

## FANTASY AND CONTEMPORARY CITIES: URBAN SPACES IN YA BOOKTUBE REVIEWS

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*Booktube*  
*City representation*  
*Online book communities*  
*Book reviews*  
*Multimodal discourse analysis*  
*Social semiotics*  
*Intertextuality*

### ABSTRACT

*This article investigates the role of cities in Young Adult book reviews on Booktube, focusing on content created by female booktubers from Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It reviews the community of Booktube, as well as its connection to participatory culture and literary theory related to fantasy and contemporary genres, which are essential for this study. A multimodal discourse analysis, supported by social semiotics, is employed as the methodology. The findings reveal that booktubers emphasize world-building, distinguishing between realistic and fantastical settings. Fantasy reviews often draw on the booktuber's subjectivity through personal experiences in similar cities or intertextual and cultural references. In contrast, contemporary book reviews utilize urban settings to reflect on current issues. Overall, the research highlights the relationship between subjectivity and city representation in online book reviews, employing personal memories and cultural references to create engaging and informative content.*

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## 1. Introduction

The online community of Booktube is a space on YouTube where individuals that act as book influencers (Reddan et al., 2024) create and share videos about books and related topics (Albrecht, 2017; Ravettino, 2015). The primary goal of Booktube is to share the love for literature with others (Tomasena, 2019a).

Initially, the self-proclaimed booktubers, the creators of this type of content, were teens and young adults, and, as a result, the majority of the books commented there belonged to the commercial sphere of Young Adult literature (Ravettino, 2015). The development of such activity showed that teens and young adults, contrary to popular belief, enjoyed reading and discussing about books (Observatorio de la Lectura y del Libro, 2017; Sánchez, 2019).

As this phenomenon grew, it caught the attention of traditional media (Audibert, 2015; Carbajo, 2014; López, 2017a; Usón & Plasencia, 2017) and academia. The latter have identified Booktube as a new field of study (Galarza et al., 2017; García, 2016; Luch, 2017; López, 2017b; Paladines-Paredes y Margallo, 2020; Pates, 2015; Ravettino, 2015; Tomasena, 2019a; Vizcaíno-Verdú, et al., 2019). They have produced very diverse works, such as articles focused on analysing the reviews posted on Booktube and contrasting them with those written by professional critics, employing philological knowledge as a tool to achieve this goal (De la Torre-Espinosa, 2019). Others have studied the evolution of the readers and their reading experiences through time (Sánchez, 2019). In other cases, the object of study has been the psychological effects caused by the pressure of being an active part of this community as a creator (Ehret et al., 2018). Other studies focus on linking Booktube with the publishing and literary worlds, including the career opportunities offered to booktubers (Albrecht, 2017; Tomasena, 2019b). Furthermore, some works have explored its use as a tool to train professors (Segovia & Herranz-Llácer, 2022). Lastly, this community has even been the main topic of doctoral theses (Tomasena, 2020). Despite the versatility of this space, little has been said about the verbal discourse in book reviews, the most popular type of video inside the Booktube community.

This article aims to present an international case study involving female booktubers from Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It will examine the verbal strategies they use in their Young Adult book reviews to talk about real or fantastical cities and the discursive strategies employed when discussing this aspect of the book. The main goal is to highlight the importance of cities in these videos, the communicative strategies used by the booktubers to talk about them, and the reasoning behind that specific use.

To achieve the previously stated goal, this text will be structured as follows: a theoretical framework will be developed, starting with an exploration of the connection between the Booktube community and the concept of participatory culture. Additionally, a subsection will provide a detailed explanation of the Booktube community. Furthermore, the theoretical framework will delve into the literary sphere, examining the distinction between fantasy and real worlds. Following this, the methodology will be presented in detail, explaining the definition of discourse analysis used, which approach of discourse was employed in this article, and its work plan, focusing on multimodal discourse analysis, particularly on verbal communication. This analysis is theoretically supported by social semiotics, incorporating specific elements of this field to deepen the understanding of the research. Subsequently, the results will be thoroughly discussed, and the conclusions will highlight the most significant aspects of the study.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Following the order established in the previous paragraph this section will serve as a theoretical framework to understand the key matters that will be discussed in this article.

As a starting point, a connection between Booktube and the term participatory culture will be established, and this will be followed by a detailed explanation about the Booktube community, its members and its videos. Lastly, taking into account the main goal is to study how fantastical and realistic cities are highlighted through verbal discourse in the Young Adult book reviews, a distinction between fantasy and realistic worlds will be developed, following literary studies.

## **2.1. Participatory culture and its relationship with Booktube**

The term participatory culture was initially coined by Henry Jenkins (2009), an author who has studied fan phenomenon online and offline, which highlights the fact that user-generated movement existed before the Internet and social media existed (Tomasena, 2019a).

Participatory culture is a term associated with spaces where there are low barriers of entry and the people who access are encouraged to create civic or creative content that is shared with the rest of the collective (Jenkins et al., 2015; Jenkins, 2009). Another characteristic of this type of virtual community is that feedback is always welcome, according to these authors. Moreover, as these sources explain, the experienced members of these spaces guide newcomers, generating a kind of mentorship. These features allow all the members involved to develop tight emotional bonds. However, they highlight that contributing to it is not a compulsory requirement for being part of said culture, as this is a choice that should be made freely. When this choice is made, the member's contribution is highly valued (Jenkins, 2009).

When talking about participatory culture, several forms can be identified depending on the key goal behind them (Jenkins, 2009):

- **Affiliation:** the relevant matter is getting involved in online communities, either formally or informally.
- **Expression:** The important detail of this participatory culture is the fact that people contribute with original content, expressing through creativity.
- **Collaborative problem solving:** The objective is to expand knowledge in formal or informal groups, trying to solve a problem.
- **Circulation:** The main goal of this form is to make the information flow accessible but through means different than the traditional mass media.

YouTube, which is where Booktube is developing (Albrecht, 2017; Reddan, et al., 20124), follows all these rules, according to Chau (2011).

The author points out that YouTube as a platform is very accessible because it allows everyone to enjoy the content for free. However, if a user wants to fully be able to explore all the possibilities the website has to offer, such as filming and posting videos, commenting on other's content and having debates in the comment section, clicking the Like button or creating a playlist of specific content, they need to open an account. This action is extremely easy, as it only requires the person to use an email address and a password of their choice, which proves that YouTube has, following participatory culture rules, extremely low barriers (Chau, 2011). Once the account is settled, the user can produce and upload content to the website, showing that the space facilitates content production, creative or civic, as the choice is entirely up to the owner of the account, proving as the author states, that participatory culture is present at its core. In addition, this academic links YouTube with participatory culture because creators can also give feedback to others or receive it themselves, which proves the importance of having a democratic approach to responses. In fact, in all the communities set in this space, people tend to establish bonds with others through this type of interaction, to the point that more experienced users tend to act as guides for newcomers, characteristics present in participatory culture.

Booktube, as a community on YouTube, shares this connection with participatory culture in all its aspects. The difference between the general explanations presented in the previous paragraph and this community resides in the shared content: the love for books. The most experienced booktubers tend to share videos giving tips or introducing the community's vocabulary, and this content is useful for the newcomers, as these videos serve as tutorials for them. In addition, the relationships between these literary influencers, as well as the relationship they have with their audience, have proven Booktube brings people closer, as it is shown in events such as *BookNet Fest* (2024), an event dedicated to literary content creators and their audiences to discuss about the state of the different literary communities, including Booktube.

## **2.2. The community of Booktube: the starting point, its characteristics, the profile of the booktuber and the typology of videos inside the community**

The Booktube community, so named by its members as a blend of the words 'book' and 'YouTube' (Noguera, 2020), is part of a set of online literary communities, such as Bookstagram and Booktok. These

communities have emerged in a highly social environment, where various agents and processes within the literary world have adapted as readers began to share their reading experiences publicly (Reddan et al., 2024).

As the latter authors highlight, reading is not a solitary action, despite appearances. Over time, readers have gained greater access to books and information and have sought new ways to make their role more active (Sánchez, 2019). With the advent of the Internet and social media, readers found ways to share their opinions about the stories they read and to discuss them with others (Lluch, 2017; Sánchez, 2019). This practice, known by the term social reading (Rovira Collado, 2016; Rovira Collado, 2015; Sánchez, 2019), can take diverse forms. Booktube was born in this environment.

The origins of Booktube are difficult to track. This community appeared in the United States of America in 2009 (Galarza, et al., 2017; Pates, 2015; Reddan et al., 2024; Rovira Collado, 2016), 2011 (Tomasena, 2019a), or 2012 (Velasco & Trillo-Domínguez, 2019; Reddan et al., 2024). From there, the phenomenon expanded globally. The Spanish Booktube community dates back to 2011 (Lluch, 2017), 2012, or 2013 (Rovira Collado, 2016).

Communicatively, booktubers emphasise the emotions books evoke in them (Reddan et al., 2024). As a result, the channel serves as a vital space where booktubers can express their opinions and share book recommendations (Observatorio de la Lectura y del Libro, 2017), while appreciating physical books (García, 2016) and discussing other topics related to reading (Albrecht, 2017). These interactions are shaped by a personal and emotional approach that sets booktubers apart from traditional critics (Reddan et al., 2024; Reddan, 2022).

However, it has to be taken into account that this community, as the last authors cited mentioned, is a very North American-centric space, which means booktubers from different areas of the world cannot gain as much visibility as those from the United States and similar countries (Reddan et al., 2024).

The booktuber's profile is characterised by academics as a white young woman (Albrecht, 2017; Lluch, 2017; Sánchez, 2019; Reddan et al., 2024), although the community is becoming more diverse (Reddan et al., 2024). Regarding the age, several sources state that booktubers are in their teens, twenties and even thirties (Álvarez y Romero, 2018; Lluch, 2017; Noguera, 2020; Tomasena, 2019b), which makes understandable the possible thematic change as these actors grow up (Tomasena, 2019b). However, it is important to remark that this change in literary taste does not always happen, as Young Adult literature has surpassed its original target audience to include more mature ones too (Ravettino, 2015).

In addition to gender, race and age, other elements are relevant when describing booktubers as relevant actors in the digital world.

As it has been explained before, posting book-related videos on the Internet to fulfil their desire to share their reading experiences with others is the key objective of the booktubers (Reddan et al., 2024). To do this, booktubers have developed a communication strategy, similar to videoblogs, in which they talk directly to the camera (Albrecht, 2017). This way booktubers have a direct discourse that comes out as natural and genuine, and it is that sense of authenticity and naturalness that connects with their audience (Albrecht, 2017; Reddan, 2020; Reddan et al., 2024). For them, the booktubers act "like a cultural authority" (Reddan et al., 2024 p. 17).

This happens because, as the latter authors highlight, booktubers are considered expert readers, and they are viewed as such thanks to their, previously explained, natural and passionate approach to literature. Furthermore, this appearance is sustained by the fact that their reading habits are made public very colloquially, and the possibility of formal education in the realm of literature further helps create this aura of authentic readers.

As a result, the audience is invited to this personal space of a fellow reader where they are also encouraged to give their own opinion on the matter discussed or share their own book recommendations. To make this social connection work, indicate Reddan et al., (2024), it is necessary to have a distinctive form of storytelling, which is normally accompanied by a specific scenario, their bedroom. The use of this space, explain the authors, gives the audience the sense of being in the presence of a friend who is starting a very engaging conversation about books with them or sharing, through this conversation, a specific experience of reading.

In addition, it is important to highlight that, according to the previous source, the natural approach and the honesty shown in their videos can be also mixed with the habit of booktubers of sharing personal

information. This, alongside showing themselves doing mundane activities while talking about books, fosters a parasocial relationship with their audience.

Now that a general explanation of the Booktube community has been established and the most relevant details of the booktubers have been exposed, it is time to explore the videos that can be found in this community. The videos published on Booktube depend on the specific booktuber studied but, as a non-written rule, the majority of the channels tend to follow the following typology, as shown by diverse authors (Albrecht, 2017; Ehret et al., 2018; García, 2016; Noguera, 2020 Reddan et al., 2024):

- Book review: Video dedicated to recommending a book recently read. It is the most famous inside the Booktube community.
- Book hauls: Video that is dedicated to the books recently purchased or borrowed from the library. The idea behind this type of video is to show them to the camera and briefly talk about them.
- To Be Read, also known by the acronym TBR (Ehret et al., 2018): Monthly video recorded to announce the books that the booktuber has planned to read in the following month.
- Bookshelf tour: Video dedicated to exploring the personal library of the booktuber, which includes how the bookcases are organised.
- Booktag: Video where the booktuber plays a game responding to questions related to a specific topic or theme, choosing books for every answer and explaining why that book was chosen. After finishing, the booktuber selects or tags other booktubers to do the same video with their picks.
- Discussion or response video: A video dedicated to discussing a specific theme in a specific book or creating a video responding to another booktuber in a discussion they have started.
- Collaborations: Videos where booktubers join and film together. Commonly, these videos have a more playful approach.
- Booktube issues: Videos where issues that are ongoing inside the community are discussed at length, allowing the booktuber to analyse the topic or take a stance.
- Unboxing; According to Pretel et al. (2019), in this type of content, the booktuber films the process of opening a package, and creating expectations about it.

Alongside this typology, different videos that do not fit as homogeneously as the previously mentioned are also used in the community.

Albrecht (2017) and Garcia (2016) both highlight the existence of the video known as Challenges, similar to Booktags in the sense that it is a video that sets a competition between the readers, such as reading a specific number of books for a specific period. This type of video can also be found under the name of Read-A-Thons (Albrecht, 2017). In addition, she includes book-themed recommendations, whose title changes depending on the topic or theme explored, such as Autumn Themed Books.

López (2017b) adds the Top Books, which are the type of video in which the booktuber summarises the favourite books during a period of time, although this timeframe does not have to be a month. Furthermore, this academic also includes the type of video known as Wishlist where booktubers show the books they want to buy soon, engaging with their audience to plan their future purchases.

The community also includes more complex type of videos that are lengthier and more difficult to categorize like "Screen Books or Book to Movie Adaptation" (López, p. 972), type of video where booktubers comment on film adaptations of books, news related to adaptations, recommendations, critics, tags or recreations of adaptations made by them. In addition, in this this longer form format videos, there the Book Talks, where booktubers talk about books in a broader sense, engaging with readers inside the community (Ravettino, 2015), while the type of videos known as "Questions and Answers" (Pretel et al, 2019, p. 14) is the content where booktubers reply to questions from their audience. Lastly, López (2017b) lists the videos known as "DYL Document Your Life" (p. 972), where booktubers show parts of their personal lives.

As illustrated in the video typology detailed above, Booktube features a set of specific videos with identifiable names, often derived from the literary blog community, as booktubers tend to have engaged with that community in the past (Reddan et al., 2024) and other that are more complex. This video categorization, as the recently cited authors argue, has evolved alongside the community itself. Initially, the community leaned toward a performative approach, aiming to present cheerful, humorous, and seemingly perfect content. Over time, it has shifted to a more natural perspective, where the primary goal is sharing the experience of reading. Videos like the Read-A-Thons exemplify this change, as booktubers now comfortably incorporate fragments of their daily lives into their content when relevant



to the video they are producing. In the case of this article, the analysis is going to be focalized in the video known as book review.

### ***2.3. The setting in reviews: fantasy world versus realistic world and the connection with their respective genres***

The previous section has analysed the community of Booktube and its characteristics, who are its members and what kind of profile they have. In addition, it has presented in detail the most common videos that can be found in the cited community. From all the videos mentioned, and due to the objective of this article, this text is going to focus on book reviews, specifically on Young Adult book reviews.

As the main goal of this text is to analyse how cities are cited in the reviews, and how they are used inside the discourse, it is important to study very briefly which kind of genres are the ones that can be found in Young Adult book reviews recommended inside this digital space and their characteristics.

For the analysis presented in the text, a differentiation has been detected between fantastical and realistic environments, which, in terms of literary genres, are represented by fantasy and contemporary genres, respectively.

Academic David Roas (2016) states that two elements must be present when identifying fantasy as a genre. Firstly, the story's internal logic, which tries to imitate the real world's logic, must be disrupted through the appearance of a fantastical element. Secondly, the intrusion of the unexpected into the narrative must also be unsettling for the reader. As a result, the main character and the reader face the unknown with strangeness and fear, reactions related to fantasy. According to the author, both must learn to navigate this new world unveiled through the narrative.

Furthermore, Roas (2016) indicates that, over time, fantasy elements have evolved, finding what unsettles readers by employing diverse narrative and writing techniques that bend the genre's rules, expanding the fantasy genre further.

In contrast, the realistic world is explored in what is known as the contemporary genre. Contemporary literature is a term coined for works written after the Second World War and that continue to this day (Ghostwriting Founder Blog, 2023).

According to Bennett (2023), contemporary fiction is set in the present and reflects today's social, cultural, and political environment. Despite showing the complexities of the current world and its society, contemporary literature's writing style is often easy for readers to understand.

If writing as a craft is analysed, the contemporary genre tends to prioritize plots where character development is key (Ghostwriting Founder Blog, 2023). According to this source, the following characteristics are key to the contemporary genre: moral ambiguities are explored through techniques such as realistic dialogues and multifaceted narratives, which allow readers to explore different points of view or timeframes, enriching the story. This facilitates the exploration of broader themes, as authors and characters are more diverse, reflecting today's society and addressing current relevant matters. Moreover, by making characters realistic, readers find them more relatable. This connection is significant because it can provide solutions to readers' problems, serve as inspiration, or offer emotional support. Additionally, contemporary books reflect today's use of technology and social media, contemplating the future humanity is leaning towards, and encouraging critical thinking.

## **3. Methodology**

Once the theoretical framework has been explained, it is time to present the methodology through which this study was conducted. As a guide, the following pages will cover the discourse analysis definition and the approach to discourse used in this article. In addition, this section will also state in detail the work plan selected for this study. Once discourse analysis is completely explained, it will be time to present what multimodal discourse analysis is, the specific form of discourse analysis elaborated here, and how it adapts to the work plan previously mentioned. Lastly, this section will include information about the sample of this study and the set of rules established beforehand for its selection.

### ***3.1. Discourse analysis: definition, approach towards discourse and work plan***

In this research, the term discourse analysis will consistently refer to Karam's (2005) definition. Karam (2005) describes discourse analysis as "a methodology involving a set of procedures applied to a

predefined body, where conceptual applications and interpretation tools are developed" (p. 4). This study specifically adopts Marianne LeGreco's (2017) approach to discourse, focusing on what she identifies as micro-level discourse. According to LeGreco (2017), this type of discourse encompasses interactions occurring in everyday life situations.

To conduct this micro-level discourse analysis (LeGreco, 2017), the work plan follows how discourse analysis in the communicative discipline is developed, using Tracy and Mirivel's (2009) explanation. According to these authors, it has different steps. Initially, the interaction under study is examined in detail. The next step is to transcribe relevant fragments meticulously. The third step, termed the "data session" (Tracy & Mirivel, 2009, p. 156), involves analysing the recorded interactions alongside their transcriptions, considering the chosen theoretical framework. This process culminates in the development of academic arguments, marking the final phase of the work plan.

### ***3.2. Discourse analysis: Developing a multimodal discourse analysis for this research and applying a work plan***

Now that the methodology has been theoretically explained, this section will be dedicated to explaining how it is applied to our object of study: the book reviews of Booktube.

Firstly, it is important to point out that the discourse analysis developed here is focused on the micro-discourse, as it was stated before, but, in addition to that, it is a specific discourse analysis called multimodal analysis.

Multimodal analysis is highly identifiable because, in this approach, the researcher understands that discourses do not limit themselves to one single aspect, such as written words. Instead, it understands that all the elements, known as modes, of the discourse are present because they work together to deliver the message, so if the goal is to study the discourse, all modes should be taken into account and studied together (Kress, 2011; O'Halloran, 2012; Pardo, 2012). In addition, it is important to highlight the fact that in multimodal discourse analysis, the context is very relevant because, as it is highly linked to the object of study, it influences the result (Norris, 2004; Van Leeuwen, 2004).

In the case of this research, the study of the Young Adult book reviews selected from Booktube is a multimodal discourse analysis, but its results only consider the verbal aspect of the discourse, which, as stated before, is considered micro-discourse.

As for the work plan established, it is a work plan for discourse analysis in the communication field (Tracy & Mirivel, 2009), but adapted to the object of study. As a result, the work plan is as follows:

Firstly, because all the book reviews are public on YouTube and everyone can access them, there was no need for recording the discourses expressed in them, eliminating the first phase of the work plan. However, following this work plan (Tracy & Mirivel, 2009), the researcher transcribed the already cited discourses, which allowed her to identify speech patterns and discursive uses that will be highlighted in the results section of this article.

The third phase of this process was highly respected. In this case, "the data session" (Tracy & Mirivel, 2009, 156) was carried out using social semiotics as a theoretical background.

Social semiotics is a branch of semiotics that understands that language is a system of signs that only makes sense if it is set in a social interaction, in a social context (Halliday & Hasan, 1985). In fact, these authors understand that every discourse, every text, is connected to a context, and both of them need to be studied together to be able to understand the text correctly, as it serves a purpose.

Halliday and Hasan (1985) understand that the text and its context are linked together through what they call the context of situation, which is very important because it provides the individual with the information needed to understand the situation he or she is studying or what the other actors are going to do, so the researcher uses the context of situation to act accordingly and succeed.

According to these academics, the elements that form the context of situation are:

- The field: It gives information about the situation itself.
- The tenor: It analyses the relationship between the actors involved in the situation. This element of the context of situation also includes what these authors identify as social distance, the type of relationship and the level of intimacy the people present in a situation have.
- The mode: All the details related to how this situation is produced, how the language was used and the linguistic internal relationships in the text, but also the channel through which the text studied was sent, with all the possibilities the channel allows.

For the current research, using the theoretical components explained by Halliday & Hasan (1985), the main aspect of the context of situation that is going to be present in the results is the tenor, as it will serve to understand the subjective perspective of the female booktubers studied as well as how their audience may receive and react to the information, in case it is relevant for the result.

In addition, to fulfil the purpose of this article, the concept of intertextuality, as discussed by Halliday and Hasan (1985), will be considered. According to these authors, intertextuality refers to all the sources referenced within a discourse that are connected to the object of study. These sources provide independent information, yet their meanings are interconnected with the object of study. For instance, in the case of book reviews, when the review references, quotes, or highlights the book being analysed, including instances where the book is shown to the camera, these actions constitute intertextual elements within the original text.

Finally, the final stage of the work plan is the presentation of academic arguments, which will be exposed in the result section.

### **3.4. The sample**

Now that the methodology has been explained, it is time to discuss how the sample for this article was selected

The creators studied in this research are female booktubers, as Booktube is predominantly female, reflecting higher reading rates among women (Sánchez, 2019). Therefore, in the results section, the term booktuber refers exclusively to female booktubers. The study includes female booktubers from Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, providing an international perspective. The selection was based on the influencer classification proposed by Ruiz-Gómez (2019), using several resources:

- **Micro-influencers:** Creators that have a specific topic of interest and a very close bond with their audience, who, in turn, see them as relatable and trustworthy. According to this author, micro-influencers reach up to 99,000 subscribers.
- **Macro-influencers:** This type of influencer has a broader reach and uses several platforms to spread their content. According to this author, this typology is divided between Silver, according to YouTube's rules, whose number of subscribers ranges from 100,000 to 500,000. On the other hand, the advanced level of macro-influencers includes creators with subscriber counts ranging from over 500,000 to 1 million.
- **Mega-influencers:** Influencers are considered celebrity status due to their influence, and due to their popularity and the number of people they reach, they have high fees to collaborate with companies and brands. This typology is also divided into two, according to the author. The gold category reaches over 1 million followers, and the diamond category, whose number of subscribers is over 10 million, as established by YouTube. This category includes social media celebrities and even A-listers.

Based on this classification, all the booktubers selected except one, at the time this research was conducted, were considered micro-influencers and the remaining one a macro-influencer. However, as all of them disseminated their content through several social media profiles, in the end, they were all considered macro-influencers, although all had a very niche topic of interest. As a result, ten booktubers were selected: four from Spain, four from the United Kingdom and two from the United States of America.

As for the book review selection, the main criteria focused on Young Adult books, followed by books that both teens and adults could read, books found by booktubers in the Young Adult section of bookshops or library or, in cases where there was no official indication that the book belonged to the Young Adult category, the booktuber's classification in the video was taken as reference. In addition to this, the number of volumes was also taken into account, making standalone books a priority followed by duologies, trilogies, or sagas. Multi-volume narratives were included only if the reviews focused on the first book or provided an overview of the entire story without revealing major spoilers. The final rule established for this sample was to include book reviews where the setting was relevant and its analysis played a significant role in the video.

Following all these rules, the original sample of seventy-three book reviews was reduced to four.

Now the methodology was explained, the following section will explain in detail the relevant information this research brought to light.



## 4. Results

This section presents the research findings, focusing on the representation of cities and their use in discourse within the fantasy and contemporary genres.

### ***4.1. City representation in the fantasy genre: The power of personal anecdotes and collective intertexts***

Examining the representation of cities within the fantasy genre, it becomes evident that personal anecdotes and collective intertexts play a significant role. This is an interesting aspect because, in all cases, the fantasy element applied to the spaces is magic. Through its inclusion, a historically accurate environment is disrupted by a characteristic considered strange and rare by both, the fictional characters and the reader. Following Roas's (2016) conception of the fantasy genre, they have to adapt to a new world with new rules.

This phenomenon highlights how the introduction of magical elements transforms the urban landscape. The interplay between the familiar and the fantastical creates a unique narrative tension, compelling characters and readers to adapt to these newly established norms. Cantador (2017) emphasizes the significance of the environment, vividly depicting Venice during the Second World War, through memories and feelings from her trip to Rome. This approach, combined with her preference for stories set in this period, underscores the subjectivity of her review and her reading experience. By drawing on her own life experiences, she creates a more immersive depiction of the city, projecting her feelings from Rome to the book's imagery, which she then shares with her audience as a captivating and intriguing scenario.

The importance of Venice's portrayal in the review, despite the book's dark premise, stems from the booktuber herself rather than the author. Cantador (2017) highlights the novel's enchanting setting using her anecdotes and personal feelings from her trip, even though Rome is not Venice, as illustrated in the following fragment:

Sara Cantador: Another point of Lorenzo's story, and that's why I prefer it, is that it is set in Italy, specifically in the city of Venice. I personally went to Italy, a few years ago, on an end-of-year trip in the fourth year of secondary school, when I was almost 16 (...), and I loved it. I totally fell in love with Italy even though I was only in Rome. I don't know, I'm very Mediterranean for those things and I loved the atmosphere, I loved the familiarity, let's say, with which I felt in its streets. I know that Rome is not the same, not by a long shot, but still. It's the closest idea I have from experiences I've had, to what Italy is really like. Although I didn't imagine Rome when I read Lorenzo's part, I did try to evoke the memories I have of that trip: the smells, the bustle of the streets, more or less, and that fitted in quite well with what the novel was narrating (...). (Cantador, 2017)

Additionally, Cantador (2017) shares personal information she deems relevant to the book review, such as her holidays in Rome, with her viewers. This discursive technique, common in Booktube (Reddan et al., 2024), uses her memories of Italy to transport herself into the book and as a strategy to persuade readers to engage with the novel.

During the course of this research, a curious coincidence was observed: the remaining book reviews analysed in this subsection are dedicated to the same place: Paris. This finding illustrates how the same city can be represented in various ways across these types of videos, using identical social semiotic elements in different forms to highlight the city's significance within these book reviews.

Sarah-Jane Bird: (...) At the beginning of the story, the only way Camile and her siblings survive is because she uses the petty magic, that she learned from her mother, she turns little pieces of metal into coins and that's just about enough to get the food that they need and to just about pay the rent. (...). In desperation, Camile decides to use dark magic, she uses Glamour, and she turns herself into the Baroness de la Fontaine, and she heads to the Glittering Courts of Versailles. Once she is at Versailles, Camille finds herself swept up in the Glittering Court. She finds herself seduced by magic, seduced by the Glamour (...).

(...) I would say the main thing I really liked about this book was the atmosphere. It was extremely atmospheric. It had this magic around it, whether Camile was walking in the streets of Paris or whether she was at the Court of Versailles. It really had this magical cool atmosphere, and I really, really liked that. I liked the Glittering Courts. I liked the allure of the Courts, of the games, she goes to play cards and uses the magic to (...) deceive. I really, really, liked that aspect. (...). (Bird, 2019).

This quote is highly insightful as, through these fragments of discourse, the British booktuber Sarah-Jane Bird (2019) introduces the novel *Enchantee* by Gita Trelease (2019), which is set in pre-Revolutionary France. By referencing the Palace of Versailles, a highly recognisable symbol in the collective imagination, alongside the impoverished life of the main character, she establishes how the working classes struggled during the period preceding the French Revolution. Furthermore, she highlights the extravagance of Marie Antoinette's court, which is magically reimagined as the *Glittering Courts*. In addition, as Bird (2019) points out, the use of dark magic, known in the novel as *Glamour*, enables the main character to infiltrate this new society by pretending to be from the noble class. This situation allows her to develop as a character as she will face court politics while being there.

Following the purpose of this article, this strategy allows the reader to explore the palace from the inside. The booktuber describes a rich environment filled with expensive clothing, gambling, alcohol, luxurious food, and excess, typical of this environment at the time. This space also possesses a magical quality, making it very alluring and addictive. The audience's imagination is engaged through various collective intertexts about this period, including books, paintings, and films like *Marie-Antoinette* (Coppola, 2006). These collective depictions make the period and spaces familiar enough to imagine while sparking interest in this new, magical version.

A similar conclusion was drawn in Samantha Lane's (2018) review of *The Gilded Wolves* (Chokshi, 2019):

Samantha Lane: So, *The Gilded Wolves* takes place in an alternate History of 1889's Paris and (...) it's not steampunk but it feels steampunky. (...). There is sort of magic, but it is really cool technology this historical time period. (...) And there are secret societies that have magical artefacts (...).

First off, let me talk about the world-building. (...) This book had so many things that were so for me, and one of the things with the secret societies... is that there are a lot of mythology references. Roshani got started with a lot of mythology. I adored her because she enjoyed a lot of Greek mythology and Hades and Persephone, as you guys now is one of my things (...). And there is a lot of that (...): The House of Nix, and there are, like, parties that had underworld themes (...). And not even just Greek mythology but also other different mythologies (...). (Lane, 2018)

This quote sets the plot in a steampunk-inspired version of History. This encourages the audience to imagine an alternate world rooted in steampunk aesthetics, which are characterised by technology and clothing styles similar to the Victorian era, which are very identifiable for today's readers (Betts, 2013). Specifically, the novel is set in an alternate 1889 with magic and mythological references.

Referring to 1889, even with magical changes, clearly evokes the year of the World's Fair in Paris, with collective references like the construction of the Eiffel Tower (Bureau des International Expositions). Both the reviewer and the audience recognise the significance of this event through historical intertexts, which highlight its crucial role in technological advances, as explained in the previous source.

The realistic event in an alternate world, combined with steampunk elements, allows Lane (2018) and her audience to envision a Victorian-inspired Paris with mythological references. Regarding the mythological references, it is important to note, especially with the Greek ones, that although it is not a well-versed topic, the booktuber presents clear examples, such as Hades and Persephone, which are recognized in Western societies through multiple references.

In addition to this, the excitement and the high level of engagement shown by the booktuber for the novel, as a proof of a high enjoyment of the story, affects the reception of the review producing interest in the viewer.

Thus, it can be seen that communal knowledge from different time periods is linked and mixed in this representation of Paris.

In other cases, book reviews focus on significant areas of Paris, like the Court of Miracles, blending them with cultural products such as *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo (2012) and its musical adaptation (Schönberg et al., 1985). This is evident in Bird's (2020) review of *The Court of Miracles* (Grant, 2020), a story set in an alternate Paris where the French Revolution failed.

Sarah-Jane Bird: (...): The thing I enjoyed most about was the Court of Miracles itself. I feel like this was a very different setting. This dark underbelly of Paris (...). The whole thing was very visual. It was so enjoyable to be part of this Court of Miracles. I found it very interesting, I like the political set ups, like within each gild and the way some of them won't cross each other (...). (...) We have our main character Eponine, who is, essentially, a thief (...). (...) I just think things came very easily to her, I didn't feel like we necessarily got really into her head (...). (...) The only character that I (...) feel we got to really know was Ettie, who is essentially Cossette, *Les Mis* (...). (Bird, 2020)

This dystopian book is set in the Court of Miracles, a Parisian neighbourhood known by this name from the 17th century until its destruction in 1776 (Sadurní, 2020). The journalist explains that the area, now known as Les Halles, saw its final end in the 19th century. According to him, these streets were originally filled with poor people who resorted to stealing or begging, often pretending to be disabled or injured, earning different names based on their acts. The Court of Miracles had such a high rate of criminality that even the army avoided it, leading to the creation of its own laws and the establishment of a ruler known as the Great Coerse (Sadurní, 2020).

As noted in Bird's (2020) review, the establishment of collectives in the novel is depicted through the Gilds. More importantly, the ambiance of decadence and poverty is vividly portrayed through its world-building. It is crucial to highlight that the collective intertexts used to create the Court of Miracles are directly drawn from Victor Hugo's (1978) novel *Notre-Dame de Paris*, where this area of the city plays a key role. Additionally, Bird's generation has a clearer representation of this neighbourhood through Walt Disney's animated adaptation of the novel, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Trousedale & Wise, 1996). In this version, the Court of Miracles is populated by its false, injured members and governed by a unique ruling system. The film depicts this neighbourhood as connected to other Parisian landmarks, the catacombs.

By introducing *Les Misérables* (Hugo, 2012) into this narrative, the depiction of the Court of Miracles, already dark, becomes even darker. This book is renowned for its societal study and its portrayal of the different social strata during a complex period. Furthermore, with the well-known musical stage version (Schönberg et al., 1985) and the film adaptation (Hooper, 2012), audiences have a vivid understanding of how ordinary people lived in that space and what they had to endure. This blend of intertexts conjures a Paris that is a dangerous space, where survival depends on understanding the internal politics of the Court of Miracles.

#### **4.2. City representation in the contemporary genre: the perfect tool to denounce ongoing issues**

The last relevant discovery regarding urban depiction and use in Young Adult book reviews it is shown in the contemporary genre. This type of literature, as it can be seen in the quotes down these lines, has room enough to introduce current issues:

Jean Menzies: The book itself follows Rico (...), it is a teenage boy living in Birmingham, England. His parents are originally Romani and that has meant his race is something that has (...) affected his life and his experience with the police force, in what is most definitely a negative aspect. This book is actually set during the riots that took place in England a few years ago (...). Definitely it adds a certain urgency to the events going on in this book, asserting the fact that, though it is a fiction book it tells a quite real story (...). (...) Rico is a bit of a computer nerd (...). And has taught himself to hack to an exceptionally good level. Unfortunately some other people see this talent in Rico and exploit him (...). I enjoyed this book. I felt like it was on a very unbiased level: there were

problems highlighted with activists, there were also problems with the police force and the Government, and every aspect was shown to have its issues (...) (Menzies, 2014)

The fragment above is taken from Jean Menzies's review (2014) of *Terror Kid* by Benjamin Zephaniah (2014). Taking into account the novel is set in Birmingham and when the review was published, the real events that the book drew on were the drawing on the 2011 Birmingham riots. These riots involved looting, arson, and clashes with the police, peaking with the tragic deaths of three young Asian men defending their businesses (Meierhans, 2016). The riots were fuelled by deep-rooted socio-economic issues and racial tensions in the area, as the journalist points out.

By using real events as a catalyst for the novel, the city and its challenges take on a central role, forcing the reader to confront the fact that this story mirrors real life, playing out in many cities and affecting their citizens. Menzies (2014) further highlights how the book opens up discussions on contemporary issues like racism, police brutality, identity, and the darker sides of technology and activism. Through the lens of a young person navigating these issues, the novel serves as a tool for reflecting on the world we are building today. Teens, are encouraged to think critically about these topics, how they might address them, and empathise with their peers who do live these situations.

## 5. Conclusion

This article had the goal of exploring the role urban spaces had in Young Adult book reviews. After establishing the connection between participatory culture and Booktube and studying the community itself, as well as selecting a multimodal discourse analysis with social semiotics as the theoretical framework of use and selecting the female booktubers and the book reviews to analyse following specific criteria, these are the principal findings:

Firstly, it is important to take into account that in Booktube the environment, in this case the city, is a key element of the book reviews as the world-building was always present as a section on its own. Furthermore, the analysis of the setting was done in all the cases, without distinction between fantastical or contemporary worlds.

In the case of fantasy books, although the stories tend to have a mysterious or magical allure, the booktuber can engage with the audience and discuss the setting using different techniques. The first one of those methods is linking the setting of the novel with personal experiences. In this case, the booktuber recalls a memory about visiting similar cities and shares with her audience as a way of making a parallelism between the city she visited and the one described in the story, an approach that also makes her look closer to her audience as she is sharing personal information in a public video.

In other cases, the references to cities can be adapted to the story told or the year in which it is set, which is what happens in both of the reviews shown by Sara-Jane Bird (2020; 2019).

The main difference is that in the first one, magic plays an important role, as it covers Paris, and more explicitly engulfs the Palace of Versailles. This dark magic takes place in the Palace of Versailles, an emblematic place in the city linked to the French Revolution, which is the historical event that begins to take shape and serves as a backdrop to the plot of this novel. Consequently, the city is key to the review. In addition to this, as the magic fits with the excess of the Courts before the French Revolution, the activities described are known to readers through cultural, historical production and collective knowledge. Furthermore, as Bird (2019) explains in the video, that the fantastic element highlights the social differences and problems that the lower classes had experienced in order to survive, situations that led to the French Revolution.

In the second example given by this booktuber (Bird, 2020), the area explored is the Court of Miracles through an alternate version of *Les Misérables* (Hugo, 2012). In this review the space is modified to fit a dystopian setting while maintaining the collective imaginary of the Court of Miracles, while also including the difficult surroundings of *Les Misérables* (2012) to the story. As a result, this article showed how different types of collective intertexts were able to transport the booktuber and the audience to a decaying Paris while sparking interest in this new approach.

The last fantasy approach to cities is also a rendition of 1889's Paris, but in this case the societal knowledge about the city during the World's Fair is mixed with a version of the world anchored in Victorian times, which mixes two time periods heavily explored in other text and other media, while

adding mythologies to the underbelly of the city (Lane, 2018). As a result, the booktuber presents a city full to the brim with changes but, at the same time, familiar and coherent enough to read the book.

Lastly, the contemporary genre book reviews present stories in real cities, where their characters live through plots inspired by real events, which allows the readers to reflect on current issues such as racism, live it through the character's shoes and, later, examine their own attitude and how they can collaborate to create a better society.

To sum up, urban spaces in the Young Adult book reviews produced by booktubers have proven to be a more complex element than what they looked like at first glance, inviting future researchers to dive in further on this aspect of the videos.



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