

QUEER AND NON-BINARY NARRATIVES IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE: TRENDS AND SOCIAL IMPACT

Achmad Zahrudin

Universitas Baturaja

achmadzahrudin@fisip.unbara.ac.id

Abstract

The study of queer and non-binary narratives in young adult literature highlights the increasing representation of characters with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. This literature reflects a cultural shift towards greater inclusivity, and offers more realistic depictions of the lives and challenges faced by queer and non-binary individuals. This research identifies that books in this genre not only fill a void in media representation, but also provide emotional and psychological support to young readers in search of identity. The social impact of this trend is significant, as it can reduce stigma, promote empathy, and encourage open conversations about gender identity and sexual orientation, ultimately creating a more inclusive and supportive society.

Keywords: Queer, Non-Binary Narratives, Young Adult Literature, Trends, Social Impact.

Introduction

In recent years, young adult (YA) literature has undergone significant developments in terms of inclusion and representation of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. One trend that has become increasingly prominent is the emergence of queer and non-binary narratives. As public awareness of LGBTQ+ issues increases, YA literature is becoming an increasingly important medium for exploring and discussing these often marginalised identities (Shah et al., 2024).

Queer and non-binary are terms that encompass a range of gender and sexual identities that do not conform to heteronormative norms. Representation in literature is crucial for this group, especially considering the adolescent stage of development as a critical period for identity formation. YA literature featuring queer and non-binary characters provides a space for young readers to see reflections of themselves, as well as promoting tolerance and understanding among readers who do not share similar experiences (Katikireddi et al., 2021).

In the last decade, queer and non-binary representation in young adult literature has seen a significant increase. More and more authors and publishers are creating space for narratives that reflect the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ characters. This is in line with broader social changes that advocate for inclusion and recognition of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations (Reed, 2023). Books such as Becky Albertalli's "Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda" and Mason Deaver's "I Wish You All the Best" played an important role in popularising stories focused on queer and non-binary characters, giving them greater visibility and sustaining the need for literature that reflects contemporary realities (Lampe, 2024).

This increase not only serves as a reflection of a society that is increasingly accepting of diversity, but also as an educational tool for young readers. Such books provide resources for queer and non-binary readers who may be seeking validation and understanding at critical moments in their identity development (Myrås, 2024) . In addition, they help non-queer readers to develop empathy and understanding for experiences different from their own. In this sense, inclusive young adult literature is not just a genre of entertainment, but also an important vehicle for greater social change, encouraging dialogue about identity, acceptance, and solidarity among teens (Cosgrove, 2021) .

However, the attention given to these narratives has not been without its challenges. Some critics highlight the risk of stereotyping or inaccurate representation, while others note the persistent lack in the number and quality of books that truly represent queer and non-binary experiences with the complexity they deserve (Shelton, 2021) .

On the other hand, the increased inclusion of queer and non-binary narratives in YA literature has shown significant social impact. These books not only serve as teaching tools for a wider readership, but also as sources of validation and reinforcement for queer and non-binary readers. By exploring issues such as coming out, social pressures, and unique everyday experiences, this literature opens up dialogue about human identity and diversity (Connolly et al., 2020) .

Therefore, it is important to explore the trends and social impact of queer and non-binary narratives in young adult literature. By better understanding how these narratives develop and how they affect readers, we can better support the production and dissemination of inclusive and authentic literature.

Research Methods

The study in this research uses the literature method. The literature research method is a technique used to study and review written sources relevant to a particular research topic. The first step in this method is to identify and collect credible and relevant literature, such as books, journal articles, reports, and other written sources (Sahar, 2008) ; (Arikunto, 2000) . After that, the researcher analyses and synthesises the information obtained to look for patterns, themes, or gaps in existing knowledge. This analysis is then used to compile a critical and systematic literature review, which not only summarises previous findings but also offers new perspectives or unanswered research questions. Literature research methods are essential in providing a theoretical basis for further research and in clarifying the context and significance of the issue under study (Fadli, 2021).

Discussion Results

Trends in Queer and Non-Binary Narratives in Young Adult Literature

In recent years, literature that promotes queer and non-binary narratives has experienced a notable resurgence. One of the main trends that has emerged is the

inclusion of queer and non-binary characters as complex and multidimensional protagonists (Sharp & Shannon, 2020) . Works such as "Felix Ever After" by Kacen Callender and "The Black Flamingo" by Dean Atta feature protagonists who face the challenges of everyday life with their diverse sexualities and gender identities as an integral part of the story, rather than just an added element. This trend moves away from stereotypical images that often constrict queer and non-binary identities into narratives dominated by traumatic conflict, and instead focuses on more positive and realistic experiences (Pennell & Green, n.d.) .

In addition, more and more writers from the LGBTQ+ community themselves are gracing the world of literature. Their presence gives authenticity and depth to the storytelling. The beauty of these authentic voices is their ability to explore the nuances of queer and non-binary identities in a more empathetic and rich way. For example, the novel "Cemetery Boys" by Aiden Thomas not only features trans characters but also inserts them into Latinx culture, offering a more comprehensive view of these often multi-layered identities (Bower-Brown et al., 2023) .

Queer and non-binary narratives have also begun to explore more diverse genres than just contemporary realism. Today, we see queer and non-binary characters in fantasy, science fiction, thriller and horror genres. Examples are "Pet" by Akwaeke Emezi, a novel that combines fantasy elements with socially relevant themes, and "The Broken Earth Trilogy" by N.K. Jemisin, which while not entirely centred on gender identity, introduces non-binary characters in a complex post-apocalyptic world. This diversity of genres opens up new opportunities for the exploration of queer and non-binary identities in various contexts and settings (Newcomb et al., 2020) .

Not only in terms of narratives and genres, but there has also been an evolution in themes. From struggling to be accepted, queer and non-binary literature has begun to explore themes such as self-love, friendship, family of choice, and resistance to social stereotypes. In many novels today, we see stories that highlight the personal happiness and achievements of queer and non-binary characters. For example, "We Are Okay" by Nina LaCour explores themes of isolation and connectedness through the lens of a queer teenager, carrying a powerful message about the importance of self-acceptance and emotional well-being (Kinitz & Salway, 2022) .

In addition to changes in narratives and themes, digital platforms also play an important role in the development and dissemination of queer and non-binary literature. Social media and platforms such as Wattpad or Substack allow writers to share their work directly with audiences without having to go through lengthy and often normative publishing processes. This opens up opportunities for more voices from across the queer and non-binary spectrum to be heard and recognised. For example, many young writers have through social media managed to build communities of readers who support and promote each other's work, creating an inclusive and vibrant ecosystem of literature (Bradford et al., 2020) .

In addition, the traditional publishing sector has also started to pay more attention to queer and non-binary literature. Major and independent publishers are increasingly releasing books that represent a diversity of gender identities and sexualities. Programmes such as mentorship for queer and non-binary writers, as well as writing competitions that highlight LGBTQ+ work, are clear indicators that the literary world is beginning to recognise the importance of broader and more inclusive representation. However, despite significant progress, challenges such as the elimination of biased selection and tokenistic representation still remain and need to be addressed to achieve true inclusivity (Rogers & Brown, 2024).

This trend also has a positive impact on the reading community, especially teenagers and young adults who often seek self-reflection in the literature they consume. The presence of characters and stories that represent their lives provides an important sense of connection and validation, reducing feelings of isolation and alienation. This inclusive literacy not only educates readers about gender and sexuality diversity but also inspires them to celebrate their own identities without fear or shame (Williams, 2021).

As such, the evolution of trends in queer and non-binary narratives reflects broader social changes towards inclusivity and diversity. Through more authentic representation, diverse genres, and empowering themes, queer and non-binary literature has managed to offer fresh and evocative perspectives. From the use of digital platforms to the support of the traditional publishing sector, these steps have helped bring more voices and stories that deserve to be appreciated. While there are still challenges to be faced, the progress that has been made provides optimism about a future where literature truly reflects and celebrates the full spectrum of human experience.

Social Impact of Queer and Non-Binary narratives developed in Young Adult literature

Young Adult (YA) literature that includes queer and non-binary narratives provides much-needed validation for teens who may be trying to understand and accept their identities. The characters and stories in these books help young readers to see reflections of themselves, providing a sense of recognition and reinforcement that their identities are valid and worth knowing. This is an important step in the process of self-acceptance, where adolescents can go through their personal journey with less external pressure to conform to norms that they feel do not suit them (Martin, 2023).

With positive and diverse narratives about queer and non-binary identities, YA literature can play an important role in reducing stigma and misinformation. Non-queer readers who previously lacked a clear understanding of the complexities of gender identity and sexuality can use this book to gain new insights (Francis, 2024). This helps to reduce prejudices and stereotypes they may hold, creating a more inclusive and tolerant society. Education through literature also introduces appropriate language and concepts, which can have a positive impact on how discussions about gender and sexuality take place among adolescents (Flanagan, 2020).

YA literature that promotes queer and non-binary narratives has the potential to form solid alliances and supportive communities among readers. When teens find others who share their experiences or appreciate the same narratives, they can form strong support networks, both online and offline. This not only builds positive personal relationships but also creates a social environment where queer and non-binary teens feel more accepted and supported. This support is crucial in overcoming any sense of isolation or marginalisation that these young individuals may feel (Barsigian et al., 2023).

The inclusion of queer and non-binary narratives in YA literature empowers voices that have been marginalised or silenced. When young readers are exposed to diverse stories centred on the experiences of queer and non-binary individuals, they are also taught the importance of listening to and appreciating different perspectives. This can lead to a more empathetic generation that values diversity and strives for social justice. Moreover, young queer and non-binary writers are given a platform to tell their own stories, contributing to a richer and more authentic literary landscape (McCann et al., 2021).

As queer and non-binary narratives become more common in YA literature, it not only reflects social change but also fuels it. These stories can inspire young readers to become advocates for LGBTQ+ rights in their communities and beyond. Through the understanding and empathy gained from the literature, teens may feel compelled to participate in social movements, awareness campaigns, and legislative efforts that support equality and protection for queer and non-binary communities. Thus, this literature contributes to the formation of a more caring and progressive generation of leaders and advocates (Budzan ., 2023)

Finally, queer and non-binary narratives in YA literature provide a safe space for young readers to explore and understand their own identities without fear of judgement. These books become important tools in their journey of figuring out who they are and how they want to express who they are to the world. In addition, finding characters who experience similar struggles or face similar challenges helps teens to understand that they are not alone in this journey, even in environments that may not be entirely supportive.

Overall, the development of queer and non-binary narratives in YA literature has had a significant social impact, shaping a generation that is more inclusive, empathetic, and ready to fight for justice and equality.

Conclusion

Queer and non-binary narratives in young adult literature show that there is a significant increase in the representation of characters with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. This trend reflects a cultural shift that is more inclusive and accepting of young people in search of identity. The presence of queer and non-binary characters in these stories provides a more realistic and educational reflection of the diversity of human experience. In addition, young adult literature that includes queer and non-binary themes helps fill a void in mainstream media that often ignores or misrepresents these identities.

The social impact of this increased representation is positive, especially for young readers who may feel isolated or not understood by their surrounding communities. Books featuring queer and non-binary narratives promote empathy, understanding and acceptance, reducing the stigma that may still exist among some communities. Additionally, the presence of this literature encourages more open and honest conversations about gender identity and sexual orientation, creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone. Through literature, we see how narratives that reflect human diversity can educate and inspire positive change in society.

References

- Arikunto, S. (2000). *Research Management* (Jakarta). Rineka Cipta. [//172.0.0.2424/Felibrary%2Findex.php%3Fp%3Dshow_detail%26id%3D2341%26keywords%3D](https://doi.org/10.2424/Felibrary%2Findex.php%3Fp%3Dshow_detail%26id%3D2341%26keywords%3D)
- Barsigian, L., Howard, C., & ... (2023). Engagement with master and alternative narratives of gender and sexuality among LGBTQ+ youth in the digital age. *Journal of ...*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07435584221150223>
- Bower-Brown, S., Zadeh, S., & Jadva, V. (2023). Binary-trans, non-binary and gender-questioning adolescents' experiences in UK schools. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2021.1873215>
- Bradford, N., Rider, G., Catalpa, J., & ... (2020). Creating gender: A thematic analysis of genderqueer narratives. *Non-Binary and ...*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003015888-5>
- Budzan, B. (2023). *Experiences of Self-Compassion in Young Adults with Non-Binary Gender Identities*. era.library.ualberta.ca. <https://era.library.ualberta.ca/items/73fdbf71-caf9-4f6d-a264-b7080bd60582>
- Connolly, D., Hughes, X., & Berner, A. (2020). Barriers and facilitators to cervical cancer screening among transgender men and non-binary people with a cervix: A systematic narrative review. *Preventive Medicine*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0091743520300955>
- Cosgrove, D. (2021). "I am allowed to be myself": A photovoice exploration of non-binary identity development and meaning-making. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2020.1850385>
- Fadli, M. R. (2021). Understanding the design of qualitative research methods. *HUMANIKA*, 21 (1), 33-54. <https://doi.org/10.21831/hum.v21i1.38075>
- Flanagan, A. (2020). *Do we really get to choose our own story? (Re)imagining community support with transgender and non-binary older adults*. uwspace.uwaterloo.ca. <https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/handle/10012/16404>
- Francis, D. (2024). "Did you just say I was lit?" Transgender and non-binary youth doing gender; resisting cisnormativity in South African schools. *Journal of Gender Studies*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2023.2172386>
- Katikireddi, S., Lal, S., Carrol, E., & ... (2021). Unequal impact of the COVID-19 crisis on minority ethnic groups: A framework for understanding and addressing inequalities. *J Epidemiol...*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:21:50. <https://jech.bmj.com/content/75/10/970.abstract>
- Kinitz, D., & Salway, T. (2022). Cisheteronormativity, conversion therapy, and identity among sexual and gender minority people: A narrative inquiry and creative non-

- fiction. *Qualitative Health Research*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323221126536>
- Lampe, N. (2024). Accounting for cisnormativity: Understanding transgender and non-binary young people's strategies to resist and reduce inequality in healthcare. *Social Currents*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294965231179432>
- Martin, S. (2023). *Developing and evaluating QueerViBE: an online intervention to empower trans and non-binary youth*. aru.figshare.com. https://aru.figshare.com/articles/thesis/Developing_and_evaluating_QueerViBE_a_n_online_intervention_to_empower_trans_and_non-binary_youth/23763150
- McCann, E., Donohue, G., & Brown, M. (2021). Experiences and perceptions of trans and gender non-binary people regarding their psychosocial support needs: A systematic review of the qualitative *International Journal of Environmental ...*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58. <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/18/7/3403>
- Myrås, J. (2024). *All "Bi" Ourselves: Bisexual representation in contemporary YA literature and its prevalence in the past two decades*. ntnuopen.ntnu.no. <https://ntnuopen.ntnu.no/ntnu-xmlui/handle/11250/3139075>
- Newcomb, M., Hill, R., Buehler, K., Ryan, D., & ... (2020). ... burden of mental health problems, substance use, violence, and related psychosocial factors in transgender, non-binary, and gender diverse youth and young adults. *Archives of Sexual ...*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-019-01533-9>
- Pennell, A., & Green, C. (n.d.). BEYOND THE BINARY: EXPLORING GENDER DIVERSITY IN BOOKS FOR ADOLESCENTS. *Researchgate.Net*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ashley-Pennell-2/publication/367046676_Beyond_the_Binary_Exploring_Gender_Diversity_in_Books_for_Adolescents/links/63bf23007ecd35045c3d7422/Beyond-the-Binary-Exploring-Gender-Diversity-in-Books-for-Adolescents.pdf
- Reed, K. (2023). A scoping review of good methodological practices in research involving transgender, non-binary, and two-spirit youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2022.2092576>
- Rogers, M., & Brown, C. (2024). Critical ethical reflexivity (CER) in feminist narrative inquiry: Reflections from cis researchers doing social work research with trans and non-binary people. *International Journal of Social Research ...*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2023.2187007>
- Sahar, J. (2008). A critique of qualitative research. *Indonesian Nursing Journal*, 12 (3), 197-203. <https://doi.org/10.7454/jki.v12i3.222>
- Shah, T., Parodi, K., Holt, M., & ... (2024). A qualitative exploration of how transgender and non-binary adolescents define and identify supports. *Journal of ...*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07435584221123123>
- Sharp, M., & Shannon, B. (2020). Becoming non-binary: An exploration of gender work in Tumblr. *Gender, Sexuality and Race in the Digital Age*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29855-5_8
- Shelton, G. (2021). *An Annotated Webliography of Materials for Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming (TGNC) Youth and their Caregivers*. cdr.lib.unc.edu. https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/concern/masters_papers/73666d304
- Williams, I. (2021). Curiosity and noise: Transgender and non-binary people in children's books. *TLS. Times Literary Supplement*, Query date: 2024-12-28 10:27:58.

<https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA667422823&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=0307661X&p=AONE&sw=w>