

**OwlCrate:
A Case Study of Subscription Book Boxes**

By

Avvai Ketheeswaran
B.Sc., Queen's University, 2015

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Declaration of Committee

Name: Avvai Ketheeswaran

Degree: Master of Publishing

Thesis title: OwlCrate: A Case Study of Subscription Book Boxes

Committee:

John Maxwell
Supervisor
Associate Professor, Publishing

Leanne Johnson
Committee Member
Limited Term Lecturer, Publishing

Sally White
Committee Member
Creative Director
OwlCrate Enterprises

Abstract

Subscription boxes have been increasing in popularity over the past few years. In the publishing industry, subscription book boxes have become a new revenue stream for publishers. Currently there are over 170 subscription box companies dedicated to delivering books, some businesses ranging from a couple hundred subscribers to some having thousands. This report is a case study on one subscription book box company: OwlCrate Enterprises, a monthly subscription service delivering one new young adult book along with some other book related merchandise. This report details how OwlCrate has built a successful subscription book box service and how they have positioned themselves in the Young Adult book market.

Keywords: *subscription box; book box; young adult books; subscription book box; book marketing; social media marketing*

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Introduction

Subscription boxes have been a popular e-commerce business in recent years as a way for consumers to get a regular delivery of goods right to their doorstep. Subscribers pay a repeating subscription fee to access a curated collection of merchandise, whether it's a weekly grocery box, a monthly box of lifestyle and beauty products, or a bi-annual box of goodies for your pet. For many subscription boxes, customers forgo choice and decision making, to get a curated box of products based on a theme. Between 2013 and 2016 the number of visitors to subscription box websites have increased by nearly 3000 percent (Fetto 2016). The leading categories in the subscription box business are apparel, food, and beauty products (Chen *et al.* 2018). The majority of subscribers of subscription boxes are 25 to 44 year old urbanites living in the US with an income between \$50,000 to \$100,00. Seeing this strong growth in the subscription box industry, major retailers such as Sephora and Walmart have started their own subscription boxes as well (Chen *et al.* 2018).

In the publishing industry, the subscription-based business model is nothing new. Early examples of this are newspapers, magazines, and circulating libraries dating back to the 17th century (Noorda 2019). Today, though we are seeing a decline in subscribers for traditional newspapers and magazines, subscription services for digital products such as Netflix and Spotify and subscription boxes centring around books and lifestyle products have been steadily increasing in popularity. For publishers and booksellers, subscription book boxes offers a new revenue stream (Rosen 2019). Cratejoy, a popular online marketplace for subscription box companies, has over 170 businesses dedicated to book box companies (Noorda 2019, Cratejoy 2020). Independent businesses have been developing book boxes for different genres and ages. Even book stores such as Powell's Books in Portland, Oregon and Amazon offers subscription book boxes

(Powells 2020; Amazon 2020). The oldest and long running subscription service for books is Book-Of-The-Month-Club which started in 1926 (Milliot 2016).

In May 2019 I began working at OwlCrate Enterprises, a monthly subscription box company offering young-adult (YA) and middle grade book boxes. Each month, subscribers receive a new-release novel and a variety of “bookish goodies” related to the theme of the month. In the YA box this might include bookmarks, jewelry, art, enamel pins, candles, and other lifestyle products suited for 14 year olds and up. In the middle-grade box, OwlCrate includes items such as games, activities, and crafts, suitable for 8-12 year olds. This report is a case study of OwlCrate - specifically the YA box. I will focus on the products and value OwlCrate provides for their subscribers; how they position themselves in the Young Adult book market with different marketing tactics; and how they were able to build a successful subscription book box company.

Chapter 1 : About OwlCrate

OwlCrate “was a dream born in a basement suite” according to Korrina Ede and Robert Madden, co-founders of OwlCrate (OwlCrate 2020). In November 2014, they had the initial idea of building a business that would bring readers together from around the world and in March 2015, they mailed out their first box. Their first box featured V. E. Schwab’s fantasy novel, *A Darker Shade of Magic*, and other related merchandise. They built 150 of those boxes and it was an instant sellout. They priced their boxes at \$30.00 USD plus shipping (Cowley 2015). As of July 2019, they have over 10,000 subscribers that receive these book boxes every month world-wide (Rosen 2019). In 2017, OwlCrate launched a new line of boxes, called OwlCrate Jr, featuring middle grade books specifically or younger readers ages 8 to 12.

OwlCrate boxes are curated around a monthly theme. According to Ede, OwlCrate was the first subscription book box that they knew of to have monthly themes (Korrina Ede, personal interview, 2020). The monthly themes are inspired by the book of the month. The themes are announced every month so that subscribers get a sneak peek and some expectations as to what will be in their next box. OwlCrate initially and continues to promote and utilize Instagram and YouTube, specifically within the Bookstagram and BookTube community — a community of book lovers, book reviewers, and book influencers/ promoters on Instagram and YouTube. As a *New York Times* article reports, “OwlCrate’s success was fueled by a community of bloggers and subscription fans eager to promote their latest finds.” (Cowley 2015)

1.1 The team

OwlCrate consists of a small team of 8-10 people. Ede, the co-founder and CEO, is in charge of curating the YA box every month. OwlCrate also has a community manager who manages the social media accounts, creates content for YouTube, and runs different activities for OwlCrate subscribers, such as a virtual bookclub. There is a separate curator and separate social media manager for OwlCrate Jr. There is also staff to manage and run customer service, systems and operations, and shipping.

Though the head office is located in Vancouver, Canada the boxes are assembled and shipped out of Portland, USA by a small fulfillment team. Their warehouse is where all wholesale books and items are sent to, stock is kept, and inventory is managed. Originally, the boxes were assembled by the cofounders at home and were shipped using Canada Post. But as they scaled up and found that approximately 80 percent of their subscribers were located in the USA, shipping and fulfillment was moved to the Portland for it to be more cost-effective (Minns 2016).

1.2 How it works - subscription plans

Every OwlCrate YA box comes with a:

- new, hardcover YA book that's signed and with an exclusive cover and a letter from the author
- three to five high-end "bookish" items that are usually exclusive and custom made

OwlCrate has different subscription tiers that offer different values to their subscribers shown in Figure 1.

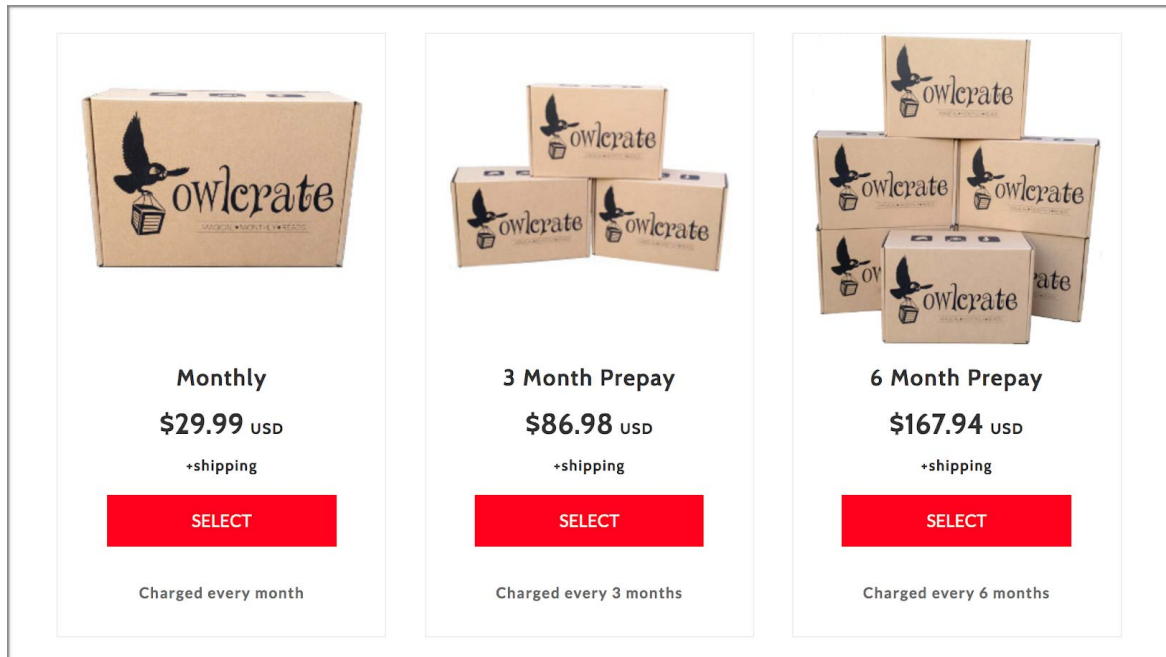


Fig 1. OwlCrate's three different subscription tiers that subscribers can choose from. Subscribers can choose to pay every month, every 3 months, or every 6 months.

The monthly subscription plan is popular among new customers who want to test out the box for a month or two before committing to the longer term plans. The monthly plan is also useful for those who are unable to make the larger upfront payment of the three month or six month plan. With the three month and six month plans, there are some savings for subscribers. Subscribers save \$2.99 USD if they go with the three month option and \$12.00 USD for the six month option rather than pay every month. Shipping is charged every month as well. For US customers it is \$8.99 USD/month, Canada \$14.99 USD/month, and International shipping varies country to country. Subscribers are allowed to cancel anytime or skip a month during their subscription if they are not interested in a certain theme coming up.

1.3 Value vs Cost

Many subscribers justify the cost of OwlCrate by the value of the products. In a Facebook group called The OwlCrate Society (a space for OwlCrate subscribers and other YA readers) there are many discussion posts in which people talk about the products they receive in the box and give a breakdown of the value of the products and compare it to the cost of the box (\$29.99 USD). For example, below I'll break down items that were included in a past box and the potential cost of those items if bought separately (all prices are in USD). Figure 2 shows the September 2019 OwlCrate box. The theme for that month was "Fear The Night".

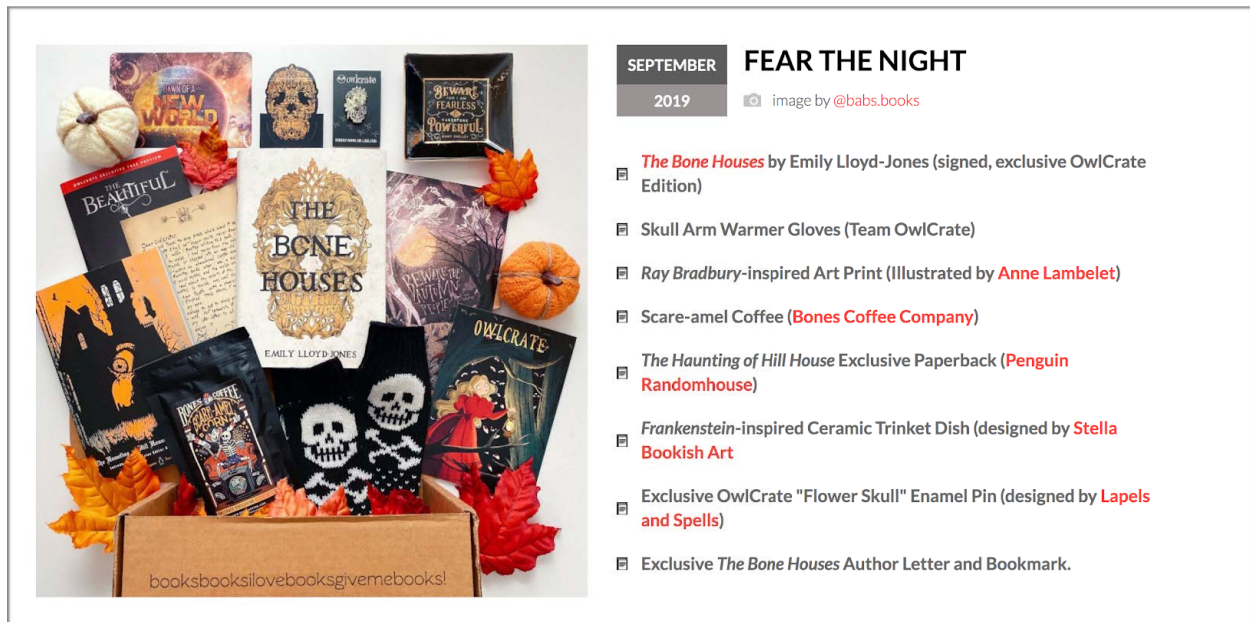


Fig 2. OwlCrate box from September 2019. The theme for this box was "Fear The Night". It included a new YA hardcover book along with other items related to the theme.

1. *The Bone Houses* by Emily Lloyd-Jones (signed, exclusive cover)

Hardcover, not signed, not exclusive edition: \$17.99 (Barnes and Noble 2020a)

2. Scare-amel Corn Coffee from Bones Coffee Company

Sample pack price: \$5.00 (Bones Coffee 2020)

3. *Frankenstein*-inspired ceramic trinket dish designed by Stella Bookish Art:

Designed exclusively for OwlCrate; however a similar dish can be found at this price on their shop page: \$9.99 (Society6 2020a)

4. A paperback copy of *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson from Penguin Horror Collection:

Paperback: \$16.00 (Barnes and Noble 2020b)

5. Art print illustrated by Anne Lambelet inspired by Ray Bradbury's novel *Something Wicked This Way Comes*:

Price for a similar art print by the illustrators with the same dimensions: \$27.99 (Society6 2020b)

6. Enamel pin designed by Lapels and Spells:

Average price taken from pins sold on the Lapels and Spells shop: \$12.00 (Laser Brain Patch Co 2020)

7. Skeleton fingerless gloves:

Average price based on a similar product from Walmart: \$9.39 (Walmart 2020)

Tallying up the value of each individual item in the box totals to be about \$98.36 USD. When comparing this to the cost of the box, \$29.99 USD, the monthly subscription is a better deal.

The idea of cost versus value is important for marketing subscription boxes and used in ads proving to new customers that it is worth the cost. Figure 3a is an example of a Facebook ad for a popular lifestyle subscription box, Cause Box, utilizing the message of cost versus value. Figure 3b shows the landing page of one of the leaders in lifestyle subscription boxes, Fab Fit Fun, incorporating the cost vs value messaging to new customers. Though OwlCrate doesn't advertise their boxes based on cost and value it is discussed among subscribers and reviewers (Alliee Reads 2019).



Fig 3a. Facebook ad for Causebox, a lifestyle subscription box, comparing the cost (\$49.95) and value (\$290) of the boxes.

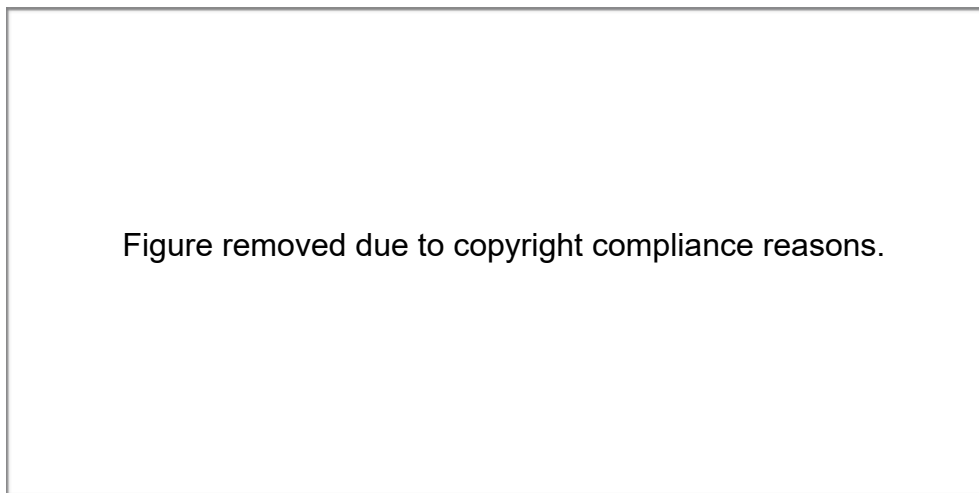


Fig 3b. The landing page for Fab Fit Fun, one of the most popular lifestyle subscription boxes, also showcases cost (\$49.99) and value (\$200) of the box to new customers.

Chapter 2: Audience — Positioning OwlCrate in the YA market

OwlCrate is focused on YA books, a category of books written typically for a teenage audience, 14 year olds and up. However, OwlCrate’s target audience is women aged 18 to 35, mainly located in the US. In this section I will be discussing the boom in the YA book market among both teens and adults and why YA books work for OwlCrate.

2.1 Why does YA work for OwlCrate?

Books specifically written for teenagers started in the 1940s when “teenagers’ were given their own distinction as a social demographic” (Strickland 2015). During the 1960s and 70s, YA novels saw it’s first golden age with the success of authors such as Judy Blume and Lois Duncan (Strickland 2015). The second golden age of YA novels began in 2000 with the explosion of J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (Turner 2018). The advent of OwlCrate in 2015 was alongside this second wave of growing popularity in YA books. Other major page-to-screen adaptations of YA titles such as *The Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins, *Twilight* by Stephanie Myers, and *The Fault In Our Stars* by John Green continued to give YA books more attention, drawing new readers of all ages (Miller 2019). Books were beginning to be specifically marketed towards teens in the early 2000s (Strickland 2015). Bookstores were dedicating sections to YA books and more genres were published in the category, especially fantasy (Strickland 2015). Between 2002 and 2012, YA titles published in the US doubled: “Over 10,000 YA books came out in 2012 versus about 4700 in 2002.” (Peterson 2018). A 2015 study conducted by Nielsen BookScan noted a 40 percent growth in the US juvenile market as a whole over the past ten years (Gilmore 2015).

Adult readers were a significant source of the YA boom. In 2012, *Publishers Weekly* reported on a study showing that 55% of books intended for a YA audience (readers aged 12 to 17) were bought by adults, and 78 percent of those purchases were for the buyer's own reading (Publishers Weekly 2012). The largest segment of YA purchasing adults, 30 to 44 year olds, were responsible for 28 percent of YA book sales. Even in library loans, a 2013 survey of American library patrons stated that 16-29 year olds were the largest group checking out books from their local library (Zikuhr *et al.* 2013).

The online community of book lovers and fandom participants were growing too. Many YA book buyers got involved in online social networks that are dedicated to books like Goodreads, Twitter, Bookstagram, and BookTube (Miller 2019). "Science fiction and fantasy reads might have been the first genre fans to congregate online, but YA fans and influencers took to social media with an enthusiasm and alacrity that was head-spinning, but far from surprising. Many of them had roots in Harry Potter fandom from way back" (Miller 2019). YA books can have a cult following. "Websites and blog sites are created for series, books, or characters. Instagram, Twitter and Facebook fan profiles are created to revolve around their YA favorites. Fans create memes of character collages about their favorite protagonists and post them on various social media. Authors have book merchandise made to sell to fans, including clothing items, dishware, stationary, key-chains, pens/pencils, decals, stickers, jewelry, etc." (Bowers 2015).

OwlCrate was founded within this community of YA book fans. Fans were seeking more YA books to read and more book merchandise. Ede is also a member of the YA Bookstagram and BookTube community with a strong connection to the *Harry Potter* fandom. Since she was already part of the community, she was aware of popular YA tropes, genres, and fandoms. Ede had a good feel for what YA readers were interested in and started curating boxes based on her understanding of their

interests (Korrina Ede, personal interview, 2020). She also started using Instagram and YouTube as the primary platform to advertise the box as that's where most of the community was congregating. Today, many new customers still find OwlCrate through Instagram which remains to be OwlCrate's main social media platform and also main marketing method (DeMeré).

2.2 What is it about YA that entices readers (teens and adults)?

OwlCrate has included a diverse range of genres such as contemporary, sci-fi, fantasy, romance, horror but their best-selling and most buzzed about books are always YA fantasy (Korrina Ede, personal interview, 2020). One theory behind this is that readers of OwlCrate grew up with the *Harry Potter*, *Hunger Games*, and *Twilight* series. Readers are seeking more books that they can escape into with magic and interesting worlds.

Cori Reed, the community manager for OwlCrate, creates online community building content for OwlCrate subscribers. Reed has a good understanding of what it is about YA books that brings readers together. She states, "YA books usually have characters dealing with high emotions. The emotional connection readers have with YA characters are quite strong and it makes them feel seen and connected." Reed's theory about the popularity of YA books, especially among adults, has been supported by other professionals in the industry. According to David Levithan, a publisher who helped develop Scholastic's teen imprint, he states that "Teens wanted things that were real, that they connected with... It doesn't have to reflect reality directly. They love 'The Hunger Games' not because it's real in that it happens, but the emotions there are real, and it's very relatable" (Strickland 2015). Meredith Barnes, a literary agent, also explains: "Every decision feels life-changing, and every choice in these books can seem life-or-death. The emotions are no more

or less valid than what one might experience at 30, but it's the first time, and thus very powerful" (Brown 2011).

Why are YA books read by a large proportion of adults? Why is a large portion of OwlCrate's subscribers between 18 to 35? In *The Atlantic* report, Caroline Kitchener looks into the reasons why adults love young adult literature by interviewing a few publishing experts who work with YA books. Kitchener finds that YA novels share a "universal coming of age experience" and it's a common experience that both teens can share with characters in real time, and adults can empathize with. Also when characters feel things in books, many of these emotions have a first-time intensity to it that just doesn't the second time around. (Kitchener 2017). The tropes and optimism that is found in many YA books can be good for readers and a nice escape, therefore comfort and escapism can be other reasons (Parrish 2018). However YA can also offer diverse perspectives and tackle hard subjects with context helping readers process and understand such topics. Hard hitting issues and topics are written in a way to help readers of all ages process and understand difficult topics (Parrish 2018, Kitchener 2017).

Virginia Zimmerman, a professor who studies YA literature, states that *Harry Potter* was a big reason YA books took off. It was popular among all ages and allowed adults to read and get comfortable reading a children's book and finding out that they enjoyed it. This opened the door to adults exploring and taking chances on more young people books (Kitchener 2017). *Harry Potter* "broke the cultural taboo around books only being appropriate for certain ages. In a sense, the books became timeless: The generation raised on Harry didn't give up on books because of an arbitrary age distinction. And it was this new shift that helped open doors for the current YA renaissance" (Turner 2018). *Harry Potter* was a huge inspiration for Ede and Madden when they came up with the name and box design for OwlCrate as shown in Figure 4. Madden states in an interview that "OwlCrate was inspired by the

Owl Post in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, which involved owls delivering mail to wizards" (Minns 2016).



Fig 4. The top of the OwlCrate subscription box. It shows an image of an owl delivering a package which is inspired by the owl post described in *Harry Potter*.

YA may also be popular among readers because there's more time and effort put into them by the publishers since these books have remained profitable with YA franchises being adapted into film and TV (Kitchener 2017). YA books tend to get more publicity on social media spaces where book lovers gather because Bookstagrammers and BookTubers tend to be YA readers (Rahim 2019). Social media has also allowed YA to grow because it's felt like a safe space for people to like YA fiction without feeling embarrassed that it's a kid's book or that it's not typically considered for "high brow" literary coverage (Rahim 2019).

The founders of OwlCrate found a market opportunity when they started a subscription service focusing on YA books. The explosion of the YA book market, an increase in young readers, and social media being a gathering spot for teens and

adults who also read books were all beneficial factors that played into the success and growth of OwlCrate. Targeting US customers, mainly women between 18 to 35 also fits with the industry standard for subscription box businesses as a whole. According to one subscription box market report, subscription box shopping is most popular in the US. The report looked at monthly website visits to subscription box services and they found that in January 2016, there were 21.4 million monthly website visits from US customers compared to 2.6 million visits from the UK and 562,500 visits from Australia (Fetto 2016). It is also found that women between 25 to 44 account for 60 percent of subscribers to subscription boxes (Chen *et al.* 2018). For OwlCrate, the boxes are curated with mostly a feminine audience in mind to further appeal to their target demographic.

Chapter 3: Curating Boxes

3.1 How boxes are curated

Ede is the curator for the OwlCrate boxes. She first starts with the monthly book which she chooses among ARCs that are sent to her by publishers. Some of these ARCs are requested and some are not. She reads books based on personal preferences, reviews, genres, and themes that she feels her audience would be interested in, and books that can have good themes built around them. After the book and the monthly theme is chosen, she looks for fun and unique items related to the book and theme. She browses Instagram and Etsy frequently and is tuned into what her community is excited about. Being part of the YA community herself helps with curation. She “gets” her audience.

3.2 Working with the major publishers

Ede works with the major publishers such as Penguin Randomhouse, Simon and Schuster, MacMillan, and HarperCollins. These publishers usually have the most buzzed about YA books with a wide selection, have dedicated YA imprints, can accommodate printing and shipping the bulk order of books OwlCrate needs every month, and are able to accommodate for exclusive editions and signed pages from the author. These publishers also have entire teams dedicated to special sales (like subscription boxes) that Ede can work with.

Books are chosen 3 to 6 months in advance of the box shipping out. For example in January, Ede will already have started reading books coming out in May or June. This gives enough lead time for books to be printed and shipped and other products to be made and ordered. One of OwlCrate’s promises to their subscribers is

that their book pick is released 45 days within a box's shipping date. This minimizes the risk of subscribers already owning the book beforehand. Another promise is that OwlCrate books will always have an exclusive cover and be signed by the author. Exclusive covers vary book to book — some books will have a slight change in colour or font, some will have significant changes, and some will have a totally different and unique cover. Sometimes OwlCrate edition books will have sprayed or foiled edges as well. Having these extra details allows subscribers to see the value in OwlCrate books versus buying the book in the traditional bookstore or online.

3.3 Monthly Theme

Once a book is chosen, Ede creates a monthly theme. Examples of some past OwlCrate themes are:

- October 2019: Dawn Of A New World
- November 2019: Through The Enchanted Forest
- December 2019: Tales Of Trickery
- January 2020: Vengeance Will Be Mine

Themes mainly revolve around the book of the month; however, they are always kept broad enough to incorporate other fandoms and items that subscribers might enjoy. Figure 5 is an example of the October 2019 box with the theme “Dawn Of A New World.” It includes one fantasy book *Crier's War* by Nina Varela and one science fiction book *I Hope You Get This Message* by Farah Naz Rishi. (This was a unique box for OwlCrate as it featured two books instead of one.)

OCTOBER
2019

DAWN OF A NEW WORLD

image by @babs.books

- ☐ *Crier's War* by Nina Varela (signed, exclusive OwlCrate Edition)
- ☐ *I Hope You Get This Message* by Farah Naz Rishi (signed, exclusive OwlCrate Edition)
- ☐ *Illuminae Files*-inspired Book Tin (designed by **Stella Bookish Art**)
- ☐ *Lunar Chronicles*-inspired Pendant Necklace (designed by **Iron and Ink Designs**)
- ☐ *Saga*-inspired Magnetic Bookmarks (**Craftedvan**)
- ☐ *Warcross*-inspired Sticker (designed by **Blanca Montiel**)
- ☐ Exclusive OwlCrate "Radio" and "Gem Heart" Enamel Pins (designed by **The Enchanted Bookshop**)
- ☐ Exclusive *Crier's War* and *I Hope You Get This Message* Author Letters.

Fig 5. OwlCrate's October 2019 box with the theme: "Dawn Of A New World". The content of this box all relate to fandoms dealing with science fiction themes related to a new world order.

Both the YA titles involve themes of the end of an old world order and a start of a new world. In *Crier's War*, the story is set in an alternative world where machine-like creatures have taken over and are keeping humans as their servants: a young human girl seeks to avenge the death of her family. In *I Hope You Get This Message* the Earth has been contacted by aliens and life as we know it may end in less than a week. The items draw on four different fandoms which can be linked to the month's theme:

- The book tin item is inspired by the book series *The Illuminae Files* by Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff. The series is a space opera set in a world where two mega corporations are at war with one another.
- The necklace is inspired by *The Lunar Chronicles* book series by Marissa Meyer. This series is a futuristic fairytale about a cyborg who fights for Earth's survival against the villainous lunar people.

- The magnetic bookmarks are inspired by *Saga* by Brian K. Vaughan. This popular comic series is a space opera about family and building a more united world in their current galactic war.
- And finally there is a sticker that is inspired by the book series *Warcross* by Marie Lu. *Warcross* is set in our world but in the distant future where a virtual reality combat game is taking over everyone's lives.

The monthly themes are not only important for curation of the box but are also important for subscribers. OwlCrate reveals the theme of the upcoming box to subscribers a week before the box goes on sale to new customers. OwlCrate also includes a sneak peek theme card in the box for the upcoming month. This does two things: one, it allows subscribers to get excited about the next box and keep up with their subscription and two, it allows subscribers to decide if they're interested in the next box and if they're not they are free to skip that month of their subscription. There are many OwlCrate customers who don't buy a regular subscription but buy one-off boxes based on the themes they like. Theme reveals also mention the general topics of the upcoming book and fandoms that will be included in the box. It does not reveal specific details about the book and the items.

3.4 Working with artists and small shop owners

-

As a small business itself, one of OwlCrate's core values is to support other like-minded small businesses and artists (Ede 2020a). When brainstorming ideas Ede looks through Etsy and Instagram for artists she might want to collaborate with. The team also goes to trade shows (such as the annual Toy Fair in New York City) to scope out the latest products and gather ideas. On average, Ede works with 4 to 6 different artists and small business owners for each box.

Small businesses and artists are sometimes a one-time collaboration or a longer term partnership. An example of a one-time collaboration is with the enamel pins. Each month, OwlCrate includes a new enamel pin that connects with the book. A new designer is contracted every month to design the pin. Riddles Tea Shoppe, is an example of a long-term partner. It is a business that creates custom tea blends and packaging based on different fandoms and a tea sample is included in a box at least once a year.

3.5 Tapping into various fandoms for additional items in the box

Including exclusive fandom products is an important selling point for OwlCrate. It not only gives many YA fans who are part of these fandoms something to get excited about, but it also allows newer subscribers or existing subscribers to be introduced to backlist titles and different fandoms they may enjoy. However there are problems that can occur with including very specific items in a subscription box. As one book blogger states in a review of a past OwlCrate box which featured items from *Star Wars*, *The Illuminae Files*, and *Harry Potter*: “While it’s fun to get the fandom stuff, it’s really only fun if they’re your fandoms. For example, I have never in my life seen Star Wars...So getting a Star Wars necklace means nothing to me. I’ve never read the Illuminae series, so that sticker has no meaning. I mean, basically the only things worth keeping were Malfoy, the book, and the bookmark. And I feel really bad because this crate was a gift and yet I don’t want a good portion of the stuff.” (belleofthelibrary 2016)

However it is a risk that subscribers take and OwlCrate tries to minimize this risk by announcing the fandoms in each box ahead of time when they announce the theme reveal. OwlCrate also increasingly tries to make these different fandom items usable and high quality for everyone to enjoy - even those who are not familiar with

the books.

One of the top subscription boxes in the US is LootCrate — a crate for gamers, pop culture, anime, and comics fans (Fetto 2016). In January 2016 it was the third most visited subscription website in the US at 3.1 million visits (Fetto 2016). This subscription service offers multiple different crates and includes items from different fandoms including official merchandise from the Marvel franchises, popular cartoons and animes. Ede and Madden subscribed to Lootcrate before they started OwlCrate and knew the potential of a subscription service that provided fandom items (DeMeré). They were able to adapt this idea to providing fandom items to a very niche audience of YA book lovers.

3.6 Product quality and uniqueness

Researchers that have studied beauty subscription box businesses have found that for customers to build a long-term commitment with a subscription service brand, the service has to offer an assortment of high quality products and a wide variety of products in each box (Lee *et al* 2019). The researchers looked at different attributes of products in subscription boxes including price, uniqueness, assortment, quality, and surprise. They found that though product quality, assortment, and uniqueness was significantly related to positive reactions from subscribers, it was product quality that was the strongest predictor of subscriber attitude toward their subscription service. Customers are more likely to spread information about the box through word of mouth and continue their subscription. Attributes such as price and surprise were not significant predictors of attitude towards subscription boxes - at least towards beauty products (Lee *et al.* 2019).

The interest in high-quality products among potential customers is reflected on the OwlCrate website where it promises to provide “three to five high quality bookish goodies.” OwlCrate has also recognized recently that product uniqueness is also an important factor for subscribers, especially long-term subscribers. Recently Ede has brought on another curator to assist curation of the box to prevent the box from becoming stale. “Tes has been helping me with curating OwlCrate boxes since last summer. She’s really helped push me to think outside the box, to discover and partner with more incredible new artists/shops and to include items we’ve never sent out before.” (Ede 2020b)

Ede mentions in a personal interview that it is sometimes difficult to find that balance between including new items that people that have been subscribing for over five years want to see more of and enticing new subscribers with items they’ve seen in past unboxings. Churn rates for subscription boxes can be quite high. Based on a sample of over 1500 subscription sites over a 12 month period, researchers at Recurly found the overall benchmark churn rate for subscription services in 2018 was 5.6 percent (Recurly 2020). This includes data from a variety of subscription services including monthly boxes, media and entertainment, software, and consumer goods (Recurly 2020). However within the “Box of the Month” category the average churn rate is 10.54 percent and it can be as high as 19.22 percent. With high churn rates, OwlCrate must be able to provide new, usable, high-quality goods to their subscribers.

With popular items, OwlCrate tends to order more than they need for the boxes to put it up on a separate shop page. For those who are hesitant in getting a subscription box where they don’t control the book and items they’ll be receiving, OwlCrate has set up this shop page where they’ll offer past boxes (if there are extras) with all the items revealed and individual items that can be purchased separately. Some customers prefer to solely purchase OwlCrate boxes from the shop

instead of a traditional subscription to eliminate the element of surprise and can make more controlled purchasing decisions. Selling back stock is yet another revenue stream for OwlCrate.

3.7 Special Edition Boxes

OwlCrate started providing special/limited edition boxes in 2018. These boxes are not part of a monthly subscription service. They are purchased separately. The book in a Special Edition box is revealed ahead of time and sometimes these special edition boxes are sequels or spin offs to books that were featured in the past regular subscription boxes (which always feature standalone books or the first in a series). A Special Edition box only features items inspired by the book. Other fandoms are not included in these boxes. For example, a recent Special Edition box in November 2019 featured, *The Queen Of Nothing* by Holly Black, a highly anticipated last book in a trilogy (*The Folk Of The Air* series). OwlCrate featured the first book, *The Cruel Prince* in the January 2018 monthly box.

Special Edition boxes draws customers that might not subscribe to the regular monthly boxes. These customers are specifically interested in the book and the fandom that is featured in the Special Edition box. These boxes are another revenue stream for OwlCrate and helps those customers who want to know what book will be in each box. It also eliminates the concern many people might have about getting different fandom products in the box that they are not familiar with. Special Edition boxes are usually ordered through a pre-sale months in advance and are ordered in lower quantities than the regular subscription boxes.

3.7 Minimizing customer risk in a surprise subscription box

There are different retail models for subscription boxes. Different researchers categorize subscription boxes in different ways but one that is particularly helpful is McKinsey's report on subscription boxes. The researchers divide e-commerce subscriptions up into these three categories: 1) subscribe for replenishment, 2) subscribe for curation, 3) subscribe for access (Chen *et al.* 2018). Subscribe for replenishment's value is for consumers to save time and money. They know what products they will be receiving on a regular basis. An example of these boxes are Dollar Shave Club. Thirty-two percent of McKinsey's polled consumers subscribe to replenishment boxes. Fifty-five percent subscribe to boxes that are curated. The value in curated boxes are that consumers are surprised by the product variety and get a chance to test new products. For these boxes, depending on the company, there can be varying levels of consumers making decisions about what gets put into the box. OwlCrate is an example of curated boxes. The third category, subscribe for access, allows consumers to gain exclusive access and membership perks. An example of this is Just Fab, a fashion subscriptions service that allows members VIP access to different styles and brands and it also offers a membership discount on items of clothing (Chen *et al.* 2018).

It seems like most subscribers tend to lean towards the surprise subscription, but why? Afterall, customers have a higher risk of a negative experience of receiving a surprise box with curated goods they have no control over. In a paper studying differences in consumer attitude between prescribed and surprise subscription boxes, Bischof *et al.* (2019) states that consumers benefit from pre-defined subscriptions because it saves them from having to go on shopping trips to receive the products they want to own. However they also found that "curated surprise subscriptions add value by exposing consumers to new products. ... [they] cater to

consumers' urge for discovery" and inspire their consumers to try something new. Noorda (2019) looks at the surprise element of children's book subscription boxes and states: "...there is an element of a particular type of discoverability that is lost in online bookselling and buying. This type of discoverability relies heavily upon surprise and is outside of algorithmic possibility." However, predefined subscription services are risk-free, while a surprise subscription has the potential to have a higher loss of customers if the expectations and tastes of the customer is not met.

OwlCrate tries to minimize this risk by exposing their subscribers to new books every month in a variety of genres. They also provide new products and tend to not repeat items more than once a year. OwlCrate encourages or "inspires" their subscribers to try new books and products they may not have otherwise picked up or offered. They provide sample sizes of products like bath bombs, teas, coffees, candles that can inspire customers to try new things.

OwlCrate also tries to incorporate the "subscribe to access" model of subscription within their business to minimize risk. As mentioned above these types of memberships provide exclusive products and purchasing environments. OwlCrate tries to provide this exclusive access by including exclusive covers and signed books of YA novels. YA book collectors may find a lot of value in this. OwlCrate also reaches out to already popular small businesses such as Riddles Tea Shoppe (a business that makes unique blends of tea based on popular fandoms) to create exclusive products solely for OwlCrate boxes that can't be sold anywhere else.

Bischof *et al.* (2019) suggests reducing the risk for consumers of subscription surprise boxes by offering a free return of unwanted products, or reducing uncertainty by pre-announcing contents of upcoming shipments. Though OwlCrate does not currently allow returns of unwanted items (other than offering a free

replacement for damaged items), they do send out annual surveys and are constantly listening and asking for feedback through newsletters, emails, and social media comments. They also reduce risk in announcing monthly themes ahead of time, telling customers what fandoms they'll be receiving in the box, and a general idea of the theme and genre of the book of the month. OwlCrate also posts two sneak peeks of items in the box each month. Past boxes and items are on display on the main website and social media and "social proof" on Facebook and Instagram also help potential customers lower their risk towards receiving a box they do not like. Subscribers also have the option of skipping a month or waiting till spoilers are posted online by other subscribers to buy the box, if there are any boxes left. OwlCrate subscribers along with other book box subscribers have also created Buy/Trade/Sell groups on Facebook to sell or trade unwanted items with each other. These groups are popular among book subscription boxes and can be helpful for subscribers looking to get rid of unwanted items.

Chapter 4: Marketing through social media

Social media marketing is a strong driver of traffic for subscription box sites. (Fetto 2016). In the US a subscription box's social media channels (Facebook, Instagram) and multimedia sites (Buzzfeed, YouTube) are stronger drivers to the company's website than search engines or other retail sites (Fetto 2016). In the US in 2015, 13.5 percent of referred visits to subscription box sites came from social media sites compared to 8.4 percent from a retail site (Fetto 2016). A research report by McKinsey & Company states that consumer awareness for subscription boxes are low stating that only about half of US consumers have heard of subscription services and only 15 percent of online shoppers have signed up for subscription boxes. Whereas 45 percent of online shoppers have signed up for a subscription online streaming service such as Netflix or Spotify (Chen *et al.* 2018). Therefore word-of-mouth marketing through social media can be helpful for subscription box companies.

OwlCrate is very dependent on its social media platforms. It is a low cost marketing tool that has the capability of reaching thousands of potential subscribers. As of August 2020 OwlCrate has approximately 216,000 followers on Instagram and 74,000 on Facebook. The number of OwlCrate social media followers is more than OwlCrate's subscribers but OwlCrate continues to work on increasing engagement and followers in hopes of converting these followers to become subscribers. OwlCrate effectively leverages the existing book-loving community on Instagram and YouTube (Bookstagram and BookTube) who are an active and social community, many of whom are on the lookout for more books to read and participate in online fandoms and are willing to buy bookish merchandise. The OwlCrate team engages with these two communities while also promoting and sharing their product. Social media allows OwlCrate to speak directly to their target customers and as a bonus provides a virtual worldwide book club.

4.1 Instagram: Participating in the #Bookstagram community

The Bookstagram community is a very important marketing channel for OwlCrate's business. OwlCrate has one of the largest followings among the book box companies on Instagram. Bookstagram is a community of Instagram users who dedicate their feed to sharing the books they're reading, book reviews, and reading culture in general. Book publishers use bookstagrammers as a valuable marketing tool to help spread the word of upcoming releases, conduct giveaways, and other promotional activity. These personalized book reviews are perceived by followers to be more trustworthy than a traditional book review in a newspaper or magazine (Rahim 2019). In the comments section, members discuss characters, plot lines, their favorite quotes, and other typical conversation you'd have at a book club. Bookstagram accounts are "often curated by young women" and the majority of readers are young adult and fantasy fans. (Rahim 2019)

In an interview from Jane Curry, the owner of Ventura Press (an Australian independent publisher), Curry states that "Instagram's changed how we find books and our perception of who's reading them. A lot of teenagers read print books...The cover is important. Either a friend recommends it, or they love the cover and decide to buy it....Instagram then influences the curation of literary lists and therefore what we read" (Seth 2019). Fans of YA have found a home on Instagram because YA doesn't tend to win 'highbrow literary coverage' (Rahim 2019).

Instagram posts within the Bookstagram community tend to have long captions with book reviews and questions and encouragement for followers to participate in discussion in the comments. OwlCrate's Instagram posts often follow a similar format as well with long captions and pointed questions to encourage engagement on each post. Figure 6 is an example of a typical OwlCrate post that is in

similar style to many other Bookstagram posts while also promoting their own products and books.

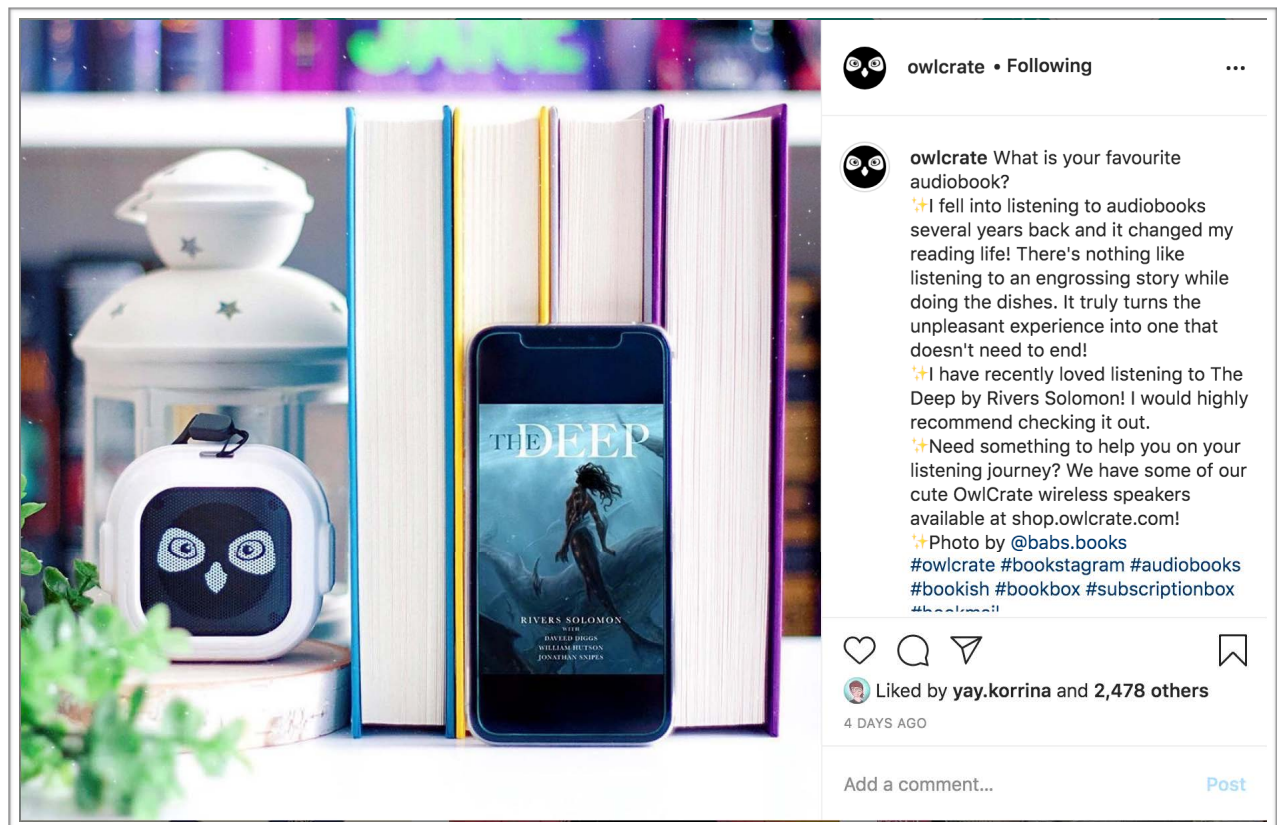


Fig 6. Example of a Instagram post from OwlCrate. OwlCrate participates in the Bookstagram community and matches the standard Bookstagram posts with long captions and questions to encourage discussion in the comments section of the post.

4.2 Content creation and influencer marketing

OwlCrate uses its Instagram channel as its main platform to make announcements, market boxes, post unboxing photos, and share YA content with their followers. When Ede and Madden first started OwlCrate, Instagram and YouTube was their first method of sharing the box. As Ede says with her interview with Canva.com, “Most people discover us through Instagram, which is definitely our biggest social platform. Whether it be from stumbling upon our own account, or by hearing about us through family or friend’s unboxing photos.” (DeMeré).

Most of OwlCrate's photos on their Instagram page are user-generated content. OwlCrate, as many other book boxes, run an Instagram rep search every three to six months. This is where OwlCrate puts out a call for anyone who would like to represent and share the OwlCrate brand. OwlCrate selects approximately 30 people to send a free box to in exchange for high-quality photos of the OwlCrate box every month. These brand reps are oftentimes active and engaged members of the Bookstagram community and are talented photographers and content creators. Their followers tend to trust their opinions on books and other things they share. OwlCrate also gives reps a 10 to 15 percent discount code for them to share and promote to their followers.

4.3 The Unboxing Phenomena

Unboxing videos on YouTube are incredibly popular. Influencers open their subscription boxes, taking each product out one at a time and going into the details about them. Some influencers shoot their unboxing live, to show their viewers their reactions to each item. In 2015, the *New York Times* reported that people watched unboxing videos of toys, sneakers, iPhones, and other products more than 1.1 billion times, for a total of 60 million hours (Hof, 2015).

OwlCrate uses this popularity of unboxing videos to their advantage as well. When a subscriber opens an OwlCrate box, there is a "Guide to Unboxing" prompt which encourages subscribers to snap a photo and share the photo with the OwlCrate community online using the hashtag #owlcrate (Figure 7). OwlCrate also has a number of YouTube reps, that are part of the BookTube community, in which they send around 15 to 20 boxes to in exchange for an honest review and an unboxing video. This kind of targeted, low-cost niche marketing is helpful for subscription book boxes to bring new subscribers in. For example, an unboxing

video of the September 2019 OwlCrate box by a BookTuber rep called Books With Chloe, have gained about 12,000 views.



Fig 7. The inside flap of an OwlCrate subscription box has a 3-step "Guide To Unboxing" which encourages subscribers to take a photo or film their unboxing experience, share it with the OwlCrate community using the hashtag #owlcrate, and to enjoy the book of the month. (Photo from Books And Shadow blog accessed online at <https://booksandshadows.com/why-you-need-owlcrate/>).

Regular subscribers also share unboxing videos or Instagram posts. All subscribers get a referral link that they can share with their friends and family to get a free box or a discount on their next renewal. Putting up unboxing videos or posts can help encourage their friends and family to subscribe and use their referral link. However, this is beneficial for OwlCrate to as it uses word of mouth marketing to spread information about Owlcrate. A non-rep subscriber, Chelsea Palmer, on YouTube has a March 2020 OwlCrate unboxing video which has gained up to 9,600 views. This is a significant increase in viewers compared to OwlCrate's own YouTube account where the staff unboxes the monthly boxes. These videos only gain an average of 1,300 views (OwlCrate TV YouTube).

Unboxing videos and posts generated by subscribers and reps are important for OwlCrate as it shows that “social proof” is important for potential customers to subscribe. Word-of-mouth communication is proven to be a strong incentive for consumers to purchase a product (Noor 2019) . It helps e-commerce businesses such as OwlCrate, build consumer trust and credibility (Fuller *et al* 2007). Online reviews, review sites, information from friends, and other third-party sources of information (called reputation information) is valuable for consumers before purchasing a product (Fuller *et al* 2007). Unboxing videos and photos also reduce the element of surprise for a customer because they can see what kind of items are featured in past boxes and what they might expect in future boxes.

4.4 Monthly Photo Challenges

Every month, OwlCrate hosts a photo challenge on their Instagram and Facebook pages. There are prompts that OwlCrate sets up for subscribers to take photos of the box (example shown in Figure 8). Usually these photos consist of an unboxing photo, photos of the items, and other fun Bookstagram-like photos. Participating in the photo challenge gives a subscriber an entry to win one of five

free OwlCrate boxes for the next month. There's a unique hashtag that is created every month so that photo challenge participants can enter into the contest. These photo challenges are popular and OwlCrate gets over a thousand entries every month. Photo challenges not only allow subscribers to engage in a fun contest, it also acts as another way for subscribers to share the OwlCrate box to their followers such as friends and family.



Fig 8. Example of an OwlCrate monthly photo challenge conducted on both Facebook and Instagram.

4.5 Building Trust With The Brand

In a *Publisher's Weekly* interview, Suzanne Skyvara, VP of communications of Goodreads mentions that the key to success in any influencer campaign is "trust and

authenticity.” With a surprise box subscription, there must be trust between subscribers and the company. OwlCrate strives to do this by sharing their influencers’ photos on Instagram letting people know who their brand reps are and they share unboxing videos from BookTubers directly on the OwlCrate homepage website. OwlCrate also tries to build direct trust by being open and transparent with the subscribers through social media. Every week, Ede and Reed hop onto Instagram Live to have weekly “Coffee With OwlCrate” chats that get approximately 100-200 views. This is a space where the OwlCrate team can talk about what’s coming up next, any announcements, and take questions for an hour. OwlCrate also takes time to address comments and concerns on their social media feeds.

Community building is another way OwlCrate builds brand trust and encourages people to gather and talk about OwlCrate books. The OwlCrate Society on Facebook has over 19,000 members. It’s a group created by OwlCrate for any reader to join and discuss books. The group is private and moderated but it is open to anyone who can answer a few easy questions to gain entry. Many members of the OwlCrate Society do not subscribe to OwlCrate but use the group as a place to talk about their love for YA books.

There is also an official OwlCrate Book Club with 5000 members. The book clubs has group read alongs and discussion questions and a monthly video chat hosted by members of the team. Every month OwlCrate also hosts OwlBabble - an Instagram Live chat with the author of the monthly book pick. This allows subscribers to meet the author, ask any questions, and engage even further with the book.

On YouTube, the OwlCrate team also participates in popular BookTube events such as week-long readathons and video tags that are hosted by other BookTubers. For example for the past two years OwlCrate has sponsored a week-long readathon

called The Reading Rush (formerly known as the BookTubeATHon) that is run on BookTube by a few popular BookTubers. The OwlCrate team also participates in popular video tags such as the #midyearbookfreakout tag in which participants create videos talking about how the year is going in terms of their reading life.

The OwlCrate YouTube channel also allows the team to promote and talk about other books (past titles or upcoming releases) that didn't make it into the box but are related to the theme of the month or they just personally enjoyed. It's a place to recommend other books and continually promote reading to their followers. When opportunities arise to have live meetups, OwlCrate will host a live meetup here in Vancouver but also try to host meetups when they travel to trade shows such as BookCon in New York City and YA book festivals such as YallWest in California or Texas Teen Book Fair.

Conclusion

With the increase in popularity of subscription boxes over the years, OwlCrate is a successful subscription book box business attracting a niche audience of Young Adult book readers. Ede and Madden found a market opportunity when they started OwlCrate in 2015. YA books were already seeing an increase in popularity and there were no other book boxes at the time that were sending out monthly themed boxes with YA titles and merchandise from YA fandoms.

The YA book market allows OwlCrate to not only sell boxes to teenagers or parents of teenagers but also adults who enjoy reading YA. There's been a growing trend of adults who read YA books which expands OwlCrate's audience. OwlCrate also provides extra value to their customers by sending signed new-release YA books with exclusive covers and custom-made usable products that can't be bought anywhere else. They tap into popular YA fandoms to provide merchandise that a majority of YA readers will know and appreciate and people just entering into the YA world can discover.

Social media has been a powerful tool for OwlCrate to market itself. OwlCrate participates in Bookstagram and BookTube, two active and engaged online communities on Instagram and YouTube where YA book lovers gather to share and discover books and participate in YA fandoms. OwlCrate also ensures that readers are engaged through photo challenges, an online book club, online author meet ups, BookTube videos, and more. These methods also reinforce word-of-mouth marketing. These activities, along with a unique product, have allowed OwlCrate to build a strong fanbase, increase social sharing among subscribers, and bring YA readers into an active and engaged community.

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