



Exploring Manipulative Traits in Veronica Roth's Divergent Novel

Ivan Yosua Perangin Angin¹, Thohiriyah²

^{1,2}Universitas Negeri Semarang

Corresponding E-Mail: ivanyosuaper@students.unnes.ac.id

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Abstract

Roth's novel Divergent depicts a dystopian society where faction-based identities determine social roles. Using a qualitative descriptive analysis approach, this study explores the character of Peter Hayes, an antagonist whose actions reflect deliberate psychological manipulation. This study uses E. Dotsenko's theory of manipulation. In this study, Peter only employs 4 of 6 traits, consisting of operational object manipulation, conventional manipulation, inference-oriented manipulation, and personality structure manipulation. The data was gathered from dialogues and narratives between Peter and other characters in the novel. The study findings show that Peter consistently uses negative manipulation to achieve what he wants. This article also explores how Peter's manipulative behaviour impacts the other characters and the group represented by the faction. This study contributes to young adult literature discourses by showing how antagonistic characters reflect deeper psychological and social issues. It offers insights into the intersection of literature and psychology and underscores how manipulative dynamics in fiction can shape readers' views of power, morality, and relationships.

Keywords: *movie character analysis, manipulation, psychological strategy*

Introduction

Manipulation is a hidden psychological influence that affects the decisions or actions of others to the manipulator's advantage. Manipulation, as defined by Hrebin (2020), is a covert psychological influence. It aims to control another person's thoughts, emotions, or actions for the manipulator's benefit. The term psychological influence refers to the capacity to affect the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours of others in various ways (Radjabov, 2021). Since manipulation benefits the manipulator, it can be done positively or negatively (Brichag et al., 2024).

Manipulation can be done in both positive and negative ways. Positive manipulation involves reinforcement techniques such as praise, rewards, or attention to influence behaviour. Brichag et al. (2024) note that such tactics can foster a sense of obligation, gradually shaping a person's choices over time. Although it may seem harmless, it still affects a person's autonomy. Negative manipulation uses psychological pressure, including stress, guilt, or criticism, to make compliance feel like an emotional release. Over time, this can reduce an individual's freedom as they prioritise the manipulator's demands over their needs and desires. For example, a manager might use praise to increase productivity as a form of positive manipulation, while making others feel guilty to control decisions is a form of negative manipulation. According to E. Dotsenko in Hrebin (2020), manipulation can be classified into six distinct types.

Manipulation is divided into six types. E. Dotsenko, as detailed in Hrebin (2020), categorizes manipulation into six distinct types, each exhibiting unique mechanisms to influence individuals' thoughts, emotions, and actions, often without their conscious realization. The categories of manipulation are perceptually oriented manipulation, conventional manipulation, operational-object manipulation, inference-oriented manipulation, manipulation focused on personality structures, and spiritual exploitation-oriented manipulation. Each targets a different aspect of the individual's cognition and behaviour.

The first type is 1) perceptually oriented manipulation, which shapes the interpretation of information through emotional associations, as exemplified by advertisements featuring families that evoke positive feelings, ultimately driving consumer behaviour. Subsequently, 2) conventional manipulation leverages social norms and expectations to compel adherence, such as the normative claim that "a good boyfriend will pick up his girlfriend every day," which engenders feelings of obligation within relationships. Following this, 3) operational-object manipulation exploits habits. For example, store layouts often place key items in ways that increase the chance of impulse buying. Thereafter, 4) inference-oriented manipulation leads individuals toward specific conclusions in a seemingly unobtrusive manner, illustrated by the question, "Do you want to clean your room before or after lunch?" which subtly coerces compliance while creating an illusion of choice. The fifth form is 5) manipulation focused on personality structures, this manipulation preys on an individual's psychological vulnerabilities, employing tactics such as gaslighting, exemplified by the statement "You are overreacting; that never happened", to instil self-doubt. Lastly, 6) spiritual exploitation-oriented manipulation targets fundamental beliefs and values, exemplified by extremist groups that convince adherents that abandoning the group is tantamount to eternal damnation.

Notably, E. Dotsenko in Hrebin (2020) emphasises that these manipulation types are not rigidly sequential; instead, they can be synergistically combined to amplify their effectiveness and depth of influence on individuals' cognition and behaviour. Consequently, these six manipulation types illustrate the multifaceted

ways manipulation can pervade interpersonal interactions, subtly shaping behaviour and thought across diverse contexts.

In recent years, Veronica Roth's novel *Divergent*, published in 2011, has continued to be the subject of research for scholars due to the numerous themes that can be explored within the novel. Several studies, such as an analysis of *Divergent* using Wolfgang Iser's feminist theory, have focused on Independent Female Characters, Female Leadership, and Gender Discrimination (Darmawanto et al., 2018). Supandi (2018) analysed *Divergent* using deconstruction, focusing on existentialism and dehumanization.

The study by de Souza & Roazzi (2017) investigates the usefulness of the five "Factions" in *Divergent* to see their utility and whether the five-faction system can be applied in our social life. The research by Wandansari & Suryaningtyas (2022) analyses the portrayal of power in the novels *Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, comparing the two books. Based on previous literature reviews, numerous studies discuss the central role itself or focus on the faction system's analysis. Still, as discussed in this study, no one has examined it from the antagonist's perspective.

Peter Hayes has attracted attention as the antagonist in *Divergent* but has received limited critical analysis in academic literature, particularly about psychological manipulation and character theory. Existing studies of the novel often focus on Tris Prior or the faction system, highlighting identity formation, courage, and institutional power, but rarely investigate the interpersonal tactics used by antagonistic characters to claim dominance within the hierarchy. To guide this study, the following questions are posed: (a) What types of psychological manipulation does Peter Hayes exhibit throughout the narrative? Moreover, (b) How does this manipulative behaviour impact the emotional and social dynamics of individual characters and the Dauntless faction?

This research aims to analyse Peter Hayes' manipulative strategies through E. Dotsenko's framework in Hrebin (2020) and explore their impact on character psychology and group cohesion. This study positions *Divergent* as a productive site for analysing how secondary antagonists in young adult dystopian fiction reflect deeper patterns of coercion, control, and emotional influence.

Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive analysis approach to analyse the novel *Divergent* and one of its antagonistic characters, Peter Hayes, by examining the manipulation tactics he employs and their impact. Thohiriyah (2019) highlights that qualitative methods are generally used to analyse data. This approach provides a systematic framework for interpreting narrative phenomena while maintaining the text's integrity, making it ideal for analysing literary representations of identity transformation (Kim et al., 2017).

The data collection process includes 1) reading and understanding the novel in depth, 2) identifying and collecting textual evidence supporting the research argument, 3) organizing the collected data into a structured format, such as tables, for systematic analysis, and 4) interpreting the data through the lens of relevant theories. The data collected comes from the novel *Divergent* through narrative dialogue and plot. Textual evidence was selected based on explicit or implicit manipulation. The theoretical framework of this study refers to E. Dotsenko in Hrebin (2020) to analyse the type of manipulation, Brichag et al. (2024) to identify whether the manipulation was done negatively or positively, and numerous studies that reinforce the impact of the manipulation.

Result & Discussion

This section offers an in-depth analysis of Peter Hayes, a key antagonist in *Divergent*, focusing on his manipulative strategies, particularly toward Tris, to achieve personal goals. Using E. Dotsenko's classifications of manipulation as cited in Hrebin (2020), it categorizes his tactics. It evaluates their moral implications by examining the context and impact of their actions, ultimately shedding light on the complexity of their character.

A. Background of Peter Hayes

Peter Hayes is the antagonist in the novel *Divergent*, from the Candour faction, known for its honesty, energetic, attention-seeking behaviour, such as interacting with others, having positive emotions, and talkativeness (de Souza & Roazzi, 2017). Despite his background in the Candor faction, Peter's behaviour is often marked by aggression and insensitivity toward others, particularly Tris. Christina, one of the characters in *Divergent*, describes Peter as "pure evil" (Roth, 2011, p. 36). Tris even dreams about Peter, saying, "*I dreamt that Peter tied me to a chair and asked me if I was Divergent. I answered no, and he punched me until I said yes.*" (Roth, 2011, p. 47), which explains that Tris dreamed of Peter torturing her. Research shows that individuals who have experienced traumatic situations, such as violence, often reflect those experiences in their nightmares (Davis et al., 2007).

Peter Hayes is portrayed as a competitive and manipulative figure. His sarcastic and intimidating behaviour underscores his desire for control. These traits make Peter Hayes ambitious in controlling his peers within the faction. These traits can trigger certain types of ambition within individuals, driving them to maintain their friends or social circles. Peter's efforts to control his peers were carried out by belittling others, one of whom was Tris, by mockingly saying, "*Ooh. Scandalous! A stiff's flashing some skin!*" (Roth, 2011, p. 22), to provoke the crowd to mock Tris and make himself appear dominant, which, according to Wang et al. (2009), in competitive environments, individuals often use taunts to demonstrate superiority over their targets. Understanding Peter's background and aggressive tendencies sets the stage for analysing the manipulative tactics he employs throughout the novel.

B. Manipulation of Peter Hayes

This section will delve into the manipulative traits exhibited by Peter Hayes, exploring how these behaviours influence his character and affect the dynamics within the group. We will analyse the manipulative tactics he employs and their repercussions on his relationships and Dauntless.

a. Type of Manipulation**1. Operational Object Manipulation**

The manipulation employed by Peter Hayes at the beginning of his training in the Dauntless faction demonstrates his efforts to maintain his self-image amid a threatening situation. In a psychological context, individuals under high pressure tend to use manipulation as a survival strategy, especially when their self-esteem or social position is at stake (Jackson et al., 2015). This manipulation can take the form of emotional concealment, behavioural adjustment, or diverting attention to appear calmer or more dominant than what is felt. According to E. Dotsenko's in Hrebin (2020) theory of manipulation, such actions can be categorised as Operational Object Manipulation, which is a form of manipulation carried out automatically based on habits or specific behavioural strategies that appear spontaneous and logical (Hrebin, 2020).

This manipulation is evident when prospective Dauntless members are ordered to jump into a dark pit as a test of courage. Tris describes Peter by saying, *"I glance at Peter. He is picking at one of his cuticles. Trying to act casual."* (Roth, 2011, p. 22), which Tris explains as Peter trying to look normal by scratching his nails, a small yet meaningful action indicating his effort to appear calm, Peter's act of picking at his cuticles, despite inner anxiety, as reflecting *Operational-Object Manipulation*. According to Dotsenko (Shyroka & Hrebin, 2020), this manipulation relies on automatic or habitual responses. Peter uses habit and logic to avoid the situation he is in. By picking at one of his cuticles and remaining calm, he uses the crowd to avoid being spotted, thereby escaping the unfavourable situation. A study by Hessels et al. (2022) states that individuals can evade social surveillance by avoiding eye contact and remaining inconspicuous. While operational-object manipulation reveals Peter's tactical use of behavioural habits, another of his key strategies lies in exploiting social norms, which is conventional manipulation.

2. Conventional Manipulation

One form of manipulation Peter Hayes uses is conventional manipulation, which exploits existing social norms or shared beliefs to achieve personal goals (Hrebin, 2020). The type of manipulation Peter uses occurs when individuals exploit social expectations to make their actions appear correct, when they intend to deceive. In this context, Peter exploits the general view

of the Candor faction, which is honesty, to create illusions and distort facts for personal gain. This is described by Christia as follows:

"He would pick fights with people from other factions... he'd cry and make up some story about how the other kid started it. And of course, they believed him, because we were Candor and we couldn't lie. Ha ha." (Roth, 2011, p. 36).

This dialogue reflects conventional manipulation, which exploits societal norms or shared beliefs. Peter relies on Candor's reputation for honesty to falsely shift blame, knowing adults are conditioned to believe Candor to tell the truth (Hrebin, 2020). This behaviour demonstrates the deliberate misuse of social perceptions of the Candor faction for personal manipulation. The values of openness, responsibility, and trust are the basis of Candor; these are vital for social collaboration and shaping social judgments (Brambilla et al., 2016; Brambilla & Leach, 2014). Honesty and moral integrity are essential for building social trust and working with others. In structured communities, these norms strengthen reciprocity and reputation (Hilbig et al., 2014). Nevertheless, Peter's actions indicate a deliberate attempt to subvert these moral expectations. He undermines the values that undergird his faction by utilising perceptions of honesty as a weapon. This underscores the intricacy of social trust and demonstrates how even positive norms can be manipulated for manipulative purposes.

Peter Hayes also used Conventional Manipulation during the initiation of Dauntless. In the ranking competition, the prevailing norm is to compete fairly. Loland (2021) argues that fairness in competition must go beyond the rules themselves. When Tris achieved the top rank among the participants, Peter incited the other members by speaking and inciting Will to believe that Tris had obtained the top rank through cheating. Peter accused Tris of manipulating people, claiming she would remove them from the rankings and force them out of Dauntless. Peter's manipulation incites Will, who eventually confronts Tris about the truth. Beyond social conventions, Peter's manipulation deepens into more personal territory with tactics aimed at emotional destabilisation, which will be discussed in personality-structures manipulation.

3. Manipulation Focused on Personality Structures

Peter Hayes in *Divergent* demonstrates manipulation focused on personality structures, a strategy to undermine a person's emotional stability and autonomy to maintain control. According to Dotsenko in Hrebin (2020), this manipulation involves creating conflict, shifting responsibility to the victim, and giving the illusion of choice. The manipulator strengthens their control by subtly guiding decisions while making the victim feel responsible. Peter uses this approach by provoking peer tension and distancing himself

from the outcome, allowing others to take the blame while he benefits socially.

Peter Hayes uses manipulation focused on personality structures again to exploit Tris's emotional vulnerabilities and provoke a reaction that damages her reputation. He reads an Erudite article aloud, specifically targeting her father, Andrew Prior, by suggesting his "morally bereft" parenting caused Tris and Caleb to leave Abnegation, effectively leveraging familial loyalty to provoke emotional instability (Brainerd, 2018). He amplifies the attack with Molly's fabricated claim about Tris's nightmares. This tactic reflects Berkovich & Eyal's (2017) concept of emotionally manipulative behaviour, particularly the use of disinformation and emotional provocation to destabilise a target. Peter's public taunting of Tris deliberately prolonged his embarrassment in front of his friends while pretending to be innocent, consistent with behaviour identified in the literature on bullying as socially manipulative and exploitative.

As noted by Roques et al. (2022), bullying often involves tactics that induce shame and manipulate social power dynamics to isolate and silence victims through public ridicule and emotional rejection. This manipulation works by weaponising Tris's love for her family and faction loyalty, making her defensive outburst seem irrational. At the same time, Peter maintained plausible denial by employing clever emotional tactics to manipulate perceptions while pursuing self-serving motives, a behaviour consistent with non-prosocial emotional manipulation discussed by Ngoc et al. (2020).

Peter Hayes uses manipulation focused on personality structures by targeting Tris's identity and emotional stability. As defined by E. Dotsenko, it directly targets identity, self-esteem, and relationships. Such emotional tactics are highly destructive, often causing victims to doubt their identity and self-worth. Manipulators typically shift blame through public humiliation, gaslighting, or covert aggression, behaviours that have long-term psychological consequences (Bates, 2020). In the novel, Peter attacks Tris's identity by calling her "*Stiff*" (Roth, 2011, p. 106), a derogatory label for an Abnegation transfer. He also accuses her of manipulating: "*She knows how to manipulate people*" (Roth, 2011, p. 106), projecting his behaviour onto her.

This tactic distorts reality and confuses, making it a classic example of gaslighting (Darke et al., 2025). He continues with the claim, "*She knows how to manipulate people*" (Roth, 2011, p. 106), a false narrative designed to isolate Tris and erode trust, reinforcing her paranoia (Spencer et al., 2021). Peter also uses physical intimidation by pushing Tris against the wall and staring at her with "*pure hatred*" (Roth, 2011, p. 106). This combination of verbal and physical aggression destroys her self-confidence and distorts her perception of reality (Taft et al., 2006). In addition to targeting identity and

emotions, Peter uses logical distortions to alter perceptions, a strategy outlined in inference-oriented manipulation.

4. Inference-Oriented Manipulation

Peter Hayes employs inference-oriented manipulation by using false logic and exploiting cognitive dissonance to influence Tris and those around him. According to E. Dotsenko in Hrebin (2020), this form of manipulation operates through internal cognitive schemas and logical patterns that seem rational but are deceptive. Such strategies can lead individuals to accept misinformation as credible, impairing their judgment (Krstić, 2024). This manipulation often causes mental conflict, a discomfort triggered by contradictory beliefs, which drives individuals to resolve it in ways that benefit the manipulator. In *Divergent*, Peter uses this technique to influence perceptions of the Abnegation faction and, more personally, to alter how Tris views her family and herself, showing the psychological effects of deceptive narratives.

One clear example of Peter's manipulation appears when he reads an Erudite article targeting Abnegation. He claims, "*The mass exodus of the children of Abnegation leaders cannot be ignored or attributed to coincidence*" (Roth, 2011, p. 96). This seems logical at first, but reflects a fallacy by assuming correlation implies causation. By presenting faction switching as proof of moral decline, Peter leads others to a false conclusion disguised as rational thought. This illustrates a reasoning fallacy where the conclusion lacks valid support despite appearing logical (Ghasemi et al., 2022). Although the reasoning mimics scientific logic, it is deceptive. Peter's method shows how inference-based manipulation uses seemingly rational statements to mislead.

Beyond logical fallacies, Peter manipulates perception through social influence by using false testimony to trigger emotional inferences. He quotes a fabricated statement from Molly Atwood, relying on peer influence to distort how others view Tris. This tactic shows how social narratives can create cognitive dissonance and lead individuals to question their realities (Mason et al., 2007). Peter quotes Molly: "*She was telling her father to stop doing something. I don't know what it was, but it gave her nightmares*" (Roth, 2011, p. 96). This misleading claim implies abuse in Tris's home, pushing others to associate her with trauma despite lacking evidence.

This tactic puts psychological pressure on Tris, causing her to doubt her upbringing. It demonstrates cognitive dissonance, which Ryan (2017) explains occurs when individuals reshape beliefs in response to conflicting information. The clash between her love for her father and the implication of abuse highlights the discomfort at the centre of this theory. The emotional tension Tris feels, fueled by social validation and logical distortion, reveals how manipulation can exploit emotional vulnerabilities.

Although Dotsenko's framework mentions six different types of manipulation, not all of these types apply to the character of Peter Hayes in *Divergent*. This analysis did not find clear examples of perceptually oriented manipulation or spiritual exploitation-oriented manipulation in his behaviour. Instead, Peter relies more on operational object manipulation, conventional manipulation, manipulation focused on personality structures, and inference-oriented manipulation. These manipulations highlight the flexibility of the psychological framework in literary analysis and emphasise that manipulation can take forms dependent on context, shaped by character function, narrative structure, and the author's intent.

b. Peter Hayes Negative Manipulation Performance

Peter Hayes's actions in *Divergent* exemplify negative manipulation, as they consistently involve psychological coercion, emotional harm, and the suppression of others' autonomy. Brichag et al. (2024) define negative manipulation as pressure, guilt, and criticism to force compliance, traits that clearly describe Peter's behaviour. His denial of vandalism is an example of gaslighting, aligning with Dickson et al. (2023) analysis of manipulators who distort evident truths to erode victims' perceptions and induce self-doubt. Peter also exploits social norms to isolate Tris, destabilizing her emotionally and socially to assert control.

His tactics, such as public humiliation, false accusations, and narrative distortion, serve his interests at the expense of others' well-being, echoing Hrebin's (2020) findings on manipulation through cognitive and emotional exploitation. Unlike positive manipulation, which encourages cooperation through reinforcement, Peter relies on fear and obligation, leaving his targets without meaningful choice. His behaviours harm individuals like Tris and disrupt the cohesion of the Dauntless faction.

c. Peter Hayes Manipulation Impact

Peter Hayes' manipulation has impacted several characters in *Divergent*, especially Tris as the main character, through psychologically destabilising tactics that erode her self-concept and factional identity. In addition to the impact on the characters, Peter Hayes' manipulation also impacts his surroundings by fostering toxic social dynamics within Dauntless and exacerbating inter-faction tensions throughout the novel's dystopian society.

This section will address this topic from two different perspectives. First, it will examine the profound effects of his manipulations on the characters, revealing their emotional turmoil and transformation as they are exposed to Peter Hayes' manipulations. Then, it will explore the broader impact of his actions on the group.

1. Impact on the Manipulated Characters

Peter Hayes' manipulative behaviour in *Divergent* generates significant psychological distress among the Dauntless initiates, particularly Tris Prior, through a pattern of coercive control that undermines identity, fosters social isolation, and inflicts emotional trauma. His actions are not mere acts of bullying but deliberate efforts to destabilise his victims' sense of self and their relationships with others. Although Dadds & Rhodes (2008) primarily examine aggression in children with callous, unemotional traits, they argue that emotional insensitivity and deficits in fear recognition contribute to persistent antisocial behaviour. When combined with a competitive or emotionally detached environment, these traits may exacerbate interpersonal trust and psychological regulation difficulties.

The emotional damage inflicted by Peter is not limited to waking life but invades Tris's subconscious. In one of her dreams, she envisions Peter tying her to a chair and beating her until she confesses to being *Divergent*. She states, *"I dreamt that Peter tied me to a chair and asked me if I was Divergent. I answered no, and he punched me until I said yes. I woke up with wet cheeks."* (Roth, 2011, p. 47). This dream reflects the internalisation of fear and the way psychological abuse can manifest as recurring anxiety even in sleep. It mirrors common patterns in coercive relationships, where perceived threats condition victims to anticipate violence or rejection as inevitable consequences of noncompliance (Keilholtz et al., 2023).

Peter's manipulation also involves the calculated use of social isolation as a tool for control. After Tris earns a high-ranking during simulation exercises, Peter initiates a campaign to alienate her from her closest allies, including Will and Christina. Peter tells Will, *"She's going to edge you out of the rankings and out of Dauntless... all because she knows how to manipulate people and you don't."* (Roth, 2011, p. 106) This statement casts suspicion on Tris's integrity and implies that Will is naïve for trusting her. The accusation successfully drives a wedge between Tris and her friends, leading to their emotional withdrawal and leaving Tris socially vulnerable. Such manipulation illustrates how aggressors often isolate their targets from support systems to exert greater psychological control (Birditt et al., 2020).

Other characters also suffer due to Peter's manipulation, further demonstrating the systemic nature of his influence. Al, who struggles with emotional sensitivity and fears of inadequacy, becomes one of Peter's secondary targets. Peter exploits Al's insecurity by persuading him to participate in a late-night attack on Tris. Although Al shows hesitation during the incident, the moral compromise leads to unbearable guilt. The next day, Al approaches Tris and pleads, *"I just want to say that I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I don't...I don't know what's wrong with me, I... please forgive me, please...."* (Roth, 2011, p. 119). Tris, still traumatised, responds with, *"Stay away from me"* (Roth, 2011, p. 119). Al's emotional despair culminates in his suicide. This

tragic outcome reveals how manipulation, especially when it forces individuals to betray their values, can result in deep psychological fragmentation and irreversible consequences (Grieve & Panebianco, 2013).

Edward's case highlights the violent extent of Peter's efforts to dominate. In a shocking act of aggression, Peter stabs Edward in the eye with a butter knife while he sleeps. This attack occurs in what should be a safe, private space, magnifying its traumatic impact. When Tris sees him, the narration describes,

"Edward lies on the floor next to his bed, clutching at his face. Surrounding his head is a halo of blood, and jutting between his clawing fingers is a silver knife handle."
(Roth, 2011,80).

Later, Tris reflects on the situation, saying, *"I doubt I'll ever be able to sleep again"* (Roth, 2011,80), revealing her psychological distress. This reaction aligns with findings that witnessing violence is associated with elevated anxiety and trauma symptoms, especially in vulnerable populations (Ronzio et al., 2011).

Peter's manipulation also distorts social dynamics within Dauntless by creating an atmosphere of distrust, fear, and emotional instability. His victims, including Will and Christina, are confused and disillusioned as they struggle to reconcile Peter's accusations with their loyalty to Tris. Christina, in particular, becomes withdrawn and emotionally volatile, reflecting the emotional dysregulation that often follows manipulation-induced betrayal (Guo et al., 2021). Peter aggressively tells Will, *"Are you blind, or just stupid? She's going to edge you out of the rankings and out of Dauntless... all because she knows how to manipulate people and you don't"* (Roth, 2011, p. 106). This accusation shakes Will's trust in Tris and causes a visible rift in their relationship. Research suggests verbal aggression can lead to significant trust disruptions and interpersonal relationship dynamics (Tull et al., 2020).

Peter Hayes' manipulation is not merely a series of attacks but a sustained campaign of psychological control that disrupts individuals and their relationships. His behaviour thrives in Dauntless's competitive, high-stakes environment, where aggression is rewarded and vulnerability is punished. Roth portrays the psychological realism of this abuse through characters who display trauma symptoms such as cognitive dissonance, emotional numbing, and hypervigilance. The breakdown of characters like Al, Edward's departure, and Tris's emotional volatility illustrate how manipulation erodes identity, trust, and group resilience. Peter thus symbolises the wider psychological dangers of unchecked manipulation within hierarchical systems, fracturing both individuals and the social fabric of Dauntless.

2. Impact on the Group

Peter Hayes' manipulation goes beyond individual victims and extends to the structure and culture of the Dauntless faction. His tactics exploit the hyper-competitive nature of the Dauntless initiation process, creating an environment based not on courage and unity, but on fear, division, and distrust. This aligns with the idea that competitive environments can fuel inter-individual hostility and reduce collaboration (Lindström et al., 2015). By provoking conflict among fellow members, Peter weakens social cohesion and disrupts the principles that form the foundation of Dauntless. This is evident in his reaction to Tris's promotion, where he psychologically attacks Tris by saying, "*I will not be outranked by a Stiff*" (Roth, 2011, p. 106). Such violence creates a climate of intimidation and power assertion, eroding mutual respect among new members, a consequence identified in competitive environments (Keresztes et al., 2015).

Peter exploits the norms within Dauntless to manipulate others into seeing his targets as threats. This is evident when Peter tries to sow doubt in Tris by making her appear to be a threat to the group, portraying her as an antagonist who manipulates people to shift them out of their ranks and force them out of Dauntless. Peter's behaviour reflects a psychological pattern in which individuals often project their insecurities onto others, further fuelling conflict (Feng et al., 2016). Here, Peter projects his manipulative behaviour onto Tris while exploiting the fear of failure embedded in the Dauntless ranking system. His words are designed to incite hatred toward Tris, portraying her success as deceitful and detrimental to the group. This rhetoric leads to Tris being ostracised by others, including Will, who begins to question her intentions, asking, "*Are you trying to manipulate us?*" and then asking Tris, "*Acting weak so we pity you?*" (Roth, 2011, p. 106), where the doubt arises because of Peter.

This is evident again when Peter reads Erudite propaganda accusing Tris's parents of violence, saying, "*She was telling her father to stop doing something. I don't know what it was, but it gave her nightmares*" (Roth, 2011, p. 96). Peter cites Molly Atwood's fabricated account to discredit Tris's parents and cast suspicion on their character. By exploiting the shame arising from public pressure, Peter encourages faction members to view leadership through cruelty rather than conviction, reflecting how a competitive environment can distort perceptions of morality and loyalty.

Peter's actions culminated in his betrayal of Dauntless itself. During the faction's attack on Abnegation, it was revealed that Peter had been removed from the simulation conducted by Erudite and had deliberately and consciously aided the operation. He said, "*The Dauntless leaders...they evaluated my records and removed me from the simulation*" (Roth, 2011, p. 185). This confession proves that Peter had fully aligned himself with the Erudite's authoritarian regime, abandoning Dauntless' idealism for personal

survival and power. His betrayal marks the final step in his corrupting influence, not only on individuals but also on the moral direction of Dauntless as a faction.

Peter Hayes contributes to Dauntless's collapse in two ways. He represents the faction's internal corruption and accelerates its breakdown through his actions. His manipulation turns courage into conquest, unity into division, and ultimately transforms a community built on trust and courage into one torn apart by fear and betrayal. The implications of such transformations are often discussed in social and psychological contexts, as manipulation can fracture group identities and lead to detrimental outcomes for community cohesion (Ni et al., 2025).

Furthermore, findings by Platt and Freyd elucidate the relationship between betrayal and psychological distress, illustrating how breaches of trust generate personal shame and trauma that disrupt interpersonal relationships (Platt & Freyd, 2015). This relationship is deepened by Freyd's Betrayal Trauma Theory, which posits that high-betrayal experiences induce maladaptive coping mechanisms like dissociation, ultimately undermining the social fabric (Freyd et al., 2005).

The erosion of trust impacts community dynamics significantly; it emphasises how betrayal, especially from leaders, fosters increased division within groups and damage's collective identity (Bernstein et al., 2015). Additionally, it is argued that manipulation instigated by individuals like Hayes results in individuals retreating into self-preservation modes of distrust and fear. This encapsulates how Hayes's actions not only act as catalysts for division but also create enduring trauma that necessitates urgent measures for restoration and healing.

Conclusion

This study analyses the manipulative traits of Peter Hayes in Veronica Roth's novel *Divergent* through the framework of manipulation types by E. Dotsenko in Shyroka and Hrebin. The study's conclusion shows that Peter consistently uses negative manipulation strategies, including operational, conventional, inference-oriented, and personality-based manipulation, to control others and realize his ambitions. His actions cause psychological harm to Tris by damaging her identity and emotional stability, while also disrupting the social cohesion of the Dauntless faction by fostering fear, division, and distrust. Peter's character illustrates how manipulation can be a personal weapon and a force that undermines group cohesion and moral idealism. Through this analysis, the study emphasizes the importance of examining antagonistic characters to understand how manipulation shapes relationships, identity, and power structures within fictional narratives.

In addition to character analysis, this research contributes to literary studies by demonstrating the significance of antagonistic and non-main characters in driving thematic depth. Peter's behaviour reveals the psychological complexity embedded in secondary roles and how these characters can reflect broader patterns of coercion and control. From a psychological perspective, the study affirms the value of applying theoretical frameworks to literature to understand behavioural patterns in fiction. This approach expands current scholarship on *Divergent* by shifting focus from the protagonist to the manipulative influence of an overlooked character.

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