Article

Consent capital: From Romantasy's "Alpha male archetypes" toward a new cultural theory in post-digital storytelling

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Abstract
The article introduces the concept of "consent capital" to analyze how writing and reading romantasy, a leading book genre on contemporary bookish platforms often criticized for its young female communities and "trivial" nature, has become a site for political discourse. Drawing on feminist research on romance since the 1980s, and theories on consent culture and cultural capital, the analysis traces romantasy's role in the post-digital storytelling of body politics, particularly after 2016. Through a comparative analysis of contemporary romantasy series, exemplified by a case study on Rebecca Yarros's Empyrean series and a focus on "alpha male archetypes," the article argues that notions of consent, bodily autonomy, and trauma have been transformed into a form of cultural capital, which is actively practiced, but also discussed and aesthetically reflected upon on social media platforms. In post-digital storytelling, it informs cultural value debates and commodification strategies on "sides" like BookTok, where romantasy's fictional renegotiations of consent capital intersect with the current political, legal and cultural debates on "consent" in countries in the "Global North".

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Introduction

When Rebecca Yarros's third installment in her *Empyrean* series, *Onyx Storm*, was published in 2024, the full force of the contemporary "reading industry" (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2013) was at work. With 2.7 million copies sold in its first week, it became the fastest-selling adult novel since print sales tracking began 20 years ago (Alter, 2025). *Onyx Storm*'s literary genre "romantasy," a combination of romance and fantasy, has recently been topping the bestseller lists in many countries. On the one hand, it is a post-digital "marketing behemoth" (Cugini, 2023) that converges the conventional book market with the exponentially growing communities on SNS platforms such as BookTok (TikTok) or Bookstagram (Instagram) (Stollfuß, 2024). It has drastically rearranged the publishing market for fiction books and revitalized and reshaped bookstores and book chains (Balling and Martens, 2024; Creamer, 2025). Listed under the extended heading of "New/Young Adult" (NA/YA), it is, on the other hand, a seemingly youth-oriented literary genre anchored in a social reading culture, which takes place online and in resurging real-life sites such as book clubs, silent reading parties, book fairs, or fantasy conventions and public readings (such as Yarros's *Onyx Storm* events: Alter, 2025).

Despite the measurable industrial and cultural impact, its pop cultural nature combined with its focus on female readers and authors connects the genre to the long and complicated history of romance writing and reading. Romantasy, like romance, is still conceptualized in literary criticism through stereotypical apolitical understandings of "light fiction" or "trivial literature." But critical readings in feuilletons, blogs or platform content call this assessment into question. A German journalist attested *Onyx Storm* a writing "[i]n step with the times. Yarros Gen-Z-izes the dragon college cosmos for her readers. Non-binary characters with they/them pronouns appear [. . .]. Coitus is consensual, and the novels begin with trigger warnings" (Wolf, 2025, transl.). This idea of romantasy "moving with the times" will be explored in more detail in this article, from an initial look at the reading industry, over a theoretical framework for sociopolitical implications of romance literature to a case study of contemporary romantasy series and the ways in which their ideas are (re)negotiated in post-digital narratives online.

Study aim and material analyzed

The following study is based on a comparative analysis of eight contemporary romantasy series (34 books between 2011–2025),[1] selected for their status on bestselling lists and BookTok resonance, with Yarros' *Empyrean* series serving as the illustrative example for the broader findings. Consent motifs and (non)con characters in consensual consent narratives were clustered, recurring patterns were identified and contextualized in post-digital storytelling structures and the reading industry. To see how BookTok renegotiated these books, characters and motifs, an algorithm-based walk-through for a newly created TikTok account was chosen as a second methodological step. 15 'consent'-centered videos (2022–2025) were analyzed to frame how patterns and terminology were discussed in BookTok's post-digital literary culture. The initial videos were accessed through the search parameters #empyrean and #romance. They mainly included reaction vids to the *Empyrean* series, then led to other sections of consent-based content, for example,

feminist reading lists and particularly "I Can Fix Him" book memes. Excluded from the scope of this article are book reviewing (e.g. Goodreads) and fanfiction platforms (e.g. AO3). Both showed similar discourses and use of terminology (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo, 2018; Popova, 2021) but would've required embedding in their respective research fields. They should be included in a further analysis on the topic.

To theorize the findings on "consent" discourses, I combine feminist romance research since the 1980s with Katherine Angel's concept of consent culture in *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again* (2021) and Simone Murray's writing on Pierre Bourdieu and romance to frame what I call "consent capital." This leads to an analytical focus on male main characters, so-called "alpha male" 'archetypes' – a term and structural concept I will explore. I trace how new romantasy bestsellers reframe but also monetize consent, exemplarily in the writing of these "archetypes," and how readers on platforms like BookTok retell and renegotiate it. The goal of this article is to explore how the "trivial" genre of romantasy on bookish platforms reflects upon and intersects with the pop cultural storytelling of boundaries in post-digital communities. While the analysis of this article is mainly accomplished through the lens of (gender) media studies and popular culture/fiction studies, it also offers intersections to comparative literature, ethnology, the sociology of literature, and practitioners/research in school education.

The current state of a post-digital reading industry

Recent studies suggest that "sides" like BookTok (Maddox and Gill, 2023) have had a significant impact on social reading cultures (Reddan, 2022). The so-called "BookTok effect" (Nicoll, 2023) of boosting book sales is challenging to pinpoint (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo, 2023), but it correlates with a quantifiable increase in reading time among younger age groups (Clark et al., 2024). Romantasy and other pop cultural "middlebrow" (Carter, 2016: 362) genres like how-to-read books or memoirs drive this change. Many of the books are "popular fiction," a genre of literature defined by sales, formulas and fandoms rather than "timeless literary quality" (Schneider-Mayerson, 2010: 22). These books, their transmedia adaptions, new festivals and events (Collins, 2010: 3) are topical to platforms such as BookTok (Balling and Martens, 2024), Bookstagram, or BookTube. At the intersection of a post-digital media landscape, platform capitalism and affect cultures (Kulkarni, 2024), new social reading cultures thrive on "bookishness" (Birke, 2021, 2023; Pressman, 2009) that is, "an identity and aesthetic strategy that reinscribes the cultural significance of physical books" (Reddan et al., 2024: 2 in ref. to Pressman, 2020).

Yarros's series is part of a new romance-focused imprint from indie publisher Entangled Publishing called Red Tower. The mid-sized company's strategy for publishing its 50–75 titles a year is deliberately built around a focus on printed books and an increasingly active involvement in post-digital marketing and even the writing process (Milliot, 2024). This connection relies on authors and readers sharing digital spaces, but also more broadly on the well-established concept of actively *identifying* with a book franchise, as has happened in the past for Harry Potter (1997–2007) or The Hunger Games (2008–2010). Bookishness is thereby based on ownership, aesthetic (Driscoll, 2024: 57–89) and includes (para)social reading practices (Reddan et al., 2024: 36–57)

like acting, cosplay, fanart (Kulkarni, 2024: 76) or practices like "tabbing" or "memeing" books.

Contemporary romantasy books are designed for affective engagement (Banou, 2017: 135) as is BookTok (Kulkarni, 2024). All analyzed books feature dedications and notes of thanks, which acknowledge (online) readers but also the reading industry. Yarros's dedication for *Onyx Storm* "To those who don't run with the popular crowd, to those who get caught reading under their desks, to those who feel never invited, included, or represented. Get your leathers. We have dragons to ride" is an often-quoted example of this on bookish platforms. By catering to (sub)cultural feelings of belonging, authors situate themselves in the same bookish reading culture as their fans (if they are not using the same platforms anyway). It is but an example of how pop culture franchises "support identity, formation, cultural identification, and coping" as consumers turn to them to "organize, give, and receive social support in the face of such traumas as racist policing and sexual violence" (Soukup and Foust, 2024: 44). But does romantasy offer a critical potential for such a pop cultural meaning-making – especially against the backdrop of the historical romance novel?

Theoretical framework: romance novel discourses and consent capital

Literary criticism has historically been ignorant or dismissive of women readers and authors, particularly of the romance genre. This is in part due to "a larger societal devaluation of women" (De Melo, 2024; also Kim and Chong, 2023) in book cultures, but especially because romance literature itself is an "entertainment medium that is both *mass* and *dynamic*, though both characteristics are ignored or go unrecognized by casual observers and scholars alike" (Thurston, 1987: 3, emphasis in original). In the same line of thought, romance readers are often stereotyped as passive, naïve, and unworldly, seeking refuge from the real world in fictional romances. These depictions, however, have long been disputed for popular fiction (Schneider-Mayerson, 2010: 26) as they frequently overlook the fact that reading (as well as writing) "is an inherently social practice. It is a dynamic activity that produces meaning shaped by the time and place in which a reader reads" (Reddan et al., 2024: 1). Feminist reading lists, which were soon recommended in the BookTok walk-through analysis, are a poignant example of this.

"If only they were real. #booktok #womensrightsmatter" notes BookTok user cloudydayreads. Standing in front of a shelf of romantasy novels, she begins with the caption "Characters that would fight for womens rights" and proceeds with a tightly edited selection of book titles she holds into the frame, with the names of the female protagonists inserted (cloudydayreads, 2024). More explicit, though going beyond romantasy, is a video by user littlemermaid215: "I know these ladies would be fighting with us. #mybodymychoice #roevwade #fireiscatching," she notes in the subtitle of a video called "Book babes that would fight For your right to Choose. My body my Rules" (littlemermaid215, 2022). The addressing "us" in this "call to action" refers to the imagined main (albeit statistically not sole) audience of BookTok, which is broadly defined through a shared (mostly Anglophone) canon, specific algorithmic "peer group" (white, cisgender,

heterosexual, Gen Z/Millennial women) dynamics, the bookish lifestyle and a strong sense of community (Dera, 2024: 4–5).

As Carol Thurston found in a major study as early as the mid-1980s, most romance readers led "busy, participatory lives," had clearly defined social values and were even "spurred by the stories they read to seek change in their own lives" (Thurston, 1987: 217). Equally, the books were wrongly faulted "for ignoring the 'real' problems of women today [. . .] – even though that is exactly what so many of these stories, whether historical or contemporary, have been and are really about" (Thurston, 1987: 218). The erotic romance novel – like romantasy – therefore is, "more than anything else, a social phenomenon" embedded in popular culture (Thurston, 1987: 218). The post-digital reading industry has emerged as but the latest milieu of this signification, which exemplifies an active process of subjectivation practices through political discourse. It gained prominence "in the aftermath of the election" (Dumond, 2024) in 2024, though the littlemermaid215 example shows how it already (re-)negotiated the US election in 2016 and the subsequent discussions of Roe vs Wade. Furthermore, the shift in romance writing had been underway since the 1970s.

Iterations of the intrusive paranormal from the 1970s onwards: developing consent capital. Romantasy is just one of the latest iterations of the postmodern mass-market romance novels that started in the 1970s, "along with women's social and political concerns, providing a space for women to explore and respond to the shifts happening around them and in their lives" (Green, 2018). As early as the 1980s, this included a rapidly changing narration of relationships and boundaries: "[I]nstead of man-as-enemy, heterosexual romantic fiction since 1980 has come a long way toward reconstructing the hero in the image of women by creating males who reflect female values" (Thurston, 1987: 185). Romance was increasingly based on a mutual and equal (but mostly still heteronormative) relationship "characterized by eroticism and autonomy" (Thurston, 1987: 185). But even though the relevance of consent-based stories grew, the books were not necessarily monetizing consensual consent. This became visible through bestseller trends but also because the readership of the books migrated from private reading clubs to digital public spaces.

While the 1990s had seen a number of strong female leads in YA stories negotiating boundaries of consent in paranormal romances – for example, the book series *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* (Laurell K. Hamilton, 1993–2010) and the TV series *Buffy – The Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) – the 2000s were defined by the popularity of more dubious consent narratives like the *Twilight* series (Stephenie Meyer, 2005–2008) or *Fifty Shades of Gray* (E. L. James, 2011–2012). Public debates signaled a growing awareness and openness to address this shift in public discourse – even if often from a place of defense for one's book interests. As Monica Hesse noted in 2009, "The women who have succumbed to 'Twilight' have heard all of these arguments before. They *wrote* those arguments. This self-awareness is what makes the experience of loving 'Twilight' a conflicting one" (Hesse, 2009, emphasis in original).

Notably, the *Twilight* series has been examined in relation to the "abstinence ideology in the contemporary U.S." post-Bush era and a heteronormative societal concept of "ubiquitous, but [. . .] carefully constrained" sexuality (Mukherjea, 2011: 72–73). Through the paranormal characters, it revolves around the inherently "complex terrain"

of the otherworldly vampire figure, due to which "meanings around hospitality and consent become uncertain" (Baker et al., 2017: 6). A similar case can be made for other paranormal figures like werewolves, fae, witches, mermaids or demons, all of whom either subvert the body itself (e.g. a werewolf curse, demonic possession) or undermine individual agency (e.g. bewitching, sirening).

Consequentially, *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Gray* have "sparked discussions over the matter of sexual consent" (Lange and Rose, 2013: 160). These discourses were inextricably linked to the shifting sociopolitical landscape. Many narratives revolved around a loss of individual agency in a world increasingly determined by external powers (Green, 2018), while "the post-feminist realities of hook-up culture" (Tripodi, 2017: 93) saw both a liberation and stigmatization of sexual consent discourses. The era post-2016, with its increasing prevalence in heteronormative alt/far-right rhetorics in many countries in the "Global North" and corresponding changes in female reproduction rights, once again sees the genre profoundly "grappl[ing] with its place in the resistance" again, as "it confront[ed] the structures of privilege and exclusion that have shaped the genre for decades. It is a reflection of America, after all, in more ways than one" (Green, 2018). The emergence of tangible real-world ramifications, as one could argue with regards to the BookTok videos, has given rise to a novel digital discourse, where fictional characters have begun to transcend their own narratives and evolved into imagined allies in an ethical and legal struggle for bodily autonomy.

The prevailing motif in post-2016 romantasy books appears to be consent, a form of respectful communicative agreement concerning the autonomy of women's choices regarding their body, lifestyle, freedom and place in society. In contemporary cultural discourse, consent has become a pivotal component of post-digital, post-modern cultural capital. The concept of cultural capital, as it pertains to Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, is "a form of value associated with culturally authorised tastes, consumption patterns, attributes, skills and awards" (Webb et al., 2002: x). Simone Murray has outlined how Bourdieu's theoretical framework is "especially applicable to the online environment" of the digital literary sphere, if his models are adapted to and reframed for it (Murray, 2018: 18). Economist David Throsby proposed in 1999 that cultural capital essentially becomes an "asset that contributes to cultural value" (Throsby, 1999: 5–6). Murray also discusses this "charged relationship between the concepts of 'community' and 'commodity'" and finds an array of bookish communities, which work in varying proximity to Bourdieu's concept of "social capital," "in which prominent and communally well-integrated individuals are able to [. . .] to further their interests" (Murray, 2018: 77). In this notion, tangible post-digital cultural capital assets, such as books, platform infrastructures, and online content comprise aforementioned "middlebrow book culture" environments (Carter, 2016: 359). But they also imply an intangible cultural capital, that is "the set of ideas, practices, beliefs, traditions and values which serve to identify and bind together a given group of people" (Throsby, 1999: 7).

Consent can be identified as a core value in this context, if examined through Katherine Angel's concept of consent culture. In 2021 she noted a "widespread rhetoric claiming that consent is *the* locus for transforming the ills of our sexual culture" (Angel, 2021: 7, emphasis in original). Affirmative consent had become a heated topic in the 1990s (Angel, 2021: 18), after decades of a problematic legal but also sociopolitical and literary

entanglement of romance and rape (Philadelphoff-Puren, 2005: 31). Following many "no means no" rape prevention campaigns that controversially framed consent as "presumed unless withdrawn" (Angel, 2021: 18) the "only yes means yes" paradigm shift toward respectful communication, mutual agreement, and equality in sexual encounters emerged. This was, in hindsight, the conceptualization of assumed and negotiated consent capital. The emergence of a consent culture implied changing social roles where individuals were now expected to possess consent capital – a form of cultural capital encompassing communicative boundaries and bodily autonomy.

Just like cultural capital in general, one could argue for consent capital as a theoretical commodity depending on a variety of social and individual factors – such as upbringing, education, community and a general sociocultural landscape, political backgrounds or media and pop culture discourses. It plays a central role in "postfeminism's key features – individualism, bio-essentialism, the commodification of intimacy, the myth of equality achieved, a renewed focus on heteronormativity and war-of-the-sexes tropes" (Ging, 2019: 59), some of which make a literal appearance in romantasy discourses. However, consent does not imply active agency, it is always only "a response to power–it adds or withdraws legitimacy" (Brown, 1995: 163) and it relies on a community acknowledging rules of consent. From the 1970s feminist mantra "My Body, My Choice" to the contemporary antifeminist inversion "Your Body, My Choice" consent capital is often negotiated in transnational body politics, as it implies a fundamental idea (and at times conflict) of communicative boundaries with regards to, for example, health, identity, a role in society or toward legal, political or cultural institutions in the "Global North". Consequently, consent has become a significant and often contested motif in popular culture, reflecting contemporary values, as seen in Yarros's *Empyrean* series. It is both an important intangible cultural concept and a tangible, monetizable topic.

Analysis: re-reading consent capital and male archetypes in Romantasy books

The romantasy novel with its paranormal inversion of bodily boundaries is an obvious environment for consent discourses in the sense that "the body itself is politically inscribed and is shaped by practices of containment and control" (Brown and Gershon, 2017: 1). However, while the initial wave of contemporary romance novels in the 1970s and 1980s predominantly centered on the heroine's journey through romance, romantasy novels now frequently integrate it with societal and political contexts. A notable example in Yarros's *Empyrean* series, akin to most of the series analyzed, are warfare and terrorism, social and political discord and inequality, educational institutions (also relevant for the "dark academia" subgenre) with their memory politics as well as governance structures and hierarchies. In numerous instances, the romantic narrative commences only after an extensive world building and character-building part.

But how is consent narrated in contemporary romantasy and then reflected in bookish communities? The *Empyrean* series offers a prototypical plot and figuration. Her main protagonist is a disadvantaged woman (in this case: with a disability, in other case with a lack of education, lack of financial means or overall political agency) that becomes involved in a political state of emergency as her war-general mother unexpectedly forces

her to enroll in war college. In many of the analyzed series, consent capital is tied to a reactive role that arises from these disadvantages, the ability to grant or decline consent is a first step to self-empowerment. Despite her disadvantaged position in the active military training as a dragon rider, the *Empyrean* female lead, for example, refuses to be rescued, instead leveraging her intelligence and empathy (instead of strength) to subvert preexisting structures, in turn confounding "the dominant discourse by opposing prevailing ideologies that have marked the body with meaning" (Brown and Gershon, 2017: 1). As an educated woman, she clearly holds and values consent capital for herself and others and through that forms strong alliances (with the dragons, some protagonists).

Yarros's disadvantaged protagonist shares characteristics with her initial adversary within the "enemies to lovers" trope. The male lead presides over a group of orphaned descendants of executed rebels. The young adults have all been marked with a tattoo, effectively limiting their "fate" to active enlistment in this section of the military or execution. While not being officially enslaved, their bodily and political agency is almost completely stripped because of events beyond their own control. The thematic exploration of atrocities stemming from enslavement and external, patriarchal control and oppression constitutes a central, often explicit, motif in contemporary romantasy works, for example, Sarah J. Maas' *ACOTAR* and *Crescent City*, Lauren Robert's *Powerless* or several of Jennifer Armentrout's book series. The inclusion of perspectives from these marginalized characters, whose agency is systematically undermined within hierarchical, conflict-ridden societies prioritizing physical dominance and ownership of bodies, marks a significant departure from earlier genre conventions. Consequently, within these narratives, characters advocate or fight for consent, defined as respect for personal boundaries, as this is their only claim to control.

As romantasy books adhere to the principles of cultural goods, however, consent-based narratives encompass a monetization of *any* possible form of consent narrative. The "trigger warnings" used in fan fiction and many (especially dark) romantasy books mark texts and potential transgressions of boundaries. The spectrum for the main romances ranges from consensual, over dubcon (dubious consent: consent is unclear or gained under dubious conditions), noncon (nonconsensual consent: consent to a "forced" non-consensual situation is pre-agreed) to rapemance (rape romance: romance is based on the rape of the heroine by the hero), marking the decrease in mutual consensual communication on matters of bodily autonomy. Interestingly, contemporary "warnings" themselves facilitate consent capital, as they acknowledge potential boundaries and leave the choice for transgressions with the readers. While all analyzed works used a consensual consent idea, and revolved around consent as a motif within the stories, the latest rise of dark romance / romantasy series also marks a return of the "forced seduction" category of the 1970s and 1980s in controversially reviewed BookTok bestsellers like *Haunting Adeline* (H. D. Carlton, 2021) – a phenomenon which is beyond the scope of this analysis but should see a thorough examination in the future.

Alpha male archetypes. Yarros's storytelling, like that of all series analyzed, prioritizes consensual interactions and critiques violations of bodily autonomy, but it also defines and drives the plot through consent-based conflicts. These conflicts, like the "enemies to lovers"

trope, are part of a "tropification" of post-digital storytelling, that is "recurring plot devices, character archetypes, and themes that are written consistently enough to become recognizable by readers and warrant their own names" to aid market orientation on platforms (Mayeaux, 2024). Particularly "archetypes" in the sense of Carl G. Jung, as innate symbols of a collective cultural reservoir, have been featured in early Internet visions (Stefik, 1996) and currently make a noticeable return as capitalist 'personality characteristics in the digital culture' (Viloria-Núnez et al., 2023). In pop cultural use, however, the term is devoid of its psychoanalytical dimensions and usually describes a transmedia, transcultural and transhistorical character pattern for value debates.

"Alpha males" are, for example, the latest term used for the 1970s "romance hero known as the Alpha Hero" (Kluger, 2024: 168). This alpha hero, as Jayashree Kamblé has pointed out, was originally designed as an "antithesis of the gay male" (Kamblé, 2014: 89), hyperperforming heterosexual masculinity through dominating and aggressive behavior. Johanna Kluger, who follows a similar consent argument to the one in this article, argues that his „masculinity is essential to his ability to fulfill the romantic fantasy; he is the perfect life partner *because* of it" (Kluger, 2024: 166, emphasis in original). The focus on heterosexual hypermasculinity eroded in the 1980s, turning "alpha males" into a pop cultural term used to criticize toxic masculinity, as, for example, done in *Buffy* (The Prom, 1999; critically discussed in: Large, 2007: 95). But particularly contemporary romance novels post-Trump showcase an "effort among romance writers to examine critically what was considered attractive in the past, moving towards heroes and plotlines that affirm the heroines' agency instead" (Kluger, 2024: 169–170) – placing a focus on "honest communication" and consensual relationships (Kluger, 2024: 181). The "alpha male" archetype still exists, but he is now more victim than perpetrator.

All analyzed romantasy series featured initially "dark" and "brooding" male leads exhibiting aggressive "alpha male" traits as a basis for the popular "enemies to lovers" trope. This behavior, for which the *Empyrean* male lead is a prime example, was then challenged by the contemporary heroine and regularly proved to be a facade to navigate environments where the characters themselves possessed limited consent capital within their societal roles. As the stories progressed, the "alpha males" then often served as a playful critique of hypermasculine behavior, which tied in with post-digital platform discourses. Maas's *Crescent City* female protagonist's use of "alphahole" (alpha asshole), for example, references platform rhetorics in a similar way as the often-shared "Beautiful. Fucking. Asshole" quote about the *Empyrean* male lead. Through this rhetoric, social reading communities are directly acknowledged, where readers critically discuss the language of consent capital (r/crescentcitysjm, 2023). This is particularly relevant because of the diachronous renegotiation of "alpha males" as "archetypes" in manosphere communities. While the often female and queer spaces of fan fiction/romantasy readership reflect "alpha males" in elaborate consent debates, other digital subcultures sketch almost antagonistic consent discourses.

Seven "male modals" prevalent in manosphere and meme cultures (Ging, 2019) are used to depict a perceived societal "sex war" and renegotiate post-Trump sexual identities in a "masculinist Heideggerian world" (Friedland, 2018: 126). Male modals serve as narrative tools for dissecting complex post-modern identities in the post-digital landscape. In these discourses, "alpha males" are not a facade, but – comparable to 1970s

romance novel writing – an oversimplified personality template that dominates through aggression and demands unquestioned authority. This "authority" is founded in the conscious transgression of the boundaries of others to, almost ironically, reclaim the "inviolable male body" (Friedland, 2018: 118) in the sense of Thomas Hobbes, which is needed to rebuild geopolitical and cultural power.

With these discourses in mind, the "strange bridge between YA fandom and straight dominance/submission fantasy" is often critically addressed, reflecting on consent motifs and "domineering and disregarding" alpha male behavior as a "source of attractiveness" for teenage readers (Cugini, 2023). In their narrating of gendered (often heteronormative) roles and consent capital, however, YA and BookTok offer a low-threshold access point to foster consent education in schools (Dera et al., 2023; Little and Moruzi, 2024; Cahill, 2024). Because upon critical analysis of the archetypes and tropes, the general hypocrisy of an "inviolable" male body in postmodern societies comes into focus.

Traumatized military boys. The actual consent capital held by male characters of the analyzed book series becomes apparent through their relationship with the hero or heroine. Almost all male characters (and female characters) work from a background of personal trauma like torture, physical and psychological violence, loss, gaslighting and even rape. Their attempts at regaining consent capital forms romantasy's narrative foundation. Romance being "the privileged vehicle of trauma fiction" (Onega and Ganteau, 2013: 8–9) has profound ethical implications, as modern romantasy shows a conscious divergence from trauma re-telling in "oldskool" romance, where it was a narrative reason for abuse and violence. Yarros explicitly illustrates this narrative arc through the Empyrean male character's linguistic shift from "Violence" (instead of Violet) to "Love" when addressing his romantic interest. Although the convergence of romance and trauma often invokes the conventional "love conquers all" trope, contemporary romantasy frequently acknowledges trauma directly, integrates the complexities of healing into plotlines, and links it to broader political oppression – often making it the central plot of the last book in a series, for example, Jennifer Armentrout's fourth title in the *Flesh & Fire* series or Kate Stewart's final book in *The Ravenhood* series.

But consent capital exceeds discourses of sexuality and partnership as the characters often hold positions of (growing) power within the worlds they inhabit – the question how to command armies or change governments or societies is informed by their personal trauma of subverted or declined consent. Maas's *ACOTAR* high-lord character Rhysand, Leia Stone's *Kings of Avalier* ruler Lucien Thorne, Yarros's disgraced lord Xaden Riorson, Lauren Roberts's prince and (law) enforcer Malakai Azer in the *Powerless* series, Armentrout's primal of death Nyktos/Ash in *Flesh & Fire* or even Kerri Maniscalco's demon lord Wrath in her *Kingdom of the Wicked* series, who turns out to be the literal devil, all share traits of the seemingly cruel royal who uses this disguise to establish and uphold a fair and just ruling system in a conflict-shaped world. Particularly Maniscalco's reading of Satan (or Lucifer, as the books call him) as the *one* biblical character to honor boundaries refers to an important pop cultural renegotiation of Christian values with regards to discourses on reproductive rights (Escamilla, 2023: 54–76).

Once again important with regards to YA literature, many analyzed characters undergo healing through a visual transition from rigid, often militaristic or professional attire to more casual, youthful fashion, accompanied by interests in sports and more adolescent-typical behaviors. The predominantly US-American reading industry of romantasy could add a complex layer here, exemplified by Yarros's controversially discussed open letter refusing her husband's sixth deployment (Britzky, 2019). It highlights a tension between patriotic duty and individual autonomy of the "inviolable" body, including the freedom to love and establish personal boundaries underpinned by consent capital. This tension appears central to many contemporary romantasy novels analyzed, suggesting a renego-tiation of a national trauma of a generation of young Americans, predominantly men, engaged in protracted foreign conflicts. This recurring pattern across the books, the read-ing industry, and post-digital community debates is hypothetical with regards to the material analyzed but could merit ethnographic exploration akin to studies conducted in the 1980s.

While personal trauma was already a narrative movens in romance novels in the 1970s, post-2016 romantasy characters differ in their handling of it. Characters often appear like militarized young adults exhibiting "alpha male" behavior, but for those who need protection – and here romantasy diverges from online storytelling – they are com-passionate, gracious and caring under the surface and their healing process is tied to both love and a conscious delimitation from their internalized military behavior. They try to remain in control of their bodily urges and uphold concepts of consent capital they them-selves have been deprived of – as individuals, groups or paranormal species. This is in turn important to the negotiation of consent capital in bookish communities.

Analysis: "I Can Fix Him": Re-negotiating consent capital and trauma on BookTok

Janice A. Radway's (1984) ethnographic study *Reading the Romance* first identified a paradoxical relationship readers of romantic fiction had to their preferred genre and its characters. While the readers admired strong, independent female characters, they still accepted the patriarchal rules and violent structures many of the heroines eventually conformed to. Even the changing values of the novels after the 1980s did not totally seem to atone them from feminist criticism that the books reasserted "the dominant hegemony (i.e. patriarchy or capitalism)," while their female readers "reproduce[d] their own repressed status as commodities for male consumption [. . .], [their] complicity with social norms" (Gruss, 2009: 199). This paradoxical relationship is still negotiated today.

Radway proved that "the romance reader has an active, critical role" (McCracken, 1998: 81), and that the genre is "inextricably bound up with her [the reader's] position as a woman in the modern world" (McCracken, 1998: 6). Consent capital, as should be clear by now, defines romance writing *and* (social) reading – and two prominent modes of marking and discussing consent are reaction vids and memeing. Reaction reads are short videos expressing pleasure or excitement, using emotion as a central instrument of TikTok's/BookTok's viewer engagement (Harris, 2021; Martens et al., 2022), but also more broadly of most social reading practices on bookish platforms (Dera, 2024). They are important as a narrative mirror of internal monologues – a central storytelling form

in romantasy – as they make an internal emotion visible but also contextualize it through captions or titles.

For instance, a user (mreads27 2024) uses a quote emphasizing the consensual dynamics in the Empyrean series ("I ask permission of one person on the Continent and it sure as Amari isn't you") alongside an affective reaction video of her smiling coyly. Another user (glass.skylee, 2025) conveys her devastation about the change in the male main characters' loss of agency by shaking her head while sitting on the floor, mouthing along to the prominent TikTok sound meme "No, don't do this to me." As a form of online storytelling, these reaction vids are significant in negotiating consent capital on bookish platforms as they allow for emotional reader responses to boundaries and plot points.

In the context of *Onyx Storm's* portrayal of consent and male archetypes, they are used to highlight the male character's coerced descent into evil, signifying his diminished consent capital. Bookish communities counter this narrative trajectory with their own "I can fix him" trope. The trope typically depicts a female character sacrificing aspects of her autonomy to "save" a flawed male character, thereby diminishing her own consent capital. It invites a critical (self)reflection, particularly concerning the potential of YA to normalize toxic relationship dynamics for young adult readers (Bratteng, 2023) but also serves as a meta-commentary in converged popular media cultures. BookTok videos frequently link the *Empyrean* romance with Taylor Swift's "I Can Fix Him (No Really I Can)," combining Yarros's appreciation for the singer, the broader relevance of the singer for BookTok's main demographic, and the pop cultural acknowledgment of this trope, like a user crying while singing along to the song over references to the male main character's fate and hashtags like #onyxstorm #xadenriorson #booktok and #icanfixhim (lilahrosereads, 2025).

The trope's narrative potential comes from being used, repurposed, and reinterpreted through new visuals and narratives, as its implication of unhealthy relationship dynamics have long evolved into a parody meme (Know Your Meme, 2019). "I Can Fix Him" memes are directly examining consent capital by questioning both a problematic behavior by one partner and a potentially forceful "rescue" intervention by the other. Consequently, memetic references to the trope often carry humorous connotations (e.g. a community-oriented "book boyfriend" joke like #wecanfixhim) or are playfully framed as excessive reactions (lilahrosereads, 2025) – both facets of the pleasure of emotional content expected from TikTok (Barta et al., 2023). Notably, the walk-through followed up on those videos with recommendations of more elaborate forms of GIF-related memes (often based on film snippets) with a humorous tonality, for example, in-group jokes about how readers of Sarah J. Maas' *ACOTAR* series preferred the consensual relationships over the dubcon relationships of the early books. There was a fluent transfer from emotional reaction vids about loss of consent capital in the *Empyrean* books to memes that humorously deconstructed and reflected on consent-centered tropes in book cultures. The value placed on consensual consent throughout the different formats remained similar, however.

Using memes as *the* affect-based "lingua franca" (Milner, 2018: 109) of online communication and their self-reflective use of humor, which is paralleled in the corresponding tropes and phrases, serves to build communities and marks values and boundaries (Nowotny and Reidy, 2022: 17). This is important in establishing cultural norms needed

for consent capital – which alongside the initially discussed feminist reading lists is but another example of BookTok's role in fostering "critical connections and promot[ing] justice-oriented actions beyond personal enjoyment of reading" (Jerasa, 2025: 1). Many forms of online storytelling suggest such a community agreement on consensual consent, but it is important to critically reflect how they can also serve to explore the dual nature of consent capital as a cultural token and a consumer good. Between affect and effect, consent capital is renegotiated in a variety of stories told in post-digital communities and their preferred forms of communication on bookish platforms – it is a motif, upon which many of the new structural categories for monetizable content (tropes, archetypes) rely. Political readings of these books as well as humorous or emotional readings of their storytelling and tropes for reading enjoyment are based on a shared idea of established consent capital – potentially threatened but always implied.

Summary

This article examined how contemporary post-digital romantasy cultures negotiate consent, taking Rebecca Yarros' *Empyrean* series as a case study for a broader comparative analysis. Utilizing concepts of consent culture and cultural capital, it introduced the idea of consent capital to analyze how current romantasy bestsellers engage in post-digital storytelling, reflecting shifting cultural narratives around trauma, agency, and boundaries. From the idea that bookish platforms are reshaping reading culture, BookTok was read as a side of belonging and identity expression, like past pop culture franchises, in which the plots and characters are increasingly framed politically around themes of feminism, bodily autonomy, and affirmative consent.

I have argued for an increasing consciousness for consent capital, which implies a cultural communication shift based on mutual respect of boundaries. This shift had been underway since the 1980s but became particularly relevant – but also contested – after the 2016 US elections and subsequent political debates in many (transatlantic) countries in the "Global North". Romantasy's narratives and aesthetics are responding to it, offering spaces for authors and readers to explore consent capital in a postmodern age, or to simply consume consensual content "in step with the times." Through tropes and archetypes, romantasy now places consent-conflicts at the heart of its world-building, highlighting characters' struggles with agency and control.

Male characters like the "alpha male" are hereby reimagined: seemingly dominant and dismissive of consent at first, they reflect contemporary ideals and values – a conscious delimitation from past character writing and discourses in other post-digital subcultures. Consent capital is hereby tied to identity, particularly trauma and healing, enabling critical post-digital storytelling on topics like gender, power, social justice, representation and politics. Bookish communities engage with ideas of consent capital and trauma narratives in romantasy fiction through practices like reaction videos and memes. The platforms have transformed reading into a participatory and affective experience, where readers not only consume but actively renegotiate texts and tropes. Ultimately, consent capital emerges as a shared, negotiated value in these communities, it is assumed cultural capital, but also turned into a selling point within the new reading industry.

Looking at the question what makes Yarros's *Empyrean* series a "timely" media phenomenon, the placement of characters on a spectrum of consensual actions emerges as more than just a narrative tool, as does the political self-location of authors and readers within body political structures. Consent is topically expected as it is consciously consumed, reflected upon, reviewed, (re)constructed and (re)applied. It is central to the communities and their various experiences of marginalization in this world, as it is once more under threat in postmodern countries. Beyond book markets and bookish communities, romantasy therefore does contain *one* escapist notion: that consent can sometimes just be a fictitious commodity, that the personal does not *have to be* political always, because personal boundaries and an equal status in society are not just a fantasy trope lived by fictional lovers.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no digital data sets were created or analyzed in this study.

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Note

1. Jennifer L. Armentrout – Covenant (7 books, 2011–2013), J. L. Armentrout – Flesh & Fire (4 books, 2021–2024), Sarah J. Maas – A Court of Thorns and Roses (5 books, 2015–2021), S. J. Maas – Crescent City (3 books, 2020–2024), Kerri Maniscalco – Kingdom of the Wicked (3 books + 2 spinoffs, 2022–2025), Lauren Roberts – Powerless (3 books, 2023–2025), Leia Stone – Kings of Avalier (4 books, 2022–2023), Rebecca Yarros – The Empyrean (3 books, 2023–2025). All of them featured consensual consent relationships and discourses on debates, that were clustered and annotated to create a comprehensive overview.

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