

ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE HARRY POTTER SUBCULTURE

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PART I - INTRODUCTION

With seven books, seven movies, and a multimillion dollar merchandising franchise, the “Harry Potter” series is a ubiquitous cultural phenomenon in the Western world. Even those who haven’t read the books or seen the movies can’t help but have heard about them. For many fans, though, their experience goes beyond reading the books and watching the movies. Harry Potter has been, and continues to be, an integral part of growing up for many people. An entire subculture exists that has been based on the Harry Potter books. Fans have developed their own brand of music (Wizard Rock), foods (bizarre treats such as cockroach clusters and cauldron cakes), clothing (Hogwarts robes), sports (quidditch), and even language.

I was first introduced to the books and their subculture in the year 2000, when I was 11 years old, and I have been an active participant ever since. Since then, I have met a lot of people who have enjoyed participating as much as I have. In my 10 years as a Harry Potter fan, I have had a lot of fun. Yet lately I have been wondering: What is it that makes Harry Potter so much fun? Why are so many inspired to recreate a make-believe world that was created as part of a children’s book? What is it that so many people love about it?

I don't think anyone can fully explain the emergence of the Potterite subculture, but, from an anthropological perspective, I decided to try. The midnight premiere of "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (Part 1)" afforded me the unique opportunity to observe a large group of Harry Potter fans assembled in one place. Since American culture often assumes that people who like books are quiet and antisocial, I was particularly interested in observing Harry Potter fans in a social setting.

Most fans arrived at the midnight premiere in groups of six to twelve. Of the people at the premiere, most were either high school or college age. Very few were older than twenty five, and those who were appeared to have come with their adolescent children. I did not see any groups of adults who were older than twenty five, nor did I see any young children. This age range made sense when I considered that when the Harry Potter books became popular ten years ago, most of its readers were children between the ages of roughly five and fifteen. These same children would be high school and college students today, which suggested to me that many of these people were fans who grew up with the books from a young age. This theory was later supported by a survey, which I will discuss shortly.

Following the midnight premiere of "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (Part 1)," I posted a short survey on facebook. I figured that facebook would be a good way to reach the age demographic that I had seen at the movie theater; I also hoped that I would receive responses from some less intense fans to provide a more varied perspective. The survey consisted of the following questions:¹

¹ The full survey can be found at the end of this document.

1. What is your age? How old were you when you started reading Harry Potter?
2. Indicate which books you have read/movies you have seen.
3. How much of a fan do you rate yourself on a scale of 0 to 10?
4. Why are you personally a fan of the books/movies?
5. What theme of the books/movies do you most relate to?
6. Name at least one way the books/movies have impacted your life.

Altogether, I received 18 responses. The oldest person to respond was a 29-year-old professor. Everyone else was between the ages of 16 and 24. Of the responses I received, fourteen were women, and only four were men. There was a much closer male-female ratio at the midnight premiere (although I noticed that there were still slightly more women present than men). This discrepancy in numbers may be due to the fact that women are more likely to talk openly about how something affects them personally; men will show up to the movies but are less willing to talk about why they are there.

Most of the information I have collected in this ethnography comes from either the surveys I have performed or from my personal observations over the course of the last ten years. In the event that I was in need of additional information, I turned to online sources. For the sake of space and time, I am writing this ethnography with the assumption that the reader has at least a brief understanding of the plot and themes of the Harry Potter series. (If not, Wikisummaries has a charming and concise explanation of the seven-book series found [here](#).)

PART II – THE CULTURE

There are many fascinating aspects to the Harry Potter subculture, but for the purposes of this essay, I have narrowed it down to three: Food, Clothes, and Music. In each of these three fields, Harry Potter fans have taken a subject typical of Western pop culture and turned it into something of their own.

Food

Author J.K. Rowling created a series of magical treats that Harry and friends enjoy. Chocolate frogs, cockroach clusters, pumpkin pasties, cauldron cakes, and Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans are just a few of the many treats that are popular in the wizarding world. Although these treats are mostly referenced and are not described in detail, Potterites have done their best to recreate them. Recipes can be found in compilations such as the "Unofficial Harry Potter Cookbook" and also at popular fan sites such as Mugglenet and The Leaky Cauldron. I decided to sample some cauldron cakes from The Leaky Cauldron's recipe collection. (It was my duty as an anthropologist, after all.) This interpretation called for pumpkin cupcakes flipped upside-down to look like cauldrons with pretzel stick handles. I switched in chocolate cupcakes for pumpkin and twizzlers for pretzel sticks. Since there is no official recipe, there is always room for creativity.

Furthermore, companies have taken advantage of Harry Potter's popularity to recreate the foods mentioned in the books as best they can. Sometimes it is impossible to accurately recreate the foods due to the fact that many of them require magic in order to

exist. In “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone,” Harry is amazed when his chocolate frog jumps out the window. Our chocolate frogs do not move. They do, however, come with a collectible famous wizard trading card, much like those in the books.

In my opinion, the most successful food creations are Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans. They are packaged to look and taste like something only a wizard would eat, and they certainly do. I have had the misfortune to come across flavors such as Grass, Horseradish, and a harmless-looking pink bean that turned out to be Gravy. There is a moment in the first book when Albus Dumbledore eats what he thinks is a toffee-flavored bean, only to exclaim, “Alas! Earwax!”² Every fan now has the chance to experience the same uncomfortable revelation.

Clothes

In Western culture, clothes are a popular way of showing your loyalty, be it to a band, a cause, or, in this case, a book series. T-shirts are the most common form of Harry Potter clothes. They typically feature popular characters, the Hogwarts crest, or the colors of the various Hogwarts “houses,” Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, or Slytherin. These clothes are usually not available in regular clothing stores but are available online. I find that stores like Hot Topic, which make their name by catering to various subcultures, will carry Harry Potter clothes in the weeks surrounding a new book or movie. Because these clothes are only available in select places, they are not cheap. A small Harry Potter t-shirt at Hot Topic goes for \$22 + tax.

² Rowling SS p. 301.

For special occasions, such as Harry Potter-themed parties, midnight releases, or Halloween, Harry Potter fans will dress up in full Hogwarts robes. In the books, it seemed that wizards wore only robes with nothing underneath. (In Goblet of Fire, Harry meets a collection of adult wizards who cannot figure out how to dress like ordinary people, including old Archie who is infamous for insisting on wearing a woman's night gown because, "I like a healthy breeze 'round my privates."³) For the movies, however, the students typically wear either school uniforms or normal clothes under their robes. I found a particularly good description of the Hogwarts uniforms from the Rebel's Haven, a costume design website:

Each student must wear a white button-down shirt, a silk tie in their house colors, a dark gray sweater, vest, or cardigan with house colored trim, slacks (as this last movie proved with Ginny, yes, Girls can wear slacks if they want), or a knee-length skirt (and no, boys can't wear skirts even if there are scotsmen ;)). [sic] ... In addition, for girls, a pair of black tights is worn under the skirt.⁴

At the midnight opening of "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows (Part 1)," I was awarded the rare opportunity of observing many Harry Potter fans in costume. I afterwards heard of people going to some of the larger theaters dressed as magical creatures and other crazier costumes, but because I was at a smaller theater, the only costumes I saw were typical wizards. About half of the people at the midnight premiere wore costumes, mostly consisting of the Hogwarts uniforms, although a few wore full robes. I was amused to see several teenage girls walking around in very form-fitting

³ Rowling GoF p. 84.

⁴ <http://www.rebelshaven.com/hogwarts.html>

vests and skirts. I never thought of a Harry Potter convention as the sort of place where girls would be trying to attract boys' attention, but I suppose it was first and foremost a social event.

Of the half that was not in costume, most were wearing shirts with some sort of Harry Potter logo on them. The girl behind me in line wore a red and gold hoodie adorned with the Gryffindor logo. My friend wore a t-shirt that looked like the front of the Hogwarts Express. One girl wore a "Twilight" shirt, which I thought was brave considering that many Harry Potter fans resent being lumped into the same category as Twilight. Probably a sixth of the people at the movie wore normal jeans and t-shirts.

Music

I consider myself to be a pretty big fan, but I have never gotten into Wizard Rock (also known as simply "Wrock"). Therefore this is the only part of the ethnography that I am writing about as a nonparticipant. In order to find out more about this aspect of Harry Potter culture, I had to do a bit of digging online.

Whenever I googled "Harry Potter subculture," what I found were mostly articles about wrock. This surprised me, especially when I saw that Wizardrock.org attributes the beginning of the Harry Potter subculture to the existence of Wizard Rock:

Wrock (Wizard Rock) originated [with] the Harry Potter-themed band which became the genesis of the subculture composed of fans of the Books who [are]

characterized by a feeling of sympathy and camaraderie with others who share a common interest centering around wizard rock.⁵

Wrock began in 2002 with the Massachusetts-based band “Harry and the Potters,” which is still the most popular wrock band today. The focus of wrock bands is simply to have fun. The songs are often silly, and performances are many times done with performers role-playing as characters. According to wizardrock.org, wrock was first inspired by the Harry Potter movies, not the books. Yet wrock bands also often perform in bookstores and libraries “to promote the reading of the novels.”⁶

PART III – MEANING BEHIND THE MAGIC

So we have looked at some attributes of the Harry Potter subculture, but we have not looked at the most important question: What is it that so many people like about Harry Potter?

Some fans relate strongly to the ethical themes in Harry Potter. Among the fans that I surveyed, they had the option of choosing from the survey’s themes--“love versus hate,” “the power of friendship,” and “fighting against discrimination”—but many chose to write in their own. One fan, “Viktor,” likes that the books encourage “standing up for what you believe in.” Another, “Molly,” admires that they emphasize the “importance of the choices one makes.” “Fleur” really sums it up, however. “There is SO MUCH that

⁵ <http://wizardrock.org/>

⁶ <http://wizardrock.org/>

goes on in these books in terms of social commentary,” she says. “Questions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and national identity arise throughout, and I think Rowling does a good job of pandering these issues to a broad audience.”

The majority of fans, though, seem to be most drawn to the social aspect of the books. For Questions 4 (“Why do you personally like Harry Potter?”) and 5 (“To what theme do you most relate?”), I offered multiple choices, including an “other” option where participants could write in their own ideas. Yet an overwhelming majority selected “Social activity” as the reason that they personally liked Harry Potter. Likewise, a similar majority selected “the power of friendship” as the theme to which they most related.

As one participant, “Luna,” explained, “Harry, Hermione, and Ron are everything a family should be. Harry and Hermione showed us what *agape* love truly is, and Harry and Ron have the ultimate Bromance. ... The bonds portrayed [in the movies] are an inspiration to people of our age group.” Many fans use Harry Potter as an ice breaker with new people and have attributed the beginnings of their real world friendships to a shared love of the story. “Parvati,” a freshman in college, says that Harry Potter makes a great conversation topic when meeting with new people. “Padma” agrees. “I made a lot of friends through Harry Potter,” she says, while “Lavender” says, “It has actually made some of my friendships better.”

Only one fan took time to comment on some of the negative aspects of engrossing oneself so thoroughly in a make-believe world. “Cho”—now a friendly, talkative girl—selected “desire to escape reality” as an option for Question 4. She recalls how, having

always been somewhat of an outcast, she used to envy the close bonds between the Trio in the books. “To have friends who are so loyal to you ... just like Harry Potter and his friends seemed like an impossible dream that only existed in fiction,” she said. “It's kinda hilarious to note that my obsession with HP turned several people off from me, thus probably making me even more lonely.”

“Escapism” was a built-in option, but the few others who selected it emphasized that while they enjoyed briefly escaping to a fantasy world, the greater appeal was the real world friendships that formed around the books. Still, I couldn't help but wonder if more fans had similar stories to Cho's that they were unwilling to mention on their survey. It is, perhaps, a difficult subject to talk about. And as Cho points out, it was a long time ago. “Once I shed the fanaticism, found myself in a new environment (college), and learned more social skills, I was able to build closer friendships.” She likes spending time with friends but still enjoys the books as well.

Many fans attribute their continued love of the series to nostalgia for their childhoods. Cho jokes that now that “I'm too old for Hogwarts,” she can better appreciate the creativity of the series as well as the fond memories of her time growing up as a hardcore fan. A lot of fans seem to share a sense that they were able to grow up alongside Harry, Ron, and Hermione. “I got to be thirteen and angsty when Harry was thirteen and angsty,” says Fleur cheerfully. Luna adds, “I feel bad for a kid that picks up Harry Potter for the first time now. They already know how it ends and won't have the opportunity to grow up with Harry like we did.”

Yet the culture of Harry Potter does not seem likely to end anytime soon. One only needs to look as far as fan sites such as “My Life is Magical” to see that a whole new generation of young Harry Potter fans are growing up with Harry, Ron, and Hermione. “Minerva,” a teacher, says that she likes the books because she can “converse with the kids in my high school-aged youth group” about them. Furthermore, first-generation fans express a hope that they will be able to share their love of the stories with future generations. “They are books that I will probably re-read again,” says Molly, “and share with my own children/nieces/nephews.”

Survey

1. What is your age? How old were you when you started reading Harry Potter?

2. Indicate which books you have read/movies you have seen?

Books: All 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

Movies: All (to date) 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

3. How much of a fan do you rate yourself on a scale of 0 to 10? (Guidelines below.)

0 – Never read/don't like Harry Potter.

5 – Read/watched and enjoyed all books and movies but not seriously into it.

10 – Founder of Harry Potter fan club/website/quidditch team/etc.

Briefly explain why you give yourself this rating.

4. Why are you personally a fan of the books/movies?

- Social activity (friends are also fans)
- Escape from daily life
- Fun adventure story
- Other (explain below)

5. What theme of the books/movies do you most relate to?

- Power of friendship
- Love versus hate
- Fighting against discrimination
- I don't relate to any of these themes
- Other (explain below)

6. Name at least one way the books/movies have impacted your life.

Works Cited

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