The Impact of Popular Culture on the Social Identity of Young Adults: 
Harry Potter and the Search for Belonging

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*Go slitherin’!*

*Malfoy rules!*

*Gryffindor is an awful choice*

*Hi – I love harry potter! I have a broom and quittich googles and a wand. I would love to talk to you sometime!*
Abstract

Popular culture has provided consumers with symbols and tools to make sense of the world. Developmentally children’s literature specifically provides the bases for emotional and psychological growth. Studies connecting popular culture and social identity theory (SIT) have demonstrated that popular culture supports social identities, however, research has not explored how or if popular culture creates social identities. Using the Harry Potter books, due to their popular culture dominance during the youth of the millennial generation, this study investigated the lived experience of young adults who had read all of the Harry Potter series. The findings of this study emerged around the usage of the participants of the Harry Potter books to make connections to their own life and their peers, to identify and label themselves and those around them, and to use both the Harry Potter books and other popular culture artifacts to navigate their world. Implications and recommendations are discussed for educational and workplace settings filled with Harry Potter readers, the Harry Potter readers themselves, and for future research. In the classroom, workplace, or individually, the study recommends that knowing the Hogwarts House that someone identifies with can expose their perceived strengths and weaknesses, which is helpful in both individual and teamwork settings.

Keywords: popular culture, children’s literature, social identity theory, Harry Potter
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research

Problem of Practice

On the 20th anniversary of the release of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, the first book in the Harry Potter series, Rosenberg (2017) wrote in *The Washington Post* that this “means that an entire generation has come of age with J. K. Rowling’s seven-part ‘Harry Potter’ series, the movie adaptations, a play and various web iterations as one of their dominant cultural experiences” (2017). Examining the impact of this dominant popular culture artifact allows insight into both the members of this millennial generation and others who encounter and embrace this phenomenon. These insights may apply also to other important popular culture phenomena.

Narrative has long been recognized as not just a communication form, but also a way of making sense of the world (Bettelheim, 1976; Bolton, 2016; Gerrig, 1993; T. Heath & Heath, 2016; Olson, 1990; Rustin, 2016; Sanyal & Dasgupta, 2017). Culture and language establish the symbols and tools that individuals use to make meaning of their life and community (Bruner, 1990). This cultural pedagogy can come in many forms, including fictional narrative. The impact of storytelling and narrative has been well established through research (Bettelheim, 1976; Bolton, 2016; Das; 2016; Gerrig, 1993; T. Heath & Heath, 2016; Olson, 1990; Rustin, 2016; Sanyal & Dasgupta, 2017). Gerrig (1993) noted that not only do readers contribute their own experiences while consuming text, but also that text can then influence the real world. Children’s literature helps students make meaning of their lives. These age-appropriate developmental experiences can provide the emotional and psychological bases for growth among youth and adolescents (Bettelheim, 1976; Bolton, 2016; Das, 2016; Rustin, 2016; Sanyal & Dasgupta, 2017).
According to Bowman (2013), “culture has been theorized as pedagogy; in several languages and many contexts ‘culture’ and ‘education’ can be used interchangeably” (p. 601). Culture encompasses both high and low art; both are educational experiences, as even the low art of popular culture, known for its entertainment value, teaches as it entertains and entertains as it teaches (Weiner, 2001). Popular culture as a teaching tool is called cultural pedagogy, recognizing that popular culture does not merely reflect the world, it also has educational outcomes (Weiner, 2001). Fictitious characters can influence a student’s learning as much as a real person could, if the author’s presentation is just as colorful and well-rounded as a live interaction would be (Bolton, 2016; Das, 2016; Hall, 2003; Lively & Bromley, 1973; Rustin, 2016; Sanyal & Dasgupta, 2017). Consumers of popular culture use these emotional interactions to construct their personal identities (Duffett, 2013), as “they connect with reality in reading fantasy” (Das, 2016, p. 341). This developmental capability can be even stronger in adolescence, when a book, and more specifically the Harry Potter books, “can affect identity formation of the readers” (Bahn et al., 2017; p. 38).

According to social identity theory (SIT), social categories can be based on collectives or categories that are used by people when they are salient to the individual experience (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). While some social identity categories are fixed, such as age or generation for the millennials who grew up with the Harry Potter series, social identity can be useful for looking at the characteristics, expectations, and learning styles of different groups (T. Werth & Werth, 2011).

Previous studies on the effects of social identity on the selection of media entertainment have demonstrated that popular culture supports social identities. Nevertheless, social identity theory is “still a comparatively new social-psychological theory in terms of how often it has been
applied to problems and questions in media effects and entertainment research” (Trepte, 2006, p. 257). Furthermore, while studies have confirmed the role of media in reinforcing social identity messages (Harwood, 1999; Trepte, 2006; Trepte & Kramer, 2007), the creation of social identities through popular culture has not been studied as much, even though “social identity shapes the way we see the world” (Reynolds & Subasic, 2016, p. 348). Regarding the study of the Harry Potter books as a media artifact, Ras (2016) noted that “despite recognition of the very empirical nature of understanding the cultural relevance of the series, the analysis has usually been along the lines of textual critique of roles, motifs, and representations” (p. 344).

“The process of identity development represents the link between self and society” (Hammack, 2008, p. 224). This link can be as direct as those formed in intimate relationships, “such as parent-child, lovers, and friendships” (Brewer & Gardner, 1996, p. 83), or more diffused through a collective social identity that utilizes common exemplars (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). How individuals gain and use information about people, groups, and social events are forms of social cognition (Kosslyn & Kagan, 1981), “the process of representing knowledge about people and their relationships” (Nelson, 1981, p. 97). In social identity theory, knowledge classification and categorization form schema or prototypes that “cognitively segments and orders the social environment, providing the individual with a systematic means of defining others” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, pp. 20-21).

“Social identification provides a partial answer to the question, ‘Who am I?’” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21), recognizing that there can be many answers coming from many places. According to Hall (1996), identity is established through discourse that creates the “narrativization of the self” that is “partly constructed in fantasy” (p. 4), both the fictional and the psychological meanings of the word.
The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of the millennial readers of the Harry Potter books and how they respond to, relate to, and incorporate the lessons of the book into their thoughts on identity. By looking at a fictional popular culture phenomenon that began 20 years ago (Moore, 2017; Pippin, 2017; Rosenberg, 2017), at the height of the millennial generation’s childhood, this study investigated how that artifact shapes the social identity of the millennials who embraced it on such a large scale (Bahn et al., 2017; Stetka, 2014; Tucker, 1999; Vezzali et al., 2014). Furthermore, considering that over half of the consumers of books marketed to young adults are not in that age category (New Study, 2012), and the books and movies continue to be consumed today by the generation that followed the millennials, this popular culture artifact may have even wider implications.

**Statement of Significance**

Social identity theory requires categorization, which serves two functions:

First, it cognitively segments and orders the social environment, providing the individual with a systematic means of defining others…Second, social classification enables the individual to locate or define him- or herself in the social environment…Social identification therefore, is the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, pp. 20-21).

Forgas (1981) observed, “human knowledge is a social product” (p. 1). According to social cognition, the aggregating and categorizing of this knowledge allows the mind to apply its stored mental models to interpreting the world around it: the mind “never acts as if everything is new” (Feldman, Bruner, Renderer, & Spitzer, 1990, p. 81).

Popular culture is also a social process, a lived experience that is always unfinished and in development and dialogue (Dolby, 2003; Fiske, 1989a; P. Smith, 1989). Just as a person can
have many social identities, so too does popular culture have many definitions. With respect to youth culture, it primarily focuses on commercial entertainment (Hall & Whannel, 2006). Whether book, film, video, or song, all popular culture artifacts can be and are referred to as text for the purposes of this study and other research (Brennen, 2013; Brummett, 2006; Dolby, 2003; Duffett, 2013). These texts can both reflect and affect the societal environment of their consumers (Hermes, 2005; Rushing & Frentz, 1978). This cultural pedagogy enables both the acceptance and exclusion of ideas, norms, and meanings in society (Weiner, 2001).

Stories have always been an important way to express the human experience and communicate lessons of values and judgment (Cummins, 2007; Forster et al., 1999). Storytelling through media has allowed leadership and management educators to present examples that can more clearly define the ideas of the leadership, business, and management curriculum (Callahan & Rosser, 2007; Cummins, 2007; McMahon & Bramhall, 2004; Rajendran & Andrew, 2014; Scott & Weeks, 2015). Research, however, has concentrated on the use of stories and media as a learning tool in the classroom, more than on how exposure to texts outside of the classroom has established social identity. Current research on particular popular culture artifacts has primarily focused on the utilization of such artifacts in the curriculum (Harrington & Griffin, 1990; Rajendran & Andrew, 2014; Rosser, 2007; Scott & Weeks, 2015; Sprinkle & Urick, 2016) and not on how they may have influenced students before they entered the formal classroom environment. Furthermore, popular culture texts have been studied as a way of confirming identity messaging (Harwood, 1999; Trepte, 2006; Trepte & Kramer, 2007), rather than for the messages conveyed by the popular culture artifact itself. According to business ethicist Joseph L. Badaracco, Jr., “fiction can be as instructive about leadership and organizational behavior as any business textbook” (Couto, 2006, p. 48).
The fictional Harry Potter books have gained an unofficial entrée into the world of academia as “Harry Potter Studies” (Das, 2016, p. 341). While originally focusing on religious, ethical, and textual analysis (Das, 2016), recent scholarship has expanded into the books’ influence on millennials’ political and social opinions (Gierzynski & Eddy, 2013; Mutz, 2016; Vezzali, Stathi, Giovannini, Capozza, & Trifiletti, 2015). Classroom lesson plans have been developed around the movies (Rosser, 2007; Tucker, 1999). Only recently, however, have scholars examined the “real, lived accounts of young people’s experiences” (Das, 2016, p. 344). While a recent study of Harry Potter and identification exemplified textual analysis by demonstrating how the Sorting Hat, a tool used in the books to assign the students to their houses, played a role in “establishing the students’ identities” (Bahn et al., 2017, 38), that study referenced the characters in the books rather than the readers themselves.

By examining the widely read and viewed works of J. K. Rowling (Bahn et al., 2017; Stetka, 2014; Tucker, 1999; Vezzali et al., 2015), this study examined the connections that the readers themselves have made between the texts, the community of consumers of the texts, and their own social identity. It thus expanded on Bahn et al. (2017), by connecting both the books and the concept of social identity to what Das (2016) referred to as “real, lived accounts” (p. 344). This study provided insight into one of the social identities that millennials, as well as both younger and older readers of the books, may bring with them into the world and the workplace. These insights take the form of “biodata” or “life experiences that potentially categorize a person” that can be “easily collected during recruitment” and “could be quite helpful in hiring decisions” (Ashforth, 2016, p. 364). These life experiences may also be useful in the classroom for instructors looking for new ways to connect and interact with their students, beyond just including the books in lesson plans (Rosser, 2007; Tucker, 1999). Furthermore, readers
themselves may use knowledge about social identities gained from the books, to gain insight into the social identity that they have developed to categorize themselves and others.

**Positionality Statement**

In phenomenology, a researcher must recognize any biases surrounding the research questions (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008; J. A. Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Thus, it is necessary to examine the thought process behind this research. I gave my first leadership workshop as a state officer for a nationally recognized school club at a state convention as a senior in high school. My biggest takeaway from the experience was that the little things can have the greatest impact. I misspelled a word while writing on a flip chart; when called on the mistake, I noted that you do not have to spell to be a leader, you just have to be open to spell checkers. Later that day, a student from my high school who had attended my workshop before competing in an interview competition, told me about her experience. She was a recent immigrant from China, and English was her very new, second language. She told me that the knowledge that one did not have to spell everything correctly to be a leader, gave her confidence that she did not have to speak perfectly, to succeed in her own endeavor. This jump-started my recognition that education was often about making connections to students’ lives and experiences.

As an avid consumer of popular culture, including the Harry Potter books, I continued to try to make these connections, as I began to teach classes. For example, I showed clips from my own movie collection, to drive home points about group development and also to demonstrate leadership and identity development skills. Like many researchers, I recognized that storytelling and emotion in fantasy worlds, could help my students grasp difficult concepts (Callahan & Rosser, 2007; Cummins, 2007; McMahon & Bramhall, 2004).
Through my own experience and review of research, clearly there is a difference in how students experience a new media artifact versus one they are familiar with. I have attended many workshops and sessions at regional and national conferences for the American College Personnel Association (ACPA), Association of Leadership Educators (ALE), International Leadership Association (ILA), the Global Community for Academic Advising (NACADA), and Student Affairs Professionals in Higher Education (NASPA) that have dealt with incorporating popular culture into the classroom. These meetings rarely address the implicit knowledge that the artifacts have already conveyed to the students, or, in other words, the knowledge and expectations that students bring to the classroom and the workplace.

The Harry Potter books appear to be an ideal gateway into learning what implicit messages students have internalized based on their reading. More than 450 million copies of the Harry Potter books have been sold (Stetka, 2014) and eight blockbuster movies were released based on the novels. Harry Potter has been experienced around the world, in multiple languages (Vezzali et al., 2015) and it has been proven to affect attitudes and mindsets (Gierzynski & Eddy, 2013; Stetka, 2014; Vezzali et al., 2015). My question is: What impact have the messages that readers have internalized through entering the world of J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter already had on their attitudes and identity?

To even ask the question above betrays my main bias. I am a “scholar-fan” or “aca-fan” and need to confess this, for the fidelity of the research (Bennett, 2014). As a scholar-fan, an academic studying a subject I am a fan of, I must recognize that there are many reasons why some people have not read the Harry Potter books: for example, lack of interest, religious objections, or negative attitudes towards children’s literature. Even though so many have bought the books or seen the movies, I cannot assume everyone has. In my research I balanced the
information presented in my dissertation with recognition that some of the language and descriptors may be foreign to some of the readers of my work.

Furthermore, due to my academic interest in popular culture, I am comfortable using it as a medium for educational content. However, not everyone is an active popular culture consumer or recognizes its academic value. There are some who reject the influence of popular culture in their lives. Therefore, I needed to document the academic support for using popular culture as an academic medium.

I also need to establish that I am a white woman, which affects the lens through which I see the world. Further, five of the six women who participated in this study were also white, something I needed to be conscious of, for both the interviews that I had with those women versus the three other participants, as well as the way in which I interpreted the data from each of the interviews.

The bias that I hold that most affects my research is also a social identity: my age. I am a member of Generation X, as is the author of the Harry Potter books, J. K. Rowling (J. K. Rowling, 2014). However, the main audience of the books and movies, and those who have co-opted the language of Harry Potter into their lexicon the most, are Generations Y (millenials) and Z. Both of these generations also can be categorized as “digital natives” or the “virtual generation” (Black, 2010; Prensky, 2001; Prosperio & Gioia, 2007). While interviewing this group, I needed to concentrate in order to allow me to hear what they really had to say.

As with any research, when the question is asked, there is often an assumption of what the answer will be. While I did not know the answer ahead of time, I certainly hoped that it would coincide with my original thesis. To ask the question, is to expect that there will be identity derived from the messages in the Harry Potter books. In my research, I sought to
discover whether that assumption was mine alone, or found among the millennial consumers of
the Harry Potter books.

**Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of the millennial readers of
the Harry Potter books, particularly how they respond to, relate to, and incorporate the lessons of
the book into their thoughts on identity. The researcher used interpretative phenomenological
analysis to gather information from readers of this popular culture artifact. She asked them about
their lived experience both during the reading of the books and later in their daily lives, as well
as what they think of what they have read and its applicability. The researcher attempted to
determine whether the readers have adopted a social identity through the information presented
in the texts and how that is demonstrated in their lives. The research question guiding these
interviews was: How does the experience of reading the Harry Potter books affect the social
identity of millennial consumers?

**Theoretical Framework**

According to Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas (2008), “identity has become a popular
frame through which to investigate a wide array of phenomenon” (p. 5). Social identity theory
was established in social psychology, branching from the developmental psychology tradition
(Hammack, 2008) and has been a part of the expansion of identity research for at least 20 years
(Ashforth, 2016; Jenkins, 2008; Miscenko & Day, 2016). “Although originally an analysis
mainly of intergroup relations between large-scale categories,” current research utilizes “a strong
social cognitive emphasis” (Hogg, Abrams, Otten, & Hinkle, 2004, p. 246).

According to Hornsey (2008):
At the interpersonal end of the spectrum, people’s self-concept will mostly comprise attitudes, memories, behaviours, and emotions that define them as idiosyncratic individuals, distinct from other individuals. At the intergroup end of the spectrum, self-concept will mostly comprise one’s “social identity,” defined as those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from social categories to which he/she belongs, as well as the emotional and evaluative consequences of this group membership (p. 206). This supports Ashforth’s (2016) distinction between identity and identification. Identity refers to the qualities of the person in association with a group, while identification includes their “self-defining” (p. 361) characteristics.

Social identity theory was originally proposed by Tajfel in 1972. He defined social identity as “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (Hogg et al., 2004). Tajfel continued to develop social identity theory with his graduate assistant Turner, and in 1987 Turner expanded SIT into self-categorization theory (SCT) (Hornsey, 2008). The two theories are now often combined under the label of social identity perspective (Alvesson et al., 2008; Hogg et al., 2004; Hogg & Reid, 2006).

According to Chiang, Xu, Kim, Tang, and Manthiou (2017), Tajfel and Turner originally laid out a “three-step mental process” that included “social categorization, social identification, and social comparison” (pp. 780-781). Current research on identity separates the study of self into three levels. The first level is the personal self, based upon traits and interpersonal comparison. The second level is the relational self, which is role-based in its self-concept. The third level, which is represented in social identity theory and self-categorization theory as the collective self, is based upon group relations (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).
Social identity theory recognizes that individuals relate to a variety of social identities, some clearly delineated and others more abstract in design (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosie, 2002). The clearly delineated self is most often derived through interpersonal relationships, while the more abstract self is conferred through group categorization (Brewer & Gardner, 1996).

According to Alvesson et al. (2008):

SIT examines how people understand and position themselves and others in terms of social group categories, whereas SCT investigates what leads people to view themselves as unique individuals in some circumstances and, in others, to define self through group membership (p. 13).

In 1989, Ashforth and Mael expanded social identity theory into organizational studies (Alevesson et al., 2008). Organizational studies utilize SIT more actively than SCT in study and practice (Alevesson et al., 2008). Ashforth and Mael (1989) concluded that “identification induces the individual to engage in, and derive satisfaction from, activities congruent with the identity, to view himself or herself as an exemplar of the group, and to reinforce factors conventionally associated with group formation” (p. 35). According to Ashforth and Mael (1989):

- social identification is a perception of oneness with a group of persons;
- social identification stems from the categorization of individuals, the distinctiveness and prestige of the group, the salience of outgroups, and the factors that traditionally are associated with group formation; and
- social identification leads to activities that are congruent with the identity, support for institutions that embody the identity, stereotypical perceptions of self and others, and
outcomes that traditionally are associated with group formation, and it reinforces the antecedents of identification (p. 20).

Recognizing social identities is important in organizations, as it allows individuals to have expectations about their own behavior, in addition to plans for their future growth and development. Organizations also use social identity to encourage the outcomes they are hoping to achieve (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016).

Social identities are self-categorizations that “shape judgments, attitudes, and behaviors” (Reynolds & Subasic, 2016, p. 350). These identities form prototypes or schema that contain the attributes that distinguish groups from each other, providing similarities and differences for comparison (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Miscenko & Day, 2016). These schema do not simply label others, they are also used for self-identification. According to Hogg and Reid (2006):

Self-categorization has additional effects; it not only transforms self-conception and generates a feeling of belonging and group identification, but also transforms how we actually feel and behave to conform to the group prototype. Self-categorization causes our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and behavior to conform to our prototype of the in-group (p. 11).

In social identity theory, the idea of in-group and out-group, or us and them, is motivated by self-esteem and uncertainty reduction (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Hogg et al., 2004). They allow the individual to not only answer the questions “Who am I?” and “Who are we?” but also the question “Who are they?” (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000, p. 13). This process of categorization can depersonalize the perception of people or groups, which can lead to stereotyping based upon group perceptions (Hogg & Reid, 2006). This view of social identities in forming positive or negative opinions can also influence the sense of self, as compared to
other group identities (Ellemers et al., 2002; Hornsey, 2008). Brewer and Gardner (1996) proposed that there would be no social identity without comparison, as it is the similarities and differences that make categorization possible.

While social identity research has not studied young people very much (Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005), studies of adolescents have shown that the devaluation of out-groups is less prevalent in their use of social identity (Romero & Roberts, 1998; Tarrant, 2002). In fact, Romero and Roberts (1998) found the exact inverse to be true, that stronger ethnic identities in adolescents led to more positive views of other ethnic identities. Recent studies found that exploring adolescent decision making through the social identity theory lens makes sense because the theory “posits that a person’s sense of who they are is based in part on their membership or sense of belonging to one or more social groups” (Berends, Jones, & Andrews, 2016, p. 23).

Media use and social identity is also emerging as an area of study (Harwood, 1999). Most studies regarding media use, have focused on how its messages reinforce social identities (Harwood, 1999; Trepte, 2006; Trepte & Kramer, 2007). Harwood referred to the rewards of media usage as “social identity gratifications” (p. 125). According to Trepte, “social identity influences the selection of media entertainment, because people are creating their personal media profile to support their own identity” (p. 255). However, while Harwood (1999) and Trepte (2006) both called for future research into the consequences of media usage, they still focused on the consequences of choosing media by social identity, and not the impact of the media on social identity creation. Bahn et al. (2017) approached the issue of identity development through the Harry Potter books, however, they explored the issue through character development in the
books and a discussion of the need for a workable model, that would mirror the books’ process, not the impact of those books on the readers’ social identity.

Jenkins (2008) stated:

Identification and interests are not easily distinguished. How I identify myself has a bearing on how I define my interests. How I define my interests may encourage me to identify myself in particular ways. How other people define me has a bearing on how they define my interests, and indeed, their own interests. My pursuit of particular interests might cause me to be identified in this way or that by others. How I identify others may have a bearing on which interests I pursue. And so on (p. 7).

Individuals search for their identity and how they fit with those around them. While some identities carry a title or label, even those that do not, still clearly situate a person in a worldview or the surrounding hierarchy (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). Social identity is crafted through an internal discourse, utilizing fantasy and reality to tell a personal story that needs to be examined and understood (Hall, 1996).

**Conclusion**

Popular culture has been used as a lesson plan in the classroom for decades (Callahan & Rosser, 2007; Cummins, 2007; McMahon & Bramhall, 2004; Rajendran & Andrew, 2014; Scott & Weeks, 2015; Sprinkle & Urick, 2016). This study explored the idea that popular culture has been an educator long before the student entered the classroom. Cultural pedagogy provides many images and models for how to live in the world (Giroux, 1999, 2000). The question here was whether we can confirm that those lessons include views of social identity.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Popular culture artifacts have long been used as teaching tools in the classroom (Callahan & Rosser, 2007; Cummins, 2007; McMahon & Bramhall, 2007; Rajendran & Andrew, 2014; Scott & Weeks, 2015; Sprinkle & Urick, 2016). Their use recognizes that narrative provides a medium that translates difficult concepts into an emotionally recognizable form (Auvinen, Aaltio, & Blomqvist, 2013; Bolton, 2016; Callahan & Rosser; Forster et al., 1999; T. Heath & Heath, 2016; Rustin, 2016; Sanyal & Dasgupta, 2017). Millennials grew up reading “the bestselling series of all time” (Stetka, 2014), the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling. This book series, and the movies developed from the books, have become a teaching tool (Rosser, 2007; Tucker, 1999). The lessons found in this popular culture artifact (PCA) enhances the classroom experience as much as the emotional connection created by the book.

The impact that this PCA has on the development of its readers’ social identity has not been studied. What have they learned and internalized, and how do they use that knowledge? The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of the millennial readers of the Harry Potter books, particularly how they respond to, relate to, and incorporate the lessons of the book into their thoughts on identity.

This literature review is organized into the following sections: social cognition, cultural pedagogy, popular culture as a learning tool, storytelling and narrative, and the Harry Potter books as lesson and lesson plan.

**Social Cognition**

Cognitive studies is a vast subject, encompassing many different psychological areas. This study narrowed the focus to social cognition and cognitive science, which is less concerned with observable behavior and more concerned with inner mental life (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008;
Social cognition involves the social aspects of human cognition: how individuals think about people and social events, and how they process and develop the information they have gained about the social world (Hala; 1997; Higgins, 1981; Kosslyn & Kagan, 1981). Social cognition is especially interested in how children develop these knowledge bases, concentrating on the formation and utilization of knowledge acquisition and attribution (Berndt & Heller, 1985).

Cognitive science diverges from strictly psychological studies of cognition to explore the subject from an interdisciplinary point of view, including psychology, linguistics, education, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, mathematics, artificial intelligence, and other fields (Graesser, 1981; Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977). This research is concerned with the meaning, structure, and processing of knowledge (Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977). Cognitive science further differs from cognitive psychology in its use of diverse research methodologies, whereas cognitive psychology is bound to traditional experimental psychology methodologies (Graessner, 1981).

Cognition involves the acquisition, interpretation, and utilization of information. Knowledge is the underpinning of all cognition, yet it can be difficult to trace knowledge acquisition because it can be generated from many different learning experiences (Varga & Bauer, 2014). The first cognitive challenge that humans face in their development is gaining the knowledge they need to make sense of the world around them (Nguyen & Girgis, 2014).
Information can have multiple meanings, so learning addresses norms and how to apply outlying knowledge (Johnson-Laird, 1983).

Once obtained, information must be stored and processed. The cognitive process creates concepts and categories that allow one to make better sense of the information obtained. These categories change and develop over time and with new information (Nguyen & Girgis, 2014). Information alone does not create action; the receiver’s incorporation and interpretation comes into play when the concept is activated (Johnson-Laird, 1983; Kintsch, 1978). The function of categorization is to allow “one to go beyond the information given” (Rothbart & Taylor, 1992, p. 13). According to Hogg and Reid (2006), “self-categorization theory focuses on the basic social cognitive processes, primarily social categorization, that cause people to identify with groups, construe themselves and others in group terms, and manifest group behaviors” (p. 9).

The form of the original information does not affect the relative importance of the knowledge. According to Johnson-Laird (1983), “the processes by which fictitious discourse is understood are not essentially different from those that occur with true assertions” (p. 204). The cognitive processing needed to interpret stories and real life encounters is similar, even though the context and procedures may differ (Feldman et al., 1990). Fiction is processed through the messages delivered by the author, but a full-scale impression of the human experience can still be present (Lively & Bromley, 1973). Furthermore, information storage is no different whether it “is words from Shakespeare’s sonnets or numbers from a random number table” (Bruner, 1990, p. 4).

Information must be examined and interpreted to construct meaning and become useful. The construction of meaning is based in the culture and language that surround people, providing them with ready-made concepts to incorporate into their own lives (Bruner, 1990). Culture
provides shared meanings and concepts that explain intentions and enable participation in communication and society (Bruner, 1990). Lingle, Altom, and Medin (1984) noted:

We understand new experiences by relating them to what we already know. Such relationships or concepts give our world stability, for if each entity were perceived as totally unique, we would be overwhelmed by the diversity of our experience and unable to communicate it to anyone else. By grouping objects and events together that are alike in some important respect we are able to think about and respond to them in ways we have already mastered (p. 73).

This corresponds with Feldman et al.’s (1990) assertion that “the mind…never acts as if everything is new” (p. 81): it is “guided and constrained” (p. 80) by the schema available to it.

Folk psychology is one way researchers group this process of understanding and making meaning of cultural knowledge. Folk psychology can include other developmental theories, such as theory of mind and theory of motivation (Bruner, 1990). According to Hutto (2008), “folk psychology is a philosopher’s label for the practice of making sense of intentional actions, minimally, by appeal to an agent’s motivating beliefs and desires” (p. ix). Developmental processes use folk psychology in meaning-making and information analysis not only for action, but to prescribe motivations to those actions (Hutto, 2008).

Labels and categories for information can “differ in potency, possess disproportionate power, obscure within-category differences, imply exclusivity from other categories, and have a reality above and beyond what is justified by the real-world correlates of that label” (Rothbart & Taylor, 1992, p. 11). Knowledge is converted from the real world into useful data in many ways. Knowledge is no less powerful because it may have come from popular culture.
Cultural Pedagogy

Education occurs both inside the classroom and out, during real and fictional explicit and implicit learning experiences. Popular culture has been accepted as a classroom delivery method; however, due to the control academic disciplines exercise over the educational system, there has been an intellectual bias against popular culture as a form of education (Trend, 1992). Despite this consolidation of power, which leaves traditional pedagogy in the domain of classroom educators, popular culture has been appropriated by students as a primary source of knowledge for their personal development (Dolby, 2003; Giroux & Simon, 1989b). Cultural pedagogy is the recognition that pedagogy is an active tool that occurs in interdisciplinary spaces in addition to the classroom environment (Ellsworth, 2005; Giroux & McLaren, 1992; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997). This concept validates that learning never begins in an empty space (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). According to Giroux and Simon (1989b), “popular culture is the terrain of images, knowledge forms, and affective investments which define the ground on which one’s voice becomes possible” (p. 221).

Cultural pedagogy, also referred to as public pedagogy, occurs whether educators recognize it or not (P. Smith, 1999; Wright, 2007). It is based on the idea that culture “can” and “does” operate in pedagogical ways (Hickey-Moody, Savage, & Windle, 2010). Embracing the concept allows instructors to meet students where they are and expand upon the learning experience (Thompson, 2007). According to Giroux and Simon (1989b), “while popular culture is generally ignored in the schools, it is not insignificant in shaping how students view themselves and their own relations to various forms of pedagogy and learning” (p. 221).

It is commonly believed that young people are victims of popular culture. Popular culture is not imposed on youth, however: they are in a complex and interactive dialogue with the texts
The relationship with texts changes along with interpretations and circumstances (Trend, 1992). The pedagogical belief that knowledge is a “sacred text” that must be controlled by a teacher is considered false in cultural pedagogy, which holds that discourse in many places leads to self-empowerment (Schwoch, White, & Reilly, 1992). To many, media and popular culture have “at least as much cultural authority as more traditional sites of learning, such as the public schools, religious institutions, and the family” (Giroux, 1999).

Cultural pedagogy through popular culture, is defining meaning, identity, and desire to its consumers (Giroux, 1999). According to Giroux (2000):

As a performative practice, pedagogy is at work in all of those public spaces where culture works to secure identities; it does the bridging work for negotiating the relationship among knowledge, pleasure, and values, and it renders authority both crucial and problematic in legitimating particular social practices, communities, and forms of power (pp. 168-169).

Recognition of cultural pedagogy in educational institutions leads to a need for critical pedagogy, teaching that media representations require continual analysis (Giroux & McLaren, 1992). Critical pedagogy examines how students construct meaning from all educational sources, empowering them to incorporate all of their knowledge (Giroux & Simon, 1989a).

Articulation is important in critical pedagogy because it gives meaning to the resources that students bring to educational environments (Giroux, 2000). Articulation is a form of discourse that involves “the continuous deconstruction and reconstruction of contexts” (Grossberg, 1989, p. 169). This discourse, or dialogue, is important for critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2000; Grossberg, 1989), for cultural pedagogy (Brooks, 2006; Fiske, 1989a), and for
the narrative analysis required in storytelling and the use of popular culture as a learning tool (Bakhtin, 1981; Fiske, 1989b; Huczynski & Buchanan, 2004).

**Popular Culture as a Learning Tool**

Popular culture artifacts make complex ideas come alive and become more emotionally relatable in the classroom (Callahan & Rosser, 2007; Cummins, 2007; McMahon & Bramhall, 2004; O’Keefe, 2003; Weiner, 2001). PCAs of all media have been used in the classroom for some time, including literature, movies, television series, and poetry (Callahan & Rosser, 2007; Cummins, 2007; Gehrs, 1994; Grisham, 2006; McMahon & Bramhall, 2004; Rajendran & Andrew, 2014; Rosser, 2007; Scott & Weeks, 2015; Sprinkle & Urick, 2016; Tucciarone, 2007). This research refers to all PCAs can with the singular term, “text” (Brennen, 2013; Brummett, 2006; Dolby, 2003, Duffett, 2013).

The intent of the popular culture artifact does not need to be, nor in fact should it be, education. Its intent should be entertainment and enjoyment; the relatability of the story allows the instructor and the viewer to impose their own understanding out of the unconscious (Bettelheim, 1976; Gierzynski & Eddy, 2013). According to Fiske (1989b), there is little pleasure in accepting ready-made meanings. Pleasure is derived from claiming the knowledge as your own. In passive learning, the more one enjoys what one is encountering, the more one’s defenses are down, and the more receptive one is to the messages contained in the PCA (Gierzynski & Eddy, 2013).

Popular culture can have both conscious and unconscious effects on consumers (Thompson, 2007). Whether recognized as educational or not, it is a part of everyday communication (Hobbs, 1998) that presents messages and lessons that are absorbed by the receiver (P. Smith, 1999). The current generation has learned actively from television and other
texts from the beginning (G. W. Smith, 2009). According to Giroux (1999) media culture has become a major, if not the primary, education force in regulating meanings, values, and tastes to its consumers.

Recognizing the influence of popular culture is important for learning to harness its educational potential (Thompson, 2007). Studies have shown that popular culture contributes to psychosocial development (Brooks, 2006), identity formation (Dolby, 2003; Wright, 2007), and social identity (Fiske, 1989a). It gives young people their “mental picture of the world” (Hall & Whanell, 2006). Furthermore, popular culture enables better understanding of leadership (Adenoro & Ward, 2008).

Instructors can use PCAs to provide students with a case study or example that makes the theoretical realistic (McMahon & Bramhall, 2004; Phillips, 1995). As case studies, PCAs provide multiple layers of meaning and symbolism that can be analyzed, with a level of nuance not found in the typical reality-based case study (Couto, 2006; Gehrs, 1994; Phillips, 1995). Media messages have been found to influence viewers’ perception of reality, so they can be incorporated into the knowledge base of the media user. Furthermore, PCAs have been proven to modify and influence human behavior and education as they communicate ideas, (Beck, 2004; Tucciarone, 2007).

PCAs have been used in the area of leadership development to demonstrate the complicated messages of leadership theory. PCAs have been effective in teaching transformational, situational, transactional, and authentic leadership (Gehrs, 1994; Rajendran & Andrew, 2014; Rosser, 2007; Scott & Weeks, 2015). Callahan and Rosser (2007) proposed lesson plans that use PCAs to incorporate leader-focused theories, situational theories, and social dynamic theories across a number of sessions. Harvard Business School business ethicist Joseph
L. Badaracco, Jr., is noted for teaching that “fiction can be as instructive about leadership and organizational behavior as any business textbook” (Coutu, 2006, p. 48).

It is the escape into fantasy that makes the unreal real. This begins with children’s literature (Bettelheim, 1976; S. B. Heath, 1982; Jweid & Rizzo, 2001; Rustin, 2016; Sanyal & Dasgupta, 2017); however, “it’s not just that both adults and children are reading fantasy; in many cases they are reading the same books” (O’Keefe, 2003, p. 13). While developmentally appropriate, children’s literature is more than escapist reading because it allows readers to identify with the characters and practice making sense of the world (Bettelheim, 1976; O’Keefe, 2003; Rustin, 2016; Sanyal & Dasgupta, 2017). As youths, this sense can develop in black-and-white ways through the moral development of good and evil; as adults, the learning becomes more nuanced, recognizing the complexity of moral decision-making (Cuotu, 2006).

PCAs, in the end, “are explanations of events and occurrences couched in the pedagogy of storytelling” (Cummins, 2007, p. 143). They allow the humanities-based study of leadership to be explored and valued over the more empirical methods (Gehrs, 1994). Myths and fairy tales as PCAs have helped shape and influence people and organizations in their everyday practices (Czarniawska, 2004). This may occur through active or passive learning that can then be harnessed by instructors and supervisors. Passive or incidental learning is the “byproduct of some other activity, such as reading for pleasure or watching movies for fun” (Gierzynski & Eddy, 2013, p. 29). McMahon and Bramhall (2004) contended that when utilizing PCAs, while the activity itself might be viewed as passive, education is in fact an experiential activity when facilitated in a proactive manner.

To best facilitate utilizing PCAs in the classroom, the instructor must be aware of issues that could arise. Instructors must be aware of how the historical context of the PCA may affect
the text’s meaning. Examination of the author’s or creator’s ideologies can also affect the communication of its lessons (Gehrs, 1994). When used properly, PCAs allow the instructor to scaffold the meaning and lessons for stronger educational impact (Brooks, 2011).

**Storytelling and Narrative**

Cognitive psychology holds that “reading is largely a matter of making sense or interpreting” (Olson, 1990, p. 108). Stories and narrative are perceived as outside traditional pedagogy; however, they are analyzed as much as any other social science (Brummett, 2006; Huczynski & Buchanan, 2004; Phillips, 1995). One needs to examine any text for signs and artifacts that express the meaning (Brummett, 2006); novels, however, are three-dimensional, lack temporal stability, and open-ended (Bakhtin, 1981), calling for a dialogue between the text and the consumer (Bakhtin, 1981; de Certeau, 2006; Fiske, 1989b; Gerrig, 1993; Huczynski & Buchanan, 2004).

Stories have been told since the development of civilized society to explain and praise leaders and their traits (Bass, 1990). The origin of the word “story” is Greek, meaning knowledge and wisdom (Yoder-Wise & Kowalski, 2003). A story is “an account of imaginary or real people and events” (Mladkova, 2013, p. 85). Storytelling allows for sensemaking in organizations and individuals; it helps to communicate vision and context, and explain an irrational world (Auvinen et al., 2013; Bettelheim, 1976; Bolton, 2016; Fleming, 2001; Forster et al., 1999; Gabriel, 2000; S. B. Heath, 1982; Mladkova, 2013; Sanyal & Dasgupta, 2017; Yoder-Wise & Kowalski, 2003). Sensemaking in storytelling makes the story real and rational to the reader or observer (Auvinen et al., 2013; Callahan, Whitener, & Sandlin, 2007; Phillips, 1995). In fact, whether a story is “real” or “imaginary,” it seems to have the same power (Bruner, 1990, p. 44).
Human beings learn from experiences of themselves and others through narrative (Callahan et al, 2007; Harris & Barnes, 2006). Stories can stimulate an empathetic response that is useful in educating all ages (S. B. Heath, 1982; Rossiter, 2002). Stories are how communities educate the next generation, passing on spiritual, moral, and cultural mores and helping establish shared belief systems (Gabriel, 2000; Gierzynski & Eddy, 2013; Harris & Barnes, 2006; Kirkwood, 1983; Mladkova, 2013; Olsen, 1990).

Stories are narratives with plots and characters, generating emotion in narrator and audience, through a poetic elaboration of symbolic material. This material may be a product of fantasy or experience, including the experience of earlier narratives. Story plots entail conflicts, predicaments, trials, coincidences, and crises that call for choices, decisions, actions, and interactions, whose actual outcomes are often at odds with the characters’ intentions and purposes (Gabriel, 2000, p. 239).

Storytelling, no matter the format, is a conversation, a dialogue between the narrative and the person receiving the information (Bakhtin, 1981; de Certeau, 2006). It can provide the receiver with inspiration, motivation, understanding, and focus, in addition to preventing conflict and building trust among those who encounter the tale and are immersed in the narrative (Auvinen et al., 2013; Harris & Barnes, 2006; Phillips, 1995).

Storytelling conveys tacit knowledge, incorporating emotion, meaning, and ideas that can be difficult to articulate explicitly (Mladkova, 2013). According to Ready (2002), effective storytelling must be context-specific, level-appropriate, told by respected role models, have drama, and have high learning value. Stories involve the reader in the experience, which demands “active meaning making” (Rossiter, 2002) that must be analyzed for sensemaking (Fiske, 1989b). Leadership lessons that can be communicated well through narrative fiction
include: mistakes and failures, unexpected opportunities, risk and reward, choices and consequences, lessons learned, obstacles and challenges, advice from a mentor, and inspiration. All of these lessons can be stand-alone or combined (Callahan, et al., 2007; Harris & Barnes, 2006, p. 352).

Storytelling allows attribution of “motive, agency, or purpose” (Gabriel, 2000, p. 240) in explaining, interpreting, and making sense of the world. A story is not only a purveyor of information; it can also create transformation, leading to personal growth and change. Stories can be “motivators, pathfinders, and sources of encouragement” (Rossiter, 2002). Stories allow visualization that facts alone cannot (Gehrs, 1994).

Storytelling and narrative fiction use metaphor to express complex ideas. From religion to today’s leadership lessons, metaphor consolidates thoughts in many media and across cultures (Forster et al., 1999; Gehrs, 1994; Gerrig, 1999; Grisham, 2006; Harris & Barnes, 2006; Ready, 2002). Weick (1977) said that “reality is metaphor” (p. 278) in that an individual’s reality is how she or he makes sense of the environment and imposes patterns on that which may be tenuous. As metaphor is a collective conception or common understanding (Kaye & Jacobson, 1999) that can translate into schema shared as mass-meaning. The narrative process allows big ideas such as metaphor or schema to be translated by the individual and to the masses.

While stories’ primary goal of is most often to entertain, they take their readers on a journey with characters who develop and learn through overcoming obstacles and performing incredible feats (Gabriel, 2000). “Stories cross boundaries and frontiers, settle in different places, and then migrate to or colonize other places. They resurface in different spaces at different times, preserving their ability to entertain, to enlighten, and to bewitch” (Gabriel, 2004, p. 1). According to Bettelheim (1976), in a story “internal processes are externalized and
become comprehensible as represented by the figures of the story and its events” (p. 25).

Consuming texts is an active and productive act (Fiske, 1989b; Grossberg, 1992).

By placing information in context, stories can convey emotions, trigger individual and group memories, and provide intuition and insight (Danko, 2003; Yoder-Wise & Kowalski, 2003, p. 41). Stories are a “complex system of symbols” (Mladkova, 2013, p. 84) that incorporate norms, experiences, and explanations of the world. These symbols “create personal and group identities, change social practices, and share knowledge and values” (p. 84). Narrative is a powerful and effective format for transforming these complex ideas into knowledge and feeling (Grisham, 2006). Storytelling is a “collective act” (Kaye & Jacobson, 1999, p. 46) that encourages shared meaning and group cohesion. “Storytelling can be a valuable source of trust by creating a shared context and sense of meaning among leaders and their followers” (Auvinen et al., 2013, p. 497).

People naturally learn from stories, as they were the first introduction to learning. According to Rustin (2016), “the best works of this kind have meaning and resonance for adult readers and audience too, with young children, reading and viewing is at first most often a mutually pleasurable experience shared with grown-ups” (p. 139). Bedtime stories present messages of moral development, teaching youth about right and wrong (Forster et al., 1999; S. B. Heath, 1982; Yoder-Wise & Kowalski, 2003). In colleges that attempt to develop the whole person, the narrative process provides students with mentors and moral sounding boards that are developmentally appropriate (Danko, 2003). Rosser (2007) developed a lesson plan around the film *Harry Potter and Goblet of Fire*. She argued that “by suspending the real world temporarily and allowing learners to transcend into another world/experience” (p. 249) the learning process is enhanced and leadership theory can be both observed and followed.
Fantasy stories “can expand the mind and the heart, suggesting unusual choices and perspectives. Fantasy does not provide comfortable answers and solve problems. It poses questions, nudging readers toward a new openness. It is moral but not moralizing” (O’Keefe, 2003, pp. 9-10). Stories can be transmitted in many forms to societies, individuals, or the masses. The Harry Potter books did not break new fantasy ground: J. K. Rowling followed in the steps of earlier popular children’s authors such as Roald Dahl and Enid Blyton (Brooks, 2008). These authors’ success is based on their refusal to condescend to their readers, acknowledging the good and bad in life, and recognizing and illuminating all of life’s complexities (Brooks, 2008).

**The Harry Potter Books as Lesson and Lesson Plan**

The Harry Potter books, as a popular culture artifact, fit the mold of fairy tales (Damour, 2003; Grimes, 2002; Ostry, 2003). According to Bettleheim (1976), fairy tales are the perfect mode for the young to learn and relate to the struggles of life in the search for victory over obstacles. Fairy tales are not safe: they confront death and other existential dilemmas, presenting life in the black-and-white of good and evil. In personality development, understanding of ambiguity comes later in the aging process. By presenting this information clearly, children can then later make choices about who they want to be “facilitated by the polarizations of the fairy tale” (p. 9). “The question for the child is not “Do I want to be good?” but “Whom do I want to be like?” (p. 10).

The Harry Potter books, in all their popularity, are fairy tales written in an unintimidating style that welcomes readers and does not make them feel stupid. The books provide a structured and hierarchical setting with a balance of good and evil (O’Keefe, 2003). As the characters of the books age and develop, so too do the readers, exploring their own liberation and leadership.
According to Grimes (2002), the Harry Potter books contain “universal archetypes” that “help children face and understand the truths of their world” (p. 91).

Popular culture artifacts can be used to explore ethical and moral implications (Hess, 2008; Jweid & Rizzo, 2001). Hess (2008) stated that “the Harry Potter books succeed in creating quite a lot of ambiguity and ambivalence, specifically in regard to what constitutes and characterizes ‘an enemy’” (p. 51). Many have written about the moral and value lessons found in the Harry Potter books (Armstrong, 2008; Kern, 2003; Neilson, 2001), with recent studies demonstrating the effects of reading the books on ethical and political decision-making (Mutz, 2016; Vezzali et al., 2015). This follows the work of Gierzynski and Eddy (2013), who explicitly studied the effects of the Harry Potter books on millennials and their political beliefs.

As a leadership education tool, the movie *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* was used by Rosser (2007) in a leadership lesson plan because of the many lessons that can be taught from that text alone. Cummins (2007) recommended contrasting the same Harry Potter book with the television series *Lost* to demonstrate “how different approaches can yield similar results” (p. 144). Others have used characters from the Harry Potter books to emphasize leadership styles, such as demonstrating authentic leadership with an exploration of the character of Dumbledore (Benefiel, 2009) or comparing the title character to the characteristics of servant leadership (Eblin Group, 2011).

Rowling (1998), in the books’ first introduction to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry houses by the Sorting Hat, describes Gryffindors as “brave at heart, their daring, nerve, and chivalry set Gryffindor apart” (p. 146-147). The next house described is Hufflepuff, who are just, loyal, patient, true, “and unafraid of toil” (p. 147). Ravenclaw is the house for those who are wise and “ready of mind, where those of wit and learning will always find their
kind” (p. 147). Finally, Slytherin are described as “those cunning folk [who] use any means to achieve their ends” (p. 147). Each of these descriptions set the stage for what can become a social identity schema with the addition of further character action and interplay.

Lavoie (2003) connected the traits emphasized by the four houses of Hogwarts to how they have been translated by outside sources. She cited an unofficial website that has simplified those traits down to one-dimension: brave, loyal, smart, and selfish (p. 40). Lavoie also recognized the many positive and negative aspects of the multiple traits raised by the Harry Potter books and its characters. The more positive or neutral side of the Hogwarts house traits are presented by Chappell (2012) as bravery, hard work and loyalty, intelligence and wit, and ambition (p. 127). Bahn et al. (2017) took a more book-based listing of the traits, stating: “Gryffindor, novelty and bravery; Slytherin, power-hungry and cunning; Ravenclaw, kindness and wit; and Hufflepuff, loyalty and patience” (p. 40). The differences among these descriptions may be because even though the main traits were established for the four houses, the development of the characters and their embodiment of these traits happened over their aging and developmental process (Chappell, 2012; Mills, 2003).

Gierzynski and Eddy (2013) asked Generation Y or millennial students at the University of Vermont about those things that defined their generation. The students responded on the Harry Potter series by saying that the books:

Got kids to read massive books in a matter of a few days; made literature a strong form of entertainment again. Harry Potter was more than a series of seven award-winning novels. Harry Potter was one of the great cultural events of our generation’s time. Harry Potter helped raise the children of our generation by instilling in them some of the basic moral conceptions of right and wrong. In the series there is a very clear “good side,” epitomized
by Harry Potter, which embodies the basic qualities of love, loyalty, courage, and forgiveness. Juxtaposed is a very clear “bad side,” epitomized by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, which embodies all of the negative qualities of deceitfulness, vengeance, and killing…The Harry Potter series is very pronounced in the views that it expresses; views that were instilled in our generation through this popular series of books (pp. 42-43).

These students have identified the impact the Harry Potter books have made on their lives and in their development. While Gierzynski and Eddy (2013) were interested in how the Harry Potter books affected Generation Y/millennial political activities, many of their stated reactions tie into the development of their social identity.

As reported in the Wall Street Journal, readers of the Harry Potter books, old and young, have created “Potterisms” that they use in work and school settings (Borah, 2004, p. 346). These additions from the world of Harry Potter to the lexicon of those who have experienced it demonstrate the influence that this popular culture artifact has had beyond the story of “the boy who lived” (Rowling, 1998). Because the books have influenced students before they entered a classroom or the workplace, they are useful in both in connecting with the numerous Harry Potter consumers.

Das (2016) noted that “Harry Potter Studies” has become an unofficial subfield in academia, “appearing in handbooks, course offerings, and conferences” (p. 341). Das found, however, that studies of the Harry Potter phenomenon focused on textual analysis and that focus on the “real, lived accounts of young people’s experiences” was “rare” (p. 344) despite the creep of the books into the daily life of the readers (Borah, 2004), beyond the average popular culture artifact.
Conclusion

This study, grounded in social identity theory, with its connection to social cognition and its recognition of the importance of categorization and schema to place the world in context, utilized cultural pedagogy to analyze the impact of popular culture on the readers of the Harry Potter books. This study recognized the educational importance of storytelling and narrative as popular culture artifacts, and that learning happens in many venues. This study used interpretative phenomenological analysis, as explained in Chapter 3, to follow the messages imparted in the Harry Potter books to learn how they have spread out beyond the pages into everyday use by this popular culture artifact’s consumers.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In examining the impact of the Harry Potter books on the social identity of the series readers, this study asks the following question: How does the experience of reading the Harry Potter books affect the social identity of millennial consumers?

Qualitative Study Reasoning

Creswell (2012) presented the major stages of a qualitative research study. These include:

- exploring a problem and developing a detailed understating of a central phenomenon;
- having a literature review play a minor role but justify a problem;
- stating the purpose and research questions in a general and broad way so as to see the participants’ experiences;
- collecting data based on words from a small number of individuals so that the participants’ views are obtained;
- analyzing the data for description and themes using text analysis and interpreting the larger meaning of the findings; and
- writing the report using flexible, emerging structures and evaluative criteria, and including the researchers’ subjective reflexivity and bias (p. 16).

These qualitative criteria connect well with this study, the constructivist or interpretivist research paradigm within which it was grounded, and the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology that was used.

The methodology was guided by the constructivist or interpretivist research paradigm, which has an ontology of “multiple, socially constructed realities” (Mertens, 2005, p. 11). Research paradigms help couch a study in “certain philosophical assumptions that guide and
direct thinking and action (Mertens, 2005, p. 7). According to Cohen and Crabtree (2006), the “relativist ontology assumes that reality as we know it is constructed intersubjectively through the meanings and understandings developed socially and experientially” (2006). This research paradigm grew out of a response to the theory-based postpositivist research paradigm, utilizing Husserl’s phenomenology and other German philosophies based in hermeneutics (Mertens, 2005).

Phenomenology, originated by Husserl, is interested in describing and interpreting participants’ lived experience (Mayoh & Onquegbuzie, 2015). This methodology recognizes the social and experiential development of participants’ reality, and also acknowledges that what we know affects “how we understand ourselves, others, and the world” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Interpretative phenomenological analysis developed out of hermeneutic phenomenology and “offers an established, systematic, and phenomenologically focused approach, which is committed to understanding the first-person perspective from the third-person position” (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011, p. 321). This aligns with the study purpose and research question, which asked participants to examine their thinking around the reading of the Harry Potter books and how that may influence their everyday thinking and social identity.

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

According to J. A. Smith (2004), interpretative phenomenological analysis can be described by three main elements. First, epistemologically it is a method for conducting empirical research. Second, theoretically it “aims to explore in detail participants’ personal lived experience” (p. 40). Finally, phenomenologically it is concerned with “individuals’ perceptions of objects or events” (p. 40). It also recognizes the role of analysis in making sense of those
explanations. IPA is a methodology in the long tradition of phenomenology, beginning with the ideas introduced by Husserl.

**Historical Development of Phenomenology**

The philosophical concept of phenomenology was derived in Germany before World War I (Dowling, 2007). Husserl proposed phenomenology initially as a “rigorous human science” that could “investigate the way that knowledge comes into being and confronts us with the assumptions upon which all human understandings are grounded” (van Manen, 2014, p. 91). From the Greek word phaenesthai, which means to flare up, to show itself, to appear, phenomenology’s motto is “zu den sachen,” which means both “to the things themselves” and “let’s get down to what matters” (Dowling, 2007, p. 132).

Husserl was concerned with the human experience. He was interested in a methodology that would not only allow someone to know his or her own experience, but also help illuminate that experience for others. To do this, he developed a “phenomenological method” (J. A. Smith et al., 1999, p. 13). He expected researchers to first “bracket” (p. 13) their everyday thoughts on the world, putting them aside to be replaced by “consciousness” (p. 13). The process then went through a series of “reductions” (p. 14) that allowed the essence of a phenomenon to be distilled. Husserl’s phenomenology can be classified as transcendental phenomenology that tried to uncover the “nature of consciousness per se” (p. 14).

Heidegger, one of Husserl’s students, developed the next iteration of phenomenology, hermeneutic phenomenology (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger agreed with Husserl’s philosophy of “to the things themselves,” but proposed that analysis as well as description was necessary in exploring the lived experience (Dowling, 2007, p. 133). Furthermore, for Heidegger lived experience meant a “worldly” one, not an internal exploration (J. A. Smith et al.,
Ontologically, Heidegger advocated for a more interpretive process (Dowling, 2007, p. 133).

Heidegger was increasingly concerned with the ability of language to allow exploration of the lived experience. As his work progressed, he concentrated more on the intersection of “language, being, and thinking” (van Manen, 2014, p. 110). Heidegger connected phenomenology and hermeneutics. According to Tappan (1997), “historically, hermeneutics has focused almost exclusively on interpreting literary and religious texts; in recent years, however, there has been a significant turn toward what has been called “interpretive social science” (p. 645).

Out of Heidegger’s work came that of Merleau-Ponty, the originator of phenomenology of perception, who agreed with both the contextual nature and the worldliness of hermeneutic phenomenology. However, Merleau-Ponty called for concentrating on the embodied nature of humans and how that affects their perception of place and viewpoint (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Finally, among the original philosophical phenomenologists, Sartre established existential phenomenology, which recognizes that people are always changing and developing, and thus the self is not a static entity (J. A. Smith et al., 2009).

While the philosophical development of phenomenology came first, phenomenological psychology developed from Husserl’s original philosophical underpinnings. This area of psychology is “concerned with an individual’s personal perception or account of an object or event as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself” (J. A. Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999, p. 219). New methodologies and ideas have developed apace since Husserl’s first writings on phenomenology.
While all phenomenology is concerned with the lived experience, the study of that lived experience varies according to different methodologies. Not only is hermeneutic phenomenology interested in the interpretation of language, but it can also be primarily studied through the “explication of texts” (van Manen, 2014, p. 110). This is different from literary phenomenology, where a researcher uses writing to explore the lived experience, and oneiric-poetic phenomenology, which uses poetry (van Manen, 2014). Fictional literature can be valuable in phenomenological study because it can bring intuition and perception to “phenomena such as love, grief, illness, faith, success, fear, death, hope, struggle, or loss” (p. 318).

**Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis was first proposed by J. A. Smith in 1996 (J. A. Smith, et al., 2009). J. A. Smith (1996) referred to this proposed methodology as interpretative phenomenological analysis to demonstrate the “dual nature of the approach” (p. 263). Unlike prior phenomenological methodologies, “the aim of IPA is to explore the participant’s view of the world and to adopt, as far as is possible, an ‘insider’s perspective’ of the phenomenon under study” (p. 264). IPA developed out of psychology and shares “a recognition of the centrality of mentation” (J. A. Smith, 2004, p. 41) with cognitive psychology and social cognition.

IPA is very interested in the sensemaking process of both the participant and the researcher. J. A. Smith (2004) described the methodology as involving a “double hermeneutic” (p. 40) because the process requires the interviewee to examine her or his experience with the phenomena and the lived experience, while the researcher then has “to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world” (p. 40). The involved nature of the researcher in the IPA research process produces the interpretative response to the participant’s experience, recognizing both the desire to capture the lived experience, as in other
phenomenological studies, and the fact that such information is not fully accessible to anyone other than the one who lived it (Alase, 2017; Willig, 2001).

According to J. A. Smith (2004), IPA can be described by “three broad elements” (p. 40). Epistemologically, IPA provides a methodology for conducting research. Theoretically, IPA follows the phenomenological path of exploring the lived experience. Phenomenologically, IPA calls for the researcher to interpret or analyze that experience in a manner somewhat similar to hermeneutic phenomenology.

This connection to phenomenology centers on its concentration on cognition. According to J. A. Smith and Osborn (2015):

IPA is phenomenological in that [it] involves detailed examination of the participant’s lived experience; it attempts to explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual’s personal perception or account of an object or event, as opposed to an attempt to produce an objective statement of the object or event itself (p. 25).

This “gives voice” to those interviewed, while it “makes sense” of their experiences (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006, p. 102). The sensemaking provides the connection to hermeneutics, which in IPA happens both by the interviewee and the researcher. “Allowing both aspects of inquiry is likely to lead to a richer analysis and to do greater justice to the totality of the person” (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 26).

IPA is idiographic, emphasizing on analysis of each interview on its own before moving on to the convergence and divergence found between the subjects (J. A. Smith, 2011). Whereas the term idiographic has referred to psychological studies of an individual, here each individual gets his or her due, while being further analyzed alongside subjects who have had similar lived experiences (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Due to the idiographic nature of IPA, studies
utilizing this methodology usually involve a “highly intensive and detailed analysis of the accounts produced by a comparatively small number of participants” (Larkin et al., p. 104). Each interview or text, as participant accounts can be journals, is examined in great detail before moving on to the next participant. Only after each individual analysis is complete are the cases examined for similarities and differences (J. A. Smith, 2004, 2011).

According to J. A. Smith (2011), “the most common method of data collection is in-depth, semi-structured interviewing” (p. 10). This method of data-collection allows the “participants to articulate stories, thoughts, and feelings about their experiences” (Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, & McFaden, 2010, p. 100) and helps a researcher build rapport to better examine the interviewees’ lived experience.

While its original roots are psychology, the above methodological process has proven to be applicable in many different academic areas of study. In fact, not only is IPA research being done across domains, the researchers themselves often have interdisciplinary academic interests (Alase, 2017; J. A. Smith, 2004).

**Research Design**

Once the research question was established, the first step was finding a sample that fit the research parameters, generally between six and 10 participants (Larkin et al., 2006; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The sample size was small because of the detailed analysis that would be performed on the interview transcripts (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2015).

While research can be conducted through focus groups or journals, most IPA uses semi-structured interviews. These provide the opportunity for a researcher to build rapport, follow up on answers, and seek to go deeper into the information provided (Palmer et al., 2010, J. A. Smith, 2004; J. A. Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, due to the small sample size, the participant
pool should be homogenous, allowing connections to be drawn between them (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2015). Creswell (2012) defined homogeneous sampling as when “the researcher purposefully samples individuals or sites based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics” (p. 208).

**Participants and Recruitment**

Utilizing Creswell’s definition of homogeneous sampling, this study sought out no more than 10 participants from among millennials aged 20-26 who have read all of the Harry Potter books. There is no official time range for the millennial generation, however, the range of 1981-1999 is offered by the United States Air Force (K. Smith, 2008). Participants aged 20-26 were all born at the time of the publication of the first Harry Potter book, and that age range puts them in the latter half of the millennial time frame, keeping them either out of the workforce, or in their first professional employment experience. A further similarity of lived experience is that all of the participants were either college students or graduates.

Participants needed to have read every Harry Potter book from the original series, because no one book could provide enough information. According to Bormann (1972), to fully grasp an author’s message there must be an examination of the author’s entire oeuvre, thus the requirement for having read all of the series books. This requirement may also best account for the absorption of the books’ material. While participants may or may not have viewed all of the Harry Potter movies, that was not a vital selection criteria because the books provide more developed information than the movies due to their breadth and format. Participants’ experience with the movies was noted to account for any changes in data. The age criteria also allowed for clear, legal consent for student participation, in addition to establishing membership in the millennial generation.
The invitation process for participants utilized a “snowball strategy” (Alase, 2017, p. 13). Through this strategy, in addition to sending out targeted invitations to participants (Appendix B) who fit the criteria and may be interested in being interviewed for the study, invitees were also asked to help “‘put in good words’ to attract other participants to join in the research project” (Alase, 2017, p. 13).

Participant information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abigail</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
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<tr>
<td>Catherine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
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<tr>
<td>Georgina</td>
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<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

The interviews were semi-structured; a list of initial questions that guided the interviews can be found in Appendix A. Interviews were scheduled with participants to last up to 90 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed for data analysis. Semi-structured interviews allow an interviewer to diverge from the set questions as new information and stories arise from the interview subject (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2015). Unlike a structured interview that seeks to acquire certain data, the following are important in an unstructured interview:

- there is an attempt to establish rapport with the respondent,
- the ordering of questions is less important,
- the interviewer is free to probe interesting areas that arise,
the interview can follow the respondent’s interests or concerns (p. 31). This allows an interviewer to delve more deeply into the true lived experience of the subjects of the study, allowing their experiences to drive the subsequent questions.

J. A. Smith and Osborn (2015) offered the following tips to interviewers who are conducting semi-structured interviews for interpretative phenomenological analysis studies: (a) don’t rush the interviewee, (b) “use minimal probes,” (c) “ask one question at a time,” and (d) “monitor the effect of the interview on the respondent” (p. 36). Gaining the information that the researcher needs requires the trust of the research participants.

Once the interviews were completed they were transcribed word-for-word. As this is not discourse analysis, the transcription did not need to include short pauses and non-verbal communication, only the information that was analyzed (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The information included in the transcription did include long pauses, false starts, and emotional cues (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2015). The interviews were digitally recorded to allow for later transcription. They were professionally transcribed before being used for coding and analysis.

**Data Management**

In this study no participants were referenced by name, all identifying data were kept confidential and destroyed in a timely fashion, and all information was kept under lock and key to protect the privacy of the participants both during and after the research process. Computer and electronic files were password protected, and paper copies and documents were kept locked up for participant confidentiality. This is in accordance with Northeastern University Institutional Review Board rules and guidelines, as referenced in Appendix C.
Data Analysis

A word-for-word transcription allows transcripts to be “subject to systematic processes of reflection, identification, description, clarification, interpretation, and contextualization” (Larkin et al., 2011, p. 330). The following strategies were utilized in the analysis process, as suggested by J. A. Smith et al. (2009):

1. The close, line-by-line analysis of the experiential claims, concerns, and understanding of each participant.
2. The identification of the emergent patterns within this experiential material, emphasizing both convergence and divergence, commonality, and nuance, usually first for single cases, and then subsequently across multiple cases.
3. The development of a structure, frame, or gestalt, which illustrates the relationships between themes.
4. The organization of all of this material in a format which allows for analyzed data to be traced right through the processes, from initial comments on the transcript, through initial clustering and thematic development, into the final structure of themes.
5. The development of a full narrative, evidenced by a detailed commentary on data extracts, which takes the reader through this interpretation, usually theme-by-theme, and is often supported by some form of visual guide.
6. Reflection on one’s own perception, conceptions and processes (p. 79-80).

Larkin et al. (2006) laid out two aims for the IPA interview process. The first goal is understanding the participant’s experience in a “specific event, process, or relationship” and “to describe what it is like” (p. 104). The second goal is to develop a deeper level of analysis that
explores the “wider social, cultural, and perhaps even theoretical context” (p. 104). This second aim is at the heart of the sensemaking process in IPA.

Hein and Austin (2001) succinctly described the basic steps of an IPA research project:

A first step involves immersion in the data, which normally requires the researcher to read the transcript several times to develop an overall sense of the participant’s experience of the phenomenon. Statements that are relevant to the phenomenon are then identified. Each non-repetitive statement is then thematized so as to capture its meaning. These excerpts and themes are then used to develop an exhaustive description of the participant’s experience of the phenomenon… If there is more than one participant, these steps are repeated and the individual thematic analysis and situation structural descriptions are compared to identify shared themes. From the shared thematic structure, a general structural description is developed that expresses the shared or general aspects of the phenomenon as experienced by all participants (p. 8).

The interview transcripts were coded, first individually. According to J. A. Smith et al. (2009), these individual reviews should involve multiple readings and levels of analysis, looking for issues that might be descriptive, linguistic, conceptual, and deconstructive. These reviews were then analyzed to find emergent themes. After each interview was analyzed, they were then compared for connections and finally interpreted as a whole.

**Trustworthiness**

Larkin and Thompson recommended the following strategies for ensuring a quality IPA study:

- collecting appropriate data, from appropriately selected informants;
- some degree of idiographic focus balanced against “what is shared” within a sample;
an analysis that: (a) transcends the structure of the data collection method, (b) focuses on “how things are understood,” rather than on “what happened,” and (c) incorporates and balances phenomenological detail and interpretative work to develop a psychologically relevant account of the participants’ “engagement-in-the-world;”
• appropriate use of triangulation or audit and/or credibility-checking to achieve trustworthiness;
• appropriate use of extracts and commentary to achieve transparency;
• appropriate level of contextual detail – for the extracts, participants, researchers and study;
• attention to process; including both analytic and reflexive components;
• appropriate pitch and engagement with theory;
• engagement with other IPA work and/or phenomenological theory; and
• appropriate understanding and implementation of transferability issues (pp. 113-114).

To ensure “credible and transferable findings in an IPA research study,” Alase (2017) discusses the need for “trustworthiness, member-checking, triangulation, and auditing” as well as a “quality and verification tool” that looks “at all of the information gathered to make sure that every one of them has met, at least, the minimum standards required for attaining credible and transferable results” (p. 17). For this study, neither triangulation nor member-checking were appropriate (Larkin & Thompson, 2012), so verification counted on audit and the quality and verification tool, in addition to keeping in mind the suggestions of Larkin and Thompson (2012).

Protection of Human Subjects

There are always concerns regarding privacy and ethics when working with human beings. The researcher followed prescribed protocols concerning ethical qualitative research
practices, and protected the privacy and trust of the participants following the guidance of Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board. The consent to participate form is found in Appendix C. The form was presented to the participants and explained their rights and the study’s interest to them before they signed off on their agreement to participate.

The consent to participate form explained the nature and interest of the research study. It guaranteed the anonymity of the interview participants and explained the process they will be participating in, as well as any risks or discomfort they might encounter. It also discussed possible treatment for any concerns they could encounter due to their participation. The researcher recognized that she is not a qualified therapist and offered guidance to psychological services if necessary during the course of the participant interviews or after participation if issues arose later.

Conclusion

According to Hermes (2005), popular culture “can disclose to those who are interested what collective fantasies we hold, what scenarios and criticisms circulate” (p. viii). This study was interested in doing exactly that. It used a fantasy story, under the imaginary definition of the word, to establish the other form of fantasy, that which captures “the constructed nature of the theme” (Foss, 2009, p. 98). Through analysis of the lived experience of readers of the Harry Potter books, an exploration of their uses of the books’ lessons on social identity allowed the researcher to delve into the thinking of the research subjects and present findings about their experiences.
Chapter 4: Findings

The question guiding this qualitative study was: How does the experience of reading the Harry Potter books impact the social identity of millennial consumers? The researcher addressed this question using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), conducting eight semi-structured interviews with millennial readers of the books and analyzing their answers to seek out their lived experience. This chapter presents the study’s findings.

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews, as shown in Table 2. The first theme is a search for belonging; this theme includes making a personal connection to the Harry Potter books, the strength of connection among peers and friends, and a pull to expand upon the phenomenon outside of the original popular culture experience. The second theme is categorization and the application of the book’s Sorting Hat premise to the individual experience; this includes identification and self-selection, an understanding of duality, and the experience of us versus them. The final theme is the power of popular culture; this includes recognition of the power of fantasy as well as the search for role models, particularly female role models. These themes are explored in detail below. All participant quotations use the assigned pseudonym.
Table 2

Superordinate and Subordinate Study Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Superordinate Theme #1: Harry Potter and the Search for Belonging</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This theme, with its three subordinate themes, encompasses the developmental connections that readers encountered in the reading of the books through the similarity of their own life trajectories to those of the characters, their relationships with other readers of the books, and the expansion of their relationship with the book beyond page and screen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Subordinate Theme A: What if I Went to Hogwarts?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Subordinate Theme B: Friends in the Forbidden Forest</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Subordinate Theme C: Wizards, and Muggles, and Quidditch, Oh My!</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Superordinate Theme #2: Harry Potter and the Sorting Hat of Life</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This theme, with its three subordinate themes, explores the social identification that came from the reading of the Harry Potter books, including personal identification, a recognition of change and duality, and the labeling of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Subordinate Theme A: Who Am I?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Subordinate Theme B: Is That All There Is?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Subordinate Theme C: Who Are You?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Superordinate Theme #3 – Harry Potter and the Power of Popular Culture</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This theme looks at consumers’ use of both the Harry Potter books and other popular culture artifacts in their search for understanding and assistance in navigating the world around them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Subordinate Theme A: The Reality in Fantasy</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Subordinate Theme B: The Search for Role Models - Female Role Models</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Harry Potter and the Search for Belonging**

Reading the Harry Potter books was, and is, both an individual and a communal experience. While Abigail was not sucked into the Harry Potter world to the extent of many in her peer group, she did note that absence. She was not “slightly obsessive,” as Elizabeth described herself; instead, she recognized that she did not have her peers’ intense connection as she did not find the books “life changing.” While those participants who were more deeply involved never specifically called the books “life changing,” they did express a connection to a shared phenomenon that touched, and in many cases continued to touch, many corners of their lives.

**What if I went to Hogwarts?**

As individuals, the participants grew up alongside the characters of the Harry Potter books. They experienced many of the same triumphs and losses, and thus searched for themselves in the Harry Potter books. Each book progresses a year in the life of the characters, so as the millennial readers of the books aged and progressed on their life journey and development, so too did Harry Potter and his peer group. This connection forged an intimate connection between the participants and the books, helping them to process similar issues that they were experiencing. It was not the fantasy of the books they related to, but the reality of the everyday growing-up experience. As Abigail said, “It’s a series that’s narrated through the perspective of an 11, or like, 17-year-old,” and because of that it was “the personal dynamic within the series” that was “something I could relate to.”

Only one of the interviewees, Henry, watched the movies first, and did not begin reading the Harry Potter books until towards the end of his high school career. His connection to the experience was expressed very differently than that of the other participants, who began reading
or being read the books in childhood. Henry’s recollections and emotional connections to the story came from important moments, or main characters in the movies. He had less recall of, and placed less importance on, ideas and characters that were omitted from the motion pictures.

Those participants who did experience the books as their introduction to the Harry Potter stories, recalled and connected with characters who were often much more obscure. Details went beyond a scene and involved character development that they connected to their own personal development. This character connection also was apt to change over time as the participant developed.

Many of the participants connected to Hermione, one in the main triad of heroes in the book. While both male and female participants noted that Hermione stood out in the book as a strong and memorable character, many of the female readers connected to Hermione as a strong female role model. This connection continued today for two of the readers – Danielle and Fiona – who utilized Hermione as a talisman or costume that they could don when they needed to be smart, strong, and brave. Fiona even commented on how she when she needs to step up and take a leadership role she says to herself, “Let’s just put on your big-girl pants and be like Hermione.”

Danielle, however, saw her connections to characters change over time. While Hermione was still a strong role model, as Danielle aged and matured, so did her connection to the books and the characters. In her modern life she connected to Snape, a much more conflicted character, but one she appreciated for his “Byronic” qualities. As her life grew more complicated, so too did her understanding of the characters of the book and thus, her respect for some of the difficult choices those characters had to make. As she said:

But I think there’s something to me about a character arc that allows for someone to be vulnerable and human, and I thought he had the most room for growth, in terms of like
from initial perception, both in the books, but also chronologically in his life. To the end, the actions he took were very understandable to me in a way that sometimes Hermione was too mature for her age, and too smart, and too capable, and it didn’t feel real. And he felt more real.

This understanding that life is not as simple as it seems when you are young, and the story of the Harry Potter books is not as clear cut as it seemed at that time, was recognized by several participants. Many of them not only continued to reread and revisit the stories, but they also found ways to analyze them that changed their perspective, although not their connection. Even as their understanding of the flaws and weaknesses of this children’s story became evident to them, they still clung to the Harry Potter universe as an organizing device in their own world.

As Elizabeth said:

I think my view of kind of the Harry Potter series has evolved quite a bit, so it’s hard to really say what I was learning from it directly because I read it when I was so young. But, like, since then I’ve definitely reread portions and listened, like friend fan fiction and sort of various commentaries about it, and that sort of helped take a different sort of approach to it than I originally did because I don’t think I thought very much about it when I was initially reading. Like it was just sort of fun characters and you’re like involved in their world.

**Friends in the Forbidden Forest**

As much as the participants learned of themselves by reading the Harry Potter books, so too did they connect with their peers. When the books first came out, the phenomenon was about the shared nature of the knowledge and experience. As the readers aged, it became a shorthand that could be used to place new people into a context and a connection that explained
how those people may fit into their worldview. As the story progressed, and the readers matured, it expanded beyond its original book form into new friendships and connections.

For many of the interviewees, participating in the Harry Potter phenomenon was almost required in order to fit into the social groups that surrounded them. Knowledge of the stories, attendance at events, and an avowed connection to the Harry Potter universe bought entrance into peer groups. As Brian said:

I started reading them; I think the first two maybe had come out when I started reading them. But from then I was reading them as they came out. And it was a big thing at school; everyone was reading them, so it was always a competition as to who had read it first. Then someone who had read it before you would always end up inadvertently revealing something. But then everyone would talk about it nonstop for months or something.

Danielle had a similar introduction to the books as they went from an individual experience to an important part of her peer experience:

Oh gosh. I think my first experience I was like nine, in like second or third grade, and my stepmother brought the first two books back with her from a trip to the U.K. to visit a friend. And so I read the books, and I didn’t quite get sucked in until some of my friends started reading them as well, and then it very quickly became like going to night premieres for all the movies, and waiting in line for the book releases, and all that. So, like slowly, and then all at once.

This attraction to the Harry Potter books continued to be important in their everyday interactions, helping them make new friends, and organize their friends into categories that they could understand and utilize. This knowledge told them about their friends’ strengths and
weaknesses, and gave them insight into who they would get along with, and who might be more contentious. Catherine discussed this continued interaction around the Harry Potter phenomenon, saying:

And then growing up also with the culture of the movies, because the movies came out in middle school/high school era, and I would go with my friends. So it was a way to connect socially with my friends as well. It’s still to this day a way that we connect. We share memes. We share, you know, funny quotes. My sister, the other day, told me that she took a BuzzFeed quiz and it said she was a Hufflepuff, and she said, “I’m a Gryffindor!” And I was like, “Accept the Puff!” We still talk about it today. It’s very much an integral part of my social life with my friends.

The concept of Harry Potter as a continuing point of connection to peers was raised by Danielle, who said:

Like what a weird thing to sink so much of my time and energy into, is like thinking about the complex realities of people and these houses and what that means. But like I have spent a significant portion, not only of my adolescence, but like my adult life, both thinking about and having conversations with other real humans about this thing. So obviously it’s deeply ingrained somewhere. And it’s something you can pick up and have a conversation with a complete stranger about. As long as they’re vaguely familiar, you have an in.

While this was enough for some participants, and kept them, and continues to keep them, close to those around them, for others this was only the first level of peer interaction. They expanded beyond their geographical peer group into an online universe where they could further explore the Harry Potter stories, themselves, and others.
Wizards, and Muggles, and Quidditch, Oh My!

The Harry Potter books spawned activities and interactions that are integral to the lives of those who participate. These activities and interactions can be in person, such as team sports, concerts and conventions, or virtual through fan fiction, chat rooms and online experiences. The level of participation of individuals ranged from observer to active participant, but no matter the level of participation, it adds to the Harry Potter experience and its importance in the reader’s lives.

As with other experiences surrounding this popular culture phenomenon, these outside interactions ebb and flow, becoming more serious at moments that may or may not have anything to do with the publication of the books or the opening of the movies. While certain online entertainment options were popular mostly during the height of the publication frenzy, others continued. In addition, some of these outside entertainments took on a life of their own, diverging from the Harry Potter books and attracting new participants who had not read the books.

Fiona, who was involved enough in the online community to be invited to be a beta tester for Pottermore.com, had this to say:

Like when it was on Live Journal I used to be involved in those like Live Journal groups where you would just sort of talk about things. But I also, you know, talked about like fan theories, and stuff like that. And I listened to the, like the podcasts when they started happening. And I went to wizard rock concerts, read a lot of fan fiction, wrote some fan fiction; um, yeah, it was all my friends and I talked about.

Brian, who was in a Harry Potter Society in college, started playing quidditch through meeting the captain of his school’s team at a club meeting. After college, he continued to play
on a team, and competed for Ireland at the Quidditch World Cup. Brian said “initially, when it started, it was more sort of Harry Potter related, but as it’s grown, it’s become more of a sport in its own right.” In fact, Brian said, “there’s people who can’t stand Harry Potter who play, but they just love to play sports.”

However, whether someone has read the Harry Potter books or cannot stand them, that choice may have an impact on relationships both on and offline. Catherine had used Harry Potter as an introductory conversation in her online dating life, including with her current boyfriend. She said:

I think, you know what I actually did? I think I asked him, I think I was like, okay, I have an important question for you. Mind you, this is before we had even met like because we’d started chatting online first and I’ve, I’ve gone on dates with people before and been really interested and then find out they either hate Harry Potter or just like are indifferent to it. And it shouldn’t make a difference, but I like stop seeing those people. Just because it’s such a huge part of my life of, this is the core of who I am, and I’m going to be making references and I need you to pick up those references. So, I think I asked him before we even met. I was like, “Are you a Harry Potter fan? I need you to at least be acceptable of the Harry Potter phenomenon.” And he was like, “Absolutely.”

As will be discussed later, this raised red flags when he identified his house selection to Catherine.

**Harry Potter and the Sorting Hat of Life**

One of the discussions with the interviewees was about their thoughts, or lack of, around the Sorting Hat, a device used in the books to place the characters into a house. The protagonists in the Harry Potter books attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. All students who
attend this school are sorted on the first day of school into a house by the Sorting Hat. These four houses – Gryffindor, Slytherin, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw – do more than just decide where the student will sit or sleep during their time in school: the house designation comes with descriptors that designate their strongest traits. The interviewees were questioned on whether they had explored or recognized this sorting system for themselves, both informally and formally, with the addition of the Sorting Hat Quiz on Pottermore.com, and other online sorting tests.

**Who am I?**

Every interviewee, no matter the strength of his or her connection to the Harry Potter phenomenon, had an opinion on the house that they would be in at Hogwarts. All but one of the participants had taken the Sorting Hat Quiz on Pottermore.com, if not additional sorting hat quizzes. However, they did not always agree with their test results, having a strong connection to the house that they claimed as their own. As Fiona said:

So, I was sorted into Ravenclaw. I was on the beta for Pottermore. I was very excited about that. But I always self-identified as a Hufflepuff. And I was actually wearing my full Hufflepuff robes when I took the quiz. So that was a heartbreaking moment.

Due to Fiona’s beta status, it was a year before she could retake the Sorting Hat Quiz, and in that time she reconciled herself to her results, partially because “well, you can’t get resorted at Hogwarts.” However, two other interviewees did admit to retaking the quiz on Pottermore.com when it disagreed with their view, either at the time of the test or later in their development.

Henry’s first experience with the quiz was during free time in school at the behest of his schoolmates. His first result was Slytherin, which he did not agree with as he equated Slytherin with the character Malfoy, and as Henry said, “I’m not that kind of a dick.” When he retook the
test, alone, he was sorted into Gryffindor, but upon reflection he could see that he had traits of both houses.

Unlike Henry, who took the test first for his friends, and then retook it for himself, Catherine retook the Pottermore.com Sorting Hat Quiz at the behest of her friends. She had originally been sorted into Gryffindor, and was proud of being a “courageous, go-get-em type of person.” However, Catherine said:

My friends and I retook the Potter quiz. And because one of my friends was adamant that I was a Hufflepuff, and she was like “You’re not a Gryffindor. This is a lie. Retake it.” So we all retook it, and I got Hufflepuff. And I have recently accepted the ‘Puff,’” and I find it very accurate.

When describing why she now finds Hufflepuff an appropriate house, Catherine said:

So I think Hufflepuff has a really bad rep for being the lazy group. Or, you never want to be a Hufflepuff or the boring or the pushovers. And I think they’re so much more than that. We’re the caregivers. We’re the people that you call at three in the morning when you have a flat tire. We’re the people that are going to stand up to you when you’re backed into a corner. But we’re much more on the nurturing side. We’re much more other-focused that I think other houses tend to be. So, I definitely think that who I’ve turned into as an adult. And that’s definitely how I self-identify. And the description of Hufflepuff is – I’ve accepted it because that’s the who I believe I am now. I don’t think I’m a Gryffindor.

For some participants, their house selection, whether assigned by Pottermore.com or self-selected, was straightforward. As Danielle said:
I think knowing their Hogwarts house is actually really helpful, because I think it lets you know what your strengths are, or at least what you perceive your strengths to be, and it gives you an opportunity to sort of think about what things you’re not bringing to the table or what things you could work more on. Like I identify very strongly as a Slytherin, which has made me, as I’ve gotten older, try to learn more Hufflepuff tendencies, because I think that’s what gets lost, and I think that makes me better.

Danielle did not start with that level of awareness. When she did originally take the quiz to be sorted into a house, she was sorted into Slytherin. To that she said:

I am proud of that. I like…I think we all love to take personality quizzes and learn more about ourselves in that way. But I would have been happy with just about anything. I didn’t have a set result in my mind when I...like some of my friends have very specific, “I’m a Gryffindor forever!” Right? Like, or, “I’m a Hufflepuff forever and I can’t be anything else.” And I identify with quality traits from several of the houses, and so I would have been fairly content with anything but Gryffindor.

Just as the participants’ connection to characters could alter as they matured, some also found that their house connection changed. While characters in the book stayed in one house through graduation, when the participants matured beyond secondary school, some found that their dominant traits shifted, along with their interests. For some, this was a recognition of their true self, not a selection made based upon popularity and peer pressure; for others, it was a shift in their priorities. Often the switch was made with an understanding that they were not rejecting their first house, but opening to embrace another, as well.
Is That All There Is?

Many of the participants felt the pull towards more than one house selection, not wanting to be pigeon-holed. There was an understanding of the duality of personalities, that no one is just one identity. For the interviewees, this was not a decision made expressly by the Sorting Hat, but one based on their inner thoughts and feelings. As Georgina said, who had been sorted in the Sorting Hat Quiz into Ravenclaw:

If I had to pick a house for myself, I probably would have thought it might be Ravenclaw. But then at the same time, then you want to say, “Oh, but I also have elements of all of these other houses, and so this adds up.” So, I think a lot of time, the, like, the characteristics of each house are very one-dimensional and people aren’t.

Fiona was one who was sorted into a different house than her own choice by the Sorting Hat quiz on Pottermore.com. Because she was unable to take the quiz again for at least another year she used this time to get over her heartbreak on being sorted into a house other than the one she had sorted herself into. Upon reflection she said:

I really admired the Hufflepuff traits of sort of like fairness and hard work and loyalty. And those are things that I do still really feel like are very important to me. But, as more of like, you know, as I’ve started to do my university degree, and then my master’s degree, I feel like education and knowledge, just for, you know, knowledge for the sake of knowledge is also a very worthwhile aim. So, I think the Ravenclaw is more about, like, what I do, whereas, the Hufflepuff traits were more about what I wanted to be.

This reflection did not require a change in test results or an unexpected result; in fact, Abigail, who is the one participant who never took the Sorting Hat Quiz on Pottermore.com, still had thoughts about her house membership, defining herself by her personal development. She
thought at the time of reading the books that she would have seen herself as a Ravenclaw, but now she considers herself more of a Hufflepuff. She explained the difference this way:

I think I was younger, I was a lot more into school, I was kind of the nerdy one, so I think I related with the idea like the, kind of nerdy, more academically focused group. But now that I’m older I think I have taken on a more relaxed personality. So, yeah, I mean, I think Hufflepuff is where I would see myself now.

Being attracted to more than one house was discussed by Danielle in context with a fan theory about the books. She said:

There’s a particular fan theory drifting around somewhere on the internet that talks about the three people in the Golden Trio who are all Gryffindor really should have been in a different house. You know, Hermione should have been in Ravenclaw if we’re going by like the base traits of Ravenclaw, Harry should been in Slytherin according to the Hat, and Ron was definitely a Hufflepuff. But they were put in Gryffindor for whatever reason, and so that kind of…these very specific categories that can be subverted with the knowledge that people are more complex than that. You can’t just put on the scarf and be like a specific person.

Henry in fact did feel a similar sort of pull that Harry had in the book, being torn between Slytherin and Gryffindor. Whereas Harry chose not to be in Slytherin, Henry would let the Sorting Hat decide. He said:

I think I would be very much like Harry. It [the Sorting Hat] was where it’s torn between Gryffindor and Slytherin, and it’s not exactly sure where I belong. And it would be an interesting toss up, considering I have no predisposition to be in either one. So I kind of just would let it sit there and be confused for a minute.
While Henry wanted the answer of an outside source of his house identification because he did not feel a strong pull one way or another, Danielle would prefer to know someone’s house affiliation from their own opinion, and not an online quiz. She said:

I think if I was in charge of a team or a study group or a project, I would want to know everybody’s…And I wouldn’t necessarily want to know what the sorting hat on *Pottermore* put them into, I’d want to know, “How do you identify?” “What would you put yourself into?” Because this lets me know the role that they would rather play, I think.

Catherine even put it like this when discussing the relationship between she and her boyfriend:

Like I would definitely think that I’m a Hufflepuff/Gryffindor, way more on the Hufflepuff side I would say is probably 70/30; whereas he’s probably a good 60/40 between Slytherin and Ravenclaw. He’s very intelligent, very methodical, very creative. But he has that side that he’s not afraid to get aggressive and to get passionate about something.

The usefulness of not being just one thing, or having a team of just one identity was recognized by Henry, who said:

You know, a team full of Gryffindors would all be butting heads with each other over what is the best way to go about this, until the strongest of them all stood up and said, “I win, I’m right.”

This idea that duality and diversity are important arose with many of the participants, and they could account for it in their lives, as they did identify themselves and label others.
Who Are You?

House selection and identification had larger implications for the lives of the participants. The participants used house identification to assist them in forming expectations about people they encountered. It was even integral to their interactions in intimate relationships. Elizabeth, who made her friends “get sorted after they started dating” put it quite bluntly, saying:

I would just say like I guess I still consider it quite, like the house system especially, quite influential in my thinking, because you know, we love to categorize people. And so like there’s all those like Myers-Briggs personality tests. And like, in my mind, it’s just the house system, so I just have everyone sorted.

This idea of sorting people into their houses was a major theme across the interviews. Even Abigail, who did not take the Sorting Hat Quiz, when asked if she ever met anyone and thought to herself that they were “such a Slytherin” answered with an emphatic “Yes!”

The participants expressed ways that this categorization could be used in positive ways. Catherine, who has said to someone “You’re such a Ravenclaw,” said:

I think if I was in charge of a team or a study group or a project, I would want to know everybody’s [house], and I would necessarily want to know what the Sorting Hat on Pottermore put them into, I’d want to know, “How do you identify? What would you put yourself into?” Because it lets me know the role they would rather play, I think.

However, Catherine almost did not date her boyfriend due to his house identity. When she learned that he associated with being a Slytherin “My red flags went off, ‘Don’t do it! Red flags! He’s crazy!’” He had to convince her of the positive aspects he saw of being a Slytherin and re-educate her on the prejudices she had formed around his house selection.
On the other hand, Danielle, who like Catherine’s boyfriend was sorted into Slytherin, had a slightly different take on Gryffindor, which was Catherine’s original house. She said:

So I think I do associate someone comforting someone who is in need, or accepting someone who feels lefts out, or being quieter and more in the background, all with Hufflepuff, because those were consistently character traits that were shown throughout. And then I think I would also say that self-preservation and drive and interest in tradition, or like interest in the way things have always been done I definitely associate with Slytherin, for good or for bad. And I think for Gryffindor, again, I can’t, they’re reckless, I just, they’re even the other Gryffindors we get to know, the whole quidditch team, they’re constantly falling off their brooms, and like running into the Forbidden Forest, and getting into fights in the hallways because they just like saying mouthy things to Slytherins in particular. And I’m like, “Well, you know if you say something mouthy they’re going to hex you. Like why is this a surprise to you?”

Danielle also noted that it is not just her opinion of someone’s thoughts about their Hogwarts house that are useful, but how they feel about their house can also offer insights about how they see themselves and others. She said:

It’s an easy shortcut to… Like when I meet new people, one of my favorite… You know, you always end up talking about values in some way when you’re meeting new people and getting to know them. And one of the ways that I like to get to know new people at parties is to be like, “Well, what Hogwarts House are you in?” And I can tell a lot by their answer to the question. If they say it and they’re proud, if they say it and they’re kind of ashamed, if they’re not sure. And always in the explanation I learn something. You know anyone who says like, “I’m a Slytherin!”[confidently] Like, oh, okay. And
anyone who says like, “I’m a Hufflepuff,” [diffidently] and seems like insecure about it, I’m like, oh, okay. And that like lets me know where they are with their perceptions of the houses too. Which I don’t know what that says about me, that that’s like how I get to know people at parties.

While Danielle questioned her own use of the Hogwarts houses, overall, the majority of the interviewees noted that they label themselves and others and used this information in their current lives and relationships. Catherine recognized that the use of the labels from the Harry Potter books was not something that necessarily began in the first encounters with the book but, became “more developed as you age.” In fact, she said:

And I think we naturally label people as things. And I think we do this naturally in our head. But when you think about the underlying descriptions of the house that I just said, they easily – you can pick out people in your life who fit those categorizations, and you can assume what type of leaders they would be based on what they are. And I think that goes back to their core of a human. Like for example, my core of a human is service to others. It always has been and it probably always will be. That very, very, very much aligns with the Hufflepuff values. And that tends to be how I lead. It’s very much: “What can I do for you? How can I get this done for you? Do you need anything?” Not: “How can I better myself? How can I push myself to be more?” And also not – I’m not a methodical person. I am going to jump at the opportunity to do something. But I’m going to jump at the opportunity to do something for someone else.

The participants each used slightly different language in their descriptions of the houses, but the overall schema they were using to label themselves and others had clear similarities, demonstrated in the tables below.
Table 3

**Gryffindor Schema**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bravery</th>
<th>Brave</th>
<th>Heroic</th>
<th>Courageous</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>Vocal</td>
<td>Confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brash</td>
<td>Reckless</td>
<td>Risk Taker</td>
<td>Face Fears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly</td>
<td>Extroverts</td>
<td>Proud</td>
<td>Loyal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People-driven</td>
<td>Overt</td>
<td>Doers</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>Selfish</td>
<td>Cocky</td>
<td>Concerned with Cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dive in Head First</td>
<td>Raw Charisma</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

**Hufflepuff Schema**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conscientious</th>
<th>Fairness</th>
<th>Hard Work</th>
<th>Loyalty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of Others</td>
<td>Supportive</td>
<td>Kind</td>
<td>Concerned with Individual Team Members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chill</td>
<td>Party House</td>
<td>Lazy</td>
<td>Boring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Good Followers</td>
<td>Good Heart</td>
<td>Good Intentions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introverts</td>
<td>People-driven</td>
<td>Quiet</td>
<td>Caregivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other-focused</td>
<td>People-focused</td>
<td>Nurturing</td>
<td>Service to Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>Meek</td>
<td>Pushovers</td>
<td>Relaxed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Relaxed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

**Ravenclaw Schema**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analytical</th>
<th>Data-driven</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accomplished</td>
<td>Smart</td>
<td>Methodical</td>
<td>Intelligent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has a Vision</td>
<td>Process-driven</td>
<td>Mad Chemist</td>
<td>Creative Problem Solvers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Averse</td>
<td>Snooty</td>
<td>Know-it-all</td>
<td>Too Smart for Their Own Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemotional</td>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>Nerdy</td>
<td>Value Intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think through Situations</td>
<td>Analyze Pros and Cons</td>
<td>Quiet</td>
<td>Academically-focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researchers</td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6

*Slytherin Schema*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cunning</th>
<th>Political</th>
<th>Conscientious</th>
<th>Individual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kind of a Dick</td>
<td>Enjoy Causing Problems</td>
<td>Ambition</td>
<td>Not Giving a Crap what Others Think</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results-driven</td>
<td>Charismatic</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Mean When Necessary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-preservation</td>
<td>Self-Absorbed</td>
<td>Resourceful</td>
<td>Individually Focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mischievous</td>
<td>Villain</td>
<td>Prankster</td>
<td>Calculating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Extroverts</td>
<td>Smart</td>
<td>Selfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sneaky</td>
<td>Conniving</td>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>Passionate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruthless</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Harry Potter and the Power of Popular Culture**

The fantasy world of the Harry Potter books connected to its readers by following the path of their own lives and development. It connected to their feelings of love, life, and who they were and wanted to be. The interviewees had other fictional influences that they called upon when learning life lessons, most of them from the fantasy realm. The fantasy of these texts drew them in, but what they were looking for, was help with reality, help with how to exist in their own lives and skin.

**The Reality in Fantasy**

No one outwardly recognized the pull of fantasy on their popular culture decisions. In fact, when Georgina was asked about what she read to learn about the world, she at first discussed “traditional media” and when she expounded on some of her fictional choices, she selected more political fiction. However upon contemplation, she found that the fantasy of the Harry Potter books more closely aligned with her worldview, than more serious adult political fiction. Georgina found the “political” novels less helpful in “conceptualizing…political goings-on” than the Harry Potter books, which to her “feel more realistic and plausible.”
Overall though, when asked about their popular culture influences, the primary genre mentioned was fantasy. Many participants brought up the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which was another popular culture phenomenon that was popular in their youth, when the story was reintroduced beyond the books with a number of epic movies. When discussing their role models and influential fictional leaders, those characters came from science fiction and television shows, young adult fantasy fiction, and even fantasy-based video games. The participants could even connect the Harry Potter books to their newer fantasy popular culture influences. When asked about the leadership style of Robb Stark from *Game of Thrones*, Henry compared Robb Stark right back to Harry Potter himself, saying:

Harry. It would be more like Harry. Because he did try to use, he did send his mother as an envoy, and he knew that she was very skilled at dealing with the court, with the ladies, and the lords at court, and being, you know, very political-minded. Whereas he was more of the, “I am the young leader and I know what I’m doing, I think, so let’s go forward.” Then he also has the impulsive side that Harry kind of has, where he’ll run off on his own and do his own thing. Only Robb kinda did it as, he went off and got married and then kind of blew up an alliance because of that. But he did, they both of them have that, you know, impulsive, “I can do this myself” streak, and then they realize they actually do need the help of their team, and Robb dies and Harry does die, only to be brought back to life. I still kind of think that’s cheating, but okay.

The participants here utilized fantasy stories for their lessons on how to live their lives and how to process the world around them. They also utilized the stories for the role models that they contain who offered an example to follow, or not.
The Search for Role Models - Female Role Models

The participants learned lessons about both what to do and what not to do, from reading the Harry Potter books. They used these lessons in their own lives to craft interactions in the world. Certain characters had more of an impact than others, both for good and bad. Of the three main protagonists, both Harry and Ron were mentioned for both their good and bad life lessons. The same could be said of most of the instructors at Hogwarts. However, while the dearth of female role models in the book was noted, on the whole they were all highly regarded, as previously noted about Hermione.

When discussing other fictional influences, many of the female participants noted their search for stories with female leads, characters that they could use as role models in their lives. In addition to Hermione, who was one of the few female, main characters in the Harry Potter books, participants sought out strong female characters in other fantasy books they encountered. Abigail, who did not connect well with the Harry Potter series, did find a connection in another young adult fantasy series, the Old Kingdom series by Garth Nix. While she connected to “the teenage drama side of things,” she also said:

It’s basically the books have different main characters who all tend to be young women who are kind of tested into their challenges and situations, involving, like, the three zombies I guess, long story short. I think those resonated with me more, I think probably because the main characters are four women, and you know, like, them, females.

Danielle also found role models in fantasy novels focused around female characters. She said:

I loved Tamora Pierce’s fantasy novels when I was a child. She had like a girl who wanted to be a knight, you know. And she had one girl who was the first female knight,
and then she did another set of books that was like the girl who was the first female knight after it was acceptable and allowed, and the differences between their two experiences and the differences in their leadership styles because of it, right. So I think I would associate Tamora Pierce books a lot with leadership.

Elizabeth discussed what she found similar between the multiple fantasy series she mentioned, all written by women, who had a female character as the main protagonist. She said:

I think usually they’re kind of conveyed as the stereotypical like strong female character, so they can all like, yeah, kick ass and take names. And they’re, they tend to be like characters who aren’t considered very feminine and sort of, but because they’re growing up in difficult situations. They haven’t, like, they’ve learned various skills and stuff that you don’t commonly see associated with women in like literature and movies, so like in *Hunger Games* archery. And in Mercedes Thompson she’s a mechanic, so tends to be sort of someone of outside the social norms who comes in to be like the big hero.

This concept that you do not have to fit norms, or as a female, be weak, was also part of the strength of the Harry Potter series, especially compared to the weakness of another fantasy popular culture phenomenon that occurred during these millennials’ youth. Danielle compared her reaction to the *Twilight* series to how she viewed Harry Potter, saying:

But as a young child, even not really understanding leadership, or feminism, or whatever you want to prioritize, I was a young child who was getting picked on all the time at school. I didn’t know how to look at this woman who was like letting everybody tell her what to do and like couldn’t do anything by herself. You know, you put something like that next to something like Harry Potter, where everybody is capable. By the end of the
series everybody has shown that they are capable of doing things by themselves and succeeding. Everyone.

**Conclusion**

The concept that a popular culture artifact can influence the social identity of young adults was behind this exploration of the role the Harry Potter phenomenon has played for the millennial generation who grew up alongside those books. Eight phenomenological interviews can only begin to provide the data needed to answer the questions asked within, but Danielle believed that she was not alone in her embrace of the Harry Potter books. She said:

Yeah, I suspect that I’m not. My peer group would suggest that I’m not. Because even when I got to college, like I grew up with these books. I had this community with my friends from childhood. I had a new sort of nerd community in high school that also read Harry Potter. But even when I got to college and we’d be doing icebreakers in the dorms, it’d be like, “Well, what’s your patronus?” or, “What Hogwarts house are you in?” or you know. It’s so much a part of the lexicon and the culture now that, even if someone has never actually read the books they know what you mean. And like they probably know their Hogwarts house. Like they probably do. Someone has told them at some point. Even if they have not like gone out of their way to find it, I suspect that someone in their life has been like, “Oh, you’re such a Gryffindor!” at some point.
Chapter Five: Summary of Findings

This study asked the question: How does the experience of reading the Harry Potter books affect the social identity of the millennial consumers? To answer the question, the researcher approached the subjects using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the research methodology, due to its ability to explore participants’ worldviews (J. A. Smith, 1996), given a study that requires “complexity” or “novelty” with flexibility and in depth study (J. A. Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 27). In their semi-structured interviews participants shared their experience with the Harry Potter books and how those experiences may have spread beyond the original text into their social identity development.

The findings of this study look to provide insight into the social identity that millennials may bring to the classroom and workplace through their interaction with popular culture artifacts (PCA). This chapter will discuss and interpret how the analysis of the interviews and the emergent themes relate to the study’s theoretical framework and literature review. In addition, the significance of the findings on interested parties and future research will be addressed.

Discussion and Interpretation of the Findings

No matter the level of education or prior exposure to a subject in the classroom, students are never a blank slate (Bransford et al., 1999; Giroux & Simon, 1989). Students bring with them a history, both real and fictional, that has provided them with positive and negative views especially in areas that involve human interactions and social cognition (Bruner, 1990; Feldman et al., 1990; Johnson-Laird, 1983; Komives et al., 2005; Lively & Bromley, 1973). These experiences help to create their social identity as it pertains to both their own identity, and their views on others (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Miscenko & Day, 2016; Reynolds & Subasic, 2016).
Social identity theory (SIT) draws upon social psychology (Hammack, 2008) and has been a main driver in the last twenty years of identity research (Ashforth, 2016; Jenkins, 2008; Miscenko & Day, 2016), with its strong emphasis in social cognition (Hogg et al., 2004). Social cognition is defined as the concept that the culture that surrounds an individual, helps guide them, in how they examine and interpret the information they encounter in their development (Bruner, 1990; Hala, 1997; Higgins, 1981; Kosslyn & Kagan, 1981).

Part of the reason that no student enters the classroom as a blank slate, is because the mind does not like to perceive information as new, as that can be overwhelming (Feldman et al., 1990; Lingle, Altom, & Medin, 1984). Cultural pedagogy recognizes this developmental cultural education, that occurs outside of the formal classroom learning experience (Ellsworth, 2005; Giroux & McLaren, 1992; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997). Cultural pedagogy further recognizes the interactive dialogue that occurs between popular culture texts and those who interact with them, particularly youth participants (Brooks, 2006; Fiske, 1989a; Hermes, 2005; Hobbs, 1989; Trend, 1982). Whether used in the classroom or encountered externally, popular culture’s intent is not, nor should it be, education, however, the storytelling nature allows for emotional connections to be made (Callahan & Rosser, 2007; Cummins, 2007; McMahon & Bramhall, 2004; O’Keefe, 2003; Rajendran & Andrew, 2014; Weiner, 2001) and for the user to find their own understanding, whether implicitly or explicitly (Bettelheim, 1976; Gierzynski & Eddy, 2013).

The storytelling in popular culture provides an opportunity for the reader to make sense of the story without consideration for whether the story is based in reality or fantasy (Auvinen, Aaltio, & Blomqvist, 2013; Callahan et al., 2007; Phillips, 1995), in fact, whether the story is real or not does not lessen the impact of the PCA (Bruner, 1990). Stories place knowledge in

While the overarching idea behind this study, is the concept that popular culture artifacts are impactful in creating social identity, specifically this study is examining the impact of the Harry Potter books as the PCA examined here. The Harry Potter books were chosen due to their large-scale popular culture impact that is quantifiable through book sales and movie revenue (Stetka, 2014; Tucker, 1999). This allows for the analysis of the interview data for not only individual impacts, but also for group trends and findings. This was served by the two aims of the interpretative phenomenological analysis process, as it allowed for participants to express their personal relationship to the phenomena, followed by a deeper analysis that allowed for an exploration of the social and cultural context (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

The findings of the study encompassed three main themes. The first theme was the search for belonging, which included the developmental connections that the participants made to the books and the people around them, through their shared Harry Potter experience. The second theme involved the adoption of the Hogwarts Sorting Hat, a social identification tool. The adoption of the Hogwarts houses allowed for the participants to form personal social identities, even if they might question or alter them with age and reflection, and also provided a tool for labeling others. The final theme was the use of popular culture artifacts for the purpose of navigating the world. Here the participants embraced fantasy PCAs as a learning tool, and searched for role models, both in and outside of the Harry Potter books. Each of the sub-themes is explored below.
What if I Went to Hogwarts?

Part of the enjoyment of reading is imagining yourself as a part of the story. All but one of the participants of this study read the Harry Potter series throughout their childhoods, beginning in elementary school, and graduating high school along with the characters in the books. As the characters in the books progressed through their childhoods – making friends, suffering pain and loss, celebrating triumphs, and dealing with the tedium of school and home life – so too did the young millennials who were following along. Developmentally, the characters of the books and the participants of this study were both following the same path, and in the end both were working to answer the question “Who am I?” in their search for identity. For the majority of interviewees here, there was a connection to the Harry Potter stories, because despite its fantasy setting, the trials and tribulations of the characters, also had a realistic tone that the readers could relate to, as they were dealing with many of the same adolescent concerns. Thus, it is not hard for the consumer to put themselves in the shoes of the characters of the books, and see themselves as students of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft andWizardry, with an identity formed in their Hogwarts house selection.

According to Bruner (1990), popular culture provides users with shared meanings and ideas that encourage societal participation and communication. Further, Reeder, Pryor, and Wojciszke (1992) found that the younger the participant, the greater the usage of social cognition, as a tool to explain and conceptualize the surrounding environment. Young people are not victims of popular culture, but utilize it through interactive dialogue with the texts to shape the world around them (Brooks, 2006; Fiske, 1989a; Hermes, 2005; Hobbs, 1998; Trend, 1992). Just as the participants in this study utilized the Harry Potter books to navigate their lives as they developed throughout adolescence, they continue to use the information today.
The more a user adopts a text beyond their initial interaction, the more that text becomes a part of their social and moral development (Bruner, 1990; Coutu, 2006). Initially, the draw to a PCA can be because of the developmental connection between the reader and characters (Bettelheim, 1976), as found in the Harry Potter books, where the aging and development of the characters often happened along with the readers of the books, allowing the readers to find understanding in their own growth along the way (Grimes, 2002). This connection to the character’s developmental process mirrored the reader’s developmental process and was recognized as a draw to the Harry Potter books by the study participants, as it aided their own lived experience. This was echoed by the pop culture digital editor of The Washington Post who wrote an article on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the first Harry Potter book that noted the timelines of the book and her life and that of her peers often aligned, helping her to deal with death, depression, and other issues of pain, and friendship (Moore, 2017).

Chappell (2012) and Mills (2003) both noted that the traits of the Hogwarts houses are established at the beginning of the Harry Potter series, but the development and demonstration of what these traits mean, occurs throughout the books with the development of the characters in these books. This demonstrates the power of storytelling to teach those who are immersed in the narrative, how to live their lives while working with others through building trust and while in conflict, as well as in other situations that can be encountered in the real world (Auvinen, Aaltio, & Blomqvist, 2013; Harris & Barnes, 2006; Phillips, 1995). It was further found here that in the revisiting of the story as the readers continued to develop beyond the age of the characters in the books, they continued to utilize the lessons presented and the identities discovered, but through new lenses, allowing for reflection and revision.
Friends in the Forbidden Forest

To the young millennial readers of the Harry Potter books, the experience of reading the books and their continued relationship to the Harry Potter story has been used to navigate their peer relationships, both in retaining and making friends. All eight of the participants connect their relationship with the Harry Potter books with their relationship with their peer groups, all from their initial encounters with the series, but many through their current relationships, both friendly and romantic. Initially this demonstrates the power of storytelling. While storytelling is a dialogue between the consumer and the text (Bakhtin, 1981; de Certeau, 2006), the consumption of that text is active and productive (Fiske, 1989b; Grossberg, 1992). However, storytelling is not a solo activity, it is a “collective act” (Kaye & Jacobson, 1999, p. 46) that conveys emotions, memories, and insight into the collective (Danko, 2003; Yoder-Wise & Kowalski, 2003).

As the participants continue to utilize the Harry Potter books as the foundation for relationships, both new and continuing, this begins to demonstrate the connection of social identity theory with the experience of reading and embracing this popular culture phenomenon. As Ashforth and Mael (1989) established, “social identification stems from the categorization of individuals, the distinctiveness and prestige of the group, the salience of outgroups, and the factors that traditionally are associated with group formation” (p. 20). This fits in with the interviewees responses of labeling and identifying those around them as similar or different, and utilizing that information to form friendships and organize those around them.

If public pedagogy supports the idea that social norms are passed through the “family, school, religion, and the workplace” (Hickey-Moody, Savage, & Windle, 2010, p. 228), then the
findings of this study demonstrate that the strength of connection to those institutions aid in the strength of the socialization process. Further, the connection that the user has to the text and the outside influence that is exerted to continue that connection, can lead to an expansion from the original ideas into an ownership that deviates from the original story. This is seen in the participants who use their connection to the Harry Potter books to form further connections, through the fandom community and as an icebreaker to create a common language in new situations and relationships. These relationship builders are a form of “participatory culture” that allows for greater reflection and meaning to develop as the information presented is reimagined and reinvented (Borah, 2004, p. 344).

**Wizards, and Muggles, and Quidditch, Oh My!**

When a popular culture artifact grows as impactful as the Harry Potter books have, page and screen are often not enough for the consumers and they co-opt the story for themselves, creating their own expanded content. For the participants of this study, that content included fan fiction and clubs and organizations that allowed them to continue their relationship to the Harry Potter series in new ways. Often these new experiences created new social identities that attracted both Harry Potter consumers and non-readers of the Harry Potter books, who found connection in these new activities. According to Callahan, Whitener, and Sandlin (2007), “we are not simply passive recipients of popular culture, rather, audiences have agency to reject dominant meanings and re-create or produce their own meanings from popular culture” (p. 156). The Harry Potter books have spawned multiple outlets that have taken on a life of their own outside of the initial relationship between consumer and text.
According to Green and Guinery (2004), being an active member of a fan community is an identity itself. They quote Hearn, Mandeville, and Anthony, who said, that a “central assertion of postmodern views of consumption, is that social identity can be interpreted as a function of consumption” (2004). This is especially true of those who were active in the online communities, writing and reading fan fiction, and participating in the speculation of plot lines as the story was developing, or analyzing the stories that had already been presented. For this study’s participants who found identity in the online communities, either in the creation or the consumption of new material and story analysis, this extension of the Harry Potter world both grounded them in the sense of belonging and continues to be utilized in their developmental growth through continuing analysis and reflection.

However, while being active in the Harry Potter community can allow access to outside opportunities, it is not a requirement, as we learned from Brian, whose Harry Potter fandom brought him to playing quidditch competitively, with team members who are both Harry Potter fans and those who want nothing to do with the J. K. Rowling story. Just as the online communities could take on a life of their own outside of the books (Green & Guinery, 2004), so too did the game of quidditch spread to create its own identity outside of the books, on school campuses and beyond; drawing players from both Harry Potter fans and from those just interested in a new sport, and not reading. It has demonstrated though, that for some the connection to the books has become an important identifier for establishing relationships. Not being familiar with the Harry Potter story can establish someone as being in an “outgroup” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 20) and thus, someone who is less desirable as a friend or colleague.
Who Am I?

While the readers of the books were developing their identities along with the books’ characters, there was one aspect of the books that was found here to be most meaningful in creating the interviewees social identity – the Hogwarts’ houses. These were a solid identity schema that the participants adopted into their own lives to help define themselves and others. Different developmental processes have been shown to be impacted by popular culture, including psychosocial development (Brooks, 2006), identity formation (Dolby, 2003; Wright, 2007), and social identity (Fiske, 1989a). Duffett (2013) found that popular culture artifacts are used by their consumers to construct their personal identities. Fairy tales and children’s literature in particular contribute to the sensemaking process of both people and the world around them (Bettelheim, 1976; O’Keefe, 2003). According to Bettelheim (1976), “the question for the child is not “Do I want to be good?” but “Who do I want to be like?” (p. 10). In the Harry Potter books, the readers did not just choose a character that they wanted to be like, or that they related to, they chose a house – Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, or Slytherin – that they most related to, a social identity that gave them an in-group, and also told them who were the “out-groups” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 20).

Social identity theory answers the questions “Who am I?,” “Who are we?,” and “Who are they?” (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000, p. 13). By utilizing comparison (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), social identities can be formed through the development of prototypes or schema (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Miscenko & Day, 2016). These schema, such as the schema created out of the four houses of Hogwarts, allows for both self and group identification (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Every study participant was found here, no matter the strength of their connection to the Harry Potter books, to see themselves in the Hogwarts houses. They internalized the traits of each
house, giving them a schema and then equated their own skills and traits to those in the book. This relationship, in many cases, was verified by the participant taking The Sorting Hat quiz on Pottermore.com. However, in some cases the online quiz countered their initial connection, which required reflection, followed by either an embrace or rejection of the quiz results.

**Is That All There Is?**

While some of the participants were swayed by their Pottermore.com quiz results, often a contradictory result from a quiz, or a comment from a person, would set in motion a period of reflection that resulted in a recognition that a person could have multiple identities. Interviewees recognized that they were both able to be more than one identity at a time, though some aspect might be more dominant and/or their identity could change as their personality and interests developed.

According to Trend (1992), through ever-changing interpretation and circumstance, the relationship with texts is constantly developing. While this can be because popular culture impacts consumers on a conscious and unconscious level (Thompson, 2007), it is also because in this passive learning relationship the more enjoyment found in the encounter, the more susceptible the reader is to the messages contained (Gierzynski & Eddy, 2013). Further, there is pleasure found in making knowledge personal, rather than accepting the ready-made meanings (Fiske, 1989b). One participant showed the evidence of this, in her noting an online analysis of the Harry Potter protagonists and how each of them should have been in a different house than they were sorted into in the books. If the characters in the book could be more complicated than a single schema, of course, the same could be true of the participants.
No matter how readers relate to a popular culture text, “fiction is not empirical truth” (Oatley, 1999, p. 101). This allows the readers to impose their own emotional connections to the story (Callahan, Whitener, & Sandlin, 2007; Oatley, 1999), and as they age and develop to incorporate and recognize complexity and ambiguity (Bettelheim, 1976; Coutu, 2006). As Hess (2008) said, “The Harry Potter books succeed in creating quite a lot of ambiguity and ambivalence, specifically in regard to what constitutes and characterizes “the enemy”” (p. 51).

This developmental recognition of ambiguity, whether triggered by The Sorting Hat quiz or just by the passage of time, did find many of the participants embracing either their change from a belief in membership in one house to another, or a recognition of the inherent dichotomies found in humans, that mean that they can be more than one thing. This idea was strengthened by the books that also acknowledged the duality in its characters, such as the fact that Harry could have been sorted into Slytherin, but chose not to be, and was instead placed in Gryffindor (Rowling, 1998). This did not mean he did not have the ability to be great in Slytherin, and thus had some of their traits, it just meant that he was emphasizing, or de-emphasizing, Slytherin characteristics in favor of those of Gryffindor.

Similarly, many of those interviewed found that if their allegiance to a house changed with age, it did not mean that they lost the connections and traits of their initial house, but that they had developmentally adjusted to emphasize new aspects of their personality. Further, they also recognized that just because characters in the books might be bad, that did not mean that the traits and schema of the house itself were bad, and it was okay to embrace those traits, or embrace someone who did, as Catherine did with her boyfriend, an avowed Slytherin.
Who Are You?

The relationship of the interviewees to the Harry Potter books and their own identity did not stop at themselves, as with social identity theory, they also labeled others. Even those who were interviewed who claimed to have less of a relationship to the Harry Potter series than their peers, still had a strong reaction to the recognition that they classify the people around them by their Hogwarts house. Social identity theory is a three-step process that includes “social categorization, social identification, and social comparison” (Chiang et al., 2017, p. 781). The concept of self-categorization includes not only the collective self, but also a group comparison (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). This group comparison can set up a dynamic of in-group and out-group, which allows for motives of self-esteem and uncertainty reduction (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Hogg et al., 2004). This can lead to stereotyping (Hogg & Reid, 2006) which is a form of schema.

The participants in this study used the stereotypical schema of the Hogwarts houses to categorize those around them. This was often a conscious choice; a question that they asked, or an assumption that they applied in their everyday relationships, both casual and intimate. Often this was seen as a useful tool, like the “Myers-Briggs personality tests,” according to Elizabeth. Identifying someone else’s Hogwarts house was viewed as just as important as acknowledging your own house affiliation to the majority of the interviewees.

The Reality in Fantasy

The participants of this study were attracted to both the fantasy and the reality of the Harry Potter books, and when asked about other influential popular culture artifacts in their life,
the majority mentioned were also from fantasy platforms. According to Callahan, Whitener, and Sandlin (2007)

Storytelling has been a vehicle for teaching, learning, and sensemaking throughout history; one need only think of epic tales such as Beowulf or the Odyssey to be reminded of lessons taught through stories. Because of the important role they play in community learning, sensemaking, and communication, these stories are embedded in our popular culture, and indeed are vehicles for transmitted that culture (p. 156).

J. K. Rowling followed in these great traditions, not breaking new fantasy ground, but using the great British fantasy authors of Roald Dahl and Enid Blyton as a foundation (Brooks, 2008).

It should be of no surprise when the participants of this study were asked for other popular culture artifacts that they could look to having an impact on their lives, the majority of answers surrounded other fantasy properties. Further, the one participant who did note that she read more realistic fiction for what she thought would be life lessons, found that she related more to the fantasy of the Harry Potter books for a comparison to, and lessons about, her reality.

The choices mentioned among the interviewees varied. The only repetition of text was The Lord of the Rings, another popular culture phenomenon that occurred during the adolescence of these millennials, with the release of the movies. Beyond that, participants referenced science fiction and fantasy television shows, books, and even video games that they reached for or utilized, when making life decisions or contemplating who they would like to be, and who they would like to be like.

Harry Potter books perfectly fit the mold of the fantasy fairy tale (Damour, 2003; Grimes, 2002; Ostry, 2003). Fairy tales have been shown to be a perfect mode for personality
development, due to their age-appropriate approach to difficult life lessons (Bettelheim, 1976; Grimes, 2002; O’Keefe, 2003). They present “universal archetypes” (Grimes, 2002, p. 91) that can be understood by readers of all ages.

The Search for Role Models - Female Role Models

While the Harry Potter books offered identity schema in the Hogwarts houses, it also offered characters for the readers to relate to and look up to. The character mentioned the most in this study, with its majority female participants, was the only female protagonist, Hermione Granger. However, they also noted that there was a lack of female role models and main characters in the books, and thus they often had to look elsewhere for characters to fill that gap.

One of the archetypes that the participants were looking for in their popular culture choices outside of the Harry Potter books were sources of role models, including strong female roles models. Just as some of the interviewees talked about using Hermione as a role and inspiration that they could use at a time when they had to take on their own leadership opportunities, so too did many of the participants look to popular culture artifacts with strong leads, particularly strong female leads. This demonstrates the strength of popular culture in “shaping how students view themselves and their own relations” (Giroux & Simon, 1989b, p. 221). It furthers the understanding that popular culture and storytelling provides inspiration, motivation, understanding, and focus to consumers who immerse themselves in the narrative, and through that experience, they receive much more than the original tale (Auvinen, Aaltio, & Blomqvist, 2013; Harris & Barnes, 2006; Phillips, 1995).

In forming their identity, adolescents are looking for archetypes to emulate. It goes back to the question of “Who am I?” One of the ways people answer this, is by comparing
themselves to others. This too can change, as people age and develop. As seen here, an attraction to Hermione can change from one of admiration, to a view that she is too perfect, and thus a character with more open flaws is more relatable. But access to a multitude of archetypes is necessary, and if not found, the participants have stated they will go searching.

**Implications and Recommendations**

While the concept of social identity is a personal one, as we know from Ashforth (2016), it carries with it “biodata” (p. 364), which can be utilized on a more practical basis. Personality assessments, like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, have been in use since World War II (Wikipedia, 2017). Readers of the Harry Potter books have adopted the Hogwarts’ house system as their very own personality assessment, that they use and so can those around them.

**Implications and Recommendations for Education**

While the millennials are about to be overtaken in traditional college educational environments by the next generation, they do remain in the system as non-traditional students and in the graduate education system. Further, while the next generation, Generation Z, may not have had the all-inclusive popular culture experience of the millennials, they are still regular consumers of the Harry Potter books and media. Thus, it would make sense for college educators to pay attention to this identity forming popular culture artifact.

**Classroom Curriculum.** Rosser (2007) and Tucker (1999) have already established the usefulness of the Harry Potter books as a lesson in the classroom. The movies, through their storytelling, like other fictional popular culture artifacts, convey messages that make information more real and relatable (Bolton, 2016; Das, 2016; Hall, 2003; Lively & Bromley, 1973; Rustin, 2016; Sanyal & Dasgupta, 2017). However, the recent turn in “Harry Potter Studies” Das, 2016,
away from textual analysis and towards an exploration of the “real, lived accounts of young people’s experiences” (Ras, 2016, p. 344), allows for an expansion of the use of the Harry Potter books from simply a teaching tool to a developmental tool. This presents the opportunity for not just a presentation on an outside topic and how the Harry Potter books make that information relatable, but a personal exploration of strengths and weaknesses of self and others, and how that can be applied in the real world.

**Developmental Exploration Tool.** The participants here acknowledged that Harry Potter is being used informally as an icebreaker in residence halls and on college campuses. In their textual analysis of the Harry Potter books, exploring the Sorting Hat as an identity formation tool for the books’ characters Bahn et al. (2017) recognized that “The Sorting Hat can be an ideal model for finding one’s identity during adolescence” (p. 38). The further study of the impact these books have had on the social identity of readers could open this informal usage into a formal, recognized personality assessment, or at least a more formal recognition beyond a *Buzzfeed* quiz or listicle.

**Teamwork Assistant.** With the current educational emphasis on group work in the classroom (Parent et al., 2016), the participants interviewed here already recognize the importance of knowing peoples’ house identification in order to utilize them effectively in a group project. This educational importance of group work has grown out of the call for more effective teamwork in the workplace, thus demonstrating the importance of this study’s findings in the workplace. However, as the importance of group work has been transferred into the college classroom, the tools to work well in a group become not only important, but also necessary at earlier stages.
**Implications and Recommendations for the Workplace**

As of 2010 Generation Y, or as they are referred to here, millennials, were expected to make up almost fifty percent of the full-time work force as seventy-six million baby boomers moved towards retirement (Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009). The millennial generation, defined by the United States Air Force as being born between 1981 and 1999 (Smith, 2008), “have been described as a challenging group to recruit and manage” (T. Werth & Werth, 2011, p. 12). T. Werth and Werth (2011) ascribe this to research findings that “describe millennials as individuals exhibiting a casual attitude toward employers, possessing a higher degree of loyalty to their personal lives than their employer, displaying a propensity to challenge rules, expecting instant gratification, and valuing a fun, flexible work environment where coworkers are friends” (p. 13). However, as the size of this generation can be measured as up to three times the size of the proceeding generation, Generation X (Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009), it is important to learn how these workers identify, to better be able to supervise them in the workplace even if just by becoming familiar with the Harry Potter storyline.

**Know Harry Potter, Know Your Work Force.** Millennials are now entering the workplace en masse and forming more than fifty percent of the workplace (T. Werth & Werth, 2011). The findings of this study can then be of use to the supervisors in the workplaces of these millennials, who are looking to connect to those of this generation known to be characterized as more group-and socially-orientated than their predecessors (T. Werth & Werth, 2011). Dulin (2008) notes the importance of examining the formative experiences of workers to better manage the work environment. Even if a manager is not interested in spending the time and energy to explore the world of Harry Potter, the act of familiarizing oneself with the basic story line may ease the ability to connect with this growing segment of the work force.
Identity Identifies Strengths and Weaknesses. Ashforth’s (2016) “biodata” (p. 364) can be used by employers from the hiring process through an employee’s tenure with the organization. Just as group work is an active trend in education (Parent et al., 2016), it is a necessary part of most business organizations, thus, not only does an employee’s organizational social identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) provide insight into their loyalties, so too can their house identity help to establish their in-and out-groups (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Hogg et al., 2004) and their strengths and weaknesses. Being aware of an employees’ Hogwarts house identity provides insight into their view of their own abilities, as well as how they view others. This provides useful knowledge in how the employee might best be utilized, demonstrating developmental aspects for “decision-making purposes” (Church et al., 2016, p. 450).

Teamwork Assistant. As noted in the recommendations for education section, the ability to work in a team is a highly valued skill, one that employers are asking educational institutions to provide students with more skill-based learning opportunities. However, as teams must continually adapt to personnel and responsibility changes, the ability to gauge the best way to utilize all of the skills of team members, is in constant need. Again, as an awareness of the social identity a reader of the Harry Potter books brings with them provides an insight into their perceived abilities, so the knowledge of house identity can be a useful tool in office’s that thrive on team work.

Implications and Recommendations for Harry Potter Readers

The participants of this study often mentioned how the acknowledgement of their own house social identity and the labeling of those around them was a useful tool for both less and more serious parts of their lives. It had impact on who they tried to be, who they strove not to
be, who they were in relationships with (both more and less intimate), and how they thought of themselves and others. Even those who recognized that they were less attached to the story of Harry Potter and the whole Harry Potter phenomenon, still had a visceral reaction when it came to the labeling of themselves or others. Due to the pervasiveness of the Harry Potter experience, it would then seem to be useful for this to be a more open topic of awareness.

**Know Your House, Know Yourself.** In her interview, Danielle acknowledged that as an avowed Slytherin, she felt a need to cultivate the traits of Hufflepuff to balance her own strengths and weaknesses. This knowledge is useful for everyone, but for those who have read, or are reading the Harry Potter books, the awareness of these lessons may not come in the real-time of reading the books, but in the reflection that follows, allowing for an examination of who one thinks themself to be, and how they can improve on that reality.

Certainly the Harry Potter books present a full picture of the Hogwarts’ houses schema for readers to make a connection with, and many readers will do just that. However, there are informal tools that can assist in this selection, such as the *Pottermore.com* Sorting Hat Quiz, that can be useful both in verifying or questioning an individual’s house identity.

**Implications and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study explored the lived experience of a reader of the Harry Potter books, as opposed to many other Harry Potter research projects that analyzed the text and how it appears or can be utilized. As such, it is a recommendation that replication studies be completed to both explore the findings of this study, in addition to an exploration of other lessons that might occur both from this books series, as well as other popular culture artifacts.
Future Research on Leadership Lessons. Regarding this series, in addition to the exploration of social identity theory, other implicit lessons could be explored. The Harry Potter books have been explored for their impact on the political thinking of the readers (Gierzynski & Eddy, 2013; Mutz, 2016; Vezzali et al., 2015), however, while the text has been used to teach leadership (Rosser, 2007; Tucker, 1999) it has not been studied for the leadership lessons that the book presents and how those might affect the readers.

Researching Harry Potter in Other Methodologies. While much of the work done in “Harry Potter Studies” (Das, 2016, p. 341) has been textual, a fantasy theme analysis of how the lessons in the book have chained out beyond the original text into the consumers’ lexicon (Bormann, 1972), would provide new insights. Similarly, a rhetorical analysis of the social identities presented in the books, another textual analysis, might provide a more in depth look into the identity schema presented by the four Hogwarts’ houses, going beyond Bahn et als. (2017) study of the concept of the Sorting Hat on the books’ characters.

Future Research into the Impact of Other Popular Culture Artifacts. While “Harry Potter Studies” (Das, 2016, p. 341) is an unofficial topic of study, the impact of popular culture artifacts, especially those that grab widespread attention, is also an area in need of exploration. One popular culture artifact that has been impactful since the publishing of the Harry Potter books is the Divergent series. As this series also utilizes a sorting system amongst its characters by their dominant traits, a similar study of the readers of that series might offer further insight into the impact of popular culture on the social identity of its consumers, or it might prove that the Harry Potter series is a phenomenon all its own. The Divergent series also has a female protagonist that would allow for an exploration of female role models. Further, the only popular
culture artifact mentioned by multiple participants of this study is *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, making it another impactful text to be explored for any lessons that may have been imparted.

**Recommended Research with Other Populations.** This study concentrated on young millennials, who grew up during the publishing of the Harry Potter books, these books were and are however being consumed by others, both older and younger. Thus, another area of study could be a look at any generational differences in the impact of the Harry Potter books on the readers. This study explored those who were growing up with the characters in their development. Would there be a difference if the reader was already out of adolescence and did not relate to the characters in the same way? Further, what of those who are reading the books today? Does it make a difference if the fandom phenomenon is not in full swing as someone is encountering the books and movies for the first time?

**Recommended Research on Other Media Impacts on Social Identity.** This research explored an area of social identity theory that has not been widely researched, that of media impact in imparting social identity, not just confirming it. As such, there is much room for future research to explore other areas of identity around both the Harry Potter books and other popular culture artifacts. This study already demonstrated some room for research around gender with popular culture. This could also be expanded to race and other recognized social identities.

**Conclusion**

This study explored the impact of popular culture on the social identity of young adults, with a concentration on the power and scope of the Harry Potter books as its individual focus. In speaking with the young millennials who participated in this research, it was established that the Harry Potter books have the power to connect its readers to their own lives, their friends, and
expand their horizons beyond the original text. Additionally, the Harry Potter books have given its consumers a structure to identify themselves and others, with some recognition that duality is a part of most personalities. Finally, the Harry Potter books represent to their readers the elements of classic fantasy storytelling, an area that the readers’ use to relate to the world around them, with this series, and other popular culture artifacts that provide cultural pedagogy to navigate the world.

This study expands the research on social identity theory beyond the current literature that has explored the impact that popular culture has had on confirming social identity, into a look at the impact popular culture has on establishing a social identity. Furthermore, this study expands the study of popular culture and the Harry Potter books beyond the current focus in the literature on textual analysis, to an analysis of impact on the lived experience of consumers.

Through an examination of the lived experience of the young millennials, this study provided insight into how educators and employers and might utilize the information to enhance their opportunities in connecting with this population. Furthermore, this study offers a window into how the readers of the Harry Potter books might use and have used their connection to the Harry Potter books for their own growth and development.

According to Adamic and Patel (2014) the Harry Potter series tops the list of “books that have stayed with us” (2014). Now, perhaps is the time to look at the other 19 books/series that make up their list, of which at least half are also fantasy novels to see what impacts those novels may have on their readers.
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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your experience with the Harry Potter series?

2. Did you take the sorting hat quiz on pottermore.com? If so, would you share your result?
   What was your reaction to your quiz result?

3. When you think about the characters in the Harry Potter books, how would you describe their leadership characteristics?

4. How about the descriptions of the Hogwarts houses, do they remind you of any leadership characteristics?

5. Can you draw any parallels between what you read in the Harry Potter series and what you have learned about leadership?

6. When you think about other fictional characters or stories, can you describe any leadership characteristics that are presented?

7. What do you think are the most important leadership characteristics? Why?
Appendix B – Recruitment Email

Hello, my name is Lisa Scheeler. I am a coordinator in Letters and Sciences at UMD and also a doctoral student at Northeastern University. I am conducting a research study exploring the impact of popular culture on leadership. I would like the opportunity to speak with millennials aged 20-26 who have read all of the original Harry Potter books and would be willing to speak about their experience.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

- Share your experiences and thoughts around the Harry Potter books and leadership and
- Participate in an interview for up to 90 minutes

All information will be kept confidential and the data will only be used for this research.

For more information please contact Lisa Scheeler, Ed.D. student, at lscheele@umd.edu.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lisa Jenice Scheeler
Appendix C – Consent to Participate

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Investigators: Dr. James E. Griffin, principal investigator, and Lisa Jenice Scheeler, doctoral candidate

Title of project

The Impact of Popular Culture on the Implicit Leadership Theory of Young Adults: Harry Potter and the Leadership Schema

Informed consent to participate in a research study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form tells you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask her any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher whether or not you want to participate. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are millennial between the ages of 20-26 with an interest in leadership who has self-identified as having read the original Harry Potter book series.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to interview millennials between the ages of 20-26 who have read all of the original Harry Potter books to explore the impact of popular culture on their thoughts about leadership.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, the researcher will ask you to answer questions about your experience with the Harry Potter books. The semi-structured interview will last up to 90 minutes. The interview session will be recorded. Participants names will not appear on the interview transcripts -- pseudonyms will be used.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

You will be interviewed in a place that is convenient for you. The interview will last up to 90 minutes.
Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

Describing experiences always has the possibility of uncovering painful or uncomfortable memories or anxiety. If you experience any level of discomfort you are encouraged to utilize the Counseling Center. Counseling services are free and available to all UMD students. For more information about counseling services, please visit www.counseling.umd.edu or contact them at (301) 314-7651. If you are elsewhere you are encouraged to utilize the services available to you.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. It is hoped that the data from this study will contribute to knowledge about leadership education.

Who will see the information about me?

Your identity as a participant in this study will not be known. You will be asked a series of questions by the researcher. Interview sessions will be recorded and later transcribed to create transcripts. Each interview will be numbered and each participant will be issued a pseudonym.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?

No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of participation in this research.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a member of the University of Maryland, College Park, community.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

For questions please contact the researcher, Lisa Scheeler at lscheele@umd.edu. You may also contact Dr. James Griffin, the principal investigator, at jam.griffin@neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director of Human Subject Research Protection, Northeastern University, 490 Renaissance Park, Boston, MA 02115-5000, by phone at (617) 373-4595, or by email at n.regina@neu.edu.

Will I be paid for my participation?

No, there is no remuneration for your participation.
Will it cost me anything to participate?

There will be no cost associated with participating in this study.

Is there anything else I need to know?

You must be at least 18 years of age to legally consent to participate in this study. The researcher, Lisa Scheeler, is a coordinator in Letters and Sciences at the University of Maryland, College Park, as well as a doctoral student at Northeastern University.

I agree to take part in this research:

__________________________________________________________________________  _____________
Signature of person agreeing to take part                      Date

__________________________________________________________________________

Printed name of person above

__________________________________________________________________________  _____________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent                      Date

__________________________________________________________________________

Printed name of person above