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The Chosen One: A Q-Method Analysis of the “Harry Potter” Phenomenon

Cindy Phippen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

The Chosen One: A Q-Method Analysis of the “Harry Potter” Phenomenon

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Master of Arts

This study examines how pop culture fandoms are formed, based on five communications theories: Escapism, Mood Management, Parasocial Relationships, Identification, and Social Capital. The researcher examined the *Harry Potter* fandom specifically because of its global pervasiveness. Using Q Methodology, 47 respondents fell into one of four categories: Relationship Experts, Happy Introverts, Identifying Isolationists, and Isolated Self-regulators. Relationship Experts like *Harry Potter* because of parasocial relationships with the characters as well as the story’s capacity for escapism, and Happy Introverts focus on liking *Harry Potter* for their own enjoyment (not that of others) and mood management. Identifying Isolationists like *Harry Potter* because they identify with the characters and enjoy discussing the books with those around them, while Isolated Self-regulators do not have any parasocial relationships and focus on the books’ mood management capacity. It is interesting to note that Escapism played a supporting (but never leading) role in each of these Factors. All respondents agree that *Harry Potter* has been, and will continue to be, an important part of their lives. It is hoped that this conclusion can form the foundation of future popular culture studies.

Keywords: Harry Potter, escapism, mood management, parasocial relationships, identification, social capital, fandom

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## Introduction

One of the most popular storylines of all time is the Hero's Journey. In such stories, the hero must go on a personal and often solo quest to achieve an objective that will ultimately benefit the world in which he or she lives. It is "a call to adventure and trials. It is a call to transformation and perseverance. It is a call to change the world" (Portnoy, 2013, p. 11). It is during those quests that heroes come to know who they truly are. By extension, people who listen, read and/or watch those stories learn what a hero is and how they themselves can be heroes (a personal quest in itself) (Weltzien, 2005).

What is a hero? Cawelti (1975) defined a hero as someone "who faces the ultimate challenge of life and death and emerges triumphant" (p. 529). In *Superman on the Couch*, Fingerroth (2004) described a hero as "someone who rises above his or her fears and limitations to achieve something extraordinary...embodies what we believe is best in ourselves" (p. 14) and knows—and actually does—the right things. These heroes exist in real life, but more people know about heroes of the big screen and printed page. Despite the public attention that such heroic characters receive, the question remains as to why this attention ranges from mild praise to cult-like worship. Because so many heroes are the objects of this adulation, it is helpful to look at a single hero to address this culturally relevant issue.

One hero has captured the imaginations of more people around the world than almost any other before him: Harry Potter. The first installment of the seven-part series,

*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, hit American shelves on September 1, 1998. (For the sake of brevity and convenience, books one through seven will be referred to as *Stone*, *Chamber*, *Azkaban*, *Goblet*, *Order*, *Prince*, and *Hallows*, respectively, throughout this thesis.) Six sales-record-breaking books and eight blockbuster films later, *Harry Potter* has become not only “an extremely successful literary franchise aimed at children...[but] also a vector in the cultural dimensions of globalization” (Gemmill & Nexon, 2006, p. 83). Throughout the years, one question prevails and has yet to be answered by scholarly inquiry: how did a children’s book by an unknown author spark a seemingly unquenchable international cultural phenomenon (Kelsey Wruck, 2012)?

### **A Brief History of Fandom**

In order to understand Pottermania—the term used to describe the global sensation—we must first understand the origins and nature of other unquenchable cultural phenomena, or *fandoms*. These histories go back long before *Harry Potter* was published or even before author J.K. Rowling was born. The term *fandom* was originally coined to describe sports and theater enthusiasts. However, production of *The Comet* (a magazine created by and for fans in 1930) is considered the birth of pop culture fandoms. But it was science fiction enthusiasts in the 1960s—namely, Trekkies—who developed the jargon and sociocultural infrastructure on which modern fandoms are based (Coppa, 2006).

Being part of a fandom goes beyond mere enjoyment of content. Rather, fandoms consist of individuals who rework popular content into significant and intensely personal experiences (Fiske, 1992). Contrary to popular stigma, such individuals are not necessarily social outcasts. To have a complete fandom experience, fans must immerse themselves in the community surrounding their chosen content area(s). These areas vary endlessly and are increasing in cultural significance as technology continues to connect people from around the world (Soukup, 2006).

Such connections are often as culturally relevant to their members as any other culture to which those members might belong. Core individuals within such groups must know, analyze, and appreciate the official texts or *canon* in various media (books, film, etc.) (Fiske, 1992). Such individuals regard those who use this information for their own benefit to be disingenuous regarding the content in question (Coleman, 1988). According to these purist consumers, individuals should seek to “enhance or enrich the appreciation of the work,” and those who utilize canonical knowledge for personal gain are not “true” fans (Fiske, 1992, p. 43).

Media purists believe that true fans are completely altruistic in their efforts to share and discuss the object of their fandom (Coleman, 1988; Fiske, 1992). Most websites created by fans (often purists themselves) yield little financial profit for their operators, who seek only to provide a mutually beneficial gathering place for like-minded individuals (Soukup, 2006). One of the unique things about the *Harry Potter* fandom is

that it often crosses traditional cultural barriers (age, gender, race, class, etc.) with unprecedented ease (Blake, 2002; Fiske 1992).

### **Controversies**

Despite its seemingly universal appeal, *Harry Potter* has its share of naysayers. One of the primary objections is that the books are too dark and intense for children. (Interestingly, it is only the books that have raised controversy; one must wonder why, since “visual images have a much greater capacity to frighten children than do the word portrayals in books” [Taub & Servaty, 2003, p. 62], the film adaptations have not drawn similar negative attention.) However, child development research has shown that discussions about dark topics such as death—a prominent theme in *Harry Potter*—is healthy for children (Taub & Servaty, 2003). Harry’s unprecedented popularity may even suggest that children are drawn to such topics (Grimes, 2002). This is because as children read about how Harry deals with his burdens, they may be able to relate to him and thereby feel more comfortable discussing similar problems in reality (Natov, 2002). In other words, seeing darker topics represented in popular books may “help children face and understand the truths of their world” (Grimes, 2002, p. 91).

Another cause for protest toward the boy wizard’s tale is *cultural infantilism*. Adults are losing sense of what truly makes a classic because they read *Harry Potter* for themselves instead of reading the series to their children (Safire, 2000). Those arguing for cultural infantilism believe that adults are only reading the series “for nostalgic

escapism, an unexamined and naïve sense of ‘pleasure,’ or because they are following some kind of trend” (Barfield, 2005, p. 180). These types of critics fail to recognize the universal relatability of the *Harry Potter* universe. Adults and children alike are drawn to this particular story because the characters deal with many of the same issues that the readers themselves face (Blake, 2002).

*Harry Potter* is also often challenged on the grounds that “the books portray magic as harmless, fun, or good and...may encourage children to dabble in the occult” (Taub & Servaty, 2003, p. 55). Not only that, but Harry’s often-blatant disregard for rules and authority may promote a mindset of non-accountability in which people only have to answer to themselves (Gemmill & Nexon, 2006). The books, however, are not how-to manuals for witchcraft (Blake, 2002), nor do they purport that magic solves everything. For instance, soon after telling Harry that he is a wizard, Rubeus Hagrid—the half-giant groundskeeper at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry—explains that wizards keep to themselves because Muggles (non-magical people) would “be wantin’ magic solutions to their problems” (Stone, 1998, p. 65). Also, heroes and villains alike can do magic (Prince, 2005), further supporting the assertion that the *Harry Potter* magic is merely a storytelling device (Taub & Servaty, 2003) through which Harry displays courage, loyalty, compassion, and other virtues (Wandless, 2005).

Some critics of Pottermania have chalked the hysteria up to marketing and media hype (Blake, 2002) and would therefore die down upon the series’ conclusion. Scholars

(often fans themselves) have counteracted this cynical perspective. Rebecca Borah (2002) suggested that fans of varying demographics (which variance is a factor in itself) not only read the Harry Potter canon multiple times but also interpret what they find and discuss these interpretations with other fans. Why do these fans exhibit such behaviors? Phrased another way, why does Pottermania even exist? Surprisingly, this question has yet to be answered by scholarly research. This thesis seeks to fill that gap.

## Literature Review

Fandoms have been around for decades, with the term first being coined to describe sports enthusiasts and avid theatergoers. In modern phraseology, fandom refers to a specific area of interest within the larger arena of nerd culture, “a field generated by a set of practices and situated within a larger space of lifestyles” (Woo, 2012, p. 661). Nerd culture, of which the *Harry Potter* phenomenon is a part, came about as a third option to the perennial Science vs. Humanities debate, built from the technology of science and the personal meaning of the humanities (Kelly, 1998). With television shows with “nerdy” characters gaining more and more popularity (i.e., *The Big Bang Theory*), nerds are under the pop culture microscope more than ever. They are often misconstrued as undesirable social outcasts even though the realities of nerd culture are far more complex than the stereotypes (Kendall, 1999; Woo, 2012).

### Nerd Culture

The term “nerd,” typically directed toward young men, often has negative connotations. Lori Kendall (2011) delineated two types of nerds, one bad and one good, each of which has a unique effect on those around them. “The bad nerd— asocial, bitter, too smart for his own good— might cause harm. The good nerd— lacking in social skills but still friendly, willing to use his intelligence to help others— just needs a little ‘dating advice’” (p. 511). These stereotypes are still relevant to current nerd culture, but they have recently been reworked to encapsulate a particular lifestyle (Woo, 2012).



The regular practices of modern nerd culture are among the most significant aspects of nerds' lives. Individual nerds have formed a community of information producers and consumers (Kelly, 1998). The strength of such communities is knowledge-based with a direct correlation between knowledge depth and community strength (Woo, 2012). Such communities have increasing opportunities to explain, express, and communicate with each other and those around them—extending not only their global ingroup but also their cultural outgroup reach—in large part because of new technology (Kelly, 1998).

New technology does not repeat itself as mindlessly as it seems (Livingston, 1993). Nerds in particular use technology in increasingly innovative ways and are therefore “central to how contemporary American culture understands media audiences” (Stanfill, 2013, p. 130). Conventions like San Diego Comic Con are infiltrating mainstream culture more completely each year, solidifying fandom's role as a primary media consumption method (Harrington et al., 2011). Although nearly everyone in modern society is a fan of something, there are certain ingroup practices that delineate different levels of devotion (Stanfill, 2013). The production facilities behind the somethings to which individuals are devoted contribute to such delineations on occasion. In a *New York Times* interview in 2002, Jim Ward (then-Vice President of Marketing for Lucasfilm, the studio behind *Star Wars*) said of fan-produced content:

We've been very clear all along where we draw the line. We love our fans. We want them to have fun. But if in fact someone is using our characters to create a story unto itself, that's not in the spirit of what we think fandom is about.

Fandom is about celebrating the story the way it is. (Harmon, 2002, p. AR28)

By that logic, true fans only display their fandom through institutionally-sanctioned channels. Such attitudes are clearly ignorant of what the actual fans know and believe about their own cultural practices (Murray, 2004).

Individuals in today's world are most likely fans of something in pop culture, and that can be anything from comic books to music to science fiction to sports. Regardless of the object of their attention, all of these groups have one commonality between them: they identify as fans. Although the stigmatized fan is an isolated social outcast, research shows that "fan culture [is] common, active, social, and participatory" (Plante, Roberts, Reysen, & Gerbasi, 2014, p. 49). Fandoms arise because like-minded individuals reach out to one another to express appreciation for beloved content in various ways (Stanfill, 2013). These expressions, which ebb and flow throughout a fan's life, are chock full of opportunities for a full range of emotional experiences (Harrington et al., 2011) that can have significant impact on a fan's identity (Plante et al., 2014).

There are two primary methods for channeling emotional fandom experiences: accruing knowledge and acquiring collectibles. Knowledge is based on "canon" or official texts. Displaying this knowledge most often takes the form of injecting

references into everyday conversation or wearing referential clothing. Collectibles vary in economic and cultural value, with primary emphasis on the latter; greater cultural value means higher quality (Woo, 2012). These methods hinge upon a singular notion, namely that “text and reader are interdependent, mutually conceived, [and] joint constructors of meaning” (Livingston, 1993, p. 7). Such a notion is having a direct effect on the future of fandom. Marketing directors and other communications professionals recognize the importance of fandom and its effects on how media content is presented around the world (Harrington et al., 2011).

Depending on the genre of the text in question (Livingston, 1993), engaging with media is routine for fans across the world (Plante et al., 2014). Because of the egalitarian nature of fandoms, increasing engagement increases what Mel Stanfill (2013) called the “burden of intelligibility”:

To be something, to be understood, means doing so on the terms of its culturally assigned meaning. In the case of fans, membership in the category brings with it a meaning of nonnormativity that fans have to find some way to bear. (p. 129)

This means that in order to be a true fan, an individual must learn to operate outside generally accepted social norms—not just those within the fandom—while actively attempting to distance themselves from negative stereotypes.

Stigmatized associations with nerd culture and fandom increase hesitation in fans who might otherwise attend conventions and participate in fan clubs (Jindra, 1994),

associations many people ignore in order to more fully engage with their chosen fandom (Plante et al., 2014). Nerds of various devotion levels “gather in homes, store, community halls and hotel ballrooms...to share their interests with others. Taken together, these spaces and events compose a milieu within which participants can access various resources and opportunities to pursue the cultural practices” they find enjoyable (Woo, 2012, p. 663).

Sometimes, these practices are condemned by the institutions responsible for producing the content—as with the case with *Star Wars* and Lucasfilm mentioned previously—but some creators celebrate the practices. Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, is a particularly vocal proponent of all types of fan activities. News Corporation, the corporate right holder for *Buffy*, has not alienated fans by publicly condemning Whedon for this endorsement while striving to distance itself from such a relaxed handling of intellectual property. Organizations like News Corporation should recognize the economic importance of fan activities upon which they typically frown. New Line Cinema, the studio behind the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, merged the two approaches when marketing its tent-pole films. New Line actively sought out the most ardent fans in order to engage them and thereby build a strong foundation for the studio’s marketing strategies. The rapidity and enthusiasm with which the fans took to this approach—and the resulting financial success of the film franchise—is a testament to fandom’s true power (Murray, 2004).

Media commentators have recently observed that fandom is increasingly accepted by society at large and that negative stigmatizations are beginning to disappear (Woo, 2012; Stanfill, 2013). Academic research reinforces this conclusion, noting that “fandom may be the dominant mode of consumption in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Harrington et al., 2011, p. 578). As such, scholars are investigating pop culture in ways historically reserved for higher culture (Livingston, 1993). These investigations contradict what fans feel, which is that fandom in general is not as mainstream as scholars and professional communicators seem to think (Stanfill, 2013). The normalization of fandom is evidence of media flexibility as opposed to increased societal acceptance (Harrington et al., 2011).

### **Fandom Research**

The great majority of fan research looks at fandom after it has been formed. However, “it is also important to consider how such a community and the subjects in it come to exist in the first place” (Stanfill, 2013, p. 121). Michael Jindra (1994) took this approach when studying the *Star Trek* phenomenon, as did Stanfill (2013) when studying *Xena: Warrior Princess*.

***Star Trek* and Trekkies.** When Jindra’s research was published in 1994, no other pop culture phenomenon had “shown the depth and breadth of ‘creations’ or ‘productions’ ...that *Star Trek* has, both officially and unofficially” (p. 28). There are many different explanations for this popularity: timeliness, family friendliness, and a

sense of family among characters. Academics have looked into these as well as the conflicts between masculine and feminine traits displayed by different characters, as well as the classic “nature vs. nurture” present in character development. Because of its unique place in pop culture, scholars began to examine Trekkies themselves.

Jindra (1994) chose to use online resources because of the opportunities afforded ethnographers, “for these on-line services contain discussion groups for a variety of popular and specialized topics” (p. 30) that would provide unique insight into the *Star Trek* fandom. These electronic links facilitated fans discussions where lifestyle and mobility might inhibit such conversations normally. The discussions consisted of fans taking the original content and reworking it for their own purposes. Fans suspended their disbeliefs as they discussed a variety of topics as though they themselves were part of the *Star Trek* world.

Although fans participated in the online forums enthusiastically, many of them claimed to not be hardcore Trekkies, a label that carries a significant amount of negative stigma even among fans. Eighty percent of fans polled at a convention agreed that fans occasionally take their devotion to *Star Trek* too far, blurring the lines between fiction and reality and forgoing basic necessities in lieu of paraphernalia. At the end of the day, *Star Trek* fans of all devotion levels “want to be respected and understood, and want their devotion to be recognized as legitimate” (Jindra, 1994, p. 48).

*Xena: Warrior Princess and fandom.* Much like Trekkies, fans of *Xena: Warrior Princess* take great pride in loving their content, despite being categorized as social misfits. While interviewing these fans, Stanfill (2013) noticed that ingroup stereotyping is just as common as outgroup stereotyping and is oftentimes even more judgmental. “There is a sense among *Xena* fans that...being too invested and buying too many things that have to do with the show, or the wrong things, is suspect” (p. 126).

There are two forms of ingroup stereotyping amongst *Xena* fans: deviant behavior and social ineptitude. In this case, deviant behavior is defined as placing too much emotional value or cultural stock in the show. On the mild end of the spectrum, fans overindulge on learning as much as possible about the show, the characters, the actors, etc. The more extreme deviant behavior entails fans’ obsession blurring the lines between fantasy and reality, “which leads to connotations of insanity and lack of behavioral and affective boundaries” (p. 124). Social ineptitude is not a new concept when it comes to stereotypes about fans. What makes it unique in the *Xena* situation is that fans accused fellow fans of “substituting imaginary relationships with stars or characters for the real relationships they lack” (p. 124).

While Stanfill acknowledged that these findings are not statistically significant in a scientific sense, they do have a great amount of social significance. Although the interviewees were *Xena* fans, many of them ascribed to other fandoms as well (as fans

often do). This “potentially provides insight into a broader cross-section of Internet fandom and its relationships to non-fan culture” (p. 122).

### **Pottermania**

The *Harry Potter* series is appealing to people of various ages, cultural backgrounds, and socioeconomic status who are loyal to the Boy Who Lived. The series is not successful just because of the story’s depth (which will be discussed later) but also because of its timely release. Born in the early years of the Internet age, *Harry Potter* is not only culturally significant but also financially significant for AOL Time Warner, the parent company responsible for the films’ productions. When AOL and Time Warner merged in January 2000, executives used *Harry Potter* “as a test case for the grand synergy claims volubly promoted by TW’s then senior management” (Murray, 2004, p. 15), meaning that the films’ success would have ramifications for the business world as well as the pop culture realm.

Warner Bros. initially took a hands-on approach when it came to halting unofficial fan activities, distributing cease-and-desist letters to many fan websites. This caused a veritable tidal wave of negative responses from fans around the world, displaying “an extraordinary misreading of fan psychology” (Murray, 2004, p. 16). When executives realized their mistake, they halted legal action against fan websites and allowed Potterheads the freedom to express their fanaticism in online forums and other public venues.



Like other pop culture phenomena, *Harry Potter* has impacted the everyday lives of its fans. In one tragic example, Cassidy Stay, sole survivor of a shooting that left her parents and four siblings dead, quoted the *Azkaban* film at a public memorial for her family: “Happiness can be found even in the darkest of times if one only remembers to turn on the light” (Botelho, 2014). There has also been a whole other side to the *Harry Potter* industry, with the upcoming *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* films, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, and J.K. Rowling publishing new stories on her Pottermore website helping to fill out the *Harry Potter* world.

Before delving into questions about the *why* of Pottermania, we must first examine the *what*. After all, one must examine the foundation of a fandom in order to understand the fans themselves (Livingston, 1993). Firstly, Pottermania could not exist if not for the depth of content present in the *Harry Potter* books (Longster, 2005). Doing adequate justice to such content is beyond the scope and objective of this thesis, so I will focus on three major themes throughout the series: agency and personal responsibility, the power of love in the fight of good versus evil, and family dynamics.

### **Agency and Personal Responsibility**

“It is our choices...that show who we truly are, far more than our abilities” (Chamber, 1999, p. 333). As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, the *Harry Potter* saga follows the hero’s journey paradigm, but it is also a coming-of-age story. As the story progresses, Harry becomes more aware of his skills and, because of his status as

The Chosen One (*Prince*, 2005), his responsibility to the wizarding community to vanquish the evil Lord Voldemort (Narov, 2002). Harry never asked for the fame and responsibilities placed upon him, and he often doesn't want them at all (cf. *Goblet*, 2000, p. 290; *Order*, 2003, p. 824; *Hallows*, 2007, p. 718). Near the end of *Hallows*, Harry has a choice to die or to return to the living from his out-of-body experience in order to "ensure that fewer souls are maimed, fewer families are torn apart" (p. 722). In other words, Harry becomes The Chosen One not because of a prophecy made shortly before his birth (*Order*, 2003) but by personal choice, revealing more about who he is than the dark events of his past (*Wandless*, 2005).

Despite these noble choices, Harry is not perfect (Grimes, 2002). Because he didn't learn that he was a wizard until age 11 (*Stone*, 1998), his expectations of the magical realm are misguided, and his solutions are not always on target (Garver, 2010). Even Harry's enemies attribute his survival to their own errors (*Hallows*, 2007, p. 6), "sheer luck and more talented friends" (*Prince*, 2005, p. 31) rather than to his own skill.

Harry's two primary "more talented friends" — Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger — face choices of their own. During the Sorting Ceremony (which will be explained in further detail in the Results section of this thesis), Hermione is placed into Gryffindor House because she wanted to be there, despite the fact that her personality is more suited to Ravenclaw (*Stone*, 1998, p. 106; *Order*, 2003, p. 399). Ron, too, makes difficult decisions. In *Stone*, he chooses to sacrifice himself to help Harry achieve his

goal (p. 283). In *Hallows*, however, Ron abandons Harry and Hermione in the middle of nowhere (p. 310). But after several weeks, he finally swallows his pride and rejoins them on their quest to destroy Lord Voldemort for good (p. 370). Although Hermione and Ron use their agency in offering Harry support (*Stone*, 1998; *Prince*, 2005), they rarely give Harry explicit instructions other than when he asks them to do so (Wandless, 2005; Blake, 2002). With the wizarding world on his shoulders, “Harry must fight the demons himself” (Grimes, 2002, p. 101).

### **Love Conquers All**

One of the main themes of the *Harry Potter* series is that love is “a force that is at once more wonderful and more terrible than death, than human intelligence, than forces of nature” (*Order*, 2003, p. 843). To believe in such goodness, it is necessary to believe in evil as well (Gemmill & Nexon, 2006). Because Lord Voldemort has never known love and is so evil, he constantly underestimates the power of love (*Order*, 2003). Love protects Harry from evil on numerous occasions throughout the saga. One of the key pieces of background information is that Lily (Harry’s mother) chose to stand in the way when Lord Voldemort tried to kill baby Harry, ultimately sacrificing herself in the hope of saving her infant son. This love left Harry with a powerful protection that “lives in [his] very skin” (*Stone*, 1998, p. 299) and saves him yet again when Lord Voldemort tries to steal the Sorcerer’s Stone. Harry’s love for his father, James, is most evident when Harry’s Patronus—a physical manifestation of a positive inner force—takes the

form of a stag (the animal into which James could morph at will) and drives soul-sucking dementors away (*Azkaban*, 1999).

When Harry fights Lord Voldemort in *Goblet*—meeting face-to-face for the first time since Harry’s infancy—ghostly echoes of Harry’s parents provide their son with encouragement and protection as he battles for his life. A year later, Lord Voldemort attempts to possess Harry in the Ministry of Magic but “could not bear to reside in a body so full of the force he detests” (*Order*, 2003, p. 844). In *Prince*, Harry and Dumbledore discuss that Harry’s love for his long-dead family allows him to resist the Dark Side despite Harry’s unique ability to see Voldemort’s thoughts, “a gift any Death Eater [Voldemort follower] would kill to have” (p. 511). It is this same love that gives Harry the strength and courage to walk toward certain death, come back to life, and ultimately vanquish Lord Voldemort forever (*Hallows*, 2007).

Each of these instances shows that Harry could not have survived (or even taken) his chosen path without the hope of love to sustain him (Natov, 2002). Although he suffers so much in his youth, it is in the power of love that Harry “ultimately finds hope for a new and better home” (Kornfeld & Porthro, 2009, p. 135).

### **Family Dynamics**

In many respects, Harry Potter is a high-risk youth. Firstly, he is an orphan, and on top of that, his guardian family is abusive. Petunia, Vernon, and Dudley Dursley (sister, brother-in-law, and nephew to Lily) epitomize the wicked stepfamily dynamic

present in so many fairy tales (Longster, 2005). Much like the protagonists of those stories, Harry has known only loneliness, persecution, and repression of his true identity at the Dursleys' hands (Grimes, 2002). Even before his introduction to the wizarding world, Harry's "dearest wish is to escape from [the] petty, claustrophobic environment" (Blake, 2002, p. 26) that is living with the Dursleys. This unstable home life is detrimental to Harry's mental health (Kornfeld & Porthro, 2009; Wilks, 1986), and home stability is essential for a healthy mental state (especially for high-risk youth like Harry) (Wilks, 1986; Ungar, 2004).

Despite his rough upbringing, Harry finally learns what home can mean after his first year at Hogwarts, when he forms a quasi-family unit with Ron and Hermione (Kornfeld & Porthro, 2009). Although this Trio works together and save one another's lives on numerous occasions, Ron's and Hermione's capacities "to guide, correct, and restrain Harry is extremely limited" (Wandless, 2005, p. 230). Such guidance, correction, and restraint often come from parents, a relationship Harry has never fully experienced.

Harry often grieves the relationships he never had with his dead parents (Taub & Servaty, 2003). Frequent remarks about his athletic gifts inherited from his father and his vivid green eyes from his mother remind Harry of his connections to them (Kornfeld & Porthro, 2009), thereby giving him uniquely strong power in surmounting obstacles. And although Harry's biological parents are gone, he is not without parental figures.

In *Azkaban*, Harry meets two of James' friends from his own days at Hogwarts: Sirius Black and Remus Lupin. Sirius Black is James' childhood best friend, best man at James and Lily's wedding, and Harry's godfather. Throughout *Azkaban*, *Goblet*, and *Order*, Harry comes to "regard Sirius as a mixture of father and brother" (*Order*, 2003, p. 831), two relationships foreign to Harry. His relationship with Sirius further reinforces links to the Potters for both of them, forming yet another pseudo-family unit Harry thought had been stolen from him. In the climactic Ministry of Magic battle at the end of *Order*, Sirius dies at Harry's side while fighting Death Eaters, repeating the theme of parental abandonment (Grimes, 2002).

Remus Lupin is yet another of James' closest friends. At first, Harry knows Remus as one of his professors, but he learns in *Azkaban* that Remus was there for much of James' and Sirius' troublemaking-antics during their Hogwarts days. Remus adds yet another link to the connection between Harry and his parents, particularly when Remus names Harry godfather to his son (*Hallows*, 2007). Tragically, Remus is killed during the Battle at Hogwarts. However, when Harry walks into the Forbidden Forest to face Voldemort for what he believes is the final time, Remus's ghost joins that of Sirius, James, and Lily to offer words of encouragement and support to Harry (*Hallows*, 2007). This echoes what Dumbledore tells Harry at the end of *Azkaban*, that the ones we love never truly leave us (p. 427).

Harry's struggles with familial stability and parental abandonment are not present in the lives of his contemporaries (Wandless, 2005). While at Hogwarts, other characters keep in touch with their families still at home (a practice that increases in frequency upon public acceptance of Lord Voldemort's return [*Prince*, 2005]). For instance, Ron's family (the Weasleys) characterizes "the 1950s family: the lunch-preparing mother at home, several children at work or school, and the father, a middle-rank, underpaid, hard-working civil servant" (Blake, 2002, p. 65). As the sixth of seven children and the youngest son, Ron often struggles against the standards and expectations set by his older siblings and parents (*Stone*, 1998). His willingness to assist Harry in rule-breaking likely stems from his older twin brothers' mischievousness and his father's taboo obsession with non-magical paraphernalia (Garver, 2010). Although the Weasleys are not perfect, they are always there for each other, particularly in times of trial (cf. *Order*, 2003, p. 476-477; *Hallows*, 2007, p. 605-606, 736).

It is not just Harry and Ron whose family dynamics are illustrated throughout the series. Draco Malfoy, the Trio's nemesis at Hogwarts, is a perfect replica of his father, Lucius. Draco is not only *physically* Lucius-in-miniature (*Chamber*, 1999), but his "arrogance, condescension, and ability to finesse rules for his own benefit are clearly inherited traits" (Wandless, 2005, p. 231). Despite this, Draco is loved and valued by his parents above all else, including their allegiance to Lord Voldemort (Kornfeld & Porthro, 2009). Draco's mother, Narcissa, even goes so far as to lie to Lord Voldemort

about Harry being dead in order to ascertain if Draco is alive; later, she and Lucius actually abandon the battle at Hogwarts to ensure their son's safety (*Hallows*, 2007).

Harry's lack of a peaceful family life does not last forever. An unknown number of years after Lord Voldemort's final downfall, he marries Ginny Weasley—Ron's younger sister and Harry's teenage sweetheart—and settles into a "safe, predictable, loving unit that he had been seeking ever since his parents died" (Kornfeld & Porthro, 2009, p. 135). One of the most popular literary characters of all time finally got the normal, peaceful life he'd always longed for and previously never truly had.

Harry Potter represents many things as a character: the power of agency, the might of love in the fight against evil, the importance of good family and friends, perseverance in the face of danger, and so much more. As Grimes (2002) said:

Harry Potter is...the Everyman or Everywoman we all know is inside us, whether we are six, sixteen, or sixty, the Everyman who knows he is special, that great things lie in store for him which others do not yet recognize. We are that boy in the cupboard under the stairs just waiting for our letter from Hogwarts, just waiting for Hagrid to come and take us from the humdrum and unjust Dursleys to an exciting, magical world in which our unique heroism allows us to...look evil full in the face, and win. (p. 122)

It is to Harry, then, that fans look as a source of comfort, hope, and inspiration as they try to make sense of and find their places in the world.



Why do fans continue such practices, despite the conclusion of both the book and film franchises? Why do Potterheads (self-assigned nickname for hardcore fans) become wrapped up in a story that deals with “many of the anxieties in our changing political and cultural world” (Blake, 2002, p. 4) on such an intensely personal level? This phenomenon is best examined through five theoretical lenses: Escapism, Mood Management, Parasocial Relationships, Identification, and Social Capital.

### **Escapism**

Escapism is defined as any activity—media usage, in this case—that provides an individual with mental liberation when they feel uncomfortable or unable to deal with their problems (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004; Hirschman, 1983). Indeed, this may be seen as one of the central functions of the mass media: to provide a “dream-like world...that, once entered, [can] fulfill wishes and dreams for those who believe in them while using the media” (Vorderer et al., 2004, p. 399). Wish and dream fulfillment often come about when consumers become emotionally involved in the story, paying such close attention to the details that they lose track of reality (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010).

Escapist narratives often exist in a world parallel to our own. The characters in that world have conventional attitudes but unconventional methods of conveying those attitudes (Longster, 2005). Particularly when created for children, popular literature—e.g., *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *The Lord of the Rings*—often takes place in a world entirely separate from common reality (Natov, 2002), for such is the fantasy

writer's primary task (King, 2000). Because individuals partake of such narratives knowing this, they are able to forgive the protagonist of their story for any fantastical venue that protagonist might be in (Vorderer et al., 2004). (Perhaps this is because they know, at least subconsciously, that magical worlds are in many ways more real than daily life [Kornfeld & Porthro, 2009].) Such reality departures, especially if coupled with attitudinally-similar characters (Cohen, 2001), often lead to *transportation*.

Transportation occurs when "the fictional takes precedence over the actual as the actor becomes identified with the fictional role in the magic of the theatre...[where] the worlds of fact and fiction meet" (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215-216). An individual in such a state has lost awareness of being apart from the message and is swept into a different world (Potter, 2009), focusing on a fictional world instead of their own reality (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). This different world consists of the protagonist's thoughts and feelings (as well as physiological manifestations thereof [Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010]) as described by the storyteller (Cohen, 2001).

Safire (2000) stated that transportation is the ultimate objective of reading, "to learn about characters, explore different ideas and enter other minds" (para. 8). Research has shown positive correlations between transportation and perceived realism, a known factor of media enjoyment (Vorderer et al., 2004; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). The more one enjoys the media, the greater capacity for individuals to regulate their mood states (Hirschman, 1983).

## Mood Management

The emotional dimensions of pop culture (and media in general) used to be “rather neglected...in the context of the preoccupation with the unconscious pleasure of spectatorship” (Stacey, 1994, p. 122). Mood management theory (MMT) states that any activity, particularly consuming entertaining media messages, can affect one’s mood (Zillmann, 1988). Underpinning this theory is the idea that individuals want to eliminate negative emotions, maintain positive emotions, or at least reduce or maintain the intensity thereof (respectively). However, one of the key components of MMT is the allowance for cerebral *and* intuitive choices. In other words, individuals do not necessarily have to be cognizant of their choices.

Within that framework, MMT has four basic assumptions: excitatory potential, absorption potential, semantic affinity, and hedonic valence. Excitatory potential is the power an activity has to either arouse or calm us. Absorption potential is the ability of media content to distract us away from negative thoughts. Semantic affinity is how well a person’s mood aligns with the media they choose; a higher level of semantic affinity means a closer alignment. Hedonic valence is a media message’s capacity to intensify any particular mood; positive media messages produce more positive emotions, and negative message produce more negative emotions (Zillmann, 1988).

Those four assumptions form the foundation for a variety of scholarly studies on the different factors affecting people’s decisions of how and when to use the media. For

instance, Meadowcroft Zillmann (1987) studied the entertainment choices of women during the premenstrual and menstrual phases (typically the most physically and emotionally noxious times) of the menstrual cycle. They noted that since women are unable to release dysphoric feelings on their source, they search for “alternative strategies for alleviating noxious moods” (p. 207). Previous research showed such trends as stressed people tending to choose relaxing media, bored people choosing exciting fare, etc. Based on these findings, Meadowcroft and Zillmann (1987) hypothesized that premenstrual and menstruating women would choose humorous content due to its “capability of cutting into undesirable experiential states...and of replacing noxious moods with pleasant, relaxed ones” (p. 206).

More than a decade later, Knobloch and Zillmann (2002) conducted a study on how people manage their moods using music (having been made so readily available with technologies such as iTunes and the iPod). Their results suggested that “annoyed persons are drawn...to complex stimulation because such stimulation holds greater promise than alternative forms of distracting them effectively from their aversive experience” (p. 353).

Several years later, Knobloch-Westerwick (2007) conducted another study on her own, focusing on gender differences in mood management. She hypothesized that men prefer “media content with high absorption potential” (p. 80) after mood-impacting experiences. She also thought that women would choose “media content with low

absorption potential” (p. 80) even as related activities approach. Experimental testing procedures supported these hypotheses, showing that men tend to distract themselves out of bad moods whereas women tend to ruminate.

These three studies show that a variety of factors—from physical wellbeing to gender to the particular medium—influence the efficacy of mood management techniques. Such varying factors are all based on the same assumption: people choose certain activities and media messages for their ability to alter an undesired emotional state (Hirschman, 1983).

### **Parasocial Relationships**

Parasocial relationships began as parasocial interactions (the one-sided, imaginary affiliations between performers or characters and their audiences) (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Perse & Rubin, 1989). These affiliations consist not only of interaction, but also of identification with, personal interest in, wanting to emulate, and knowing the characteristics of the media personalities (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005). These elements are a natural consequence of media consumption (Perse & Rubin, 1989) and are essential to the media experience (Cohen, 1997). Those elements lead consumers to become more involved with their media choices, shifting from enjoying a particular mediated world superficially to wanting to enter that world (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). This is more likely to occur when parasocial interactions

resemble interpersonal interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Perse & Rubin, 1989), which leads such interactions to develop into fully-fledged relationships.

Like all relationships, parasocial relationships fulfill particular needs, the most central of which is the need for interaction. Fellow human beings and media often work together to satisfy this need (Perse & Rubin, 1989), but when interaction opportunities are not available in one's social environment, media provide situations to fill the void (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Another need more specific than general interaction is the need for attachment. This need serves to provide a secure base of intimacy from which further relational exploration can take place (Cohen, 1997; Bartholomew, 1990).

Parasocial relationships often seem meaningless or even occult to those outside of them (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This is perhaps because reciprocity is not necessary in naturally one-sided mediated connections (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Horton & Wohl, 1956). However, the individuals inside those relationships find great satisfaction and understanding therein, leading them to form parasocial relationships.

The viewer's personal construct system—that which allows individuals to make sense of the world—and personality are two of the great influences into how parasocial relationships are formed and experienced (Perse & Rubin, 1989). Some individuals may form these connections to serve intimacy or attachment purposes, which others may see them as a type of idol worship or friendship (Cohen, 1997). Regardless of personal construct system or personality, all people in parasocial relationships make those

connections by familiarizing themselves with the performer by “interpreting the appearance, attitude, style and behavior of [that] performer” (Eyal & Rubin, 2003, p. 81). In other words, viewers come to know the performer (and the character) just like they know their real friends.

“A media personality is a *perfect* friend—dependable, discreet, and uncritical” (Perse & Rubin, 1989, p. 61, emphasis added). This friendship is fostered by various factors, including but not limited to effective use of the medium, frequent and consistent performance, and character personality (including realism [Rubin & McHugh, 1987]). Perhaps the most salient factor for parasocial relationship formation—on the performer’s side—is character reliability (Rubin et al., 1985). As noted earlier when discussing interpersonal relationships, stronger bonds are formed when people are predictable and/or reliable. Parasocially speaking, character reliability is often rewarded with fan loyalty (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Horton & Wohl, 1956).

Such fan loyalty is likely to increase over time and thereby deepen the parasocial relationship. However, personality and time are not the only factors in developing these relationships (Turner, 1993). Identification—perceiving a character as similar to oneself—also contributes to the formation thereof (Rubin et al., 1985), which sometimes extends to the point of wanting to emulate the attitudes and behaviors of the character in question (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; Cohen, 2001; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005).

## Identification

Scholars operationalize identification in a variety of ways. Cohen (2001) said that identification occurs when “the knowledge of the audience members is processed from the character’s perspective and is transformed into empathic emotion” (p. 251). In other words, consumers put themselves in the character’s shoes and thereby feel empathy (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957), even if such feelings are fleeting (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010; Cohen, 2001). Other scholars see Identification as the way in which consumers feel about the stories they choose and how those stories help the consumers deal with their own lives (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). This is further defined by stating that identification is a temporary experience of the individual consumer’s imagination in which that consumer temporarily views the world through the character’s eyes (Cohen, 2001).

Seeing the world through someone else’s eyes—whether fictional or real—transforms a person’s identity. This transformation “is not only a self-forgetfulness, but is also generative of fantasy selves: a pleasure in the fluidity between experienced and imagined selves” (Stacey, 1994, p. 121). It can also vary from moment to moment depending on the absorption level of the individual consumer (Maccoby & Wilson, 1957). Rather than being absorbed in the story itself, individuals focus on a specific character (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). The key to true Identification is consumers forgoing their real identity and taking on that of their chosen character, allowing consumers “to



experience social reality from other perspectives” and thereby shape “the development of self-identity and social attitudes” (Cohen, 2001, p. 246).

Identification primarily takes place during exposure to a media message (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010) while consumers are seeing a world parallel to their own “peopled with beings exotic in appearance but unsettlingly familiar in action and motivation” (Longster, 2005, p. 109). Many media consumption habits are ritualistic, such as reading a book before heading to bed or watching a favorite weekly television program. Charles Soukup (2006) suggests that because consumption is ritualistic, identification is ritualistic as well. Identification is therefore not only a regular part of media consumption but is influenced by perceived realism (Cohen, 2001).

Some scholars see Identification as the way consumers feel about the stories they choose and how those stories help the consumers deal with their own lives (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). Other scholars further refine this definition by stating that Identification is a temporary experience of the individual consumer’s imagination in which that consumer temporarily views the world through the character’s eyes (Cohen, 2001). Participants cycle through dealing with the characters’ problems before returning to their lives outside of whatever material they consume (Blake, 2002). Once audience members are thus engaged (Soukup, 2006), individuals get those within their social circles to consume similar messages.

## Social Capital

Coleman (1988) stated that Social Capital is “a variety of different entities...[that] facilitate certain actions of actors” (p. S98) within a given social structure, combining resources “to produce...different outcomes for individuals” (p. S101). The social core of human beings necessitates reserves of such an asset, formed over time through interpersonal interactions between members of that structure (Ji et al., 2010). Social Capital contributes to individuals’ identity, which helps them negotiate the obstacles of life successfully (Côté & Levine, 2002; Coleman, 1988). This is particularly important for teenagers and young adults (Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006), a crucial demographic for many media outlets.

Teenagers and young adults frequently discuss favorite musicians, television shows, actors, movies, etc. in person and online (Soukup, 2006). Those who contribute to these discussions in meaningful ways have greater social capital and experience a higher quality of life (Fleras, 2009). It is this very thing—this social interaction—that draws people toward the content they consume (Fiske, 1992). Accruing this social capital sometimes requires economic capital, but those with limited financial assets are able to use other means (i.e., public libraries) to contribute to their social resources (Borah, 2002; cf. Coleman, 1988).

Because we live in an information-saturated age, those seeking to grow their social capital reserves must discriminate between the messages they consume and those

they ignore, knowing that their media choices contribute to or even preclude typical social experiences (Fiske, 1992). However, ethnographic research shows that knowledge of a certain celebrity or content area can “develop into an involvement in a social network or community of shared values” (Soukup, 2006, p. 321). When this social network knows about and appreciates content, events, and performers to a heightened or excessive degree (Fiske, 1992), it becomes a fandom.

### **Harry Potter and the Communications Theories: Part 1**

The Harry Potter phenomenon fits these theories well. “Harry Potter books work with almost every group of people old enough to read” (Grimes, 2002, p. 90).

Regardless of the demographic(s) to which they belong, the difference between ordinary *Harry Potter* fans and Potterheads is not the degree to which they enjoy the content but what they do with that enjoyment (Fiske, 1992). While many people enjoy the books and/or movies and give the content not much further thought, Potterheads create an endless variety of content: web sites, artwork, theme parties, etc. (Borah, 2002).

Barfield (2005) noted that the books “are more nostalgic and escapist than other similar works” (p. 179). Although the Potterverse is fantastical in some regards—Harry, Ron, Hermione, etc. *are* wizards—it “is far less distant and more familiar, closely allied with the real world we live in” (Barfield, 2005, p. 184; cf. Natov, 2002). This is proven throughout the series as Harry deals with insecurity about his place in the wizarding

world, school performance, romantic relationships, loss of loved ones, and other very realistic problems (Barfield, 2005; Garver, 2010; Natov, 2002).

This realism, although taking place in a fictional setting, reflects the way contemporary society feels about personal responsibility, family dynamics, good vs. evil, etc. (Blake, 2002). It may be argued that such “playing with the boundary between fantasy and reality” is what attracts people to Harry’s story in the first place (Taub & Servaty, 2003, p. 60; cf. Grimes, 2002). Individuals throughout the world thus welcomed him with open arms and embraced his story as a means of (briefly) escaping their own, less magical lives (Blake, 2002; Barfield, 2005).

When being interviewed for the United Kingdom’s 1999 Reader of the Year Award, a young Harry Potter fan was asked why he enjoyed the books so much. He responded, “Because it puts you in a different world and cheers you up when you’re sad” (cf. Blake, 2002, pp. 32–34). This may stem from the fact that Harry often feels powerless, a clear source of identification for children and adults alike (Barfield, 2005).

Another major reason people enjoy revisiting *Harry Potter* is the relationships they form with the characters. Longster (2005) mentioned her desire to marry Fred and George Weasley (Ron’s older twin brothers) if she were single, younger, and if Fred and George were real. In my personal experience and observations, other people form similar attachments to those and other characters.

“Identification, both with the object of fandom...and the community of fans, is central to the experience of fandom” (Soukup, 2006, p. 322). In the Potterverse, consumers see and vicariously experience Harry’s journey toward greatness, starting with his new beginning at Hogwarts (Grimes, 2002). Such experiences lead individuals to the knowledge that even in a magical setting, Harry is a normal person (Blake, 2002). His world is no different than ours regarding the physical and emotional struggles that Harry and his contemporaries experience (Grimes, 2002; Garver, 2010).

People do not discover the realism of Harry’s world on their own. As has been mentioned previously in this thesis, *Harry Potter* is so rich in detail that it is best enjoyed in groups (Borah, 2002). This type of social capital can benefit those who accrue it and should therefore be utilized to the greatest extent possible (Coleman, 1988). Potterheads have used this capital to create websites, organize international conventions, and throw midnight release parties for the books and movies. They derive as much pleasure out of these social capital investments as they do from the original content (Soukup, 2006).

These theoretical applications are evidence that “*Harry Potter*...possesses riches yet to be harvested and harnessed” (Wandless, 2005, p. 239). Several of these riches have previously been discussed in this thesis: the magical setting of *Harry Potter* is a perfect candidate for escapism. This escapism has mood management capabilities as fans join the characters on their adventures (emotional and physical). As these individuals revisit *Harry Potter*, they form parasocial relationships with the characters.

These are strengthened as fans see themselves in the characters. Such connections lead to various events in which fans bond with one another.

As the books, movies, and other merchandise have spread across the globe, scholars have examined the content from many different angles (cf. Barfield, 2005; Blake, 2002; Borah, 2002; Garver, 2010; Longster, 2005; Wandless, 2005). Despite this scholarly attention, the literature on the *Harry Potter* fans and fandom is shockingly sparse (Livingston, 1993). Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) suggested that “focusing on a specific set of characters” (p. 345) could fill this research gap. Using Pottermania for such purposes, the present research focused on the answers to the following questions:

RQ1— What types of people are drawn to *Harry Potter*?

RQ2— To what aspects of *Harry Potter* are people most often attracted?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to research one group of people, the group to which these questions are most relevant: Potterheads. Because the research questions are so broad, Q Methodology will be used to determine the strongest reasons for fans’ attachment to Harry Potter—as a story, as a character, as a sociocultural phenomenon.

## Method

### Q Methodology

Stephenson (1935) is credited as pioneering Q Methodology, pulling together the greatest strengths of quantitative methods (scientifically objective measurement techniques) and qualitative research, such as participants' individual viewpoints (Brown, 1996). He noticed that the scientists disregarded this latter point and were thereby limiting the scope of human behavior that could be studied (Popovich, n.d.). In other words, social science research data has little meaning unless it explains not just the *what* of human behavior but the *why*. Dr. Noel W. Smith said:

All systems, regardless of what they claim they are studying, can only study actual events. They cannot study minds, selves, processing, brain powers, instincts, drives, or consciousness. And Q taps into events of human subjective behavior that can *actually* be studied. (Popovich, n.d.)

Dr. Smith said that research subjects' individual personalities are overlooked by quantitative measures, and it is this individuality that "engages the attention of the qualitative researcher interested in more than just life measured by the pound" (Brown, 1996, 561–562).

Such attention is particularly useful in cultural studies, which often neglect to examine how ideologies and practices that define a culture affect individuals within that culture. The self-referent procedures that constitute Q Methodology fill this gap

(Brenner, Aucoin, & Xiaoming, 1998). Researchers using this methodology can discover how individuals use their personal tastes (an important aspect of personality) to maximize the utility of their choices (Stephenson, 1935).

Not only does Q Methodology examine the individuals' tastes, but also compares culturally-similar individuals with one another, further illuminating intracultural connections through procedures specifically designed for such research (Davis & Michelle, 2011). Controlled Q Method techniques illustrate subjectivity in objective ways so as to compare individuals with one another (Robbins, 2005). Such individuals will have specific preferences, and not everyone within a particular group will agree on such things (Davis & Michelle, 2011). However, "if significant correlations appear, they could be factorized. It might then be possible to describe as separate tastes any unitary factors that emerge, to determine their range, and to measure individuals for them" (Stephenson, 1935, p. 21). These unitary factors illustrate how emergent themes relate to one another instead of showing the themes themselves (Watts & Stenner, 2005).

Q Methodology has strengths aside from its usefulness in cultural studies and intra-group comparison. By its very nature, Q Methodology doesn't bring pre-existing notions into the research. Instead of dividing research subjects into groups beforehand, Q procedures identify relevant groups based on the individuals' real attitudes (as seen by their responses to the Q-set and post hoc interview questions) (Davis & Michelle, 2011; Robbins, 2005). While theories can—and should—influence the types of



statements included in the Q-set (which will be explained in greater detail later in this thesis), the research subjects themselves decide which theories are most meaningful in relation to the research questions of interest (Watts & Stenner, 2005). This reveals “subjective structures, attitudes, and perspectives from the standpoint of the person or persons being observed” (Brown, 1996, p. 565) in objective ways. This revelatory process involves several distinct steps.

### **Q Method Procedures**

The first step in Q Methodology is to *determine the subjectivity domain*. By definition, the subjectivity domain is the research arena the scholar wishes to explore. According to Robbins (2005), this subjectivity must be communicable and operant. If subjectivity is communicable, the individual in question is self-aware regarding their opinions and behaviors and is able to explain those opinions and behaviors to others. When subjectivity is operant, the individual actually expresses their views on a particular subject and weaves “opinions on individual matters...as a coherent whole” (Robbins, 2005, p. 210). In order to determine the subjectivity domain, then, the scholar must make sure that their chosen research arena matters to people in a variety of expressible ways.

Once the subjectivity domain is determined, the researcher must *formulate the research question*. A researcher must discover the type of question(s) that hone in on what is most relevant and which research participants can answer subjectively (Davis &

Michelle, 2011), making sure to account for the entire subjectivity domain (Robbins, 2005). While research questions and/or hypotheses anchor all academic research, they are especially important to Q methods because the research question “dictates the nature and structure of the Q-set to be generated. It will also act as a ‘condition of instruction’ for the participants, and will hence guide the sorting process” (both of which will be explained later in this thesis) (Watts & Stenner, 2005, p. 75).

Formulated research questions can guide the researcher as they *generate the Q-set*, or write the statements to be sorted by the participants (the type and quantity of which depend on the purpose of the study (Robbins, 2005)). These statements need to represent the entire subjectivity domain or “cover the concourse.” This coverage can come from a variety of sources: scholarly articles, popular materials such as blog posts, interviews with experts, and other types of literature (Watts & Stenner, 2005; Brown, 1996). The concourse is covered when the statements begin to repeat or no new information on the topic can be found. When this occurs, the statements are pared down into the final Q-set (Robbins, 2005). There are two Q-set formats: unstructured and structured. In an unstructured Q-set, researchers randomly select statements from the concourse. A structured Q-set, on the other hand, “reflects categories the researcher apprehends in the concourse or which is based on prior theory” or “provides an explicit link to theory” (Davis & Michelle, 2011, p. 567, 568). Regardless of the format in which it

is designed, a proper Q-set will illustrate subjective viewpoints among the group of interest to the research (Watts & Stenner, 2005).

After creating the Q-set, researchers must *select the respondents* who will participate in the study. This step in the Q process frequently brings the methodology into question as the sample sizes are relatively small, usually between 20 and 60 participants (Davis & Michelle, 2011). However, Q studies examine “highly complex and socially contested concepts and subject matters from the view of the group of participants involved” (Watts & Stenner, 2005, p. 70), not population characteristics. Q studies are thereby exempt from the generalizability standards typically required for other methodologies (Robbins, 2005). In fact, strategic sampling is often used in Q studies because such techniques often elicit illustrative in-group opinions (Watts & Stenner, 2005).

Selected respondents proceed to *rank-order the Q-set*. Researchers give these respondents specific guidelines to follow known as the “conditions of instruction” (Davis & Michelle, 2011; Robbins, 2005). Ideally, no two Q-sorts will be exactly the same, just as no two participants are exactly the same. Each respondent, shaped by the world around them and the in-group of study to which they belong, will complete the sort “according to some...valid and subjective criterion” (Watts & Stenner, 2005, p. 69; cf. Davis & Michelle, 2011).

After completing the Q-sort, respondents *comment in open-ended interviews* (Robbins, 2005). "Since only a few individuals at a time need be examined, it should be possible to enter into great details to find out still more" about why participants made their particular Q-sort choices (Stephenson, 1935, p. 23). The open-ended interview is crucial to gathering information that supports the results of the Q-sort alone by illuminating subjectivity within the research domain (Watts & Stenner, 2005).

Once all the Q-sorts and interviews are completed, the next step is to *analyze the data*. This is typically done with a computer program such as PCQ or PQ Method. Different options within those software packages organize data in ways meaningful to Q research. The most important type of Q data is the Factor. Factors are "groups of respondents whose Q sorts are significantly similar to each other, and significantly different to those of other groups" (Davis & Michelle, 2011, p. 570). Each of these groups has a z-score array that shows which statements had the greatest impact on factor formation. Researchers can also find consensus statements (those statements which had no statistical significance and were generally agreed upon by all respondents).

The final step for a Q researcher is to *interpret the results*. This involves taking the data issued from the software and forming into a cohesive story, taking care to describe all of the factors individually and how they relate to one another (Watts & Stenner, 2005). It is important to note that Q Methodology does not seek for one objective "truth" but rather to subjective relativity within a specific group (Davis & Michelle, 2011).

Those specific groups (Factors) are the most important elements Q methodology.

Factors are “significant and empirically derived viewpoints that exist in the population” (Robbins, 2005, p. 213) and can therefore be considered as the main characters in the story. Cross-examining these results with the interview responses can shed even more light as to why particular factors exist (Davis & Michelle, 2011). Consensus statements tell us that Factors are not mutually exclusive, that some research subjects can belong to more than one Factor, showing even more complexity within the research arena (Robbins, 2005).

### **The Chosen One**

Q Methodology is the most appropriate for the area of interest relevant to this thesis: the *Harry Potter* phenomenon. There are many advantages to this methodological choice. Firstly, the primary purpose of Q is to gain understanding about “the relationship between subjective opinions/claims/understandings as they vary throughout populations” (Robbins, 2005, p. 209). Because *Harry Potter* is so globally popular, it is important to understand how fans differ regarding their reactions to the source material. By studying a sample of these fans, we can gain understanding into why Pottermania came into being and still exists long after Harry’s story has concluded in print and on screen.

Secondly, there can be little debate about Pottermania’s place as a worldwide culture. Each member of that culture—each Potterhead—serves as a connection

between the various *Harry Potter* media (which have been studied extensively) and that media's global audience (on which the academic literature is surprisingly bare). The outcome of each Potterhead's Q-sort would represent the underlying reasons for that individual's specific rank-ordering choices. Therefore, Q Methodology provides the most appropriate way to study how those individual participants feel about their beloved series (Brenner et al., 1998).

**Determine the subjectivity domain.** The subjectivity domain for this thesis is Pottermania, a highly subjective area because it deals with personal opinions about the *Harry Potter* series. (The novels were the main focus of this research as they are the original source material.) Potterheads are very much aware of their *Harry Potter*-related opinions and have no trouble expressing those opinions to others. Potterheads also acknowledge that Pottermania has greatly affected their lives for the better. These two phenomena fit the criteria Robbins (2005) set for a subjectivity domain: communicability and operation.

**Formulate the research question(s).** There are many communications theories with academic relevance to fandom experience. Delving into those theories illuminates connections between the principles underlying those theories and sociocultural phenomena. These connections helped create testable research questions that guided the rest of the research process.

**Generate the Q-set.** Scholarly articles on each of the theories discussed in the literature review—Escapism, Mood Management, Parasocial Relationships, Identification, and Social Capital—helped frame the Q-set. Statements also came from a variety of sources beyond scholarly articles: peer-edited books, popular nonfiction (fan forums, blogs, etc.), and the *Harry Potter* novels. Each of the theories was as equally represented as possible in the final Q-set of 48 statements (Escapism: 10, Mood Management: 9, Parasocial Relationships: 9, Identification: 10, Social Capital: 10) to counteract any remaining bias.

**Select the respondents.** Strategic sampling was used to find respondents, knowing that it would do little good to conduct research among those who are not Potterheads. As the Q-set consisted of 48 statements, a minimum of 47 respondents were selected for participation. Participants were gathered through social media, participant referrals, personal instant messages, text messages, and in-person requests.

**Rank-order the Q-set.** Each respondent was given the same conditions of instruction. They were instructed to sort the Q-statements from -4 (most strongly disagree) to +4 (most strongly agree) according to a diagram (see Appendix). Respondents living in distant areas of the United States participated via webcam, with the researcher reading each statement aloud and the respondent telling the researcher which category was most appropriate for that statement. If a particular category was full, each statement in that category was read aloud, and the respondent told the

researcher how to adjust the statements so as to accurately reflect personal opinions.

Once each category had the correct number of statements, the researcher read each category (most strongly disagree, less strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, agree, more strongly agree, most strongly agree) followed by the statements in that category, making any necessary adjustments along the way.

**Comment in open-ended interviews.** After rank-ordering the Q-set, respondents answered open-ended questions about why they became a *Harry Potter* fan, why *Harry Potter* is appealing to them, and which character is their favorite. These comments were then analyzed for statements that reflected the results of their Q-sorts.



## Results

It is appropriate to first mention the successful use of Q Methodology in this research. Where traditional research methods examine pre-existing attitudinal structures, Q Method focuses on discovering those structures. As Robbins (2005) put it, Q method is “therefore used to understand the relationship between subjective opinions/claims/understandings as they vary throughout populations” (p. 209). Such relationships were indeed discovered in the data-gathering process and are explained in the following paragraphs.

### **Welcome to Hogwarts**

In *Harry Potter*, before young wizards and witches begin their magical studies at Hogwarts, they participate in the Sorting Ceremony. One by one, students place an old wizard’s hat on their heads, and it places them into one of four Houses according to personality, intelligence, and other characteristics. In that spirit, Q-factor analysis of the 47 Potterheads yielded four attitudinal typologies or Factors: Relationship Experts, Happy Introverts, Identifying Isolationists, and Isolated Self-Regulators. These labels were chosen based on the communications theories underlying the statements with the highest frequency and average absolute value of (a) z-scores of each particular statement and (b) statements significant at  $p < .01$ .

## Consensus Statements

Four of the 48 statements in the Q-set were consensus statements. This means that the majority of the respondents agreed upon these statements regardless of the Factor to which they belong. Table 1 lists these statements along with the z-scores they received in each Factor. The most statement with the highest z-score is Item 34, which was based on Parasocial Relationships. With an average z-score of -1.693, it illustrates that the majority of the participants disagreed with the notion that the *Harry Potter* series does not have any characters worth admiring.

Item 1 (based on Escapism) had an average z-score of 1.678, meaning that participants across the board mostly agreed that their love of *Harry Potter* is partially due to becoming “fully engrossed in the story” while reading the books.

Table 1

*Consensus Items (by Factor Z-score)*

ITEM	DESCRIPTION	RE	HI	II	IS
1.	While reading <i>Harry Potter</i> , I become fully engrossed in the story.	1.55	1.89	1.92	1.35
3.	<i>Harry Potter</i> takes me into a different world.	1.06	1.00	0.95	1.43
10.	I like <i>Harry Potter</i> because I like the idea of a fantasy world.	0.61	0.78	0.23	1.10
34.	The <i>Harry Potter</i> series does not have any characters worth admiring.	-1.52	-1.83	-1.32	-2.10

Items 3 and 10 were also based on Escapism (with average z-scores of 1.110 and 0.680, respectively), confirming that immersion in the fantastical *Harry Potter* world plays a significant role in the sociocultural phenomenon the series has become. This is illustrated by the fact that Escapism influenced each Factor to some degree, which influence is detailed below.

### **Factor 1—Relationship Experts**

Sixteen of the 47 respondents fell into this category. Six of these significant statements—statements with a z-score greater than 1 or less than -1—referred to Relationship Experts' feelings about the *Harry Potter* characters (see Table 2). All such statements were ranked according to the attitude in which they were written (positive statements were rated positively, and negative statements were rated negatively).

The most defining statements in this category for Relationship Experts are Items 31 (“I could see myself being best friends with my favorite *Harry Potter* character”) and 39 (“I don’t care what happened to the *Harry Potter* characters after the series ended”). These specific statements illustrate how Relationship Experts feel about the characters.

Outside their experiences with *Harry Potter*, Relationship Experts love their interpersonal relationships and tend to be friendly individuals. They also love having time to themselves to vacate reality on occasion. They attribute loving *Harry Potter* to the story’s capacity for both of these personality facets.

Table 2

*Significant Items: Relationship Experts*

ITEM	DESCRIPTION	z-SCORE
37.	Finishing the <i>Harry Potter</i> series felt like saying goodbye to good friends.	1.714
1.	While reading <i>Harry Potter</i> , I become fully engrossed in the story.	1.546
38.	I love the characters in <i>Harry Potter</i> .	1.463
40.	Reading <i>Harry Potter</i> makes me happy.	1.440
23.	I enjoy <i>Harry Potter</i> discussions I have with friends and strangers alike.	1.213
41.	Reading <i>Harry Potter</i> was time consuming, but it was worth it.	1.081
3.	<i>Harry Potter</i> takes me into a different world.	1.056
13.	<i>Harry Potter</i> is fantasy because the characters could never be real.	-1.075
32.	I do not have a personal relationship with any <i>Harry Potter</i> character.	-1.116
16.	Some of the experiences Harry goes through are so unrealistic that they get silly.	-1.163
48.	Reading <i>Harry Potter</i> has never had an effect on my mood.	-1.195
30.	I could never see myself making friends with people just because they are <i>Harry Potter</i> fans.	-1.236
24.	I never initiate conversations about <i>Harry Potter</i> -related topics.	-1.328
17.	I didn't really care about getting to know the <i>Harry Potter</i> characters.	-1.359
34.	The <i>Harry Potter</i> series does not have any characters worth admiring.	-1.519
9.	I would never want the <i>Harry Potter</i> world to be real.	-1.546
5.	I do not enjoy being sucked into the magical world of <i>Harry Potter</i> .	-1.635
39.	I don't care what happened to the <i>Harry Potter</i> characters after the series ended.	-1.636

**Factor 2—Happy Introverts**

Twenty-one of the 47 participants were sorted in the second Factor: Happy Introverts. Statements referring to the social aspects of Pottermania were the most significant at  $p < .01$  and had the highest average absolute z-score. Interestingly, these two statements were placed inversely along the Disagree-Agree continuum (as were all but two such statements).

As seen in Table 3, Item 25 (“Other people had nothing to do with why I started reading *Harry Potter*”) had a positive z-score but a negative connotation and Item 23 (“I

enjoy *Harry Potter* discussions I have with friends and strangers alike”) had a negative z-score but a positive connotation. Only two similar statements were not ranked opposingly (neither of which were statistically significant): Items 27 (“I relate to people of all ages because of *Harry Potter*”) and 30 (“I could never see myself making friends with people just because they are *Harry Potter* fans”), which were only in slight agreement and neutral, respectively. Individuals within this group are therefore more likely to be less vocal about their love for *Harry Potter*.

Table 3

*Significant Items: Happy Introverts*

ITEM	DESCRIPTION	z-SCORE
1.	While reading <i>Harry Potter</i> , I become fully engrossed in the story.	1.888
44.	While reading <i>Harry Potter</i> , I found the events going on in the story changing how I was feeling in my own life.	1.627
25.	Other people had nothing to do with why I started reading <i>Harry Potter</i> .	1.602
46.	I never purposefully think about <i>Harry Potter</i> when I get upset to help myself feel better.	1.462
37.	Finishing the <i>Harry Potter</i> series felt like saying goodbye to good friends.	1.190
38.	I love the characters in <i>Harry Potter</i> .	1.170
2.	The <i>Harry Potter</i> world is nothing like my own reality.	1.077
12.	I empathize with my favorite <i>Harry Potter</i> character.	1.076
42.	I never read <i>Harry Potter</i> with the goal of putting myself in a good mood.	1.070
40.	Reading <i>Harry Potter</i> makes me happy.	1.031
43.	Reading about how Harry deals with his problems helps me handle my own personal issues.	-1.022
17.	I didn't really care about getting to know the <i>Harry Potter</i> characters.	-1.068
45.	The humor in <i>Harry Potter</i> didn't affect my enjoyment of the series.	-1.394
36.	I would never have friends like the characters in <i>Harry Potter</i> .	-1.442
5.	I do not enjoy being sucked into the magical world of <i>Harry Potter</i> .	-1.764
34.	The <i>Harry Potter</i> series does not have any characters worth admiring.	-1.829
23.	I enjoy <i>Harry Potter</i> discussions I have with friends and strangers alike.	-2.235

Happy Introverts regulate their moods on their own. They like to keep to themselves, and they often seek opportunities to get away from it all. They have a few close interpersonal relationships, and those relationships are cherished. They like *Harry Potter* because it helps them deal with reality by offering an escape and thereby has a positive effect on their moods.

### **Factor 3—Identifying Isolationists**

Only four of the 47 participants were grouped into this Factor. As seen in Table 4, Identifying Isolationists love *Harry Potter* because they relate to the characters. Participants positively rated two statements reflecting this—Item 14 (“I can relate to the struggles the characters go through in *Harry Potter*”) and Item 20 (“I experience the events in *Harry Potter* alongside all of the characters”)—and both are significant at  $p < .01$ , averaging  $z = 1.599$ . It is interesting to note also that even though not all statements based on Identification had statistical significance, all were sorted in accordance with the attitude in which they were written.

Identifying Isolationists are empathetic individuals, reserving their empathy primarily for those within their innermost social circle. They welcome chances to escape their real lives. They are not particularly social individuals, but their interpersonal relationships are very important to them. They are the most well rounded Potterheads, liking *Harry Potter* for their ability to connect to and form relationships with the

characters, the opportunity to vacate reality, the story's effect on their moods, and the out-of-book discussions the series generates.

Table 4

*Significant Items: Identifying Isolationists*

ITEM	DESCRIPTION	z-SCORE
1.	While reading <i>Harry Potter</i> , I become fully engrossed in the story.	1.917
20.	I experience the events in <i>Harry Potter</i> alongside all of the characters.	1.644
46.	I never purposefully think about <i>Harry Potter</i> when I get upset to help myself feel better.	1.611
14.	I can relate to the struggles the characters go through in <i>Harry Potter</i> .	1.553
38.	I love the characters in <i>Harry Potter</i> .	1.527
41.	Reading <i>Harry Potter</i> was time consuming, but it was worth it.	1.527
12.	I empathize with my favorite <i>Harry Potter</i> character.	1.416
30.	I could never see myself making friends with people just because they are <i>Harry Potter</i> fans.	1.288
37.	Finishing the <i>Harry Potter</i> series felt like saying goodbye to good friends.	1.159
9.	I would never want the <i>Harry Potter</i> world to be real.	1.086
11.	I do not understand how the characters in <i>Harry Potter</i> interpret what happens to them.	-1.078
25.	Other people had nothing to do with why I started reading <i>Harry Potter</i> .	-1.194
34.	The <i>Harry Potter</i> series does not have any characters worth admiring.	-1.323
27.	I find that I relate to people of all ages because of <i>Harry Potter</i> .	-1.348
17.	I didn't really care about getting to know the <i>Harry Potter</i> characters.	-1.442
21.	<i>Harry Potter</i> connects me to other people who would normally be complete strangers.	-1.474
7.	It is quite hard to imagine the settings in <i>Harry Potter</i> , because they are so unrealistic.	-1.612
36.	I would never have friends like the characters in <i>Harry Potter</i> .	-1.696

#### Factor 4—Isolated Self-regulators

This final Factor consists of four individuals who feel little to no interpersonal connections to the *Harry Potter* characters. This is evidenced by a negative statement

having the highest positive z-score (Item 32, "I do not have a personal relationship with any *Harry Potter* character,"  $z = 1.821$ ) and a positive statement having the next-to-lowest score (Item 35, "I became a *Harry Potter* fan because I formed a relationship with at least one of the characters,"  $z = -1.834$ ) (see Table 5).

Table 5

*Significant Items: Isolated Self-Regulators*

ITEM	DESCRIPTION	z-SCORE
32.	I do not have a personal relationship with any <i>Harry Potter</i> character.	1.821
40.	Reading <i>Harry Potter</i> makes me happy.	1.646
41.	Reading <i>Harry Potter</i> was time consuming, but it was worth it.	1.567
26.	I don't try to form social connections through my interest in <i>Harry Potter</i> .	1.442
3.	<i>Harry Potter</i> takes me into a different world.	1.427
46.	I never purposefully think about <i>Harry Potter</i> when I get upset to help myself feel better.	1.415
1.	While reading <i>Harry Potter</i> , I become fully engrossed in the story.	1.353
2.	The <i>Harry Potter</i> world is nothing like my own reality.	1.270
10.	I like <i>Harry Potter</i> because I like the idea of a fantasy world.	1.102
8.	The fantasy settings in <i>Harry Potter</i> can be a little overwhelming.	-1.052
29.	I feel a deep connection with fellow <i>Harry Potter</i> fans.	-1.096
12.	I empathize with my favorite <i>Harry Potter</i> character.	-1.211
31.	I could picture myself being the best friend of my favorite character in <i>Harry Potter</i> .	-1.572
5.	I do not enjoy being sucked into the magical world of <i>Harry Potter</i> .	-1.602
43.	Reading about how Harry deals with his problems helps me handle my own personal issues.	-1.664
35.	I became a <i>Harry Potter</i> fan because I formed a relationship with at least one of the characters.	-1.834
34.	The <i>Harry Potter</i> series does not have any characters worth admiring.	-2.103

These findings are also reflected in the lack of interview comments about interpersonal relationships with the characters. The most extremely ranked statement in



this Factor—Item 34 (“The *Harry Potter* series does not have any characters worth admiring”)—reflects that while Isolated Self-regulators don’t consider the *Harry Potter* characters to be their friends, they do acknowledge that some of those characters nonetheless have admirable qualities, qualities likely apparent in their own friends (cf. Item 36).

Isolated Self-regulators do not form interpersonal relationships easily, preferring to regulate their moods on their own instead of relying on friends or media to make them happy. However, they do enjoy the effect *Harry Potter* has on their emotional state. They find the story entertaining and therefore revisit Harry’s world time and again.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to answer two questions: What types of people are drawn to *Harry Potter*? To what aspects of *Harry Potter* are people most often attracted? The answers to these questions will not only address the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, but they also have applications to communications theory and society as a whole.

### Factor Analysis

**Relationship Experts.** These respondents were grouped by their affinity for Parasocial Relationships and Escapism. Relationship Experts were particularly concerned with what happened to the characters after the series ended (Item 39, Q-sort Value = -4). This extreme negative ranking indicates that the relationships formed with the *Harry Potter* characters are as valid to these participants as their relationships with people in the physical world. Items 37 and 38 are the only ones based on Parasocial Relationships with the highest possible Q-sort value.

- Item 37—Finishing the *Harry Potter* series felt like saying goodbye to good friends. (QSV = 4)
- Item 38—I love the characters in *Harry Potter*. (QSV = 4)

These high rankings, in addition to the other results previously discussed, show that these respondents value their relationships with the *Harry Potter* characters above any other benefits they derive from the series.

The majority of these participants, when asked about their favorite character, made comments about the worthwhile traits of that character. One participant said of Dobby the house elf, "I loved how much he was willing to sacrifice for his friend. I also liked his rebellious side, like he didn't want to conform with what a house elf was 'supposed' to be doing. I thought that was admirable." Ginny Weasley was a favorite character of another participant, who stated that "it is so easy to look up to her as a strong woman and role model." One of the Relationship Experts went so far as to say that they felt as if they "were sharing stories" with Harry. Yet another expressed a desire to stand up for the bespectacled protagonist, feeling that "he gets misunderstood." When speaking of Draco Malfoy, one participant spoke of admiration of the character's personal growth throughout the series: "Malfoy gets over the mean side and actually comes around to help Harry out...[He] was a child, but he grew up to take his own stand that fit his view. I'm really proud of him." These comments illuminate the strong bonds Relationship Experts feel with Harry Potter himself and with many other characters in the series.

Of the remaining 13 statements, four are linked to both Escapism and Social Capital. However, the Escapism statements were placed more extremely than the Social Capital statements ( $z = 1.446$  and  $z = 1.213$ , respectively) and are therefore more pertinent to how these individuals feel about *Harry Potter*. One participant went so far as to say, "*Harry Potter* helps me escape reality for a little while, which helps me deal

with reality better.” And although Social Capital was not rated as highly as Escapism, it is clearly important for these individuals. “Being a fan instantly connects you to complete strangers,” said one participant.

With these three categories playing clear and individual roles in these Potterheads’ enjoyment of their beloved series, one can reasonably deduce several things. Firstly, because these participants rated the statements based on Parasocial Relationships so highly, they are more likely to value the interpersonal relationships in their everyday lives. Secondly, although these participants place great stock in their relationships with friends and family, they also enjoy the occasional escape from reality (as evidenced by the highly-rated Escapism statements). And thirdly, because Social Capital was rated almost as highly as Escapism—and with equal frequency—Relationship Experts likely seek social connections through specific channels, and *Harry Potter* provides such a channel.

**Happy Introverts.** These participants did not become Potterheads because of other people, as evidenced by the oppositionally-rated Social Capital statements. One Happy Introvert said, “I didn’t initially start the books because other people had read them.” Another participant also enjoyed the fans’ craziness: “*Harry Potter* fans are very good at being crazy...in their own way.” Another fan enjoys having “something I can talk to a few people about, ” demonstrating that Happy Introverts enjoy connecting with other people who love the Boy Who Lived.

When asked about what made being a fan so enjoyable, one Happy Introvert said that they “liked all the stuff that came with it: going to the bookstore at midnight when the books came out, dressing up to go to the movie premieres, [and] seeing the craziness of other fans.” One participant said that *Harry Potter* “is always a jumping point for conversation, a good icebreaker for social interaction,” indicating that while *Harry Potter*-based social connection isn’t sought initially, Happy Introverts welcome it upon discovery.

More than one-third of the remaining statements—six out of 15—were based on Mood Management. These statements were ranked less extremely than Social Capital, but these middle-of-the-road rankings were more frequent than any other category. One participant remarked said, “I like having things that I really love, and *Harry Potter* is one of them. It makes me feel happy.” Yet another said that *Harry Potter* is “one of those things where you find comfort within the familiarity.”

Escapism also plays an important supporting role as to why Happy Introverts love *Harry Potter*. The statement held in highest agreement among these participants—Item 1 ( $z = 1.888$ )—was based on Escapism, as was one of the most disagreed-upon statements (Item 5,  $z = -1.764$ ). These findings suggest two primary things about Happy Introverts: (1) They read *Harry Potter* primarily for their enjoyment and don’t worry about the social ramifications, which they see as side effects of enjoying the books as opposed to reasons to jump on the bandwagon, and (2) they love *Harry Potter* because

of the positive effects the story has on their mood. Individuals in this Factor are more likely to enjoy time alone while still enjoying social interaction when they feel disposed to seek out such opportunities. These people know how, when, and with what they can keep themselves entertained and in a positive mood regardless of the actions of those around them.

**Identifying Isolationists.** Identification edged out Social Capital as the primary motivator for loving *Harry Potter* for Identifying Isolationists because the two most highly rated Identification statements—Items 14 ( $z = 1.553$ ) and 20 ( $z = 1.644$ )—had high Q-sort Values (QSV = 3 and QSV = 4, respectively). These findings are reflected in the following participant comment: “I find that the characters are relatable, that even in this world that is quite different than our own, the people are very real (often fighting the same battles that we are, just with more magic).”

One Identifying Isolationist went in depth about why Neville Longbottom—one of the Trio’s closest friends and a key player in the Battle at Hogwarts (*Hallows*, 2007)—is their favorite character:

I think of his story of growth throughout the entire series from where he begins (very much an outsider, fighting his own demons, etc.), and I can relate with that the most. Growing up as an outsider, I connected with him. Even though he wasn’t well-liked, he was good at what he did. He had a strong moral compass

that in the end led to him being one of the most important players in the series. It was what I related to the most, empathized with, and wanted to be like.

It is this ability to relate to various *Harry Potter* characters that keeps these participants returning for more.

Second only to Identification is Social Capital. Although these statements were rated as frequently as the Identification statements, they were rated inversely, meaning that participants rated negatively written statements in higher agreement and vice versa. (Items 25 and 27 were both significant at  $p < .01$ , averaging  $z = -1.271$ .) This means that although these participants did not become Potterheads for their peers, they clearly enjoy discussing the story with those peers. According to one participant, such discussions are “really the only purpose of being a fan.”

While Identification and Social Capital are the top theories behind this Factor’s love of *Harry Potter*, it is only by a slim margin. Escapism, Parasocial Relationships, and Mood Management all play supporting roles for these participants. Of those three categories, Escapism had the highest frequency and average z-score of  $p < .01$  statistically significant statements. (Such data are echoed in participant statements like “I like the epic tale of a world that is more intriguing than our own” and “within the confines [J.K. Rowling] established, you can really explore a different reality.”) Parasocial Relationships, too, clearly contribute to this factor, as those statements were the most frequently rated (five of 18). Mood Management came in last, with the number of

statements at just two, but those statements averaged out to  $z = 1.569$ , making it the most potent theory. These observations illustrate that while Luna Lovegoods may not be the most common Potterhead type, they are certainly the most well-rounded. Such well-roundedness is more likely present in their everyday lives, helping them enjoy a greater variety of people and activities than most other people.

**Isolated Self-regulators.** These respondents placed statements based on Parasocial Relationships further towards the ends of the Disagree-Agree spectrum. This finding is confirmed by the following statements, the only three based on Parasocial Relationships that were ranked in accordance with their connotation (or neutrally, in the case of Item 39).

- Item 34—The *Harry Potter* series does not have any characters worth admiring. (QSV = -4)
- Item 36—I would never have friends like the characters in *Harry Potter*. (QSV = -2)
- Item 39—I don't really care what happened to the *Harry Potter* characters after the series ended. (QSV= 0)

The most extremely ranked statement in this Factor—Item 34,  $z = -2.103$ —reflects that while Draco Malfoys don't consider the *Harry Potter* characters to be their friends, they do acknowledge that some of those characters nonetheless have admirable qualities, qualities likely apparent in their own friends (cf. Item 36).



The theory second-most prevalent for this Factor is Mood Management. (Happy Introverts also ranked Mood Management in second place, and that correlation will be discussed later on.) Individuals in this group place great importance on how reading *Harry Potter* makes them feel in the present as well as in past experiences. Participants made comments such as “It’s a fun story” and “It’s funny.” However, they don’t often purposefully think about the story to correct noxious moods (Item 46,  $z = 1.415$ ) or receive inspiration for dealing with their real-life problems (Item 43,  $z = -1.664$ ). This lack of deliberate choice is of little relevance because being cognizant of a medium’s effect on one’s mood is not necessary for theoretical credibility with Mood Management (Zillmann, 1988).

Also factoring into Isolated Self-regulators is, once again, Escapism. Six of the 17 significant statements in this Factor were based on this notion of enjoying *Harry Potter* because it takes [them] into a different world (Item 3,  $z = 1.427$ ). One participant specifically enjoyed the aspect of creating that world “in my head and having it function.” The only reason Escapism’s influence is not more prominent in this Factor is the relatively average  $z$ -score (1.301) and the lack of statistically significant statements. This and the previously discussed findings point to two main inferences about the traits of Isolated Self-regulators. First, they are less likely to form deep connections with fictional characters, preferring to use their emotional reserves on people existing in the

flesh. Second, their media choices may not always be deliberate, but such choices often have positive emotional effects.

**Comparing factors.** The purpose of Q Methodology is to find sets of like-minded individuals within larger groups. It is therefore expected that there will be similar approaches to the Q-sort. In this particular study, Isolated Self-Regulators stand out because their approach to Pottermania directly opposes theoretically-similar Factors.

**Versus Relationship Experts.** These two factors both attributed Parasocial Relationships as the primary reason for liking *Harry Potter*. However, they did so with opposite approaches.

Table 6

*Differences Between Isolated Self-regulators and Relationship Experts*

ITEM	DESCRIPTION: Parasocial Relationships	IS	QSV	RE	QSV	Difference	QSV
37.	Finishing the <i>Harry Potter</i> series felt like saying goodbye to good friends.	-0.737	4	1.714	-2	2.451	6
31.	I could see myself being best friends with my favorite <i>Harry Potter</i> character.	-1.572	1	0.659	-3	2.231	4
35.	I became a <i>Harry Potter</i> fan because I formed a relationship with at least one of the characters.	-1.834	0	0.301	-4	2.135	4
17.	I didn't really care about getting to know the <i>Harry Potter</i> characters.	-.0190	-3	-1.359	0	-1.169	3
39.	I don't really care what happened to the <i>Harry Potter</i> characters after the series ended.	0.078	-4	-1.636	0	-1.714	4
32.	I do not have a personal relationship with any <i>Harry Potter</i> character.	1.821	-2	-1.116	4	-2.937	6

While Relationship Experts place high value on the relationships with the *Harry Potter* characters, Isolated Self-regulators take the opposite approach by staying disconnected from the major players of the story and focusing on how the overall plot makes them feel. As seen in Table 6, the greatest difference is whether or not these participants have relationships with the characters at all.

*Versus Happy Introverts.* These two groups both rated Mood Management as the secondary factor for their Potterheadedness. However, Isolated Self-regulators took the opposite approach to the theory from Happy Introverts (though the differences are not as extreme as those between Isolated Self-regulators and Relationship Experts). Table 7 reinforces the notion put forth by the first comparison: two groups may be similar in theory but at total variance in practice.

Table 7

*Differences Between Isolated Self-regulators and Happy Introverts*

ITEM	DESCRIPTION: Mood Management	IS	QSV	HI	QSV	Difference	QSV
44.	While reading <i>Harry Potter</i> , I found the events going on in the story changing how I was feeling in my own life.	-0.704	0	1.627	-2	2.330	2
42.	I never read <i>Harry Potter</i> with the goal of putting myself in a good mood.	0.065	-1	1.070	0	1.005	1
41.	Reading <i>Harry Potter</i> was time consuming, but it was worth it.	1.567	3	-0.299	4	-1.866	1
45.	The humor in <i>Harry Potter</i> didn't affect my enjoyment of the series.	0.473	-1	-1.394	1	-1.867	3

## Where Pop Culture Meets Academic Literature

**Agency/personal responsibility meets Social Capital.** As discussed in the Literature Review, one of the major themes in *Harry Potter* is agency and personal responsibility. The saga chronicles how Harry makes difficult decisions based on what is right and best for the wizarding world as a whole, rarely choosing to do something just to make other people happy. This theme is most prevalent in Happy Introverts, the most populous of the four factors. Because they ranked Social Capital statements contrary to the attitude in which they were written, Happy Introverts clearly did not become *Harry Potter* fans just to please their friends and family. However, they embrace these connections once made even if they weren't sought out initially. They feel a personal responsibility to make good on their choices to love *Harry Potter*. This sentiment is most obviously seen in the numerous international conventions, websites, and even rock bands devoted to helping Potterheads around the globe find joy and social connection through their beloved series.

This finding builds upon previous research on fandoms by reinforcing the notion that a true fandom experience begins by turning popular content into personal experiences, experiences that have as much relevance to the members of that fandom as any other (Fiske, 1992). The cult following of the short-lived television series *Firefly* is yet another example of how Social Capital can keep the fandom embers glowing long after the flame of mainstream content goes out. *Firefly* was only on the air for three

months in late 2002, yet the stars of the futuristic space western continue to draw thousands of fans to pop culture conventions around the United States more than a decade after the show's cancellation. *The Princess Bride* is yet another example of this. It is one of the most well-known cult classic films, particularly from the 1980s, and is arguably one of the most quoted films of all time. Nearly three decades after it premiered, people who loved the film in childhood are introducing it to their children. These are but two examples of how what was once a geeks-only venue is now increasingly important to society at large.

Social media and the prevalence of superhero movies in the last decade have also contributed to the rise of the nerds. Once a fandom has been joined, new members feel it is their duty to share their beloved content with the world at large. It is clear, then, that while Social Capital may not start fandoms, it is the top reason why the fandoms live on long after the initial stories end.

**Love conquers all meets Parasocial Relationships.** One of the most popular morals in all storytelling, especially in fairy tales, is that true love conquers all. We see this in the *Harry Potter* story time and again: Lily lets Voldemort kill her before abandoning her infant son. Molly Weasley kills Bellatrix Lestrange (an extremely dangerous female Death Eater) in the final battle because Bellatrix attacked Molly's only daughter. Ron hears Hermione mention his name and is miraculously guided back to her. Sirius Black enters a government building full of his enemies to save his godson.

These strong relationships are most clearly present among Relationship Experts, who ranked their relationships with the characters as their top reason for revisiting the tale of the Boy Who Lived. While reading the books, or even watching the movies, these Potterheads care as much for Harry and his associates as they do those in the physically real world. As the second-most dominating Factor, this has significance not just for the fans but those seeking to create meaningful content.

J.K. Rowling herself has stated in numerous interviews that her famous saga started with Harry himself. A vision of a young orphan wizard walking along a train popped into her head, and the story grew from there. Another popular example of how characters can make or break a story is the long-lasting BBC series *Doctor Who*. Since its reboot in 2005, this series has captivated British audiences anew and has made a name for itself on the international television stage. The Doctor's vast knowledge, boundless charisma, and proclivity for saving the universe have Whovians (the *Doctor Who* equivalent of Potterheads) all over the world wanting more. It is the Doctor's traveling companions that evoke some of the stronger emotional responses among fans. One only has to take a cursory glance at social media to see what kind of debates still rage about which Doctor/companion partnership is best. This is but one of countless examples of how much people gravitate toward well-written characters, often seeing themselves reflected therein. If writers wish to create something meaningful, whether on screen or in print, they must begin with realistically interesting and well-rounded characters.

**Family dynamics meets Identification.** There are several varieties of families and pseudo-families talked about in the *Harry Potter* series. The Dursleys may seem stuffy and prejudiced, but they have a bond all their own. The Weasleys are the stereotypical large-and-loud-but-loving family with a mother who cares too much and a father who cares just enough. The Malfoys are selfish and snobby, but they have enough love to lie to Lord Voldemort for the purpose of saving each other. Harry has father figures in Dumbledore, Sirius, Lupin, and Arthur Weasley. All Potterheads relate with at least one of these dynamics on some level and often choose their favorite characters based on relatability to the family situation.

Other figures from pop culture are just as relatable as those found in *Harry Potter*. Ted Mosby, from *How I Met Your Mother*, went on an eight-year quest for the woman of his dreams. This television show was particularly popular in the key young adult demographic, many of whom experienced the rises and pitfalls of Ted's love life alongside him. Taylor Swift's music is globally popular because she often writes songs based on her life, lending a degree of authenticity to her words missing from the material of many other artists and making people love not just her music but her as a person. These are but two examples of how Identification has a vast impact on the popularity of media personalities, fictional or otherwise.

This category is closely tied to parasocial relationships. The distinction lies in the idea that it is possible to love a character with whom you have no similar traits.

However, Identification greatly supplements the formation of parasocial relationships in the same way that close friendships are more likely to form when true connections are made through common interests and ideas. It is therefore imperative that characters are not only interesting but also relatable if content is to be well received.

### **Harry Potter and the Communications Theories: Part 2**

**Escapism.** This theory influenced each Factor to some degree or another. Three of the four consensus statements were based on Escapism. The average z-score for all three statements across all four Factors is 1.043. The most positively rated statement addresses this finding directly:

- Item 1 – While reading *Harry Potter*, I become fully engrossed in the story.  
(average QSV = 3.75, average z = 1.678)

This consensus clearly illustrates how *Harry Potter* performs the central mass media function of offering a world of wish fulfillment for media consumers (Vorderer et al., 2004). A key component of this wish fulfillment is *Harry Potter's* unique capacity for transportation, a state of being in which consumers lose themselves in the fictional world of their choice. This validates *Harry Potter* as more than a flash-in-the-pan fad or media hype but as a true fantasy classic in the same league as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Even after Pottermania fades, the story around which it is based will stand the test of time because of its ability to take readers into a world parallel to but hidden from our own.



**Mood Management.** Two of the key components of Mood Management Theory are excitatory potential and absorption potential (Zillmann, 1988). Absorption potential is closely related to Escapism, which has already been shown to be a critical component of literary success, particularly for the fantasy genre. Therefore, the high absorption potential of *Harry Potter* greatly increases the likelihood that Potterheads seek it out for mood management purposes. Happy Introverts secondarily attributed their personal Pottermania to Mood Management. Even the most highly rated statement in this Factor—Item 1—speaks of *Harry Potter's* high absorption potential, even though it was based on Escapism. Therefore, *Harry Potter* became a global cultural staple because of its mood management capabilities. The more absorbing the content is, the greater capacity it has for managing consumers' moods and the more likely it is to become critically and commercially successful.

**Parasocial Relationships.** A famous adage states that no man is an island. Humans are naturally social creatures. Parasocial Relationships played the strongest role with Relationship Experts. This group truly cares about the *Harry Potter* characters as if such characters exist outside the books (and perhaps they do for this Factor), as evidenced by their consistently negative ranking of negatively-written statements:

- Item 32—I do not have a personal relationship with any *Harry Potter* character. (QSV = -2,  $z = -1.116$ )

- Item 34—The *Harry Potter* series does not have any characters worth admiring. (QSV = -3,  $z = -1.519$ )
- Item 39—I don't care what happened to the *Harry Potter* characters after the series ended. (QSV = -4,  $z = -1.636$ )

This adds to the literature on Parasocial Relationships insofar as it shows that popular fiction becomes so because of the interpersonal connections consumers form with the major players in that fiction.

Parasocial relationships can also fill psychological voids that some people lack. Some people may see consuming vast quantities of media as unhealthy, but for those consuming such media, the relationships they form with the characters serve the greater purpose of staving off feelings of loneliness (Derrick, Gabriel, & Tippin, 2008). The personal psychological benefits of such consumption cannot be overstated, so long as individuals do not neglect the relationships with those in the physical world. And those outside of the parasocial relationship should not rush to judge those who form attachments to fictional characters, who often are more real than people realize.

**Identification.** Many participants in this study chose their favorite *Harry Potter* character based on principles of identification: relatability, forgoing their own personality by seeing things through the character's eyes, and feeling sorry for the characters. This study adds to the academic literature on Identification by showing yet

another example of popular media taking over the world by having characters whose personalities reflect the personalities of those who consume such media.

**Social Capital.** Social Capital is an important aspect of human nature. The more of ourselves we give to the world, the more it gives back to us. Those Potterheads who actively participated in midnight book and movie releases have greater fondness for the series, as do those who continue to discuss the series even though the books have long since been published and the films long since premiered. According to the findings of this research, fandom does not begin with Social Capital, but the desire to form new connections and strengthen pre-existing relationships is what keeps fandoms going. Having venues through which Social Capital can be exchanged is therefore crucial to keeping fandoms alive and well.

## Conclusions

Of Q Methodology results, Stephenson (1935) said, “to extend the work, we could use the same series of [stimuli] to compare individuals from different social groups, from different professions and occupations” (p. 23). The results of this study could serve as a pilot study to further examine how theoretical attractors are present in current media. This thesis could also form the foundation for research into other current fandoms. These pockets of culture make significant contributions to fans’ identities, and those contributions merit further academic scrutiny.

The overall purpose of this thesis was to answer two questions: (1) What types of people are drawn to *Harry Potter*? (2) To what aspects of *Harry Potter* are people most often attracted? Q methodology procedures yielded four attitudinal typologies who answer these questions in different ways. The majority of academic research into *Harry Potter* focuses on the books’ content and not the fans themselves. In this manner, this research serves as a pilot study for the *Harry Potter* phenomenon as well as other sociocultural fandoms.

To address the first question, there are many types of people drawn to *Harry Potter*. Cedric Diggorys value their friends and other personal relationships, but they also love getting away from it all. *Harry Potter* provides both of these for them, as well as an avenue for social connection where they might otherwise struggle. The Weasley Twins act for themselves, independent of the opinions of others, and maintain a

cheerful attitude all the while. They like *Harry Potter* because *they* want to like it and because it makes them happy. Luna Lovegoods are the most well-rounded participants. Although these individuals identify and connect with those around them, they nonetheless enjoy getting away from it all. They also place great stock in their interpersonal relationships. Draco Malfoys place little value in the Social Capital gained from their love and knowledge of *Harry Potter*, but they keep returning because they like the way the series makes them feel.

Secondly, Escapism is one aspect of *Harry Potter* to which nearly all Potterheads are drawn regardless of personality. This theory was not primary in any of the four Factors, but it was secondary in one and tertiary in the other three. Furthermore, three of the four consensus statements were based on Escapism. It can therefore be concluded that this is the most generally appealing part of loving *Harry Potter*: having a magical world to which one can always escape.

Aside from new insight into Pottermania, two primary academic conclusions emerge from this research. Firstly, Escapism and Mood Management are closely related. Mood Management hinges on a media message's absorption potential. Escapism is any message that gives consumers temporary reprieve from everyday life, a definition closely resembling that of absorption potential (the capacity to engulf the consumer). More pop culture studies into this linkage could yield greater understanding of how society's increasing media consumption is affecting their overall mood states.

The second conclusion derived from this thesis is that Social Capital does not spark a fandom. While individuals may consume certain media at others' recommendation, they don't do it solely for the approval of those others. If someone finds the content enjoyable, they delve deeper into the culture surrounding it and participate in Social Capital exchanges. In other words, while Social Capital is not fandom's foundational principle, it is the currency by which fandoms stay culturally relevant to society as a whole. Fans return to content because there is always new insight to gain, new topics to discuss, and new analyses to make, and nowhere is this more readily available than Pottermania. In the words of J.K. Rowling herself, "Hogwarts will always be there to welcome you home."

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## Appendix

## Q-sort Statements

1. While reading *Harry Potter*, I become fully engrossed in the story.
2. The *Harry Potter* world is nothing like my own reality.
3. *Harry Potter* takes me into a different world.
4. I became a *Harry Potter* fan because the story helped me escape into a world different from my own.
5. I do not enjoy being sucked into the magical world of *Harry Potter*.
6. I like living vicariously through the *Harry Potter* characters.
7. It is difficult to imagine *Harry Potter* settings, because they are so unrealistic.
8. The fantasy settings in *Harry Potter* can be a little overwhelming.
9. I would never want the *Harry Potter* world to be real.
10. I like *Harry Potter* because I like the idea of a fantasy world.
11. I do not understand how the characters in *Harry Potter* interpret what happens to them.
12. I empathize with my favorite *Harry Potter* character.
13. *Harry Potter* is fantasy because the characters could never be real.
14. I can relate to the struggles the characters go through in *Harry Potter*.
15. I am a *Harry Potter* fan because I like the characters.
16. Some of the experiences Harry has are so unrealistic that they get silly.

17. I didn't really care about getting to know the *Harry Potter* characters.
18. There aren't many people who can relate to the *Harry Potter* story.
19. I find myself wanting to be like the characters in *Harry Potter*.
20. I experience the events in *Harry Potter* alongside all of the characters.
21. *Harry Potter* connects me to people who would otherwise be total strangers.
22. I don't understand why some of my family members and friends do not like *Harry Potter*.
23. I enjoy *Harry Potter* discussions I have with friends and strangers alike.
24. I never initiate conversations about *Harry Potter*-related topics.
25. Other people had nothing to do with why I started reading *Harry Potter*.
26. I don't try to form social connections through my interest in *Harry Potter*.
27. I find that I relate to people of all ages because of *Harry Potter*.
28. I like *Harry Potter* because it appeals to so many different types of people.
29. I feel a deep connection with fellow *Harry Potter* fans.
30. I could never see myself making friends with people just because they are *Harry Potter* fans.
31. I could see myself being the best friend of my favorite *Harry Potter* character.
32. I do not have a personal relationship with any *Harry Potter* character.
33. While I am reading *Harry Potter*, I find myself worrying about the characters.
34. The *Harry Potter* series does not have any characters worth admiring.



35. I became a *Harry Potter* fan because I formed a relationship with at least one of the characters.
36. I would never have friends like the characters in *Harry Potter*.
37. Finishing the *Harry Potter* series felt like saying goodbye to good friends.
38. I love the characters in *Harry Potter*.
39. I didn't really care what happened to the *Harry Potter* characters when the series ended.
40. Reading *Harry Potter* makes me happy.
41. Reading *Harry Potter* was time consuming, but it was worth it.
42. I never read *Harry Potter* with the goal of putting myself in a good mood.
43. Reading about how Harry deals with his problems helps me handle my own personal issues.
44. While reading *Harry Potter*, I found the events going on in the story changing how I was feeling in my own life.
45. The humor in *Harry Potter* didn't affect my enjoyment of the series.
46. I never purposefully think about *Harry Potter* when I get upset to help myself feel better.
47. Reading even just a few pages of any *Harry Potter* book makes me happy.
48. Reading *Harry Potter* has never had an effect on my mood.

Q-sort diagram

