not to quite the same extent. Nearly all of the girls had read and/or watched John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, and frequently brought it up in conversation during their individual interviews, inquiry group meetings, and informal conversations throughout the school day. Lucy

stated that *The Fault in Our Stars* was her favorite movie because “It really made me cry. Like even when I put it on now, it just makes me cry” (Interview, 4/2015). Moreover, she was not interested in *Paper Towns*, another branded John Green novel and film, because she thought it would “not really make me cry”. Similarly, Anna both read and watched *The Fault in Our Stars*, and when asked to share her thoughts she responded, “I liked it. I mean, I cried for a long time” (IG 4/23/2015). Inez also shared a similar response while watching the movie with her mother and her best friend after first reading the novel:

Inez: Oh my God, so much tears. I was already fangirling soon as he said, “The fault is...” I was like, “Oh my God!” Me, my mom and my best friend went to watch it and then we went in and there was a couple of girls beside her. She was like, “Oh my God, did you read the book?” She was like, “I hope I’m not weird. Like don’t find it weird if I touch you or anything,” because she was fangirling too. She was like, “Oh my God, did you read the book?” And then she was crying, mascara running off her face.

Nora: Oh my gosh.

Inez: That book was so terrible it hurt my heart. But it was good at the same time. It was pretty good. And I can’t wait till *Paper Towns* come out.
(Interview, 4/2015)

Inez similarly characterized her response to *The Fault in Our Stars* (as well as the response of the girls sitting nearby), as “fangirling”, and her description of this experience suggested an implicit expectation for readers to demonstrate an intense, visible reaction. Is it possible for someone to be considered a TFIOS fan if they do not cry? This question was posed during an inquiry group conversation about *The Fault in Our Stars*, when Rosa shared that she had recently seen the movie. She initially stated that she “doesn’t really cry at a movie”, however, as other group members shared their

own emotionally-driven transactions with the brand, Rosa re-entered the conversation by emphatically stating that she wanted to read the branded novel:

Nora: Why do you want to read those?

Rosa: Cause, I've seen the movie, *The Fault in Our Stars*.

Nora: So you would read the book after seeing the movie then?

Rosa: Yeah, I want to cry...I'm emotional. Like really, really emotional.

Nora: Was the *The Fault In Our Stars* something that you were crying over? Or something else?

Rosa: I didn't really cry, when I was watching the movie, but I'm gonna read the book, and then, I'm gonna cry.

Nora: (*laughs*) Sorry, why isn't anybody laughing? That's not funny, to go in with a plan to cry?

Marena: That was funny, just what you said.

Brooklyn: You can't not cry.
(IG, 4/2015)

When Rosa shared her plan to read the book and cry, I initially interpreted her straightforward intentionality and matter-of-fact tone of voice as joking, since I did not expect her to control when and where she cried in response to a text. However, Rosa was perfectly serious, and the other members of the group did not find anything amiss in her stated plan – one of the reasons that these participants chose to read and watch branded fiction was because they expected to experience “drama”, “heartbreak”, and “really tragic events” (IG, 4/2015). This deliberate approach to these texts reflected the importance of “affective economics” (Jenkins, 2006) at work in their intertwining of emotional commitments and consumption. These emotional commitments were sedimented through repeated enactment of these transactions in public, participatory locations.

Distinctions Between Public and Private in the Desirability of Material Texts

Public transactions and consumption were ascribed similar importance in how students approached branded material texts. As discussed in previous chapters, the commercial products associated with young adult fiction brands encompass a broad range of types and purposes. However, despite their awareness of the vast merchandising accompanying branded novels and media, participants voiced clear distinctions between public and private engagement when discussing the desirability of material text. Research on fan culture has examined the relationship between social interaction and membership in fandoms (Black, 2009; Curwood, Magnifico & Lammers, 2013; Fiske, 1992; Jenkins, 1988; Lammers, 2012), examining the social conventions and accepted practices in various spaces. For example, Jenkins (1988) suggested that the Star Trek fandom diminishes the importance of personal reaction, arguing that “One becomes a fan not by being a regular viewer of a particular program, but by translating that viewing into some type of cultural activity, by sharing thoughts and feelings about the program content with friends, by joining a community of other fans who share common interests. For fans, consumption sparks production, reading generates writing, until the terms seem logically inseparable” (p. 473). While participants echoed this emphasis on relational worth during conversations about the material texts of branded fiction, their responses highlighted some important differences. Unlike many of the niche products and practices that construct fandom boundaries, branded young adult fiction texts are produced in order to appeal to the widest possible market and thereby expand the total franchise-brand

audience and awareness (Aarseth, 2013). This market shift was reflected in how participants interacted with these texts and with whom.

Participants primarily valued branded material texts depending upon the social interactions they expected that it would facilitate with others. The perceived worth of these products was only marginally connected to characteristics such as rarity, monetary cost, or durability – instead, desirability and value was discursively constructed with friends and other peers through interpersonal transactions rendering positive judgment, questioning, and affiliation. For example, an inquiry group conversation about the popularity of various commercial artifacts, participants emphasized the lesser desirability of artifactual texts intended for private, individual use (e.g. posters, figurines/collectibles, household items) compared to public texts (technology accessories, clothing, jewelry, etc.). Xavier questioned what people do with branded products once they've purchased them, to which Anna and Sophia both answered, "You wear it". Lucy and Xavier continued to challenge this response.

Lucy: It's like, what am I going to do with it? What would you do with it?

Xavier: Like a poster–

Anna & Sophia: (*overlapping*) Wear it!

Xavier: If it was a shirt.

Lucy: Yeah, I was gonna say, what if it's a doll.

Anna: Yeah, I'd like take pictures of it, and like put it online, and like, Oh my God, look what I got! Just like, show how you put it in your room or something and be happy that you have it and then people will comment. (FG 4/2015)

Anna's position did not depend upon the commercially projected use of a particular item. Instead, she connected her desire for branded products with the anticipated audience for her transaction – even though Anna could not wear a poster or a doll, she could perform

her enjoyment online and invite comment. Anna's suggestion resonated with Marena, who rarely read branded young adult novels but frequently went to see the franchise movies. Echoing Anna's suggestion for sharing photos of a poster, Marena noted that she frequently shared this activity on Instagram:

Marena: Yeah. And when I'm at the movie theater I'll take a picture of me at the movie theater to post it.

Nora: Where do you post that?

Marena: Instagram. (FG 4/2015)

Marilyn also suggested that public transactions with material texts can strengthen individual devotion to a brand as well as provide opportunities to bond with friends:

Marilyn: Some people, they'll be friends with somebody that like, "Oh, this would be really cool for the both of us." Or, I have a person in my church who, um, him and his girlfriend have a *Hunger Games*, lanyard for their keys, and like they both have it...

Nora: Do you think that people who are friends who like the same series do this a lot? I mean, buy stuff together, like, "Oh, this'll be cool for both of us?"

Marilyn: Yeah, I think so, definitely.

Nora: Can you just tell me a little bit more about what you think about that?

Marilyn: I think I personally would do it if I had money... (*Laughs*) Like me and my sister are big fans of like *The Hunger Games* series, and I'd definitely buy my sister merchandise like for the both of us.

Nora: That you would like both wear or share or something?

Marilyn: Definitely, yeah. Like we're together... and that's like a bonding sort of thing or like another way of sharing a story.

Other participants echoed Marilyn's opinion, describing their transactions with material texts as strengthening existing relationships, in addition to forming new social relationships. For example, Sophia described a trip to the beach where she purchased matching *The Fault in Our Stars* t-shirts with her sister. Sophia previously shared with me that her sister read *The Fault in Our Stars* novel first and enthusiastically introduced her to the brand, convincing Sophia to go see the film together when it was released.

Sophia reported that they purchased the identical t-shirts and often wear them together “Because it was about the movie and the saying. It just remind you automatically about their little saying things on the phone. It just brings back the whole scene, and the whole experience”. Although Sophia’s primary purpose in buying and wearing the t-shirt was connected to her relationship with her sister, she described other social interactions that occur when she wears her shirt.

Nora: Do people talk to you about it when you wear it?

Sophia: Yeah. Sometimes they ask where it's from. Sometimes they already know and they'll be like, “Oh, where you get that from?” So it's like other people that have seen the movie that are like that – or read the book, because they would still recognize that probably if they read the book. They're like, “Oh, where'd you get it?” Like, “I want one too”.

Nora: Is it always people that you know or do people that you haven't met before sometimes ask you about it too?

Sophia: It's sometimes people that I know, and sometimes that I'm just walking out with the shirt and I will just be with people around my age someplace, and they'll actually know what it means and they'll ask me where I got it from.

(Interview, 4/2015)

Sophia expected and accepted overtures from strangers whenever she wore her TFIOS shirt, and it is interesting to note that she would not necessarily welcome such interactions under other circumstances. Sophia clarified that she primarily talked about clothing purchases with her family members and friends, and occasionally with peers at school or neighbors “just casual, like where you get a cute shirt or bag or something you like the look of”. In contrast, Sophia stated that if an unfamiliar person approached her about her “regular” articles of clothing, she would think “they must want something, or that’s something not right...It would just be too much, like, I don’t know you”. However, Sophia perceived interactions around her TFIOS t-shirt differently, as these conversations

and questions about her shirt infused another layer of meaning (Balkind, 2014). She similarly engaged in conversations with people who did not recognize the quote on her shirt, viewing these interactions as potential opportunities to expand the fan base of the brand. During this same interview, I asked Sophia whether people approached her with questions about the quote on her shirt.

Sophia: Well, one time I was wearing the shirt and I went to the store and somebody said that it didn't make sense. It's just like, "Okay? Okay." And I told them, "If you would have seen *The Fault in Our Stars* then you would understand why it said that". And I actually didn't know them, but then when I seen them again they watched the movie and they was like, "I understand it now."

Nora: Oh my gosh, that's so great! (*laughing*) Did they have their own T-shirt then too?

Sophia: Yeah.

Nora: Wait, really? They did?

Sophia: And they have the bracelet.

Sophia's interaction with this stranger began a conversation about *The Fault in Our Stars* in which she had an opportunity to share her response to the events and characters in the story, convincing this individual to similarly engage with the brand. Her conversations reveal subtle distinctions between branded young adult fiction texts and comparable (but not similarly branded) materials, as Sophia talks about the former as something that people "recognize", "know what it means", and "understand", as opposed to simply "liking" because it is "cute". Marilyn ascribed similar value to these texts as well, sharing her expectation that branded materials act as a "conversation starter" towards multiple purposes.

Marilyn: They'll be like, "I don't know, it's just a cool quote." I mean, it's a great conversation starter where [I'm] just like, "Okay, you should read the book and know where it came from." And as well as it's kind of like, "Okay, you want to

buy a shirt, don't buy something you didn't know about." And it kind of goes both ways, you know?

Nora: Mm-hmm.

Marilyn: You can start a conversation, get the person into the book, or you can be upset because they don't know what they're talking about. (Interview, 4/2014)

What are the social outcomes of such interactions? Marilyn and other participants shared that these conversations often yielded new social media "followers" or "friends" online. However, it was not clear to what extent (if at all) these communications were sustained over time. Sophia's interactions with the individual who asked about her shirt did not develop beyond occasionally bumping into each other at neighborhood stores, yet despite not knowing this person's name she asserted that they maintained "a positive connection, kind of a bonded connection" with each other due to their shared response to *The Fault in Our Stars* (Interview, 4/2015). Inez similarly described this perspective as she explained her "obsession" with *The Fault in Our Stars* and the reasons why branded fiction products are so valuable to her and other teenage fans.

Inez: They become obsessed with it. Obsessed with the idea. I know because I became obsessed with wanting *Fault in Our Stars* accessories, because you want to become part of the fandom. You just really feel a part of it. Fit in. You wanna fit in with the accessories. You can be like, "Oh, you seen that? I seen it too. Okay, let's be friends." (*chuckles*) Like that... I was at a baseball game, and this girl had a "Okay? Okay." hoodie on, and I go, (*gasps dramatically*). And I was like, (*mimicking an excited, breathy voice*) "Oh my God, did you see the movie?" She's like, "Yeah I saw it". And I'm going (*whispers reverently*) "Oh my God, you're so cool."

Nora: So even if she's a stranger, you felt like you could go talk to her?

Inez: Yeah, it's like sending signals, like "Oh they're just like me. They're cool, and they're outgoing probably", all this other stuff. They're going to probably like you. When you see other people with the books and accessories, you know right there instantly. Even if you don't know them, you can go up to them, you get a good vibe.

Nora: Like you know something about who they are?

Inez: You already know they're going to be really, really cool...like we both feel the same. I would know we're gonna have good bond, most likely.

Inez's comments suggested that she makes intentional transactions with branded material texts in order to negotiate access and belonging within new social groups. However, while Inez repeatedly marked her desire to belong to the *Fault in Our Stars* "fandom" and to "fit in", the boundaries of this community were ambiguous at best. Inez did not participate in any TFIOS fan spaces online, and her experience at the baseball game appeared to serve a broader social function. In her rationale for approaching the girl wearing the branded hoodie, Inez did not mention the girl's age, race, or other elements of her physical appearance that might offer clues about her personality. Rather, the brand afforded a social acceptance that could momentarily supersede other social signals.

Nora: Was there anything else about her? Like, other stuff that told you she was cool and let you know that she would probably like you? Or anything about how she looked or how she acted, or maybe who she was with?

Inez: No, just because of the hoodie.

Inez reiterated that physically demonstrating her commitment to the franchise with the branded hoodie signaled mutually shared experiences and emotional dispositions, reading the hoodie as a type of invitation to connect and communicating that her interlocutor will "probably like" her. Her story reflected an assumption that the wearer of the hoodie would be familiar with these signals and would agree with her interpretation that "If you see other people with the books and accessories, even if you don't know them, you can go up to them".

“Girly-Girls” and Gendered Branding

Other participants in the inquiry group affirmed Inez’s suggestion that possession of different texts “sends a signal” to other knowledgeable individuals about the identity of the reader. To that end, access to branded material texts became a means of regulating social practices and ideological boundaries within their respective communities of practice. Many of these discursive interactions served to regulate norms of gender and sexuality, raising questions about how students materially valued, negotiated, and reconstructed performances of femininity, masculinity, and sexuality in both their individual responses to the texts and their reactions to the responses of others. While norms of participation varied across differing franchises, students regularly inferred gendered subtexts in purchasing (or expressing desire for) certain texts and strategically located themselves in accordance with these evaluations (Erlich, 1999).

An example of this positioning was articulated by Marilyn, who discussed her preference for branded materials depicting quotes or symbols as opposed to popular images of actors and scenes from the storyline. During her interview, Marilyn repeated “I don’t like the faces” three separate times, unequivocally sharing her conviction “I don’t like that. I think it looks weird” (Interview, 4/2015). She continued:

Marilyn: I think it’s turning it, just making it about having a crush...’Cause it’s hardly ever women’s faces on those things.

Nora: Yeah. It’s usually—

Marilyn: Men.

Marilyn critiqued material texts with “the faces” by suggesting that these products signaled a superficial and problematic engagement with the brand. She was aware of the

anticipated audience for these kinds of products, noting that they rarely depict images of the leading female characters. Her comments implicitly echoed popular discourses devaluing girls' interests and practices as unintellectual or weak (Toffoletti, et. al, 2009), complaining that focusing attention on a "crush" encourages a reductionist reading of the text. Nevertheless, shortly after making this statement, Marilyn modified her position.

Marilyn: A poster I would buy. I think posters I would buy.

Nora: What poster would you buy?

Marilyn: Um, a *Divergent* poster.

Nora: What would it be, I mean, what would be on it?

Marilyn: With Four. *(laughs)* As I fall into my own trap. *(laughs)*
(Interview, 5/2015)

Marilyn laughed at herself and acknowledged her own contradictory stance, illustrating how she could critically read and "crush" on the text simultaneously. Rosa's engagement across the respective material texts of *The Fault in Our Stars* and the *Twilight* franchises illustrated a similarly complex negotiation of gendered practices. Rosa asserted that even though she is "such a big, big fan" and is "in love with the whole romance" of *The Fault in Our Stars* film, she would not be interested in the branded t-shirts, jewelry, and other accessories that are popular amongst fans (Interview, 4/2015). She emphatically stated that only "girly-girls" want *Fault in Our Stars* branded merchandise. In the midst of her explanation, Rosa stood up while and began to dramatically performed her description.

Rosa: Cause like, *(high-pitched voice and dramatically widening eyes)* "they were in love". *(returning to regular speech, stands up)* I'm like a tomboy, I'm not like "ooh, "aaaah – I want this and I want that". No. I mean, I'm the princess in the house, but no. I'm not a girly-girl.

Nora: So if you're more of a girly-girl, that's why you would buy that sort of stuff?

Rosa: *(in high-pitched voice with exaggerated valley-girl accent)*. Of course, yeah. *(flips her hand and wrist, laughs)*

Nora: *(laughing)* Oh my gosh, you even did the flip! Could you tell me just a little more about the type of girl that buys stuff like that? 'Cause that's so interesting to learn.

Rosa: *(mimicking girly voice)* Can I tell you in this voice? *(flips hair and wrists)* 'Cause I love acting.

Nora: Sure – *(laughs)* is this the girly-girls' voice? *(Rosa nodding while skipping in a circle)*. What kind of girls would want to have *Fault in Our Stars* stuff?

Rosa: Um, let me think *(spins counterclockwise in a small circle)*. Girls that are like, *(mimicking)* really girly... Girls that wear a lot of makeup. And like, I don't know. Stuff like that. Maybe they're always doing their hair, talking about boys. *(pause, in regular voice)* I talk about boys but I'm not in that kind of category.

(Interview, 4/2015)

Rosa's comments highlighted the multiple and often contradictory beliefs that may influence social interactions around transmedia brands (Jenkins, 2006). Rosa suggested that uniformity across girls' transactions with the branded print and media texts of *The Fault in Our Stars* compelled her to distinguish herself from other fans along material lines. Her stance entailed judgment of "girly-girl" fans by their branded clothing and accessories rather than their attitudes and beliefs about specific characters, relationships, or narrative events. This stance sharply contrasted with how Rosa navigated the *Twilight* fandom, her other primary interest. As an ardent devotee of "Team Jacob", Rosa owned the *Twilight* graphic novels, films, and numerous material texts including werewolf-themed clothing, home decor, technology accessories, and a life-sized cardboard cutout of Jacob, which she displayed in her bedroom. Generally desiring, owning, and interacting with material texts in this community offered insufficient evidence of a gendered and sexual identity, because the love triangle between

the main characters stimulated ongoing disagreement and debate amongst fans. Since many “Twi-hards” purchased branded material products, Rosa engaged in visible practices demonstrating her commitment to the Bella and Jacob “Ship”. Her beliefs and values were thus signaled by material texts that celebrated “Team Jacob” over “Team Edward”, privileging his character’s enactment of masculinity, desire, and romance.

Rosa drew from multiple resources in order to perform gender within and across these two fan communities. Her discursive engagement with branded products performed ideological work in constructing a different but “official” truth that invoked notions of “appropriate” response to texts (Erlich, 1999). Although Blackburn (2003), Nylund (2007), and other researchers have studied the “queering” of young adult literature and other popular culture and mass media texts, these perspectives and practices were not evident in Rosa’s or other participants’ public transactions with material texts. Although material texts supported Rosa and her peers in challenging the dominant narrative of certain brands, these revisions most frequently centered on their perceptions of the attractiveness or “worthiness” of certain characters in relation to others in the same story or to popular characters in other franchises, reinforcing heteronormative gender binaries.

Performing and Assessing Group Legitimacy with Material Texts

This gendered positioning occurred most efficiently in interactions with peers who recognized signals across overlapping series and brands, for example, Inez noted that she “usually buys these types of things because I understand the inside joke of them or I recognize the quote...and Theo James is really hot!” Participants transactions with branded material texts can serve to establish group affiliations and facilitate access and

belonging within a given community of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992). The nature of these interactions can depend upon context and the affordances of different media. For instance, Marilyn was an active participant in the *Harry Potter*, *Hunger Games*, and *Divergent* fandoms on Tumblr, and she developed a system for appraising other fans.

Marilyn: I like to connect myself with like other people who share the same interests as me. I would like look at their page and then like, depending on how their page looks, I'll like be like, "Okay, maybe I should like question them something," and if they answer the question and I kind of like their answer, I'll follow them. Yeah.

(Interview, 4/2015)

By asking a question, Marilyn was first assessing whether a potential contact would meet her expectations for community participation – she required a response to her question regardless of the content posted on their Tumblr. She then evaluated the answer itself to determine the respondent's knowledge of the brand as well as their personal stance towards important elements of the branded world. Marilyn described some of the possible questions that she would pose to a fan of *Harry Potter* thusly:

Marilyn: So in the *Harry Potter* stuff, I'll ask them [something] like, what do you think about Harry as like a person? And then, 'cause I honestly feel like Hermione should have been the main character–

Nora: I know, she's awesome, right?

Marilyn: Yeah, isn't she? So I ask them something like that, like who do you think should have been the main character? Do you agree with the author?

Nora: So if somebody said, "I really like Harry. I'm glad he was the main character," would you not follow them because you like Hermione?

Marilyn: Yeah.

Nora: Is it because of whether or not someone's a fan enough for you to follow, or is it more that you also want them to agree with you on stuff?

Marilyn: It's a mixture of both 'cause sometimes you can tell when people like don't really know what they're talking about, you can tell. So if I sense they don't know what they're talking about, I won't follow them, but if they like know what they're talking about and they say their opinion, and they're like, "Okay, yeah, this is why," I'm like, "Okay, yeah, I'll follow you."

However, other contexts do not allow for the same nuanced questioning and appraisal afforded by the communicative norms of Tumblr. To that end, participants also established norms of authenticity within their community of practice by privileging "coded" material texts that required insider knowledge of a brand in order to be recognized (e.g. products with symbols or quotes, rather than titles and logos). For instance, Sophia shared her *Fault in Our Stars* t-shirt during an inquiry group meeting and discussed her reasons for purchasing and wearing this item of branded clothing. The design of Sophia's shirt transposed dialogue between Gus and Hazel, the two main characters in *The Fault in Our Stars*, depicting the words "Okay? Okay." printed inside of two cloud-shaped figures. The font and design of this t-shirt recontextualized the cover art of the novel (as well as the promotional images for the film, which similarly recontextualized the book's aesthetic elements). However, nothing on the shirt explicitly identified the brand name. (See figure 1). Sophia explained her preference for products that can only be recognized and understood by "real" engagement with the brand.

Sophia: I like it because it's a saying that barely anybody uses, and they made it up for themselves

Xavier: (*loudly, incredulously*) Who doesn't say okay?

Sophia: You gotta watch the movie to understand "okay", okay?

Lucy: Okay? Okay? Okay? (*group laughter*)

Xavier: That's not – who doesn't say this? People say okay all the time, okay? Okay, okay?

Marena: It's how they use it. They don't use it like that. They say, (*mimicking*) "Okay. Okay."

Sophia: It's not just 'okay', it's the way they said it. If you watched the movie you would understand.

Xavier: So how do they say it?

Sophia: They say "okay" like "I love you",

Marilyn: It's how they say I love you. It's not the usual meaning, it's not that, they don't just say, (*mimicking*) "okay, okay". You gotta read it.

Marena: But you also gotta understand why they say it like that.

Marilyn: Yeah, but you gotta read it, read it or watch it to understand why -

Xavier. Okay Marilyn, okay. (*group laughter*) (IG, 5/7/2015)

Although Xavier could recognize the transmedia franchise referenced by Sophia's shirt, he was the only member of our inquiry group who had not read or watched *The Fault in Our Stars*. Therefore he was the only participant in this exchange who did not understand the underlying meaning in its graphic design. Sophia, Lucy, Marena, and Marilyn all attempted to explain the context of the quoted dialogue to Xavier. It was not enough for him to simply recognize the quote on the shirt (or on other branded texts), and they took turns asserting the importance of understanding how and why the characters use this phrase. There was a great deal of laughter throughout this interaction, and the group had fun playing with language throughout this exchange. Lucy and Sophia played with humorous repetition of the word "okay", a move that simultaneously affirmed the logic of Xavier's initial question and defended their own position, and Xavier similarly conceded by jokingly emphasizing "Okay, Marilyn. Okay" at the end of this exchange. Ultimately, the girls were unable to explain the quote to their satisfaction, and Xavier was told that he must either read the novel or watch the film in order to understand the importance of the phrase.

This additional layer of meaning increased the shirt's value to Sophia and her peers, who suggested that less-overtly branded material texts created opportunities for them to distinguish their engagement with a transmedia franchise from other teens who are easily swayed by shifting fads. Their transactions with these kinds of texts served as both performance and assessment of identity and legitimacy (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992).

Marilyn: There are a lot of people who don't know anything about it but then they buy iphone cases and stuff because it's all over social media.

Sophia: It they see someone posting about one thing, then they will want it too.

Marilyn: But you can tell from talking to them that they don't really know what it means, why they are wearing it.

(IG, 5/7/2015)

Moreover, it is important to note that although they presented consensus in their exchange with Xavier, each of these participants individually navigated the myriad texts of *The Fault in Our Stars* differently: Marilyn first read the print novel, then watched the film adaptation. She thought that "the book was so much better" and later reread the text. Lucy and Sophia first watched the film, after which they read portions of the novel. Both of them characterized this partial completion of the print text as having "read the book", and neither of them planned to read the remaining chapters. Finally, Marena watched and rewatched the film, and adamantly refused to consider reading any part of the novel. Marilyn acknowledged this range of transactions in her argument that Xavier must "read it or watch it to understand". However, the words "read" and "watch" were used interchangeably throughout the conversation, and both reading and watching were considered acceptable forms of engagement by the group members in order for Xavier to

construct meaning from the quote. While students frequently debated the merits of reading versus watching branded young adult fiction texts over the course of the study, in this instance a consistent meaning was maintained across the transmediations of the brand and their shared understanding of the quote on Sophia's shirt negated their need to distinguish between the two modes.

This perspective was reflected later in the meeting, when conversation returned to Sophia's shirt. Xavier stated that this discussion about the hidden meaning of Sophia's shirt convinced him to purchase a similar shirt for men. The group immediately returned to debating the merits of the book versus the movie, until Marena reminded everyone that Xavier could understand the quote either way.

Xavier: You convinced me to get it

Lucy: Ok, so you can watch the movie.

Sophia: Watch the movie

Marilyn: Wait – wait, no! Read the book.

Sophia: Don't read the book, just watch the movie.

Lucy: Watch the movie, watch the movie...

Anna: (overlapping) Read the book or...you could do both.

Marilyn: Do you know there's so many parts in the movie that left out what's in the book? The book has so much more than what's in the movie of them together–

Sophia: (overlapping) Yeah, but the movie just makes it so much better.

Marilyn: But they did so much more, oh my God.

Xavier: You don't have to sit there for like, freakin, three days of your life reading a book.

Lucy: Or probably even more, like a week!

Marena: It's basically the same thing. I mean, it means the same thing in both–

Nora: But if you're all caught up in the story, don't you want to see more of them and how they act with each other?

Xavier: No. Maybe if you're not lazy like me. But now I can just get the t-shirt.

Xavier did not contest the other participants' personal preferences for transacting with *The Fault in Our Stars*, but he nevertheless reiterated that he still did not intend to read the novel or watch the film in remarking "Maybe if you're not lazy like me. But now I can just get the t-shirt." It was no longer necessary to transact further with either text since he now possessed the requisite code for understanding the quoted "Okay" dialogue. Xavier observed that he had "already heard a lot and read" [about it online], and this knowledge, combined with the explanation provided by the group, enabled his access to the brand and to positive judgment within this community of practice.

In their social relations and positionings, participants made use of the symbolic resources of branded fiction texts to construct identities and to collectively share a transmedial world with other participants (Dyson, 1999). For these youth, having access to branded codes was "central to being part of a community and means having access to certain kinds of power; it also allows people to adopt the self (or identity) they feel is appropriate or demanded by a particular relationship, space, or time" (Moje & Luke, 2008, p. 42). The next chapter examines how participants drew from these coded literacy practices to construct and circulate particular meanings and interpretations that were contextualized by wider issues of power, agency, and subjectivity.

CHAPTER FIVE: I want to feel part of it: Reimaginings in/of Branded Worlds

Play and Creative Resistance in Branded Worlds

Branded fiction created for young children has afforded rich inquiries into the literacy identities and repertoires of practice that youth generate in everyday play with toys and games. Scholarship in this area has researched the multiple and complex intersections of children's identities and social worlds of children with global franchises and branding relations, positioning commercial toys and games as cultural tools that index "anticipated identities" in their design and use (e.g. Black, Tomlinson, and Korobkova, 2016; Carrington and Dowdall, 2013; Marsh, 2000; Wohlwend, 2009; Wohlwend & Medina, 2015). The "facilitated play practices" of toys and games has also been a related focus of research on play and young children, examining how certain practices and meanings are connoted in their design and discourses of circulation. Although there can never be a single, predetermined meaning of an artifact, the notion of facilitated play practices illuminates the ways in which geographies of play establish boundaries of use that are socially maintained and enforced (Lauwaert, 2009). For example, Black, Tomlinson, and Korobkova (2016) took up this framework in their study of how young children are socialized into dominant narratives of gender and identity during play with LEGO Friends and LEGO City franchises, while Johnson (2013) examined the licensing and production of LEGO minifigures as a racializing discourse that constructs identity and power in both corporate brands and raced bodies of children.

Although branded young adult fiction materials are more likely to include clothing and accessory products rather than toys and games, findings from this vein of

research conducted with young children (e.g. Edwards, 2011; Wohlwend, 2012a, 2012b) proved salient to this study as well. In addition to social interactions with their peers, inquiry group participants highlighted the possibilities for teens to immerse themselves within a branded series using material artifacts, joining and interacting with their favorite characters. The students shared that they desired, purchased and used products associated with branded novels “to feel like I could be somewhat closer to the book while reading it, to feel a part of it”, contradicting depictions of adolescent consumption as merely fad or fashion (Brooks, 2008). They also characterized their engagement with products such as t-shirts, jewelry, make-up, and technology accessories as a form of “grown” or “more mature” play, a way for teens to imagine of a brand, “Ok, this is real” (IG, 4/23/2015). Moreover, many of the participants made distinctions between their branded fiction products and the toys and games marketed towards younger audiences. For example, Marena initially stated that the only product she would purchase would be a phone case depicting a photo of either Dylan O’Brien or Theo James, “Cause I could get to see it everywhere I go, ‘cause my phone would go with me. Like we always are together.” Other products, she claimed, were too “childish” (Interview, 4/2015):

Nora: Why only phone cases? What about like, um, other types of accessories?

Marena: No.

Nora: Nothing?

Marena: No.

Nora: Like you wouldn't want like a folder or a laptop case–

Marena: No. I think that's kind of childish...

Nora: Can you tell me more about that? ‘Cause they do make stuff for young kids.

Marena: Yeah, but I mean I feel like that's childish, if you carry a folder of that person, even if I have a phone case, but I don't care if that's my phone. But you

take out your folder and like – oh no, Miss, I just think it's childish. Like even rulers or pencils or something, I think that's so childish. With the wrapper for the pencils. I think that's childish.

Nora: What about a keychain or something?

Marena: That's childish also.

Nora: Um, I probably shouldn't show you my bookmarks then. I have Edward and Damon bookmarks in those books.

Marena: The bookmarks is fine, but I mean like the folder and computer stuff isn't fine. I don't know, Miss, it's just really weird.

Anna: I have posters, T-shirts.

Marena: Well, I actually have a picture of Stefan on my wall. I ripped out a magazine. It's actually, thumb-tacked to my wall.

Nora: So a poster is something that you would also want? That's not childish?

Marena: Yeah. Yeah. No, I don't feel like that's childish.

Marena suggested that while certain items were too immature, carrying a cell phone case picturing one of her favorite actors would allow her to imagine that they were “always be together”. Xavier made a similar distinction between toys for younger children and accessories for adolescents,

Xavier: I think it's a waste of money. Why am I gonna sit there and buy something that I'm not gonna use? Like, why would I spend money on a wand that is just gonna sit there in a box? It's sitting in a box...it's not real. I'm not gonna use it.

Nora: Not actually magic?

Xavier: Exactly, it's not magic.

Nora: Um, so no to the magical toys then. What about stuff like the Mockingjay pins or the T-shirts or something?

Xavier: “People say like, “Oh, like, um, I feel like I'm in the movie *Hunger Games*.” Or like everyone does the pointing thing and they'll be like, (*enacts the District 12 salute and whistles*), like on the *Hunger Games*?”

Nora: Oh, yeah that's from the movie. I recognize that. I don't know how to whistle but that's impressive.

Xavier: (*Laughs*) So people do it so they can pretend that they're in the movie then. Or pretend that they're in the books if they're fans of the books I guess. They do it to show other people that they like it.

In this instance, Xavier distinguished between a toy that required time set aside for intentional play (the magical wand) and an accessory that served multiple purposes, but allowed for incorporating this imaginative play into one's everyday life. Other participants similarly owned and/or desired products that allowed them to live with, and live within, their favorite branded worlds, emphasizing the importance of products that reflected something that was personally meaningful to them in the branded novel, film or television show. Inez shared that she especially wanted t-shirts, phone case, or a wall decal with the "tribe tree" or a quote that she would "want to be part of my life", something that would remind her "that's what I love...and then it gives you imagery to live with it too, and you're just mind-blown"(Interview, 4/2015). Anna also shared that when she read a book and it impacted her, having the shirt or necklace "keeps that impact...it reminds me of something important" (Interview, 4/2015), while Marena explained that branded material texts "have to be like a saying or something, like a little thing that they had said that was meaningful and stuff like that" (Interview, 4/2015). Finally, Cassia also echoed these sentiments, saying:

Cassia: Maybe they just want some attention.... 'Cause I think it makes people feel special or just closer to the [show]...Maybe it's probably just because like they really want it and they like the idea. It's part of the show, so it makes them feel like they're part of the show as well. And then it keeps them interested for longer.
(Interview, 4/2015)

This perspective was taken up within the inquiry group during a conversation about *Hunger Games* merchandise. In the first novel of *The Hunger Games* series, Katniss wears a pin in the shape of a mockingjay (a fictional bird) as her "tribute token" in the arena. Over the course of the series, her pin takes on increasing significance as the

mockingjay becomes the symbol of the rebellion against the capital. In the following excerpt, Anna shared a necklace with a similar mockingjay charm that she found online.

Anna: I like it. I don't know, 'cause it's cool. I saw this online, it's like a necklace with a mockingjay bird -

Marena: I was gonna say that too!

Anna: And it's really pretty.

Marilyn: Especially stuff like that, it can make you feel like you're part of it. Like, merchandise like that, I think it makes you feel like you're a part of it, like you're part of the rebellion.

Nora: Would you ever buy something like that?

Anna: If I had the money.

Marena: But you wouldn't, cause you're broke. (*Marena and Anna laugh*)

Nora: Would you ask for it as a gift?

Anna: Yeah, yeah definitely.

Marena: I think it's cool that it's a necklace. Just like the pin that she has, that's a necklace.

Anna: I don't know, it's pretty. But it's also like you have her actual pin, so you've joined in. You've joined the rebellion. (*Marena nodding.*) They have it online.

Marilyn: Yeah, like a part of the big rebellion. You get to be in that world, which makes you love it even more then because you make it the way you want. Like with choosing Gale and not Peeta.

Xavier: I don't buy merchandise. What am I gonna to do with it?

Lucy: Wear it?

Rosa: Look. I have almost everything. Wait – yeah, almost everything *Twilight*. I have the poster board, I have the t-shirt of Jacob that my grandmother buys me, I have a necklace that says “I love werewolves”, I have all of that for Jacob. So I can be with him.

(IG, 4/30/2015)

Unlike other texts that feature a branded logo or reproduce specific phrases or images, Marilyn suggested that this type of product invites an especially desirable engagement with the story by making a reader feel “like you're a part of it, like you're part of the rebellion”. Her position was affirmed by Marena and Anna, both of whom

pointed out the resemblance of the necklace to Katniss's "actual pin" and their potential for feeling like they "joined in" the rebellion.

Revising and Remaking Branded Worlds

However, students did not only seek to enter a fictional universe, but to revise and remake it as well. By positioning themselves within this imagined context, students were asserting their interpretive authority over the brand. This is illustrated in Marilyn's suggestion to "make it the way you want", in which she challenged the resolution of the central love triangle (and the conclusion of the series) by "choosing Gale over Peeta". Similarly, Rosa listed the many *Twilight*-themed products that she owns, noting that "I have all of that for Jacob. So I can be with him." Given the liminal boundaries between readers and branded fiction texts, transactions with these material products may be understood as a social practice in which adolescents performed and played with storytelling identities – by manipulating the myriad texts of branded fiction, participants were concomitantly negotiating their understanding of the anchor story and inserting themselves into its overarching narrative.

Moreover, these interactions did not suggest an unproblematic engagement with commodified texts, as textual accuracy was not the only consideration voiced by students when constructing the value of Anna's necklace. Despite their enthusiasm for tangibly entering the world of the *Hunger Games*, none of the students expressed a desire for a reproduction of the original mockingjay pin. Rather, they wanted something that was sufficiently authentic as well as something "cool". As such, Marena specifically drew attention to the fact that this product was a necklace instead of a pin, while Anna

repeatedly emphasized that that necklace was “really pretty”. In addition, this type of play required the purchase of a specific commodity, rather than encouraging individual creativity and invention. This mindset echoed warnings by Linn (2008), who cautioned, “fans of Harry Potter books don’t have to make the imaginative effort to transform sticks into magic wands when detailed replicas are available at toy stores....and the underlying message is that children will actually be unable to play without them (p. 33-34).

Similarly, Hannaford’s (2012) practitioner research on the “popular-culture literacy space” of free Internet game websites documented the creative play of her students as they integrated and constructed identities while responding to commoditized fantasy narratives, while Hill (2011) argued that an aggressive commodification of childhood is occurring unabated in “North American communities. Hill described youth as being immersed in a “buy and consume modality” that connects the ideologies and behaviors of material consumption to the development of identity and self-image. Hill cautioned that this has especially insidious effects on girls, who are inundated with marketing designed to connect femininity with consumerism – in effect, the feminine ideal is something that girls must purchase as part of the performance. Nevertheless, the data revealed youth transactions that defied straightforward classifications as “good” or “bad”. Students were clearly susceptible to the marketing campaigns and commercial products that are central to branded young adult fiction franchises. Nevertheless, their passions and intentions also shaped their participation in this community.

Branded “Whitewashing” and Contesting Racial and Ethnic Homogeneity

This inherent tension between subjectivity and positioning was further complicated by the racial and ethnic homogeneity pervading the transmediation and commodification of branded young adult fiction. Students initiated and sustained conversations in which they critically interrogated the purposes of corporate “whitewashing” and the erasure of difference in global markets. The following excerpt introduces a critical inquiry that students pursued over the course of our group meetings: What if some or all of the main characters in branded young adult fiction were identified as Hispanic or Latino/a? What if these stories were created with a primarily Hispanic or Latino/a audience in mind?

Marena: What if this was about Hispanic vampires, imagine we’d be like –

Marilyn: [laughter] I feel like Hispanic vampires, like we would always be getting together and calling each other cousins and stuff... watching out for each other.

Lucy & Marena: (*shouting in unison*) Prima!

Anna: (*shouting*) Primaaaa!! (*group laughs*)

Marilyn: But I think it’s racist. Why are there not Black vampires, or Hispanic vampires or Asian vampires? Why are they all white?

Xavier: They’re prejudiced

Marilyn: Yeah. And they like white-whitewashed them out completely. They’re not white, they’re pale.

Anna: But they’re vampires, so they gotta be pale.

Marilyn: But why can’t there be a darker tone than that? If you think about it though, if you’re a vampire, what are the chances that no Black men, no Asians, no Hispanics were ever bitten by a vampire? The fact there’s no diversity in vampires is kind of illogical. It’s like saying vampires are only attracted to white people. I’m just saying. Vampires are racist.

Sophia: In terms of the casting for these movies, they’re pretty much all white people too.

Rosa: But what about Jacob?

Marilyn: The actor is, even if they’re not white in the books. (IG, 4/2015)

In the conversation above, students explicitly referred to racism and prejudice, indicating that their transactions with branded fiction did not necessarily indicate a solely passive socialization into hegemonic values. Their comments demonstrated an understanding that the branded young adult fiction that they love was not created “for them” or their immediate community, and their cultural identities and experiences were rendered invisible even when, as Marilyn pointed out above, their absence detracted from the logic of an imagined world. While Marilyn, Marena, and Sophia were all enthusiastic consumers of both the *Twilight* and *The Vampire Diaries* series, we cannot examine consumerist practices in isolation from their critical interrogation of culture, diversity, and racial and ethnic inequality. Instead, I am situating these transactions within McRobbie’s (2005) understanding of agency as a reinventing of identity(ies) through multiple discourses, suggesting that students engagement with branded material texts illuminates the fluidity of agency and subjectivity informing adolescent literacy practices.

However, this interaction further signaled youth manipulations of branded products that are created for their consumption, positioning them as both readers and makers (as well as exploited labor and consumers). In his discussion of convergence culture, Jenkins (2006) argues that it can be defined “top-down by decisions being made in corporate boardrooms and bottom-up by decisions made in teenagers’ bedrooms. It is shaped by the desires of media conglomerates to expand their empires across multiple platforms and by the desires of consumers to have the media they want where they want it, when they want it, and in the format they want” (para. 3). When Marena directed the other group members towards a conversation about Hispanic vampires, she discursively

included herself and her peers in this category by asking her fellow group members to “imagine *we’d* be like...” Marilyn subsequently supported this positioning, suggesting, “*We* would always be getting together and calling *each other* cousins and stuff” (emphasis mine). Lucy, Marena, and Anna all affirmed Marilyn’s statement while concomitantly signaling their own belonging in this community. They were laughing as they loudly shouted “*Prima!*”, a Spanish term for cousin and popular form of address amongst friends at Unidos Academy, doubly confirming their shared, contextual understanding of a Hispanic identity.

Participants continued to explore these questions over the course of the school year, discussing the ways in which diversifying popular young adult fiction might correspondingly (re)shape characters’ actions, relationships and narrative events. Their comments during these group discussions further considered questions of identity, authenticity, and reception. For example, Marena later suggested that a Hispanic character “should really go back and forth” speaking both English and Spanish, then added a caveat “but some people, they won’t like that”. She pointed to possible tensions between cultural authenticity and market value, since “doing diversity right” might deviate from popular values and diminish profit margins.

In this later inquiry group discussion, participants returned to their discussion of “whitewashing” in branded worlds, questioning the absence of Hispanic characters (or even lead actors or actresses) in these roles. Marilyn, Xavier, and Anna all referred to the deluge of negative feedback from fans when a Black actress was cast to play Rue in the first *Hunger Games* movie. Anna described Rue to other group members as “the little

Black girl who died. The black person always dies in the movies”, and Marilyn and Xavier drew from this comment to discuss the perceived marketability of diverse characters, and the role of discrimination against Latinxs.

Marilyn: Yeah, I think it’s because of the stereotypic Hispanic thing going on.

Xavier: Cause they’re racist.

Marilyn: Yeah, and a lot of people are racist, and they might be like, I don’t want to write that book, I don’t want to buy that book because there’s a Hispanic in it. You know what I mean? So then it won’t make as much money.

The group began to discuss what an “authentic” or “realistic” portrayal of a Hispanic character would entail.

Anna: Because they’re too dramatic and... *(people laughing and making sounds of agreement)*

Nora: Because they’re dramatic?

Marena: They’d have to be way more dramatic.

Lucy: I don’t know if I’d pick a Hispanic person

Tiffany: Maybe if there was a Spanish version.

Marena: Yeah, like they would probably want the Hispanic character to speak Spanish, but then other people won’t like it. Like there’d probably be a lot of people asking things.

Anna: Like, what is that, what does that mean?

Nora: So if you were gonna do a good job, you’d have to have a character who’s also speaking Spanish as well?

Marilyn: Yeah, and if you did a good job, then people could criticize that as well, like “that’s not the right word”, or – it would be a lot more work to put in a Hispanic person instead of a White person and make it realistic.

Anna: Yeah. They would expect everything to turn into a telenovela

Rosa: They would be crying through the whole book.

Nora: They’d be crying through the whole book?

Rosa: I mean, that’s what Hispanics do when they watch TV. They watch the novelas and they’re in tears. I mean–

Sophia: Maybe people who wanna act out, they probably don’t even feel for the character. Because sometimes, some people have an accent, and their character won’t have an accent.

Nora: So is that an issue, that the stories aren’t written for a diverse cast of actors, they’re written in a way that only–

Marilyn: Only white people could play them. And that it'd feel weird for a diverse cast to play them because it would feel, I don't know how it would feel.

Sophia: It would feel fake, it'd be too fake.

Rosa: Yeah.

Marena: Yeah

Marilyn: So you'd have to change the books if you wanted to change who was in them.

Adapting semiotic elements from branded texts, students performed in creative recontextualizations that connected storylines and characters to both individual and shared Hispanic identities. In this intertextual context, “the story itself is no longer discrete or sequential because there are many other voices and intentions populating its pages and many other products that add to it”, and this fluidity thereby creates spaces for individual appropriation and repurposing of texts that may subvert the intentions of publishers and merchandisers (Sekeres, 2009, p. 412). From this perspective, youth consumption of commercially branded products may in fact create opportunities for marginalized readers to challenge hegemonic texts, rewriting themselves and their identities into a more culturally conscious narrative.

To that end, Baudrillard (1998) argued that people position and reposition themselves within the social order through their consumption of goods, conceptualizing this process as an exchange between the individual and the text. Adolescent identities are therefore produced, not transmitted, through the consumption of popular culture for specific purposes – purposes that may serve multiple and contradictory roles in the identities and positioning of these youth by dominant forces (Baudrillard, 1998). These transactions, which may consequently “challenge notions of universality and static

overdetermined identity within mass culture and mass consciousness can open up new possibilities for the construction of self and the assertion of agency” (hooks, 1991, p. 28).

“Doing” Gender in Transaction

The data revealed participants’ similar assumptions about the relationship between gender and the anticipated audience of formulaic young adult fiction brands. For example, Anna loved to both read and watch *The Hunger Games* series and Marvel’s *The Avengers*. However, she stated in an interview that she would recommend *The Fault in Our Stars* or novels by Nicholas Sparks to her friends, “Cause it's something that could relate to them or with something for a girl. More of the girls would be into [them]... ‘cause of romance and cute relationships and it's for teens”. In an interview with Xavier, he similarly suggested that there are different categories of branded young adult fiction that are grouped according to the “difference in what boys and girls like to watch and become fans of”, such as the *Maze Runner* versus *The Fault in Our Stars*. Both Anna’s and Xavier’s comments reveal an interesting contradiction between popular rhetoric about teenage girls and their engagement with branded young adult fiction, and the wide range of brands and genres that were actually discussed by participants in our group meetings.

Participants ascribed gendered meanings to the content of various young adult fiction brands, leading to clear distinctions between “girl” brands and “boy” brands and practices. (However, there was a sense that girls could like the boy brands –these were universally appealing even if boys wouldn’t like the girl ones). While it was socially acceptable for girls to enjoy any of the brands we discussed, there was a shared

understanding that boys would not. Xavier re-introduced this topic during a later inquiry group conversation about the popularity of various branded fiction franchises, however, in this instance he modified his original position by referring to a sub-genre of popular branded texts as “chick flicks”.

Xavier: All them chick flicks. I don't know the names.

Nora: The chick flicks?

Xavier: The ones that make, the girls sit there and cry.

Sophia: *The Fault in Our Stars* made me cry.

Nora: Is that a chick flick?

Marilyn: Not really.

Lucy: I think that's like, like a drama.

Sophia: It's like, both.

Rosa: Yeah. It's kind of like dark.

Xavier: Pretty boring.

(IG, 5/2015)

In addition to their general aesthetic responses, participants' talk often centered on the romantic relationships depicted in branded fictions and the “dangerous” appeal of the lead male characters:

Sophia: He just is. He just is.

Inez: Because he's sexy.

Marilyn: Yeah, he's sexy.

Anna: He's just like Edward.

Nora: What makes him sexy?

Marilyn: He's like the bad boy, it's the whole bad boy versus good boy

Marena: It's his character. He just –

Anna: Yeah, his character.

Sophia: And his jawline.

Marena: Oh! His jawline. His jawline.

Sophia: Yeah, his jawline is on point!

Inez: I think it's his character.

Marilyn: I think that it's the fact that he's like in *Dauntless*, and *Dauntless* is like, more bad. But he's kind of like a good one.

Inez: Yeah, he's worse at first

Marena: But he's still bad

Marilyn: Yeah, but he's still bad.

Lucy: What does that have to do with Edward?

Marilyn: So he's a good person but he can still, like, carry himself.

Marena: You know he can take care of himself like that.

(IG, 6/2015)

This same tendency was represented in the girls' explanation of the mass-appeal of Four to them and other teenage girls. Their responses (repeatedly describing Four as "sexy" and a "bad boy", noting his attractive jawline) articulated a good-bad tension in his characterization – Four was "bad", but he was certainly not a villain. This was also evident in Anna's observation that Four is "just like Edward", a reference to vampire Edward Cullen in the *Twilight Saga*. Like Four, Edward was initially aloof and contemptuous towards the heroine of the story. This attitude, however, disguises his immense attraction to the heroine and his desire to protect himself, and her, by maintaining an emotional distance.

In addition to broad discussions of these character's desirable characteristics, the girls also engaged in textual analyses that considered evidence of characters' "dangerous" appeal. During a debate between the girls about whether Katniss should have chosen Gale or Peeta at the conclusion of the final *Hunger Games* installation, members of "Team Gale" initially began their arguments by emphatically claiming that Gale is aesthetically "hotter" than Peeta, and that although Peeta cared for Katniss, he was "boring" (IG, 6/2015). Marilyn pointed out the long-time friendship between Katniss and Gale as evidence that they were "meant to be together", and suggested that the relationship between Katniss and Peeta was due to social pressure and the threat of the

state, rather than based on genuine emotion (IG, 6/2015). They also considered metaphors in the text that signaled Gale as the more desirable romantic partner that reinforced their reading of Peeta as boring:

Lucy: I just think Pita bread every time I hear his name.

Marena: I hate that his name is Peeta. It just sounds stupid.

(laughter)

Anna: Do you think he's named Peeta because he was a baker, and he gave her that bread?

Marena: It's just stupid

Lucy: I know, right?

Nora: And Gale...did you know that Gale is another word for a strong, stormy wind? Like a hurricane.

Marena: Plus that fits, he's—hurricanes can get really bad, or, like scary bad.

Marilyn: He's like a hurricane of hotness (*laughing*). And as always, that makes him even hotter. Definitely Gale and Katniss.

The girls made a similar transition in their conversations about Tris and Four. Although they initially discussed his physical attributes and “bad boy” status, they also engaged in a closer reading of Four’s interactions with Tris over the course of the storyline. The girls readily acknowledged that Four had an “attitude” and “is such a jerk” to Tris, yet even as they criticized his actions they suggested that it actually made him more attractive (IG, 5/2015). However, the girls also referred to the branded narrative (novels and films) to analyze the underlying reasons for his behavior:

Marilyn: Four is kind of mean in the beginning, but that's just because doesn't—he has trust issues.

Anna: Yeah

Marilyn: Like, anyone that has trust issues would be kinda skeptical of letting a girl always be around him, and especially if he's a Divergent.

Sophia: Yeah, and that's what I'm saying, it's because he was the only Divergent.

Marilyn: Yeah, and—

Xavier: (*aside to Tiffany*) Don't ask.

Marilyn: He was afraid more. He was mean cause he was afraid.

Sophia: Yes, that exactly.

Their analysis suggested that Four's actions are influenced by underlying emotions created by the conditions that he lives. Although their reference to Four's trust issues could be a reference to long-term effects of his abusive father, which had been the subject of previous conversations, there are other factors at work as well. The girls agree that as a Divergent, his actions were the product of fear. The existence of Divergent individuals threatens the stability of a society where everyone is expected conform to their faction. The girls suggested that systemic issues – the constant fear of exposure, the constant threat to Four's life, and the constant surveillance of the state – bear responsibility for his behavior.

Realistic versus Reality: Navigating the Parasocial

Although participants were well aware of the cultural homogeneity across these franchises, their responses to the various texts also revealed the ways in which they made connections to these texts. For example, participants frequently praised their favorite franchises as “realistic” when describing them to each other or explaining their preferences. This adjective was applied to a wide variety of franchises, including *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *The Fault in Our Stars*, and *Twilight*, despite elements of the fantastic in these stories. As a group, we began to analyze what made these varied stories realistic to the audience.

During our first inquiry group, Sophia stated that she likes “true stories the best – things that actually happened” (IG, 3/2015), but over the course of our meetings, she clarified her position by explaining that her favorite franchises are stories that “seem like

they *could* be true” (IG, 4/2015). Other participants agreed with this interpretation, articulating both their preference for “real life” narratives and making judgments about the relative importance of different components of a story.

I gradually realized that participants’ beliefs about the “realism” of a particular story or franchise was largely dependent on how they perceived character actions and interactions, as opposed to the trajectory of events in a narrative, setting, and other elements of storied worlds. Accordingly, the data demonstrated that participants judged realism by whether “someone would really act that way” in the face of similar circumstances, not whether the circumstances themselves could actually occur. One example of this can be seen in Marena’s explanation of *The Vampire Diaries*:

“Obviously, it’s not true, they’re no actual vampires or witches or anything just coming to school”. Marena and I frequently chatted about recently aired episodes of *The Vampire Diaries* during her Advisory period, as well as sharing other news and “gossip” about the show. Over the course of these conversations, Marena frequently criticized the implausibility of events in various episodes, describing the repeated deaths of characters who were later reanimated as well as other plot contrivances as “just getting ridiculous”. Nevertheless, she still described the series as “pretty realistic” because she felt the characters themselves “acted like real people” (Fieldnotes, 6/2015). For instance, Marena emphasized her perception of the tensions and competitiveness in the relationship between Elena and Caroline (lead female characters) as reflective of the issues that frequently occur within groups of girlfriends (Fieldnotes, 5/2015).

Although participants discussed and debated the plausibility of specific events or devices in a narrative during our inquiry group, they rarely did so unless I specifically prompted them. In contrast, notions of realism were similarly constructed by participants in their self-generated conversations about a character's response to varying issues of danger, adversity, and familial conflict. For example, our group inquiry into *The Hunger Games* was marked by comments such as "You know you would be running just like that if it was you!"; "If you were hungry, you'd do the same thing."; and "No matter what, if that's your family then they have to come first.". Another example of this distinction surfaced in a group discussion about the *The Fault in Our Stars*, in which Marilyn, Anna, and Lucy concentrated on the believability of the relationship between Gus and Hazel:

Marilyn: I honestly don't think that would happen. I think they probably could fall in love, but I don't think they'd go to Paris and all that stuff.

Anna: Yeah, and the money too.

Marilyn: I mean, they do get a wish, like they said. That part was realistic I guess.

Lucy: I think the whole thing was realistic. Like the way they fell in love with each other and were friends too.

Marilyn and Anna both noted the improbability of specific events in the narrative that are dependent upon the characters receiving an unexpected financial windfall. Their comments suggest that their interpretation of access to capital and opportunities to travel are informed by practical bounds. However, the development of Gus and Hazel's relationship and the representation of romantic love in their interactions were more significant in their readings of the novel and film. Moreover, this consideration of how main characters fell in love was a topic that recurred in group and individual conversations throughout the study. With the sole exception of Xavier, participants' focus

on interaction between characters was most evident in their interest in the representation of romance and desire in a brand.

Marilyn: I feel like Tris and Four's relationship is very realistic. Like the fighting, and the jealousy, and like all of the anger. Because he wanted to control Tris, and she wouldn't allow him to. I think that's really realistic.

Marena: Mmmhmm. I think that definitely happens.

Sophia: And how he knew she was Divergent but he didn't talk about it because he knew he was too.

Marilyn: Yeah. A lot of people, when they like each other, they know the other person likes them. That's why they keep talking to them.

In this conversation, Marilyn, Marena and Sophia co-constructed a shared interpretation of the central romantic relationship between Tris and Four in the *Divergent* series, making numerous connections between this relationship and their own lives. It is also interesting to note that although the *Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, and *Maze Runner* franchises are all dystopic fictions set in the future, participants most frequently (and collectively) described these three franchises as reading true to their lived experiences and beliefs about society. For example, Inez minimized the significance of obviously fictional elements in the *Hunger Games* and *Divergent* storied worlds (such as technologies that do not currently exist), and she argued that she and other teens identify with these stories because:

Inez: *Hunger Games*—I didn't like it that much but it was pretty good. Especially *Divergent* series, that was pretty intense. And *Maze Runner*. I finished that book in five hours. (*laughs*) I could not—that book was so compelling. Like I could not put it down.

Nora: So tell me more about it. What did you like about it?

Inez: I like how it had more imagery in it. And then, I think it was utopia, that's how you say it? Utopia?

Nora: Dystopia.

Inez: Dystopia, yeah. It has that in there and it just makes you think like, "Wow, what if the world eventually would come out like that one day?" and it just makes

you think. I find it so cool how authors have creativity like that ‘cause it makes your mindset bigger...It just made me think a lot, like, that'll be so crazy if our world would like come out like that one day. That's why it's so addicting because you're just like, oh, you want to know more what's gonna happen next.

Nora: Mm-hmm. Do you think it actually—the world actually could come out that way?

Inez: Pretty much. Yeah. [I] Could see something like that happening easily.

The slipperiness of “real life” also informed participants’ parasocial responses to the characters in a branded franchise and the actors who portrayed them on screen. Participants also formed parasocial relationships with both the media characters in branded young adult fictions and the “real life” actors who depict these characters onscreen. This was especially apparent of girls in this inquiry, who described their engagement with many brands in terms of intense, emotionally-tinged relationships (Horton & Wohl, 1956). The current structure of the media industry ensures that these characters are ubiquitous in the lives of youth, as it both saturates the market with commercial texts and positions actors as branded commodities for youth to consume.

This perspective was evident in a variety of participants’ responses over the course of the study. Conversing in her English class, Cassia suggested a future storyline for *The Vampire Diaries* television series in which Rosalie Hale, a vampire character in the *Twilight Saga*, becomes the new love interest of Damon Salvatore (Fieldnotes, 5/2015). Her belief that Rosalie and Damon would make the “perfect” couple was inspired by the news that actors Nikki Reed, who played Rosalie in the *Twilight* films, and Ian Somerhalder, who plays Damon on *The Vampire Diaries* television series, had recently married. Cassia noted that she “got them [Reed and Somerhalder] on Instagram, both of them”, and that uniting the two vampire franchises would be “so cute”

(Fieldnotes, 5/2015). Cassia further bolstered her suggestion by noting that the lead actress who played Damon's love interest throughout the series was departing the show to join a spin-off branded fiction series, *The Originals*.

Horton and Wohl (1956) theorized parasocial relationships as “a seeming face-to-face relationship that develops between a viewer and a mediated personality” (p. 215). Early research sought to understand the experience of adults who formulated these bonds, and suggested that these unhealthy, one-sided relationships stem from feelings of loneliness or antisocial behavior. Although the field is beginning to explore the short- and long-term emotional connections that youth construct with popular media, empirical research is scarce and primarily focuses on the informal friendships young children form with television characters (Giles, 2002; Jennings & Alper). Nevertheless, recent studies have begun to examine how children construct a range of positive and negative relationships through multiple media forms and both friendly and antagonistic connections with characters (Jennings & Alper). A growing body of research also suggests that personalized and interactive relationships with characters may aid children in learning, (Calvert, Richards, & Kent, 2014; Gola, Richards, Lauricella, & Calvert, 2013). Echoing much of this earlier research, participants frequently articulated a wishful identification with characters in branded fictions. For example, Marilyn identified with the relationship between Tris and Four in *Divergent*:

Marilyn: In *Insurgent*, I loved the action and I loved the love between Four and Tris, and like the drama. Like Four is extremely jealous but she's like, “I'm a woman and I do what I want,” and it's just amazing. Like I love Tris as a character. I think she was amazing, yeah.

Nora: What else do you like about her?

Marilyn: I honestly love the fact that the... I just love about *Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, I love that the main characters were women and they were showing us these strong and independent women who like really didn't depend on anybody and they, they kind of did their thing. I really like that.

The intense crossmedia promotions that accompany franchise distributions are designed to build the mass-appeal of the brand itself as well as the celebrity of the actors who star in the brand's on-screen transmediations. Johnson (2013) observed that although actors profit from the fame generated by these promotions, their association with the brand and their respective characters is also cemented in the minds of the audience. This process effectively positions them as one of many other disposable commodities. This ambiguous positioning was illustrated in Marena's identification with Tris:

Nora: If you had to choose, do you think you would...what do you think you would be in?

Marena: That I will be wherever that girl is at, whatever it's called. That section that she...

Nora: Yeah, yeah, uh, Dauntless, right?

Marena: Dauntless, yes. I would in that too, be Dauntless.

Nora: You don't think you'd be Divergent?

Marena: Well, I would be. I would be a Divergent and Dauntless.

Nora: Oh.

Marena: So pretty much I'll be the girl. (laughs)

Nora: (laughs) Maybe that's why you think it's you.

Marena: Yeah. And 'cause the guy. He cute. What's his name, Theo James?

Nora: Mm-hmm. Or Four.

Marena: No, I like Theo James 'cause Theo James, I don't know. You know he actually has a accent in real life?

Nora: You know, somebody else was telling me this.

Marena: Yeah, he really does. He's really cute.

Marena's comments revealed her wishful identification with Tris's character in *Divergent*, as well as her parasocial relationship with the text that conflated Four and Theo James, the actor who plays his character on screen (Tosca, 2015). Her response is

precisely what media franchises are designed to elicit—teenagers (and teenage girls in particular) have become a highly profitable market for the media industry. Teen girls are especially likely to focus their attention on a particular cast member in a branded media production, and their transactions with this actor/character leads to “a maze of information, products, and services” connected to a franchise (Murray, 2007, p. 49). While these youth have been described as engaging in “celebrity worship” of a “fantasy crush”, studies have also examined how adolescents both relate to and idealize brand actors of their same gender through “negotiated identification” (Aubrey e. al; Murray, 2007).

For instance, Inez shared that she began to write a *Divergent* fan fiction story during the summer before ninth grade, “the intro, like the prologue, in July, and then I read it and I told [00:24:49], I was like, “Wow, this is pretty good. Like this is actually pretty good.” She described the story as *Divergent* fan fiction that “somewhat” departed from the brand:

Inez: It's kind of a [*Divergent*] fanfic somewhat...I don't know ‘cause every time I think of the guy I think of Theo James.

Nora: Of Theo James?

Inez: Yeah, but I don't put the as character Theo James...So I was thinking, probably she goes away and then she meets this guy and then he's trying to get with her and she's just like, “No, that's not my thing,” and then she misses her best friend and then her best friend tells her about this guy she's messing with but he's messing with another girl and he's also a drug dealer, and then the whole time it was him...Yeah, something like that probably.

Inez's “somewhat” fan fiction story reflected complex transactions with the *Divergent* brand. She stated that she based her character on Theo James, a British actor who plays the role of Four in the *Divergent* films. Although she named James, not Four, as her

inspiration, further conversation revealed that her character and Four shared a number of similar traits (in appearance, personality, and physicality), while attributes of James, such as his British accent, were also included. Inez's summary of the central conflict in her fan fiction was markedly different than the plot and setting of *Divergent* world, but many of the emotional tensions between Four and Tris were represented, recontextualized into a setting that was more familiar to her everyday experiences. Her explanation suggests that she is merging Theo James and Four into a single entity – she has a crush on Theo James, with an assumption that his own personality echoes that of imaginary Four.

This “slippery” parasocial is further complicated by the relatively small cohort of actors who are cast in these roles, in a sense becoming their own “brand” within the entertainment industry. During an inquiry group meeting, the girls returned to the topic of romantic relationships in branded franchises, leading to the following exchange:

Marena: Yeah, some of them were realistic. Like what we were saying before, I would want a relationship like in *Divergent*.

Anna: Yeah, I could see, um, wait –

Marena: You mean ‘what’s-her-name’?

Anna: Shailene Woodley. Shailene Woodley with Ansel. [Switching to TFIOS – is brother in *Divergent*]

Marena: No, because they’re really just friends. They’ve said they’re just friends in interviews.

Anna: But I could definitely see them together.

Nora: Wait, do you mean Gus and Hazel the characters? Or Shailene and Ansel the actors?

Anna: No Miss, that’s not – I mean, either way. They would be so cute.

Sophia: Eeew, no that’s so wrong – he’s her brother!

In order to comprehend each turn in the above conversation, one must be familiar with both *The Fault in Our Stars* and *Divergent* franchises, including the main characters

of these stories and the respective actors who depict the transmediated characters on screen. Actress Shailene Woodley plays the lead female roles in the two popular film franchises, as Hazel Lancaster in *The Fault in Our Stars* and Tris Prior in *Divergent*. Woodley's co-stars in *Divergent* include Theo James as Tobias "Four" Eaton (Tris's love interest) and Ansel Elgort as Caleb Prior (Tris's brother). Elgort also co-stars with Woodley in *The Fault in Our Stars* as Augustus "Gus" Waters (Hazel's love interest), while James and Woodley were rumored to be in a secret, off-screen romance.

This tangled web is represented in the fluidity of characters and relationships mentioned by each participant in the example above. Marena began the conversation by referencing the relationship between Tris and Four in *Divergent*. Although Anna appeared to agree, she clarified that she was referring to a hypothetical relationship between actors Shailene Woodley and Ansel Elgort, implicitly shifting the focus of the conversation from Tris and Four (and Woodley and James) in *Divergent* to Hazel and Gus (and Woodley and Elgort) in *The Fault in Our Stars*. Marena accepted this focal shift, but she challenged the legitimacy of Anna's position by citing media interviews promoting *The Fault in Our Stars* where Woodley and Elgort claimed a platonic friendship. However, Sophia returned the conversation to *Divergent* by referring to Elgort's role as Caleb Prior by positioning Elgort as Woodley's brother.

As youth transactions with branded fictions expand, Kehrberg's (2015) research on Twitter communications between celebrity and audience offer a promising direction for this work. Analyzing the message content and rhetorical strategies of fans who communicated with popular celebrities on Twitter, Kehrberg identified elements of

interactive “facework” that suggested a discursive tensions between fan mobilization and audience exploitation (p. 87). She characterized Twitter’s online platform as “synthetic personalization: hierarchical power dynamics masked by simulated interconnection” and absent “authentic presence” (p. 85). Kehrberg further noted the complicated purposes that shape these interactions: Since celebrities (like writers, producers, and other stakeholders in media industries), are subject to the consumer demands of the marketplace, they must appease their audience through strategic use of Twitter and other media platforms. Kehrberg’s findings suggest new possibilities of youth to construct liminal boundaries between social and parasocial as they respond to branded fictions across multiple platforms.

CHAPTER VI: Conclusions and Implications

Embodied Readings and Reimaginings of Branded Worlds

Amidst concerns about the commodification of childhood and youth culture, this study suggests that it is increasingly critical for literacy researchers and educators to attend to the agency enacted by youth in traversing these spaces and in making sense of and representing their selves and their worlds. Comaroff and Comaroff (2000) have argued that "youth tend everywhere to occupy the innovative, uncharted borderlands along which the global meets the local" (p. 308). Accordingly, we need to learn more about how adolescents are approaching the multiple and diverse texts that are a part of their lived worlds, and what values they are ascribing as they navigate them. Sumara (1996) has argued that "modernity has taught us to ignore the body, to believe that our bodies are something which live in but are not really part of various locations. But...we are an inextricable part of the unity of the world. And as such, the very ecology of our lived experiences bear examination" (Sumara, 1996, p. 90). Branded fiction texts, particularly material objects, become part of the physical, lived worlds of adolescents, and as such the materiality and embodied practices of reading branded fiction raise new issues for researchers, educators, and policymakers.

Implications for Policy and Practice

These findings add to research in the field of adolescent literacy that investigates the myriad contexts where literacy, youth cultural production and identity converge, and constructively makes problematic the liminal spaces between adolescents' sanctioned and unsanctioned literacy practices and between in- and out-of school (see Alvermann, 2007;

Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004; Moje & Luke, 2009; Schultz & Hull, 2008). Henry Giroux (2014) described schools as becoming “dead zones of the imagination”, arguing that the contemporary school reform movement is driven by corporate ideology that has “turned American public schools into disimagination machines divorced from any viable notion of democratic governance and values. They kill the imagination of teachers and students by confusing education with training and teaching with mind-numbing instrumental practices” (p. 491). Low-income youth of color disproportionately attend under-resourced schools where “back to basics” rhetoric and zero-tolerance disciplinary policies further marginalize these students and deny crucial opportunities for intellectual and creative engagement (Noguera, 2009). It is within this context that we must consider the commodification of young adult literature and youth engagement with these texts in and out of schools.

For example, this study has implications for reconsidering how students are responding to texts, as the field of literacy education reflects a reinvigorated pedagogical focus on text-based evidence of reading comprehension. With the adoption of the Common Core as well as increasing standardization of assessment in education more broadly, students are increasingly directed to engage in close readings of texts. The questions that teachers and assessors pose to guide students through this process are text-dependent – readers are not asked to make connections to other texts or their lived world. Instead, this interpretive approach locates meaning within the text itself, asking the reader to focus on what a text communicates and how this communication is achieved (Shanahan, 2014). As such, close reading expects successful readers to comprehend texts

by engaging in a direct, methodological examination of the layers of meaning, rhetorical features, and literary devices presented by the author, and since meaning is dependent on the features of the text, readers should be able to support their interpretations by identifying specific textual evidence.

Although participants did not strictly engage in close reading (Gallop, 2007), the data revealed the range of interpretive approaches through which they engaged branded texts. As such, study has implications for how educators understand the work of close reading as a pedagogical framework and analytic lens. For example, students in this discourse community engaged in close, analytic readings of how symbolism was used by an author, of the cultural references in story, and of the import of various structural elements on the development of the story. These youth read and reread branded texts in order to reflect on the key details and ideas, interrogate craft and structure, and to integrate these understandings into a more nuanced and complex construction of meaning (Shanahan, 2013).

Although the participants were engaging in deep intellectual work in this discourse community, this does not suggest that their transactions should be viewed as equivalent to traditional notions of close reading as construed in policy and practice. Indeed, focusing solely on transmedia and other popular culture texts will not necessarily afford Latinx and African American students in marginalized communities access to the same schooling opportunities that youth in other contexts are taking for granted. Instead, this data points to limitations in current definitions of what constitutes both reading and

text, and suggests alternative perceptions of students who choose not to read the texts assigned in school.

Despite a general enthusiasm in the literacy field for instruction that incorporates digital media and digital literacies into the classroom, many schools in Philadelphia (including Unidos) continue to privilege printed books as a more legitimized academic text. In order for students to succeed in this context, teachers and policymakers must understand how students relate to and understand print texts and to engage in pedagogical approaches that acknowledge these relationships in practice. For example, the data illustrated youth partially reading novels or reading about novels, including excerpts of text in memes and images on social media, and assuming a norm of multiple interpretations—what does this mean for these youth when they are asked to engage in a close reading exercise or standardized assessment? Will they be more or less prepared, as they negotiate both the analytical strategies and fluid meanings that inform their transactions with branded fictions? Thus, this study suggests the need for educators to design a more expansive curricula that accounts for the range of practices that inform how students are constructing meaning. Pedagogy and policy must begin with a question: What does it mean to “read the book” in a world where texts and textuality are shifting?

Dystopian “Realities” and Critical Inquiry

Without inviting the authentic practices and perspectives of youth, assigning branded fiction texts will not engage students any differently than traditional texts. The data suggested that one potential opening for this work emerged in participants’ affinity for dystopian fiction franchises and their emphasis on the realism they perceived in these story worlds. There are numerous examples in the literature of teachers use of dystopian

novels in critical literacy instruction, including the work of Ames (2013), Collins, Groenke, Rose-Shafer, and Zenzano (2006), Glasgow (2001), and Simmons (2012), and Wolk (2009). However, this has particular relevance for low income youth of color living in urban neighborhoods, for whom the issues of hyper-surveillance and the militarization of police are often institutionalized into the fabric of formal schooling, and whose readings of branded dystopias might become an instantiation of a hyper or integral reality. Baudrillard's (2005) notion of integral reality conceptualizes a virtualized world in which the functions of society and human relations are filtered and made visible through digital media, blurring boundaries between the observer and the observed and on and off screen. As youth access branded dystopian fictions through a range of print, media, and material texts, they are simultaneously being surveilled and monitored by actors and technologies (e.g. security cameras, camera phones) in their own schools and communities. According to Baudrillard (1996), this juxtaposition creates a hyper-reality in which the boundaries between view and viewed are blurred, remaking readers “as actors in the performance” (p. 26). Teachers are uniquely positioned to access and unpack the implications of this hidden reality with their students through the use of branded dystopian texts in their classroom. As such, branded dystopian fictions offer rich possibilities for critical inquiry into broader questions of power and privilege not just in analyzing the stories (e.g. teachers who connect dystopian literature to current events), but in looking at the textual media available to students, the ways in which stories are transmediated across modes (Siegel, 1995), and the corporate structures that influence this process (Johnson, 2013).

A caveat as teachers engage in this work, however, is to be wary of assumptions that essentialize students' lived experiences and the resources of their families and communities. As demonstrated in the data, participants' identification with dystopian fiction was just as likely to be connected with the romantic or familial relationships depicted in the story or the emotional responses of the main character. Consequently, it is important to reiterate the necessity for teachers to be open to multiple interpretations and responses to such texts. Moreover, the data reiterated the need for teachers and researchers to be wary of focusing too much on the content of branded texts, and instead question and seek to learn more about what adolescents are doing with these texts. Students' collective inquiry into popular transmedia franchises reflected the wide variety of print, media, and material texts associated with young adult branded fiction as well as the strong association between the many texts that are sold under a single brand name. While some teachers might promote the use of branded young adult fiction to engage students, and others might deride the same literature's lesser literary quality, this study suggests that the text itself is only one of many that will inform how students are engaging and making sense of a story.

It is not enough to say that students only read the book or watch a movie, but rather, this study suggests that youth draw on a repertoire of multimodal texts and practices in their reading of branded fiction across real and virtual spaces. Even the participants in this study who regularly read branded young adult fiction novels did not necessarily do so when assigned by a teacher – the question remains, then, how teachers can invite multiple readings and engagements with these texts that draw from students'

authentic literacy practices, rather than replicating traditional academic norms. We need to learn more about what adolescents are doing across a host of branded fiction texts, as it was students' literacy practices that constructed meaning and power in this research.

Implications for Research: Lingering Questions and Future Directions

Reader Response as Embodied and Material

This research also has implications for reader response pedagogies, as branded fiction texts, particularly material objects, traverse real and imagined locations and raise questions about what it means to live with these texts day to day. With this in mind, the materiality and embodied practices of reading branded fiction raise new issues in transactional theories of reading and reader response. Speculating on the effects of the multitude of products within a franchise, Mackey (2001) suggested that transactions with branded fiction texts could be understood as occurring in, and producing, a “meta-virtuality: fantasy consumption of the fantasy” (p. 178). For example, the data illustrated an intertextual struggle between imagination, intellectual property, and stardom in parasocial relationships that participants formed with both the media characters in branded young adult fictions and the “real life” actors who depict these characters onscreen. Graeme Turner (2014) has conceptualized celebrity as both “a media process that is coordinated by an industry and as commodity or text which is productively consumed”, thus the actors who star in branded film and television series as yet another text to be read (p. 23). Youth are generating social identities in their transactions with branded texts—as they interpret meaning they are negotiating the text in conversation with their individual experiences, histories, and imaginings of future possibilities.

Moreover, participants distinguished between with branded material texts and other similar products that were unrelated to a young adult brand. They perceived and transacted with branded texts for different purposes and understandings that similarly align with a model of production in-use of popular culture and consumption, and more research must seek to understand this relationship between the meaning-making processes of reading and consumption. For example, Sophia's purchase and wearing of the "Okay" t-shirt meant something different to her than other, unrelated shirts that she bought and wore. At the same time, however, the distinction between different types of branded texts blurred as students navigated this universe of products. Reading these texts wasn't a linear process, but instead was part of an evolving and complex network of interrelationships.

As such, the interconnectedness of branded fiction texts renders boundaries between these texts permeable and fluid, presenting challenges to clear-cut definitions of textual response. When participants responded to a branded text, how should researchers (and educators) define text and context? Are youth responding to a branded text, or are they responding to a brand? This research aligns with the work of Livingstone (1998), who found:

But today's young people move between many different media versions of their favorite literature, not just back and forth between the print page and the moving image. Not only may they experience and re-experience the same story in many different incarnations, they also live in a world where the trailer, the spoiler, and the YouTube highlight develop an important impact on the concept of the

aesthetic whole as a unit of experience in which fragments of a story repeat ever more endlessly.

Traditional approaches to reader response analysis assume that the reader is transacting with a coherently unified text. However, the multiple texts of branded young adult fiction, while interconnected within an overarching transmedia world, are not uniformly consistent across media forms. This study suggests that even when participants are responding to a particular text, they do so with some degree of knowledge of the transmedial world that the text is situated within. In that respect, then, the transmedia world serves as both text and context. The place of the book within this framework is uncertain, as the diverse ways in which students consumed and read across the branded fiction products available to them reflects the inherent ambiguity in ascribing specific, constant values to the different types of texts in this arena (Mackey, 2004), raising new possibilities for integrating material literacies into literacy classrooms. What are its affordances and limitations? How might we situate branded fiction in relation to other classroom texts in order to support the achievement and expand opportunity for students, families, and communities?

Resisting Binaries: Agency/Subjectivity and Reading/Consumption

Finally, this research suggests unanticipated possibilities for resistance and change emerging with the commoditization of young adult literature as youth, through their entanglement with popular culture and the prevailing consumerist forces, concomitantly take critical positions, audition different identities, and create and inhabit multiple worlds (Holland, et al, 1998). In many respects, the market-driven

characteristics of branded young adult literature substantiates concerns about literary quality and the pervasive consumerist socialization of youth. Writing about the influence of corporate, neoliberal values in popular transmedia franchises, Lunenfeld (2000) cautioned that

“The result of such dubious corporate synergy is the blending of the text and the paratext, the pumping out of undifferentiated and unfinished product into the electronically interlinked mediasphere. Final closure of narrative cannot occur in such an environment because there is an economic imperative to develop narrative brands: product that can be sold and resold (p. 15)”.

However, there is also an opportunity created with these conditions – many of participants transactions with texts felt playful – playing with the “authorized” texts to create or weave their own narratives into this story. The spatial and temporal locations of the branded world became permeable – the back cover of a novel or the closing credits of a film no longer represented the end of the story.

It is important to note that while there is no specific textual hierarchy in transmediated branded fiction, the different types of texts that comprise a profitable franchise each allow different affordances and limitations in representation and consistency within the brand. Consequently, “content” is not transferred uniformly across texts. (Mackey, 2004). When young adult novels are transmediated into film and television series, the storied universe must adapt to the new medium – events may be omitted or added to the story, dialogue changes. Characters are raced, gendered, and sexualized in order to their maximize appeal to viewers, and consequently the perceived

values and desires of an anticipated audience frequently precipitates substantial shifts in the development of characters and relationships. In contrast, branded videogames allow for more faithful recreations of setting and individual characters, but must replace key narrative events with unrelated elements of gameplay (e.g. battling opponents or collecting tokens) (Aarseth, 2006).

However, the mutability of transmedia texts provides multiple points of access and spaces for individual and communal meaning-making (Jenkins, 2006). As transmedia franchises become increasingly ubiquitous within the publishing industry and corporations seek to maximize profits, market saturation of branded products destabilizes text-based interpretive authority. Students at Unidos Academy observed that intertextually branded content subverts textual hierarchies and traditional conventions of reading. In this sense, commodification normalizes expectations for individual readers and consumers to assume greater flexibility in their transactions with branded texts. These processes and practices create a cultural context that may simultaneously reinforce consumerist values as well as transgressive readings and remakings by youth. This paradox is further complicated by the observation that none of the participants in this study exclusively consumed branded products associated with a single transmedia franchise. Rather, a student might take up aspects of both *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, constructing a plurality of sites of the self (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998, p. 31).

Given these complexities, it seems dangerously reductive to position adolescents as dupes or passive consumers of young adult branded fiction. The increasing popularity

of transmediated and branded young adult fiction raises important concerns about consumerist socialization, inequality, and the commodification of culture. However, establishing an artificial binary between passive consumption and agentive resistance masks the social forces at work in creating readerly identities. Consequently, this stance perpetuates an assumption of agency as teleological and moving in exclusively progressive directions (Apple, 2010). The relationship between power, consumerism and agency is far more complex and varied, and it is crucial that we allow for the possibility for transactions with branded fiction to occupy multiple and contradictory spaces in adolescents' lived worlds

Concluding Thoughts

Participants' transactions with branded texts revealed the range of practices and perspectives that shaped their engagement with branded young adult fiction. Nevertheless, a wide body of research on fan engagement also includes myriad examples of tangible, creative productions and co-constructions of transmedial worlds, most of which were not part of the repertoires of practice that participants brought to this study. I have intentionally focused the writing of this research what these youth actually *did* with branded texts, and what this meant to them, rather than comparing their transactions to other forms of fan engagement that may be perceived as more valuable.

This study emphasizes both the tensions and possibilities that surround youth transactions with branded young adult fiction, and has implications for how we understand youth cultures as agentive and productive in a diversity of contexts. There are a number of ways that the production of audience or reader might be overlooked in the

intertextual struggle between intellectual property, readerly imagination, and the asymmetrical sites of contested image and meaning that concurrently shape each other in transactions with texts. For example, Hayward's (1997) research on the consumption of serial texts highlighted the range of ways an audience might be "active" without composing fan fiction, while Tosca's (2015) work on transmedial desires similarly emphasized a reframing of so-called "passive" desires to consume transmedia entertainment. Tosca noted despite the emphasis on participatory co-creation in the research on transmedial storytelling, "only a few" readers will engage in these practices to create their own stories within the transmedial universe:

Many readers/viewers/users/players are consuming transmedial products without actually producing any content themselves, which is kind of embarrassing if we think that the only thing that can redeem an audience is their willingness to engage creatively with their course of inspiration/fandom...From a transmedial desire perspective, they are all contributing to keeping the world alive by the mere act of engaging with it at an interpretive (and sometimes productive level) again and again (p. 38).

The field must continue to inquire into these fan engagements as well.

Adolescent reading is connected to the broader social and cultural contexts in which these texts are situated, spaces in which norms and values can be reproduced, as well as agentively resisted and renegotiated. Whether reading branded fiction for private or public purposes, adolescents' embodied experiences with these texts can be self-transformative, creating new imagined selves and recreating their relational experiences

with others. They negotiate meaning on their own terms, interacting with branded products in order to adopt, imitate, contest or expand available worlds. Exploring transmediated and branded young adult literature deepens our understanding of the rich practices through which teens are engaging with texts across real and imagined locations and enacting critical agency in (re)constructing identity, their lived contexts, and youth culture.

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Selected Young Adult Fiction Brands

Divergent Trilogy

This dystopian trilogy is set in a post-apocalyptic Chicago where society is divided into five factions, each dedicated to a specific virtue: Amity (peacefulness), Candor (honesty), Erudite (intelligence), Dauntless (bravery), and Abnegation (selflessness). All sixteen year-olds are required to choose the faction they wish to join, and their decision is permanent – the only alternative is an uncertain existence amongst the “factionless”. Protagonist Beatrice “Tris” Prior is born into Abnegation but chooses to leave her family and join Dauntless. However, a state assessment reveals that she is actually a “Divergent”, meaning that her nature does not align with a single faction. Divergents are viewed as a threat to the stability of the society, requiring Tris to conceal her divergence for her own safety. The series follows Tris in her initiation into Dauntless, where she meets and falls in love with Tobias “Four” Eaton, and their subsequent rebellion against a sinister government plot. The novels were authored by Veronica Roth: *Divergent* (2011); *Insurgent* (2012); *Allegiant* (2013); and *Four* (2014).

The Fault in Our Stars

This story focuses on the friendships, adventures, and star-crossed love affair of Hazel Grace Lancaster and Augustus Waters, two teenagers with cancer who meet at a support group for terminally ill youth. As Hazel narrates the development of their relationship, the pair travel to Amsterdam to meet the author of Hazel’s favorite novel (about a young girl with cancer whose story is similar to her own) and attend a “pre-funeral” for Augustus, whose condition has worsened upon their return. The novel was authored by John Green (2012).

The Hunger Games

This dystopian trilogy is set in Panem, a country consisting of twelve districts governed by a wealthy and powerful Capitol. As a punishment for past “Dark Days” of rebellion, one boy and one girl from every district is “reaped” by lottery and forced to participate in the “Hunger Games”, an annually televised death match in a specially designed outdoor arena. At the beginning of the series, Katniss Everdeen (the narrator and protagonist) volunteers as the female “Tribute” from District 12 in order to save her younger sister, who was initially chosen in the lottery. She is joined by Peeta Mellark, the son of a local baker, and although their depiction of star-crossed lovers makes them an audience favorite during the games, the President of Panem views Katniss as a political threat. Over the course of the series, Katniss gradually becomes the “Mockingjay”,

symbolizing a new revolution against the Capitol. The storyline focuses on her battles in and out of the arena as well the development of a love triangle between Katniss, Peeta, and Gale Hawthorne, her best friend from District 12. The novels were authored by Suzanne Collins: *The Hunger Games* (2008); *Catching Fire* (2009); and *Mockingjay* (2010).

The Maze Runner

This dystopian science fiction pentology tells the story of Thomas, a teenager who wakes up imprisoned inside of the “Glade” with no memory of his previous life. The Glade is located within a shifting maze, and the series follows Thomas, new arrival Teresa, and other “Gladers” as they attempt to solve and escape the maze. In later installments, Thomas and his compatriots learn that they are part of a scientific experiment designed to assist government group WICKED in locating a cure for the Flare, a highly contagious disease that is decimating the population. The novels were authored by James Dashner: *The Maze Runner* (2009), *The Scorch Trials* (2010) *The Death Cure* (2011); *The Kill Order* (2012); and *The Fever Code* (2016)

The Twilight Saga

This supernatural series focuses on the rocky love triangle between Bella Swan, an “ordinary” and “clumsy” teenage girl, Edward Cullen, a centuries-old “vegetarian” vampire, and Jacob Black, a Native American shapeshifting werewolf who is Bella’s best friend. Much of the conflict in the series originates from Edward resisting his forbidden attraction to Bella, and from the numerous threats posed by other vampires who wish to kill Bella. Bella eventually chooses to be with Edward and to become a vampire herself. The novels were authored by Stephenie Meyer: *Twilight*, (2005); *New Moon*, (2006); *Eclipse* (2007); and *Breaking Dawn* (2008).

The Vampire Diaries

This supernatural series focuses on the love triangle between Elena Gilbert, a mortal teen, and two centuries-old vampire brothers, Stefan and Damon Salvatore. Stefan attempts to resist his violent inclinations while Damon embraces them, and the two have been bitter enemies and rivals since they clashed over a female vampire, Katherine, who looked just like Elena. The story is set in Mystic Falls, which unbeknownst to Elena is also secretly home to witches, werewolves, vampires, and other supernatural inhabitants. The original novels were authored by L. J. Smith for book packager Alloy, Inc. and later installments were contributed by other writers.

Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group about how teenagers and young adults engage with branded young adult fiction and read across the many texts and products in popular franchises. I appreciate your willingness to work with me on this topic. Your participation in this study will enhance my understanding of what matters to teenagers and young adults as they navigate the different novels, films, television series, and commercial products that are available, and how they take up these different texts in interactions with their peers.

Before we begin today, I have just a few reminders about confidentiality and privacy. First, the substance of the focus groups are to remain confidential. That means that you should not discuss what is said or shared by anyone in this group outside of this setting. Second, you should not share with anyone outside this group the names or identities of any of the participants. Also, please keep in mind that I will be audio-recording these sessions. If at any point you would like the recorder to be turned off, just ask me. You should feel comfortable to skip any questions that you are uncomfortable answering, or to leave the interview if needed. Do you have any questions?

Great, lets begin:

Discussion Topic 1: Introductions

Please introduce yourself.

1. As part of your introduction, I invite you to share a little about your background (however you might define it) and your interests.
2. What would you say are your motivations for participating in this group?

Discussion Topic 2: Beliefs and Expectations

As you know, this study is intended to investigate how teenagers navigate the many different branded young adult fiction texts that are available to them. For example, some people love to read young adult novels, while other people don't like to read, but they are fans of TV shows or movies that are based on a book. Other people like to buy things that are associated with these franchises as well, whether or not they have read the book or watched the movie or TV show.

1. Could you share some perspectives on what you think about branded young adult fiction?

- a. In your answer, you might want to talk about:
 - b. What brands/series are you interested in? Why?
 - c. What kinds of texts (books, media, material) are you interested in? Why?
 - d. What types of stories you enjoy.
 - e. Whether, and how, your beliefs about different texts, or series or characters have changed over time.
2. What are some other branded books/movies/TV shows that you are familiar with but that you haven't read or watched?
 - a. Why haven't you read or watched this?
 3. Could you share some perspectives on what you think about how teenagers and young adults in general read across these different types of texts?
 - a. Why are some brands/series more popular than others? Why are some types of texts more popular than others?

Discussion Topic 3: Themes and trends in current branded young adult fiction

When a book is turned into a TV show or movie, there is always a lot of commentary and feedback about the ways in which the original text was interpreted. This also happens when companies create products based on the franchise, or even when fans re-interpret the story in fan fiction or other writing and artwork. I'd like to learn more about what you think about all of this.

1. What are your thoughts on this process, and on people's reactions to this process?
 - a. Can you give me some examples?
 - b. Why do you think people care about this?
2. What do you think is the relationship between the books, media and products in a brand (like The Hunger Games books, the movies, and products like capital-themed makeup and nail polish for sale Sephora, or Team Peeta and Team Gale t-shirts)?
 - a. For example, you might discuss:
 - b. How important is each type of text to each other?
 - c. How you might describe your own engagement in regards these texts?
 - d. How important do you think it is to both read the books and watch the movies or TV shows of a franchise?
 - i. Can you tell me more about this?
 - ii. What about purchasing products for the brand?
3. [Refer to previous discussion responses] We talked before about [insert book/series/franchise] – what is your opinion about the ways in which the story has been interpreted in different spaces and texts?

- a. [Use the following if people don't answer on their own]. For example, what do you think about the casting choices, like [insert leads]?
- b. What do you think about changes to the storyline or other elements?
- c. Do you share these responses with other people? Who?

Discussion Topic 3: Fandom and 'Shipping'

Some people like to read, watch or buy different branded young adult fiction texts, but don't really feel strongly about them one way or the other. Other people get really excited about these texts and are fans of particular brands or series.

1. Are there things that you (or people that you know) say, do, or buy because you are a fan of [insert book/movie/TV franchise from participant's response to previous questions]? Please share me some examples.
2. Do other people know that you're a fan of [insert from above]?
 - i. Please share a little more about this.
 - b. Do you interact with other fans of this brand/series?
 - i. If yes, please tell me more about this. (For example, who do you interact with (e.g. friends, family members, acquaintances), and through what medium (e.g. in person, online fan fiction, online commentary or social media)? What do you talk about or share with each other?
 - ii. If no, why not?
3. One thing that a lot of fans talk about is "shipping" different characters, like "Delena" (Damon and Elena) on the Vampire Diaries, or "Chair" (Chuck and Blair) on Gossip Girl. Do you ship any particular romantic relationships (or other plot developments)?
 - a. Why do you ship this relationship?
 - b. Why do you think people want to see [insert] together? Why do you think [insert] is popular?
 - c. What is attractive about [insert]?
 - d. Do you share or talk about this with other people? Please tell me more about this.

Discussion Topic 4: Literacy and Popular Youth Culture

1. Why do you think certain brands or series of books and movies/TV shows are popular with teenagers? Please share some examples.
2. How did you/how do you decide what branded or franchised books to read or what movies and TV shows to watch?

- a. Do you think this is similar to other people your age? Please tell me a little more about this.
3. How do you decide whether or not to buy merchandise that is associated with these franchises?
 - a. Do you think this is similar to other people your age? Please tell me a little more about this.
4. [If not addressed in previous question]. Why do you think other people, especially teenagers, buy merchandise that is associated with a franchise of books, movies or TV shows?
 - a. How do you feel about this?
 - b. Do you think it matters whether people buy this merchandise? Why?
5. How would you describe your experience participating in this afterschool group?
6. What (if anything) do you think it's important that researchers, teachers, and other adults understand about branded fiction? What do you think are important questions about branded young adult fiction for researchers or teachers to consider in the future?

Appendix C: Individual Interview Protocol

Student Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study about how teenagers and young adults engage with branded young adult fiction and read across the many texts and products in popular franchises. I really appreciate your willingness to work with me on this topic. In this interview, I want to learn more about some of your personal experiences and what matters to you as you navigate the different novels, films, television series, and commercial products that are available.

Before we begin today, I have just a few reminders about confidentiality and privacy. First, the substance of the interviews are to remain confidential. That means that you should not discuss what is said or shared by anyone in this group outside of this setting. Second, you should not share with anyone outside this group the names or identities of any of the participants. Also, please keep in mind that I will be audio-recording this interview. If at any point you would like the recorder to be turned off, just ask me. You should feel comfortable to skip any questions that you are uncomfortable answering, or to leave the interview if needed. Do you have any questions?

Great, lets begin:

Background/Personal Data

- A. Could you please share some information about your background?
 - a. It would be helpful if you could include your age and some of your schooling history.
 - b. It would also be helpful if you could briefly touch on your family history.
- B. Could you please talk a little about how you identify culturally, ethnically, racially, etc.?
 - a. Probe: Why do you identify in this way?
- C. Is there anything else that you think it's important to know about you?

Goals and expectations for the group

- A. How would you describe your motivation for coming participating in this afterschool group?
 - a. How do you think it's going so far?
- B. What are some ideas or suggestions for this group, or questions that you have?

General reading practices

1. What are some things that you like to do for fun in your free time?
2. What is your favorite movie and/or TV show? What do you like about it?

3. What are some websites that you like to visit at least once a week?
 - a. Can you tell me more about this?
4. What are some books that you are reading now? (it can be for fun or for school)
5. What is the last book that you enjoyed reading? What did you like about it?
6. What is your favorite book? What do you like about it?
 - a. Have you read other books by this author?
 - b. Can you tell me about other book(s) you enjoy that they have written?
7. What do you look for in a good book, TV show or movie?

Branded YA Fiction

8. Can you tell me about some series books that you have read?
 - a. What is your favorite series? Why? What do you like about this series?
 - b. How did you learn about this series?
9. [If answer to previous question does not address this] Do you ever read books that are turned into movies or TV shows? Can you tell me about some of these books that you have read in the last few years?
 - a. What is your favorite book (or series) that has been turned into a movie or TV show? Why?
 - b. How did you learn about this movie or show?
 - c. Does this book remind you of others that you have read before? (in characters, place, plot, etc.)
 - d. Have you read other books by this author? How do you think this book compares to other books that they have written?
10. Do you ever watch movies or TV shows that are based on books?
 - a. Can you tell me about some of the movies or TV shows that you have watched?
 - b. Do you also read the books that are part of this franchise? Please tell me more about this.
 - c. What is your favorite movie or TV show that was originally based on a book? Why?
 - d. How did you learn about this movie or show?
 - e. Does this movie or TV show remind you of others that you have seen or heard about before? (in characters, place, plot, etc.). Please tell me more about this.
11. How important to you think it is to both read the books and watch the movies or TV shows of a franchise?
 - a. Why? Can you tell me more about this?

12. Are there things that are important to do if you are a fan of these franchises? (In other words, are there things that you can do to show that you're a fan of these books, movies or TV shows?)
 - a. Can you tell me more about these?
 - b. How do you show that you're a fan?
13. How did you/how do you decide what books to read or what movies and TV shows to watch?
 - a. What are some things that you enjoy about these books or these movies and TV shows?
 - b. What are some things that you don't like about them?
 - c. Do you always keep reading or watching? Why?
14. Do you talk about these books, movies or TV shows with other people?
 - a. If yes, who do you talk with?
 - b. What are some of the things you talk about?
15. Do you ever read or participate in online sites where people are discussing or exploring these books, movies or TV shows?
 - a. (Some examples might be Twitter, Tumblr pages, official franchise websites, review sites like Goodreads, etc.)
 - b. Can you tell me more about this?
16. Have you ever bought, or do wish you could buy, merchandise that is associated with TV shows or movies that were originally based on a book?
 - a. If yes, what types of merchandise do you typically buy or do you wish you could buy?
 - b. Why do you buy these products?
 - c. Do you ever share or talk about these products with your friends or family members?
17. Why do you think other people buy merchandise that is associated with a franchise of books, movies or TV shows?
 - a. How do you feel about this?
 - b. Do you think it matters whether people buy this merchandise? Why?
18. What are some series books, movies or TV shows that you want to read in the future?
 - a. Why? Can you tell me a little more about this?
19. What are some series books, movies or TV shows would you recommend to your friends or other high school students?
 - a. Why? Can you tell me a little more about this?

20. Is there anything else that you'd like to share that I didn't ask you about?

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