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**Term Paper**  
**“Impact of Social Media on Contemporary Literature in Rebecca  
Yarros’ *Fourth Wing*”**

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the publishing industry has undergone notable changes to cater to the preferences and demands of an expanding readership, particularly the users of the social media platform TikTok. These changes, namely the increasing number of new readers and the homogenized subject matter of popular releases, are unprecedented in their scope. Considering that the primary demographic of this platform comprises young women, it is plausible that the book recommendations they encounter on this app may shape their perception of gender roles, stereotypes, and dynamics. Therefore, the **relevance** of this study is determined by the lack of research related to the substantial impact of TikTok on contemporary literature and the identities of young women.

This term paper **aims** at investigating the relationship between social media and major trends in contemporary literature on the example of Rebecca Yarros' "Fourth Wing" by analyzing it from a feminist point of view.

To achieve this goal, the following **tasks** need to be fulfilled:

- To define feminist literary criticism;
- To define the current digital landscape of a contemporary literary process;
- To trace the modern literary trends and their origin;
- To analyze the impact of social media in Rebecca Yarros' "Fourth Wing";
- To analyze "Fourth Wing" from a feminist perspective.

The **object** of the study is the novel "Fourth Wing" by Rebecca Yarros as an example of contemporary literature under the influence of social media.

The **subject** of the study is the analysis of social media's impact on the recently published Young Adult/New Adult literature, alongside investigating its ramifications on the preferences and values of young women.

The **methodology** employed in this study began by examining the platform TikTok to gather information about the platform's main demographic, their literary preferences, and prevalent tropes/themes in the BookTok community. With these insights, the novel "Fourth Wing" was scrutinized to identify its incorporation of popular BookTok elements, which were subsequently analyzed. Lastly, feminist literary theory was applied to analyze "Fourth Wing," revealing tropes and character portrayals that either reflect or challenge societal norms, stereotypes, and power dynamics.

The **structure** of the term paper is as follows: The first chapter explains the theoretical framework of feminist literary criticism and outlines the recent changes in popular contemporary literature. The second chapter is concerned with the analysis of "Fourth Wing", a novel that exemplifies the influence of social media on modern Young Adult / New Adult literature.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTERSECTION OF FEMINISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN LITERATURE**

### **1.1. Feminist Literary Criticism**

Literature has long served as a mirror reflecting the complexities of human experience, yet for centuries, the reflection has been distorted by the pervasive influence of patriarchal ideology. In recent decades, however, a critical movement has emerged to challenge the hegemony of male-centered literary canons and narratives – feminist literary criticism. It approaches literature from a woman's perspective and offers a transformative lens through which to explore literature, uncovering hidden voices, subverting dominant discourses, and illuminating the interplay between gender, power, and representation.

In contemporary feminist discourse, there is a growing emphasis on women's subjectivity and agency (Tyson, 2011), challenging traditional narratives that depict women as passive objects. This perspective emphasizes women's ability to imagine and shape their own lives, reclaiming agency in a world that often seeks to control or silence them.

Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking work "The Second Sex" laid bare the ways in which women are systematically marginalized and oppressed within patriarchal societies (De Beauvoir, 1949). By characterizing women as 'the Other,' de Beauvoir illuminated the fundamental asymmetry of power that underlies gender relations, positioning women as objects to be defined and controlled by men, relegated to a subordinate role within society (De Beauvoir, 1949). From the objectification of female characters to the relegation of women writers to the margins of literary discourse, literature has been an agent of the reinforcement of patriarchal ideologies and the perpetuation of gender inequality.

The persistence of harmful gender stereotypes in literature exacerbates the problem. Female characters are often dichotomized into "good girls" – depicted as

pure, weak, emotional, nurturing, and submissive – or "bad girls" – characterized as seductresses, gossips, or "bitches" –, depending on their adherence to or defiance of patriarchal gender norms (Tyson, 2011). In contrast, men are described as assertive and dominant, relegated to the roles of leaders and protectors. These stereotypes perpetuate harmful norms that constrain individual expression and compel individuals to conform to the societal expectations imposed upon them.

The way that gender roles are portrayed in literature affects how people perceive their own gender, and this effect is especially strong when it comes to teenagers, who make up the majority of YA/New Adult book readers (Jacobs, 2004). Feminist theory calls upon us to critically examine the ways in which our personal identities are shaped by the cultural expectations surrounding gender. Judith Butler proposes to view gender not as an inherent characteristic, but a learned one. She argues that gender is not an innate trait but rather a learned behavior shaped by social expectations of femininity and masculinity (Butler, 1990). This perspective echoes de Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (De Beauvoir, 1949) which suggests that gender roles are not inherent but instead culturally constructed.

Thus, the gender roles prescribed to female characters in literature are merely entrenched stereotypes, subject to transformation and reinterpretation. Fortunately, there has been an increase in contemporary literature featuring strong female characters, exemplified by protagonists in works like "The Hunger Games" and "The Throne of Glass" series (Pattee A, 2016). The prevailing perspective on these changes is that such narratives not only empower female readers but also offer a more nuanced and inclusive representation of gender in literature, challenging traditional portrayals of women as passive objects. However, some critics (Tyson, 2011) argue that an excessive focus on 'strength' may render these characters unrealistic, unintentionally echoing patriarchal standards, and may even perpetuate harmful stereotypes by implicitly denigrating the supposed weakness of real women outside of fiction.

Another way women defying the oppressive patriarchal ideology can be represented in literature is through their so-called 'madness'. This concept is explored in detail by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's in their seminal work "The Madwoman in the Attic" (1979). They argue that the recurring trope of the "madwoman" in 19th-century literature is not a reflection of mental illness, but rather a symbolic representation of female characters who challenge societal expectations. These characters' descent into madness, according to Gilbert and Gubar, can be interpreted as a form of resistance against the stifling constraints of patriarchal norms. By embracing the label of madness, these characters expose the absurdity of the limitations placed upon them.

In contemporary literature this theme continues under the name 'female rage'. Works such as Ottessa Moshfegh's "My Year of Rest and Relaxation," Melissa Broder's "Milk Fed: A Novel," and Carmen Maria Machado's "Her Body and Other Parties" depict female characters grappling with intense anger and frustration in response to patriarchal oppression. This genre represents a significant shift in narrative power: by allowing women to express their frustration authentically, these works challenge the traditional portrayal of female emotions as passive or hysterical. However, the genre doesn't shy away from controversy. The raw and confrontational nature of these narratives can be unsettling, particularly for those accustomed to sanitized portrayals of women. Yet, it's this very discomfort that makes the genre so powerful: by compelling readers to confront the realities of systematized oppression of women, these works can open a dialogue about the need for change and a more equitable world.

Finally, it is crucial to specify how feminist theory influences literary criticism. Firstly, this type of criticism deals with concepts such as patriarchy, traditional gender roles, objectification of women, sexism etc., which dictate societal expectations and perceptions of femininity. When examining a text through a feminist lens, scholars explore how these concepts manifest in the



narrative, characters, and themes, and how they reflect or challenge broader societal attitudes towards gender.

Additionally, the gender of the author and narrator is considered, as well as the social and cultural context in which the text was written, as these factors can influence the author's attitudes towards women and shape the portrayal of gender in the text.

In terms of character analysis, feminist critics explore the roles and characterization of female characters within the narrative. They examine whether women are relegated to minor, secondary, or main roles, and assess how they are depicted in terms of autonomy and complexity. This analysis extends to the examination of stereotypical representations of women, such as the beloved, mothers, seductresses etc., and whether the text upholds or resists these stereotypes.

Lastly, feminist literary criticism examines gender relations depicted in a text and analyzes the roles assigned to men and women. This includes analyzing whether gender roles align with the characters' personal desires or conflict with them, as well as exploring the causes of conflict between men and women within the narrative. By addressing these questions, feminist literary criticism sheds light on how literature reflects and shapes cultural perceptions of gender, power, and identity.

## **1.2. Transformative Power of Social Media: a BookTok Approach to Literature**

As has been established in the previous chapter, literature not only mirrors societal attitudes but also has a power to shape them. Especially for young readers who are still in the process of forming their identities, the books they encounter can deeply impact their perceptions, views, and values, particularly concerning their

understanding of gender roles, dynamics, and stereotypes. Therefore, it is imperative to explore the intersection between popular contemporary literature and social media platforms which play a pivotal role in shaping the reading habits and preferences of these young audiences.

In the contemporary literary landscape, social media stands at the forefront of transformative forces, reshaping the very foundations of and engagement with literature. The impact of social media transcends mere connectivity, as it also redefines what constitutes literature (Thomas, 2020), influences reading tastes, popularizes reading (Brown, 2022), broadens the scope of literary expression through the advent of new genres, promotes communication between readers and authors, and facilitates marketing of literature.

In recent years, the primary social media which have had an influence on literature include Twitter, Instagram and, most importantly, TikTok. The succinct and visually appealing nature of content on these platforms has revolutionized the way literature is consumed, published, and discussed. Importantly, since the primary demographic of these apps are people between the ages of 12-27 (Brown, 2022), the trends in the literary sphere have a direct connection to the younger generation, often influencing Young Adult and the recently popularized New Adult genres.

The online literary discourse is permeated with terms such as "trope," "aesthetic," and "BookTok". The primary vehicle of such changes in the modern publishing industry has been a social media app called TikTok, the magnitude of whose reach has no precedents.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which people had more free time to devote to their hobbies, TikTok, with its adroit algorithms which personalize the content the user sees, became a good replacement for 'doomscrolling'. At the same time, BookTok, a niche branch of TikTok devoted to posts about books, has likewise rapidly risen in popularity, and currently, posts

with the hashtag #BookTok already amount to over 220 billion views. The visual and interactive nature of platforms like TikTok has redefined the presentation and consumption of literary content, emphasizing brevity and visual appeal in conveying literary themes and recommendations (Harris, 2021). Thus, the short-form content under the hashtag #BookTok largely comprises book recommendations, which are typically presented in two main formats: either as a visually appealing collage accompanied by brief text descriptions or quotes encapsulating the essence of the book, or as a monologue where influencers provide a concise book review (Martens et al., 2022). As the platform gained momentum, it created a new space for literary enthusiasts to share their love for books, discover new titles, and engage in discussions about their favorite works.

It is worth mentioning that this platform has had an influence on reading habits. Notably, the majority of these video-recommendations emphasize the emotional impact of a book on the reader (Harris, 2021). Consequently, there appears to be a tendency to prioritize connecting with literature on a purely emotional level, often eschewing deeper critical analysis in favor of surface-level engagement.

Nevertheless, the viral nature of BookTok content has led to tangible impacts on book sales and publishing trends, with books marked by the hashtag #BookTokMadeMeBuyIt having dedicated shelves in both digital and real bookstores (Peirson-Hagger, 2022). Books featured on BookTok often experience a surge in popularity, leading to increased sales and visibility. Publishers and authors have taken notice of this trend, leveraging BookTok as a platform for book promotion (Barnett, 2023) and marketing strategies.

Statistics (Brown, 2022) indicate that the predominant demographic of both the users and the popular influencers on Booktok comprises teenagers and women in their twenties. Consequently, an examination of the subject matter of these widely read and recommended books can offer insights into their potential impact on young women, particularly in shaping their understanding of healthy

relationships, gender dynamics, and perception of femininity. This is particularly noteworthy concerning teenagers, whose formative years render them particularly susceptible to the influence of the literature they consume.

To gain insight into BookTok, one must examine the genres of literature that hold the most popularity among its users. Of particular interest for this study is the romance genre, as it holds a prominent position within the Booktok community and displays a wide range of variations. Among these, the New Adult sub-genre has gained significant popularity in recent years, spearheaded by authors such as Colleen Hoover, Ali Hazelwood, Emily Henry, Penelope Douglas, and Christina Lauren. New Adult literature primarily caters to readers between the ages of 18 and 25 (Peraza-Brown, 2022), addressing more mature themes, often of a sexual nature. However, some iterations of this genre, particularly those labeled as "dark romance," delve into particularly intense or disturbing themes.

Dark romances frequently depict morally grey male characters with a troubled past and dominant personality, presenting narratives that downplay or excuse harmful behaviors. The male characters in these novels are "alpha male" love interests, characterized by violence, possessiveness, aggression, and inclinations toward controlling behavior (Darnell, 2024). Authors of these books imply the desirability of such behaviors by accentuating the attraction towards a "bad boy" or "damaged" romantic partner.

Moreover, gender dynamics in these novels show signs of clear power imbalances. This frequently manifests as emotional manipulation, where one partner manipulates the other's emotions through threats or isolation (Darnell, 2024). Coercive control, involving blurred consent and emotional manipulation, may also be depicted. These dynamics are portrayed as passionate or romantic, potentially desensitizing readers to recognizing real-world warning signs in relationships.

Critiques of works falling under the umbrella of 'dark romance,' lambasted for their problematic depictions of toxic masculinity and the romanticization of abusive relationships (Makusha, 2023), underscore apprehensions regarding the potential impact of these narratives on young readers' perception of gender roles and dynamics, particularly given the widespread endorsement of such novels on platforms like BookTok in recent years.

Another notable sub-genre within romance literature is 'romantasy', featuring fantastical elements alongside a central romance narrative. Leading authors in this genre include Sarah J. Maas, Leigh Bardugo, Holly Black etc. Unlike the 'dark romance' sub-genre, these narratives typically emphasize the character's agency. Romantasy novels frequently feature retellings of fairy tales or myths, primarily because they provide a chance for authors to empower the oppressed female characters of the original stories and grant them opportunities for revenge or self-determination (Lee, 2008). The fantasy narratives frequently feature female protagonists who occupy roles traditionally associated with masculinity, most often warriors. These heroines are not merely damsels in distress; they wield both physical prowess and strategic brilliance.

Drawing from the subculture of fandoms and fanfiction, Booktok users have adopted a system of 'tropes' to succinctly categorize books based on recurring themes. A dictionary definition of a trope is "a convention or device that establishes a predictable or stereotypical representation of a character, setting, or scenario in a creative work" (Dictionary.com). In recently popular Young/New Adult literature, such tropes include 'enemies to lovers', 'academic rivals to lovers', 'fake dating', 'morally grey character' (Dees C, 2023) etc. Despite the fact that a reliance on such categorization can be detrimental, as it reduces a book to just a few major themes which can engender false expectations (De Leon, 2022), due to their simplicity, tropes have of late become the prevalent method of describing books, not only on social media, but also in the publishing industry.

An illustration of the impact of these tropes is evident in the case of Olivie Blake's novel "The Atlas Six". The book was inaccurately described in a TikTok video as a 'rivals to lovers' story with a 'love triangle', sparking significant disappointment among new readers who found the actual content to be incongruent with their expectations. Despite this backlash, the book gained attention and ultimately led to a multiple-book deal for the author (Fadroski, 2022), signifying the potential influence of BookTok trends on the publishing landscape. Moreover, this success story has prompted other writers and publishers to closely monitor and engage with the BookTok community, with some, like a best-selling romance writer Ali Hazelwood, deliberately tailoring their work to align with popular tropes (Goodreads).

While numerous books are now strategically crafted to capitalize on viral trends, they continue to resonate with mass audiences, despite inherent shortcomings. For instance, Rebecca Yarros' novel "Fourth Wing" achieved widespread acclaim as the best 'romantasy' book of 2023, winning a global Goodreads vote. Its rapid ascent to New York Times bestseller status and subsequent sequel release within six months underscored its immediate popularity. However, this meteoric success sparked skepticism, particularly as readers discerned striking resemblances between the characters in the series and those from other fantasy works. Moreover, concerns regarding the book's quality emerged, notably regarding the inadequate research into Irish culture, which the narrative purportedly draws from and acknowledges, resulting in a disrespectful misrepresentation of a minority culture.

As articulated by a Bloomberg columnist, "*Fiction novels may be an escape for some, but they are often rooted in somebody else's culture or origin story*" (Karl, 2023). Yet as the book's sales numbers show, readers continue to uncritically consume, praise and endorse books tailored solely to capture widespread attention on social media through repetitive tropes and themes, even at the expense of marginalizing minority cultures. The continued endorsement of

such works by mass audiences suggests a persistent demand of BookTok audiences for escapism and entertainment within contemporary literature, even if it means quality and integrity are sacrificed.

Authors such as Rebecca Yarros and Ali Hazelwood exemplify a prevailing pattern in the industry. Aspiring authors are increasingly compelled to conform to prevailing trends and molds in order to secure publication for their work. While this approach proves effective and profitable for both authors and publishers, it has contributed to a noticeable homogeneity among the newly released books. When combined with TikTok algorithms, which are designed to show the user similar content based on their interactions (likes, comments, etc.), this poses a threat not only for individual tastes (Thomas, 2020) but also for publishing as a whole. It fosters an environment where conformity to prevailing trends becomes paramount, thereby marginalizing works that diverge from established template or lack mass appeal. This is paradoxical, as the BookTok community prides itself on giving voice to diverse perspectives, experiences, and narratives (Iyer, 2023). Yet, the pressure to conform to popular trends proves to stifle creativity, suppress individuality, and deter experimentation. The result is, “*a subgenre of easily-bingeable novels that all sort of have the same cover*” (Pierce, 2023).

### **Conclusion to Part 1**

This chapter has explored the intersection of feminist literary criticism and the emergent phenomenon of BookTok. Feminist literary criticism provides a valuable lens through which to examine gender stereotypes, power structures, and representations within literature. By analyzing the current trends on BookTok, we see a platform that, while introducing new readers to literature, also presents a concerning tilt towards specific genres, particularly romance, and prioritizes emotional engagement over critical analysis. The assortment of books favored on the platform highlights a juxtaposition between narratives endeavoring to challenge gender norms and those that exaggerate and idealize them. This highlights the

significance of examining the books that garner popularity on the platform to gain understanding into how they shape the perceptions of gender as well as general literary preferences among younger generations. Furthermore, it has been noted that TikTok wields significant influence in the marketing of literature, with authors and publishers successfully utilizing the platform for personal gain, albeit potentially at the expense of the quality of contemporary literary works. These observations underscore the undeniable impact of social media on literature and readers, making it a compelling area of study deserving of further research.



## **CHAPTER 2: SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT IN REBECCA YARROS’ “FOURTH WING”**

### **2.1. Social Media’s Influence in “Fourth Wing”: Shaping the Reader’s Horizon**

In dissecting the influence of social media, particularly BookTok, on literature, it is imperative to scrutinize how many contemporary works often derive their themes, tropes, and characterizations from prevalent trends on digital platforms. Rebecca Yarros's "Fourth Wing" presents a quintessential case study in this regard, where the narrative appears to be curated with a deliberate nod towards tropes and character archetypes that resonate profoundly with TikTok's user base.

At the heart of the narrative lies a prominent cliché: the trope of 'the chosen one', wherein the protagonist is portrayed as a figure destined for extraordinary accomplishments and greatness. This trope, steeped in mythological and fantasy traditions, frequently acts as a catalyst for character development and self-realization, as the protagonist grapples with the weight of their destiny and the expectations placed upon them (Dees C, 2023).

The main character, Violet, is depicted as a feeble but savvy 20-year-old, unexpectedly thrown into a perilous situation. Endeavoring to meet her mother's high expectations, Violet must overcome her lack of training in a setting reminiscent of "Hunger Games" – an environment where prospective warriors undergo rigorous training, confronting mortal dangers while also being encouraged to engage in lethal conflicts. In a manifestation of the 'chosen one' archetype, Violet acquires potent magical powers, swiftly becoming the most formidable and feared recruit, ultimately succeeding in rescuing everyone despite her apparent inadequacy.

Moreover, the romantic subplot assumes a significant role within the narrative, with the trope of enemies-to-lovers occupying a central position. This

trope, characterized by the gradual transformation of animosity into romantic attraction between protagonists, serves as a foundational element in numerous contemporary romance narratives. Its resonance on platforms like TikTok is rooted in its inherent tension and emotional payoff, as well as a potential subversion of patriarchal stereotypes. In these stories, the female character isn't obligated to be immediately likable or passive; she can be strong, independent, and even confrontational – thus, more realistic and relateable for readers.

In the case of “Fourth Wing”, the protagonists initially find themselves at odds due to their family history, each having lost a family member due to the animosity between their respective political camps. Despite having been cautioned to avoid Xaden, the love interest, at all costs, and perceiving him as a threat, they inevitably find themselves in a situation which forces them to become closer. Notably, this results in a swift dissolution of the 'enemies' dynamic, which, despite being central to the book's premise, remains underdeveloped and fleeting.

What replaces it is the trope of forced proximity, which is supposed to catalyze the development of a couples' interpersonal relationships amidst constrained circumstances. This trope, often employed in settings such as workplaces, schools, or shared living spaces, serves to intensify the dynamics between characters and accelerate romantic tension. Within the novel, the protagonists are thrust into close quarters due to external factors, namely their enrollment in the same war college. This situation is further compounded when they become involuntarily bound by magic, rendering them incapable of prolonged separation. Consequently, they are compelled to seek common ground, leading, as the trope suggests, to the development of romantic feelings for one another.

Furthermore, the novel incorporated the trope of a love triangle, featuring the classic dichotomy between ‘the boy next door’ and ‘the bad boy’ archetypes. Predictably, Violet disregards the well-intentioned and protective childhood friend, who advises her to seek a means of escaping the perilous situation and liberating herself from her mother's control, in favor of the more captivating, seductive, and

dangerous character, despite her limited knowledge of him and his reputation for trouble.

In scrutinizing "Fourth Wing," it becomes evident that while the novel employs popular tropes, it does so without achieving originality or depth. While constructing a romance or Young Adult narrative around such tropes typically does not inherently detract from the coherence of the plot and the book's enjoyability, the excessive reliance on and sheer abundance of tropes within "Fourth Wing" make the work seem as merely an amalgamation of other works within the same genre. This suggests that the numerous tropes were employed primarily to appeal to a broader audience, with insufficient attention devoted to fully exploring any single trope in depth.

Of significant note is also the narrative style adopted by "Fourth Wing," namely because it is reminiscent of fanfiction, wherein the protagonist functions as a thinly veiled self-insert for the reader. Presented through a first-person perspective, the protagonist is intentionally crafted with a degree of blandness and imperfection, facilitating a seamless projection of the reader's own experiences, desires, and aspirations onto her persona (Колієва & Купцова, 2020).

In the context of "Fourth Wing," this narrative approach serves a similar purpose, aiming to make the book accessible and relatable to readers. While fostering a heightened sense of reader identification and emotional investment, this approach also poses the risk of sacrificing narrative depth and complexity in favor of personalized gratification.

Being privy to Violet's mind owing to the first-person narration, it is not surprising that her thoughts are often disjointed and juvenile, taking into account her age. Yet even supposing this was done intentionally, such writing sharply contrasts with the author's repeated attempts to portray the protagonist as a highly educated student. The author's prose in "Fourth Wing" is characterized by an abundance of swear words, frequent sequences of nominal sentences, and ellipses.

Compounding this issue is the medieval setting of the narrative, which renders the constant use of anachronistic slang and profanity further detrimental to the narrative's authenticity.

Paradoxically, these elements also contribute to the book's accessibility and appeal to readers seeking binge-worthy content. These perceived shortcomings, which some may deem as indicative of bad writing, further align "Fourth Wing" with fanfiction, known for its highly informal writing style and lack of rigorous editing (Sapuridis & Alberto, 2022). Despite evident plot holes and instances of subpar writing, readers appear undeterred, and are instead drawn to the abundance of tropes and relatable moments scattered throughout the text.

## **2.2. Feminist Perspective of Rebecca Yarros' "Fourth Wing"**

In line with some feminist themes prevalent in contemporary Young Adult/New Adult fiction, "Fourth Wing" attempts to subvert traditional gender roles for women. Initially, the fictional society in this book presents an image of potential gender equality.

For one, women are actively encouraged to participate in military training alongside men, and selection appears meritocratic: success hinges on individual performance, not gender. By foregrounding the importance of competence and skill over gender, the text challenges the systemic barriers that have historically excluded women from participating in traditionally male-dominated spheres.

Moreover, the society prioritizes utility and strength over conventional femininity and beauty. This emphasis is evident in the description of the main character's sister: "*Mira's a younger version of our mother. She's tall, with strong, powerful muscles toned from years of sparring, [...] her golden-brown hair is sheared short for combat in the same style as Mom's*" (Yarros, 2023). By defying traditional gender norms and bestowing these characters attributes typically

associated with masculinity, the author challenges the stereotypical notions of femininity.

However, a closer examination of the societal structure at large, reveals continued remnants of a patriarchal society. For one, the ultimate authority resides with the king, a male figure. Additionally, Violet's mother, a high-ranking military general, reinforces her position through displays of her achievements, suggesting the need to constantly assert her power: “*my mother, dressed in all her military finery, medals and all, lest anyone forget exactly who she is*” (Yarros, 2023). Therefore, it can be inferred that the society in this fictional universe is only superficially feminist, with the military serving as the sole avenue for female empowerment.

Violet's mother presents a striking example of a character archetype referred to as a ‘strong female character’. Her characterization –emotional detachment, mental and physical fortitude, and a prioritization of professional achievement over familial bonds – stands in significant contrast to the patriarchal image of a woman. She is cold-hearted and pitiless, “*a woman who’s been made famous for her lack of [mercy]*” (Yarros, 2023). Notably, she withdraws from active participation in family life, treating her daughters with a similar level of detachment as she would other soldiers, presumably to avoid perceptions of favoritism. Moreover, the narrative reveals her as the story's antagonist, actively engaged in protecting and manipulating political secrets that endanger countless lives.

It is worth noting that the author's portrayal of Violet's mother as a powerful figure who prioritizes career over family and maintains emotional distance could be interpreted as, paradoxically, reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes. This portrayal carries the potential implication that the character's non-conformist traits in relation to gender norms are inherently negative. The one-dimensional portrayal of Violet’s mother, lacking any redeeming traits, could create an impression that a woman who prioritizes accomplishments outside the domestic sphere is inherently unsympathetic and villainous.

As for Violet, her characterization presents a potential contradiction within the novel's exploration of gender roles. The narrative positions her as a budding warrior, a role traditionally reserved for men, thus seemingly defying stereotypical femininity. However, Violet's internal struggle exposes a potential pitfall in dismantling gender stereotypes. With self-deprecating words, she acknowledges her perceived shortcomings, expressing sentiments of physical inferiority: *"I'm too short. Too frail. What curves I do have should be muscle"* (Yarros, 2023). This sentiment stands in stark contrast to the confident and physically strong portrayal of her sister and mother.

On the one hand, Violet's vulnerability humanizes her and challenges the unrealistic expectations placed on "strong female character" the book abounds in. On the other hand, the contrast between Violet and the other female characters, who are depicted as confident and physically strong, could not only inadvertently give the reader the idea that women who do not or cannot conform this ideal are somehow inferior, but also perpetuate the stereotype of female inadequacy in traditionally male roles. This raises questions about the author's intentions in portraying Violet's character and whether her depiction ultimately serves to challenge or reinforce gender stereotypes.

Adding another layer of complexity is Violet's weapon of choice – poison. Historically associated with femininity (Sadowski, 2020), poison can be viewed as a tool for the weaker to overcome the stronger, showcasing strategic thinking. This can be empowering, as it demonstrates women's agency and resourcefulness in navigating hostile environments. However, this association can also be negative, implying weakness and cowardliness, thus perpetuating the patriarchal view of women.

The male characters in "Fourth Wing" primarily represent conventional and arguably exaggerated expressions of masculinity. The depiction of male characters as bullies, aggressors, and figures of authority aligns with patriarchal expectations of masculinity, which prioritize dominance and aggression. Violet's love interest,

Xaden, is particularly noteworthy in this regard. Describing him using predatory language, *“he’s a shark and they’re all fish giving him a wide berth”* (Yarros, 2023), reinforces toxic masculinity and perpetuates harmful stereotypes about male behavior. Such characterization of male characters appears to be a trend on BookTok (Makusha, 2023), particularly in the New Adult sub-genre, and by replicating this archetype, the author inadvertently contributes to the romanization and normalization of toxic, aggressive male partners in romantic relationships.

Similarly, to develop the trope of enemies-to-lovers, the author portrays the main couple's relationship with a disturbing dynamic reminiscent of a predator and his prey, especially at the beginning of the book. Upon first meeting him, Violet expresses a sense of unease in Xaden's presence, evident in her observation: *“I don’t even reach his collarbone. He’s massive. He has to be more than four inches over six feet tall. I feel exactly what Mira called me—fragile—”* (Yarros, 2023).

This representation implies a power imbalance between the characters. Although Violet's sentiments of fragility may stem from her physical stature in comparison to Xaden, they may ultimately reflect deeper cultural expectations and standards about gender roles and relationships. Violet's perceived frailty in this scene reinforces traditional gender inequalities in a patriarchal society that values male power and dominance, placing her under Xaden's authority and control.

Furthermore, Violet's awareness of Xaden's ulterior motives adds another layer of complexity to their relationship. Despite knowing that he has a motive to harm her and having been warned of his intentions, she finds herself drawn to him, indicating a troubling acceptance of danger and violence as inherent components of romantic attraction. This portrayal not only romanticizes toxic behavior (Austin, 2017) but also normalizes the idea of women accepting mistreatment or abuse in the name of love, a narrative that is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies of gender and power.

Once the conflict between the two has been resolved, Xaden assumes a protective role towards Violet, assigning bodyguards and eventually taking on the responsibility himself. While seemingly a positive development, this shift raises questions about agency and consent. Constant supervision by a male figure, regardless of romantic intent, restricts Violet's autonomy and can be interpreted as an encroachment on Violet's privacy and freedom of choice. Her movements are dictated by another, potentially limiting her ability to forge her own path and make independent decisions. This act implies a lack of agency on Violet's part. She is not presented with the option to choose her own means of protection, nor is she given the space to assess the potential danger herself. This reinforces the stereotype of women as passive recipients of male intervention, unable to navigate threats on their own.

The trope of a magical tether connecting Xaden and Violet introduces a further complication. The narrative establishes that the two characters are unable to withstand prolonged separation, which consequently limits Violet's freedom of movement and choice. While the concept of a fated relationship might hold a certain romantic appeal for the reader, a critical analysis reveals its potential to further undermine Violet's autonomy. The magical bond removes sole responsibility for her well-being from Violet, as her very existence appears intricately linked to Xaden's presence. This creates an unequal power dynamic, where Violet's safety and, more importantly, her ability to function independently, become contingent upon her physical proximity to Xaden. This directly contradicts the feminist ideal of female self-sufficiency and reinforces the notion that a woman's wholeness depends upon a relationship with a man.

## **Conclusion to Part 2**

The novel "Fourth Wing" presents itself as a confluence of popular tropes, predominantly centered around romantic relationships, ensuring an immediate appeal to BookTok users. The adoption of first-person narration and the



imperfections of the protagonist align with the conventions of self-insert fanfiction, facilitating the reader's projection of themselves onto the protagonist. Additionally, the utilization of simplistic writing infused with modern slang renders the book highly accessible to contemporary readers, catering to an audience seeking emotional gratification from the inherent tension associated with the utilized tropes.

Despite the narrative's attempts to subvert patriarchal gender norms through the portrayal of female characters that do not conform to the stereotyped image of a woman, the underlying romantic tropes ultimately overshadow any potential feminist commentary. While the novel may not delve into the extreme violence and toxic masculinity characteristic of many New Adult novels, it still perpetuates subtle forms of male entitlement and control, imbuing men with power both in the relationship and in the society at large. Thus, contrary to the author's intent, the overall effect on the reader might be one of female disempowerment.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study was aimed at investigating contemporary literature and the effects of social media on it from the perspective of feminist literary criticism. The results demonstrate that TikTok has had a significant impact on the publishing industry, shaping the genres and trends of popular fictional works aimed at young adults. While some of these works demonstrate an ambitious attempt to subvert gender stereotypes through feminist themes, others take a regressive stance, normalizing and romanticizing harmful representation of masculinity and unequal gender dynamics.

The novel "Fourth Wing," which was the subject of the term paper, was proven to be an example of the latter type, as the author focused her main attention on developing patriarchal aspects of romantic tropes rather than fully flashing out the instances of female empowerment in the text. The description of the female characters and the society in the novel, albeit deviating from patriarchal norms on the surface level, nevertheless seem to reinforce them.

Considering the significant influence the "Fourth Wing" series wields over younger audiences, the perpetuation of patriarchal messages within its narrative is deeply concerning. By aligning with patriarchal norms and indirectly reinforcing traditional gender roles by portraying deviation from them negatively, the book not only fails to challenge harmful stereotypes but actively contributes to their normalization. The perpetuation of outdated gender dynamics in a romantic relationship is particularly troubling given the impressionable nature of its target demographic. Consequently, "Fourth Wing" risks shaping the perspectives of young readers in ways that hinder their understanding of gender equality and perpetuate damaging stereotypes about the roles and capabilities of individuals based on their gender.

The thesis has provided valuable insights into how social media platforms have been exerting influence on contemporary literary works and their subsequent effect on younger audiences. Yet it is important to acknowledge the study's limitation, namely its exclusive focus on a single novel, which may not fully represent the scale of recent changes in contemporary literature. Further research is needed to delve deeper into the topic of New Adult literature and its potentially harmful depictions of gender, preferably on a broader scale, taking into consideration the implications of such wide-spread popularity and support for the genre on social media.

## RÉSUMÉ

This term paper is dedicated to analyzing the effects of the platform TikTok on the trends in contemporary Young Adult/New Adult literature on the example of the novel “Fourth Wing” by Rebecca Yarros. The feminist lens was utilized in the process to examine the literary trends and their impact on the development of young readers’ perception of gender and relationships.

The term paper consists of two main chapters: the first deals with the theoretical framework of feminist literary criticism and outlines the recent changes in popular contemporary literature; the second chapter is concerned with the analysis of “Fourth Wing”, a book that exemplifies the influence of social media on modern Young Adult / New Adult literature.

**Key words:** social media, TikTok, gender, feminist literary criticism, New Adult literature.

## РЕЗЮМЕ

Ця курсова робота присвячена аналізу впливу платформи TikTok на тренди в сучасній літературі для молоді на прикладі роману Ребекки Яррос "Четверте крило". У процесі дослідження було використано феміністичний підхід для вивчення літературних тенденцій та їхнього впливу на розвиток сприйняття молодими читачами гендеру та стосунків.

Курсова робота складається з двох розділів: у першому розглядаються теоретичні засади феміністичної літературної критики та окреслюються останні зміни в популярній сучасній літературі; другий розділ присвячений аналізу роману "Четверте крило", який є прикладом впливу соціальних медіа на сучасну літературу для молоді.

**Ключові слова:** соціальні медіа, TikTok, гендер, феміністична літературна критика, література для молоді.