COMING OUT OF THE CUPBOARD:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF

FANDOM AND LGBTQ IDENTITY

By

KATHERINE E. KAVANAUGH

Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Women's and
Gender Studies
Texas A&M University
College Station, TX
2014

Master of Science in Educational Psychology
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK
2017

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
July, 2021

COMING OUT OF THE CUPBOARD:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF

FANDOM AND LGBTQ IDENTITY

Dissertation Approved:

Dr. Tonya Hammer

Dissertation Adviser

Dr. Sue C. Jacobs

Dr. Carrie Winterowd

Dr. Thomas Berry

Dr. Mary Larson

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the Harry Potter fandom for having a direct impact on my understanding of the world, on the development of my personality, my identity, and, now, my career. I want to express additional thanks to the Wizard Rock community for the same, as well as for being so welcoming, accepting, creative, and courageous in the midst of a world that is not always kind. To those who offered to participate in this study, I cannot fully express how honored I am to have been trusted with your stories.

Thank you to my advisor, Tonya Hammer, for continuously reminding me of the importance of authenticity, and for supporting and seeing the value in fandom's role in people's lives. To Tom Berry, for the often tangential conversations in supervision that served to both support my growth as a clinician as well as an academic. To Sue Jacobs and Carrie Winterowd, for your support over the course of my time in CPSY and helping shape me into the psychologist and person that I am today. And to Mary Larson, for offering your support and an outside perspective when the foundations proved to be less stable than I had anticipated. Finally, to the members of my committee that were unable to continue until the end, the lessons I learned from you will forever be embedded in this work.

To my grandmothers, Elizabeth and Irma, for instilling in me the sense of wonder found only in books, and the sense of compassion found only in understanding others. To my grandfathers, Lee and Jerry, for instilling in me the importance of hard work and a refusal to be reasonable. To my long-suffering parents, Melanie and Jeff – See, my lifelong preoccupation with a fictional series did amount to something! In all seriousness, thank you for being part of this journey with me, and for doing your best to understand and support me in all of my quirks.

Thank you to the friends and colleagues that offered a shoulder to cry on or a moment of joyous distraction from what has been a hell of a year (and, to be honest, a hell of a five years). There are too many of you to name, which is a wonderful problem to have, but I assure you: your support has been crucial and life-changing. I am truly fortunate to have you in my life.

Most importantly, to my sister, Terri Lynn. You probably know just how important your support was to me throughout this experience, but now I want to brag about you to everyone else. You are my person, and you are phenomenal.

Name: KATHERINE E. KAVANAUGH

Date of Degree: JULY, 2021

Title of Study: COMING OUT OF THE CUPBOARD: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF FANDOM AND LGBTQ IDENTITY

Major Field: COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY

Abstract: The Harry Potter series, written by J.K. Rowling, is one of the most well-known pop culture fandoms in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The experience of belonging to a fandom (or fan community) has been shown to heighten sense of community and is implicated in LGBTQ identity development. Relational Cultural Theory provided a conceptual framework through which to understand the phenomenon of identifying as an LGBTQ member of the Harry Potter fandom. This qualitative study utilized a feminist phenomenological approach to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the experiences of LGBTQ individuals in the Harry Potter fan community? (2) How might involvement with the Harry Potter fan community have contributed to LGBTQ identity formation? (3) How has belonging to the Harry Potter fan community contributed to the lives of LGBTQ individuals? 17 self-identified LGBTQ members of the Harry Potter fandom created timelines of their fandom engagement and "coming out" journey and participated in a semi structured interview about their experiences. Following thematic analysis of the data, five themes emerged: (a) fandom engagement, (b) developing LGBTQ identity, (c) navigating marginalization, (d) supporting mental health, and (e) empowered voices. Limitations, recommendations for future research, and implications for clinical practice and advocacy were discussed.

Keywords: LGBTQ, fandom, Harry Potter, feminist phenomenology, Relational-Cultural Theory

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"These days are dark, but we won't fall, we'll stick together through it all,
These days are dark, but we won't fall…

And the world is beautiful, just look around
And the world is beautiful, just look at all your friends"

– Harry and the Potters, "These Days are Dark"

"What is your favorite book?" This question is commonly heard for many throughout their childhood, young adulthood, and beyond, and answers may vary based on a number of factors such as exposure to certain media and franchises, likeability of characters, richness of detail, etc. While popular creative works may reach a large number of consumers, those who consistently and enthusiastically engage with content are typically considered "fans." A community of such fans is often referred to as a "fandom." Although the term "fandom" may apply to a variety of real-life phenomena (such as sports teams, celebrities, and hobbies), this research focuses on fandom regarding works of fiction.

What exactly pulls people towards identifying with certain works of fiction? According to McCrae, Gaines, and Wellington (2013), authors of fictional works must be able to accurately portray human psychology in order to create works and characters of quality. Therefore, a story

with realistic and believable character development is more likely to be viewed as relatable by its readers than one that is perceived as unrealistic. Reading has been viewed as serving an "important psychological function" due to simulation of social experiences (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 1999, as cited in McCrae, Gaines, & Wellington, 2013, p. 76). For example, individuals can indirectly learn from character experiences, develop empathy and "an understanding of emotional responses in themselves and others," and expand their appreciation of diversity by the vicarious experiences gained through reading (McCrae, Gaines, & Wellington, 2013, p. 76). Additionally, such resonance to "quality" stories is not limited to individual experience. Community engagement with stories that appear in mass media is an "essential means of sharing human experience with one another" and indicates "that there exist internal, psychological forces that allow us to respond in common ways to stories and story characters" (Faber & Mayer, 2009, p. 307).

The Harry Potter series, written by J.K. Rowling, is one of the most prominent pop culture fandoms in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This seven-book saga about an orphaned boy who discovers he belongs to a secret, magical world inspired a generation of readers who, in growing up alongside the fictional Harry Potter, were able to find their own kind of magic. The "Harry Potter effect" has been cited as a transformative medium that positively influenced the literacy rates and reading behaviors of children growing up in the 1990s and 2000s (Dempster, Sunderland, & Thistlethwaite, 2015). As the series' popularity expanded, a multitude of additional franchises entered popular culture and engaged fans through an eight-part movie series, theme parks, an award-winning play, and a spinoff movie series, to name but a few.

Fans have created sub-communities within the Harry Potter fandom in both online and real-world spaces. Online fan activities include both fan-creations (i.e. fanfiction, fanvids, and fanart) and communal spaces through which discussion over shared interests can occur (i.e. text blogs, video blogs, and forums). Fans have also gathered "IRL" ("in real life") for fan-related activities and events such as: popular culture conventions, Wizard Rock ("Wrock") concerts, midnight releases of books and movies, and a real-life Quidditch league based on the magical sport introduced in the books

(Frankel, 2019). However, community engagement within digital and real-world spaces often overlap. One such example, the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA), is dedicated to "changing the world by making activism accessible through the power of story" (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2015). The HPA boasts over 100 local chapters across six continents and has completed numerous campaigns designed to "decrease world suck" including convincing Warner Bros. to change the source of the chocolate in their edible products to be 100% fair-trade, raising over $123,000 dollars for Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, donating over 250,000 books across the world through their Apparating Library initiative, and many more (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2015).

Because much of day to day fan engagement occurs online, opportunities to meet with other fans in person are attractive to members of the Harry Potter fandom. Wrock ("Wizard Rock") is an underground music movement in which fans create bands and songs based on characters and concepts in the Harry Potter universe (foundational groups include: Harry and the Potters, Draco and the Malfoys, and The Whomping Willows; Do Rozario, 2011; Rohlman, 2010), and performances often attract fans of all ages to dance, sing, and dress as their favorite characters (cosplay) in concert venues that often include libraries. A number of fan conventions have also provided dedicated spaces in which fans of the series can cosplay, meet featured celebrities and artists who have been involved with the series, and meet other fans. One of these conventions, LeakyCon, celebrated its tenth anniversary at LeakyCon Boston in October 2019.

Gathering in fandom-dedicated spaces, whether online or in person, can provide individuals with a sense of community. The sense of belonging to a community in which one gives and receives social support is known as psychological sense of community (PSOC; Chadborn, Edwards, & Reyen, 2016). PSOC is associated with positive mental health outcomes, including: greater social support (Li, Sun, He, & Chan, 2011), life satisfaction (Farrell & Coulombe, 2004), quality of life (Gattino, Piccoli, Fassio, & Rollero, 2013), and social and subjective well-being (Albanesi et al., 2007; Davison & Cotter, 1986; Pretty, Bishop, Fisher, & Sonn, 2007; Sonn & Fisher, 1996).

Marginalized individuals are highly susceptible to feelings of isolation and low self-worth due to societal stigmatization and discrimination, which can lead to negative mental health outcomes (Jorm, Korten, Rodgers, Jacomb, & Christenson, 2002). People who identify as a sexual and/or gender minority orientation are particularly vulnerable to experiences of marginalization and discrimination and associated rates of substance use, suicidality, and other mental health concerns (Haas et. al., 2010). Sexual and gender minority individuals have been shown to have increased resilience when sense of community is heightened, which serves as a protective factor against mental illness (i.e. Barr, Budge, and Adelson, 2016; Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2005). Sexual and gender minority identities are often referred to as one group of abbreviated letters that typically includes the identities lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, and queer (LGBTQ). However, it is important to note that there is not currently consensus on an "official" abbreviation for this community that is both fairly simple to say, as well as fully representative of the spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities (including those often overlooked, such as pansexual, asexual, and nonbinary identities; American Psychological Association, 2020). Therefore, the terms "sexual and gender minority" and "LGBTQ" are utilized throughout the paper (unless otherwise stated to reflect specific identities) when discussing multiple groups for simplicity and consistency.

The experience of belonging to a fan community, or "fandom," has been shown to heighten sense of community and be involved in LGBTQ identity development. The Harry Potter fandom in particular has been described as a "supportive and progressive" space which LGBTQ-identifying youth felt was crucial to "renegotiating their identities and developing alternative concepts of sexual difference" (McCracken, 2013). The Harry Potter series is perceived as progressive due to aspects of the story and characters themselves; in fact, empirical research has shown that reading the Harry Potter series can be used as a tool for "improving attitudes towards stigmatized groups" including immigrants, "homosexuals," and refugees (Note: the terminology of the stigmatized groups was copied as written in the publication; Vezzali, Stathi, Giovannini, Capozza, & Trifiletti, 2015, p. 108). At an LGBTQ meetup during LeakyCon 2013 in Portland, Oregon, fans emphasized "how

LeakyCon's fandom community…provided accepting, inclusive spaces for them to develop and

affirm their non-normative gender and sexual identities" (McCracken, 2013).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

LGBTQ Mental Health

Sense of belonging has long been associated with mental health and well-being in marginalized communities. Recently, psychology research has begun to explore the relationship between sense of belonging and positive mental health outcomes in sexual and gender minority individuals. Barr, Budge, and Adelson (2016) examined sense of belonging to the transgender community as a mediator between "strength of transgender identity and well-being" (p. 87). They found that "community belongingness fully mediated the relationship between strength of transgender identity and well-being" (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p. 92). This implied that increasing sense of belonging in transgender individuals through heightened engagement with the transgender community is linked to greater psychological well-being (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016).

Earlier, McLaren (2009) found that sense of belonging to the lesbian community predicted depression in participants. However, they also found that for those that did not feel a heightened sense of belonging to the lesbian community, greater sense of belonging to the general community helped to mediate depressive symptoms (McLaren, 2009). In other

words, for those who did not feel connected to a community based upon their sexual orientation, sense of belonging from an additional source positively impacted mental health outcomes.

Minority Stress and Resilience

The mental health of LGBTQ individuals is thought to be influenced by minority stress. In a meta-analysis of the prevalence of mental disorders in sexual minority individuals, Meyer (2003) found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals have a higher prevalence of mental health concerns than their heterosexual peers. This phenomenon can be understood through the concept of minority stress. Minority stress refers to the "excess stress to which individuals from stigmatized social categories are exposed as a result of their social, often a minority, position" (Meyer, 2003, p. 675). The experience of stress from external circumstances, such as social stress, has the potential to induce psychological and somatic distress (Meyer, 2003, p. 675). Therefore, the stress induced by experiences of heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, and other forms of sexual prejudice may "lead to adverse mental health outcomes" (Meyer, 2003, p. 676).

Asakura and Craig (2014) explored the messages of the viral "It Gets Better" campaign. In this campaign, adults who identified as LGBT or allies posted videos on the popular video sharing website YouTube to communicate positive, hopeful messages to LGBT youth (Asakura & Craig, 2014). Many of these individuals recounted experiencing physical and emotional disconnection from others, sometimes creating a hostile or unsafe environment as well as negative mental health symptoms such as suicidal thoughts and attempts (Asakura & Craig, 2014, p. 260). However, in these messages, the researchers found the following themes of resilience: 1) Leaving hostile social environments; 2) experiencing "coming out" in meaningful ways; 3) re-membering their social environments within the LGBT community; and 4) turning challenges into opportunities and strengths (Asakura & Craig, 2014, p. 257).

Psychological Sense of Community

Psychological sense of community (PSOC) refers to:

the perception of similarity with others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, [and] the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure. (Sarason, 1974, p. 157, as cited in Chadborn, Edwards, & Reyson, 2016).

Barr, Budge, and Adelson (2016) found that transgender community belongingness was a mediator between strength of transgender identity and well-being. Higher levels of transgender identification predicted increased levels of community belongingness, which in turn predicted higher well-being (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p. 92). This is consistent with McMillan and Chavis (1986) who stated that "shared connection with community members is a critical component of a sense of community" (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p. 92). Findings indicated that those with a strong identification with being transgender "may feel more belongingness to the transgender community due to an increased perception of a shared connection with transgender community members." (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p. 92).

Fandom and Psychological Well-Being

Fandom and Sense of Community

"Fandom" is described by Chadborn, Edwards, and Reyson (2016) as "loyal and enthusiastic admirers of any interest," which can include sports, hobbies, television shows, books, movies, etc. (p. 1). Those in a particular fandom tend to "perceive themselves to be part of [a] larger community" of individuals who share an interest in that fandom (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reyson, 2016, p. 1).

While much of the psychological literature regarding fandom has historically focused on sports fans, recent sociological and communications research has included groups such as fans of science fiction (Bacon-Smith, 2000; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992) and video game media, as well as specific groups such as fans of the television show *Doctor Who* (Booth, 2013) and the *Star Trek* franchise (as cited in Chadborn, Edwards, & Reyson, 2016). Self-identification as part of a fan community can have an impact on the emotions, perceptions, and behaviors of individual fans

(Reysen et al., 2015). Psychological needs such as self-esteem, need for meaning in life, and distinctiveness have been recognized as predictors of anime fandom membership, as well as belongingness as a predictor of fanship in female anime fans (Ray, Plante, Reysen, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2017). Similarly, those who identify as fans have reported greater subjective well-being due to their connection with fan communities (Wan, 2006; Wan, Waddill, Polk, and Weaver, 2011).

Considering how individual fans perceive sense of community within media fandom may illuminate both the positive and negative mental health implications of fandom membership. Productive engagement (i.e. production of fan-related fiction, video, music, and art; Fiske, 1992) within fan communities helps to "better define fan identity" and includes "production and publication…of art and analysis of fan-related material" on both the individual and community levels (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen, 2016, p. 3). Actively engaging with the fandom in this way and transforming (or "rebranding") canon can create a sense of bonding between fans (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen, 2016). Fandom membership also enables individuals to express, explore, and accept any and all aspects of self-identity, including in marginalized individuals (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen, 2016). According to Bacon-Smith (2000), fandom has allowed avenues for stigmatized voices (such as racial, sexual/affectional, and gender minority individuals) to be heard and accepted within the fan community, whereas traditional communities may be more likely to silence these voices. Sense of community is closely related to sense of belonging in that in order for the community to impact an individual, he or she must perceive him- or herself as part of that community (Pichon, 2016).

Fandom and LGBTQ Resilience

Sexual and gender minority individuals are more likely to experience marginalization than their heterosexual and cisgender peers, and, as a result, are more likely to feel isolated from their communities. Therefore, exploring how LGBTQ individuals experience fandom may

illuminate the ways in which belonging to alternative communities serves as a positive source of acceptance as well as a buffer against prejudice and discrimination. Craig, McInroy, McCready, and Alaggia (2015) examined the impact of media on the development of resilience in LGBTQ youth. "Resilience has been conceptualized as the ability to positively navigate through significant adversity or threat, necessitating the presence of both risk and avoidance of risk, and involving the development of skills to adapt and buffer the negative outcomes associated with risk exposure (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Mustanski et al., 2011)" (p. 255). Resilience theory "addresses risk factors but is more focused on protective factors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) that may help facilitate positive outcomes (Mustanski et al., 2011).

In one study, the researchers wanted to look at the influence of media representation on resilience development in LGBTQ youth while taking into account both traditional *and* online media, which is atypical in media research (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2005). They conceptualize media as its own ecological subsystem "comprised of both offline and online media, which are complexly interconnected and fluidly experienced by youth in the contemporary context" (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2005, p. 258). Findings indicated that participants identified four predominant ways in which "media was a catalyst for resilience by buffering discriminatory experiences," including: 1) coping through escapism, 2) feeling stronger, 3) fighting back, and 4) finding and fostering community (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2005, p. 262). Additionally noted was that the process of seeking out supportive media may itself provide resilience as "marginalized youth [seeking] out supportive content despite the many negative messages they encounter…already [takes] a certain amount of initiative" (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2005, p. 262).

Coming Out and Identity Development

Of interest to the current study is how LGBTQ individuals experience fandom not only in terms of mental health, but also in terms of identity development. Foundational research proposing stage models of LGBTQ identity development focused primarily on "coming out" as an individual and linear process (Carrion & Lock, 1997, as cited in Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019, p. 1149; Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989;). However, current research in the area of sexual and gender identity formation has focused more closely on the importance of social and political environmental influences on how LGBTQ individuals experience the coming out process (i.e. Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019; Dunlap, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2018; Ryan, Legate, & Weinstein, 2015). This relational approach modifies the perception that LGBTQ individuals must follow a narrowly defined path towards a final "stage" of identity synthesis and pride, instead bringing an acknowledgement that "coming out is a socially complex process that is mitigated by too many contextual factors to be understood linearly or moralistically" (Klein et al., 2015, p. 324, as cited in Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019, p. 1150). Instead of achieving a final stage of LGBTQ identity, this approach highlights sexual and gender minority identity development as "a primarily external, ongoing, and socially situated process" (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019, p. 1148).

For lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals, the initial disclosure of LGB identity to another person serves as an important moment early in the coming out process. Studies indicate that the reactions to coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual can have a long-term impact on mental health and sense of identity (i.e. Dunlap, 2016; Ryan, Legate, & Weinstein, 2015). Additionally, unique cohort differences have been found in the coming out process and necessitate further investigation of the coming out experience of younger sexual minority individuals (Dunlap, 2016).

The majority of research regarding identity development in people who identify as LGBTQ focuses on the experiences of sexual minority individuals (primarily, those identifying as

gay or lesbian; Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019, p. 1149). While many aspects of transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) identity development are similar to those of sexual minority individuals (such as the desire for authenticity and importance of social support; Galupo, Krum, Hagen, Gonzalez, & Bauerbond, 2014; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014), facets of TGNC experiences are distinctive (e.g. transitioning). Brumbaugh-Johnson and Hull (2019) found that coming out as transgender required navigating (1) others' gender expectations, (2) other's reactions, and (3) the threat of violence (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019, p. 1158). The participants described the TGNC coming-out process as "an ongoing and situational process of navigating the social implications of one's gender identity and gendered behavior" (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019, p. 1158).

A recent mixed-methods study explored identity development of sexual and/or gender minority-identifying youth within the context of fandom. Findings indicated that "fandom-participating youth may begin the SGM identity development process earlier" and move through "socially-mediated milestones…more quickly than non-fandom participating peers" (McInroy & Craig, 2018, p. 191). Additionally, qualitative data indicated that "many participants perceived fandom instigated and expedited identity development" and introduced the concept of various SGM identities and terminology (McInroy & Craig, 2018, p. 191). Additionally, both fandom and non-fandom participants had more online friends than offline and disclosed their identity to an online friend before either an offline friend or parent/relative (McInroy & Craig, 2018, p. 188). Therefore, further investigation of identity development in sexual and gender minority youth should consider the role of online social relationships and participation in online fandom as important factors.

Relational Cultural Theory

In order to better understand the importance of community for those identifying as LGBTQ, Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) offers a framework through which to understand this

phenomenon. RCT began as a developmental theory that describes optimum human development as growing through and towards connection, rather than traditional developmental models which assume peak identity development includes autonomy and independence (Deanow, 2011). These traditional models (such as those proposed by Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, and Lawrence Kohlberg) have been criticized for presuming that the development of boys and men (typically assumed to be heterosexual, cisgender, and white) is the norm, while failing to capture the experiences of women, people of color, and sexual and/or gender minority individuals (Deanow, 2011). RCT emphasizes the importance of connection for all individuals, including white, cisgender, heterosexual men.

According to RCT, when humans continue to experience authentic connection with others through growth-fostering relationships, they are better able to face adversity and productively work through conflict with others. This is achieved by moving towards authenticity, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment within relationships. However, when individuals continually experience disconnection from others (such as through shame or humiliation), they become increasingly isolated from both others and their authentic selves. Chronic isolation is therefore considered to be the source of many mental health concerns and has been shown to be associated with heightened depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and substance use (Jordan, 2009).

RCT can be particularly useful as a "complementary perspective to the minority stress model" in that psychological distress is positioned "within the context of relational and cultural disconnections" for sexual and gender minority individuals (Mereish & Poteat, 2015, p. 426). Jordan (2009) notes that relational and sociocultural disconnections are particularly harmful when "one individual in the relationship has power over another, as in the case of discrimination" (as cited by Mereish & Poteat, 2015, p. 426). LGBTQ-identifying individuals must also contend with controlling images, which are cultural messages regarding "what is acceptable and what is not, what people can do and cannot do" based upon their status in society (Miller, 2008, p. 112).

13

Controlling images greatly influence the ways in which individuals act and construct relationships, which may lead to inauthentic behavior and relationships that lack mutuality (Miller, 2008).

For LGBTQ individuals, experiences of disconnection and oppression "might lead them to develop self-disparaging relational images, such as internalized homophobia and concealment motivation, which can also be harmful to health" (Miller & Stiver, 1997, as cited in Mereish & Poteat, 2015, p. 426). Additionally, people who identify as LGBTQ may have fewer social supports and experience loneliness associated with minority stress (Díaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001; Kuyper & Fokkema, 2011). Therefore, because "poorer social support, such as lower sense of community belonging and loneliness, is related to poorer mental and physical health among sexual minorities" (Díaz et al., 2001; McLaren, 2009; Spencer & Patrick, 2009), reducing the experience of chronic isolation (and consequently reducing mental health concerns) in LGBTQ individuals likely requires heightened social support and sense of community belongingness. Thus, if LGBTQ individuals experience fandom as a means of improving social support and a means of building growth-fostering relationships, positive fandom engagement could serve as a protective factor against minority stress.

Deanow (2011) brings the critique of androcentric theories of development into a chronological, age-related model of relational development. While this model is comprised of eight age "clusters," this study will predominantly focus on individuals in the fifth age cluster, "Authenticity/Voicelessness," which includes the ages of adolescence (12 to 25 years old; Deanow, 2011, p. 130). According to Miller and Stiver (1997), authenticity is defined as "a person's ongoing ability to represent him/herself in a relationship with increasing truth and fullness" (as cited by Deanow, 2011, p. 130). In this age cluster, individuals do the "relational work" of "bring[ing] that evolving sense of self into relationships" with parents, friends, and romantic partners (Deanow, 2011, p. 130). According to Deanow (2011),

both male and female adolescents who identify as homosexual, bisexual, or transgender face even greater challenges in resolving the tension between authenticity (knowing what one knows, including one's sexual identity, and bringing it into relationships) and voicelessness or loss of voice. For them, *the choice to be authentic in their sexual expression may be life threatening or damaging to relationships with their families and friends* [emphasis added]. Certainly, the fear of such damage is frequently part of their coming-out process. (p. 132).

Problem Statement

Marginalized individuals are highly susceptible to feelings of isolation and low self-worth due to societal stigmatization and discrimination, which can lead to negative mental health outcomes (Jorm, Korten, Rodgers, Jacomb, & Christenson, 2002). People who identify as LGBTQ are particularly vulnerable to experiences of marginalization and discrimination and associated rates of substance use, suicidality, and mental health concerns (Haas et. al., 2010). LGBTQ individuals have been shown to have increased resilience when sense of community is heightened, which serves as a protective factor against mental illness (i.e. Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2005; Barr, Budge, and Adelson, 2016). The experience of belonging to a fandom has been shown to heighten sense of community and be involved in LGBTQ identity development. The Harry Potter fandom in particular has been described as a "supportive and progressive" space which LGBTQ-identifying youth felt was crucial to "renegotiating their identities and developing alternative concepts of sexual difference" (McCracken, 2013).

Statement of Purpose

This study explored the aspects of belonging to the Harry Potter fandom that were psychologically impactful to its members who identify as LGBTQ individuals. This qualitative study utilized a feminist phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of LGBTQ individuals who are involved in the specific phenomenon of engagement in the Harry Potter fan community. Relational-Cultural Theory was the conceptual framework used to make sense of this phenomenon due to its emphasis on relationships and cultural context. The current study sought to answer the following questions: (1) What are the experiences of LGBTQ individuals in the

Harry Potter fan community? (2) How might involvement with the Harry Potter fan community

have contributed to LGBTQ identity formation? (3) How has belonging to the Harry Potter fan

community contributed to the lives of LGBTQ individuals?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of LGBTQ-identifying members of the Harry Potter fandom. The following research questions were addressed:

(1) What are the experiences of LGBTQ individuals in the Harry Potter fan community?

(2) How might involvement with the Harry Potter fan community have contributed to LGBTQ identity formation?

(3) How has belonging to the Harry Potter fan community contributed to the lives of LGBTQ individuals?

Rationale for Qualitative Research

The study design is guided by a qualitative, phenomenological framework in order to explore what it means to identify as a member of the Harry Potter fan community as an LGBTQ-identifying individual. Qualitative inquiry is often indicated when the topic in question has not previously been studied and in order to provide a rich, detailed exploration of a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Because this topic is very specific and has not been explored from an empirical perspective, a qualitative approach allowed for deeper understanding of participants' lived experience in their context.

Assumptions of Qualitative Research

Phenomenology is a form of qualitative inquiry that ontologically (referring to the nature of reality) assumes that there is an essential structure (or "essence") of the lived experience of an individual that can be discovered through collecting structured narratives regarding this experience (Cresswell, 1998). However, phenomenology does not rely on one standard set of research practices and requires an attitude of "continuous creativity" throughout the research process (van Manen, 2014, p. 72). Therefore, it is important to discuss the underlying assumptions of this qualitative study in order to increase rigor and trustworthiness of the data and results.

Reflexivity and "Bridling"

Phenomenological inquiry has a long tradition of varying philosophical stances on the nature of human knowledge, or "epistemology" (van Manen, 2014). Phenomenological epistemology assumes that the "lived experience" of individuals is the ultimate source of knowledge, and requires the researcher to "bracket" their own assumptions and biases in order to accurately glean the essence of lived experiences from their participants (van Manen, 2014). Due to my personal interest in and identification with this topic, I instead utilized a "bridling" technique (Dahlberg, 2006; Stutey et al., 2020; Vagle, 2010). Bridling in phenomenological inquiry does not require the researcher to remove preconceived notions of a certain phenomenon; rather, the researcher is asked to relax prior assumptions in order to provide "elbow room" to observe the process of understanding and making meaning of phenomena (Dahlberg, 2009, p. 16). Bridling is therefore a fitting reflexive practice for this particular study as it allows the researcher to work with assumptions rather than against them and to "maintain a continuous openness toward their own understanding" (Stutey et al., 2020, p. 147).

Following this technique, I dwelt with, listened to, and attended to the phenomenon by working through "being in resistance" of my preunderstandings as they arose (Vagle, 2010, p.

596). The practice of bridling implicates the processes of developing interview questions, conducting participant interviews, analyzing transcriptions and timelines, and writing the final manuscript. Therefore, throughout the research process I kept a reflexive bridling journal in which I reflected upon my experiences as the researcher (see Reflexivity Statement).

Feminist Phenomenology and Epistemology

The research questions of this study were concerned with understanding the experiences of LGBTQ individuals, consequently situating this study within the social context and empirical understanding that its participants are negatively impacted by systems of oppression. Accordingly, this study was informed by a feminist phenomenological perspective that assumes that lived experience must be understood in the larger context of social existence: that human experience is inherently and pervasively influenced by ideological and political structures of power (Simms & Stawarska, 2013).

A feminist phenomenological researcher must both regard participants' experiences with "interest, respect and compassion" while also interpreting those experiences from a critical perspective (Simms & Stawarska, 2013, p. 12). Additionally, feminist researchers must "engage in the practice of reflexivity," such as the process of bridling preconceptions and prejudices, while also clarifying the researchers' own participation in the process of data collection and creation (Simms & Stawarska, 2013, p. 12). Feminist methods of inquiry tend to be relation-centered, which "challenge[s] the view of the bounded, masterful, isolated self" in traditional research (Simms & Stawarska, 2013, p. 12). This principle is congruent with Relational-Cultural Theory as a theory that understands human development through relational connection, thereby strengthening the rationale for the use of RCT as a conceptual framework.

Feminist phenomenology recognizes that the researcher is unavoidably "entangled" with their participants and that this dynamic is not only crucial to acknowledge as a reflexive practice, but also may be utilized as a "tool for hearing the voice of the other more genuinely"

19

(Hawkesworth, 2006; Simms & Stawarska, 2013, p. 13). Feminist research seeks to empower

participants as experts of their own lived experience, as well as to directly enhance the lives of

participants (Hawkesworth, 2006; Simms & Stawarska, 2013, p. 13). As such, at the end of their

interviews participants were asked to provide any additional information they felt was pertinent to

their experience that was not uncovered through previous interview questions. Additionally,

participants were invited to provide feedback on their interview transcript through a member

reflection process to ensure their experience was accurately represented.

Sampling and Participants

Approval from the Oklahoma State University Internal Review Board (IRB) was

obtained before participant recruitment and selection. Participants were selected via criterion-

based sampling. The participants were required to meet the criteria of (a) being 18 years of age or

older, (b) identifying as a sexual and/or gender minority individual, and (c) identifying as a

member of the Harry Potter fan community. Because there is no strict definition of what

constitutes being a member of a fan community, this criterion was operationalized by meeting at

least three out of five possible fandom-specific activities (see Appendix C). Phenomenological

design suggests interviewing between five and twenty-five informants (Creswell, 1998). A total

of 24 individuals participated in a phone screening and met criteria for the study; however, seven

individuals were either unable to fulfill study requirements or did not respond to follow-up

attempts by the researcher to contact them. 17 participants completed all study requirements.

Data Collection

Participants were first asked to construct a "Coming Out" and "Fandom Experience"

timeline (Appendix E). For each timeline, participants were asked to identify key milestones. For

the coming out timeline, a participant could include key milestones such as seeing an LGBTQ

character represented in the media for the first time, when they first identified as non-

heterosexual or cisgender, and coming out experiences. For the fandom timeline, a participant

could include key milestones such as when they first encountered the Harry Potter series, when they first made a personal connection with another person through being a Harry Potter fan, and a time in their lives when being a Harry Potter fan helped them through a difficult situation. Participants then responded to an open-ended, semi-structured interview (Appendix D) conducted by the researcher. Each interview was comprised of fourteen questions regarding the phenomenon of LGBTQ engagement with the Harry Potter fan community. Interviews were then transcribed by the researcher using transcription software, which aided in editing transcripts for the purpose of readability (i.e., removing repeated words and excessive filler language such as "um" and "like") as well as to deidentify where necessary to protect participants' identities. Gathering participant data from multiple sources was intended to aid in crystallization of the data (Tracy, 2010).

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed through a process of phenomenological thematic analysis as described by van Manen (2014). It is important to note that thematic analysis requires a "complex and creative process of insightful invention, discovery, and disclosure" that enables the researcher to identify meaning of lived experience (van Manen, 2014, p. 320).

In this study, data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using a three-step process in order to ascertain the meaning of lived experience as captured through narrative text, including levels of wholistic reading, selective reading, and detailed reading (van Manen, 2014). Interviews were first analyzed using the wholistic reading approach, in which the researcher attended "to the text as a whole" and attempted to capture the essence of meaning from the words in the text (Van Manen, 2014). Interviews were then analyzed via selective reading, which required reading the text numerous times (Van Manen, 2014). In this step, sentences and sentence clusters that were deemed essential to understanding the meaning of the phenomenon were selected for closer analysis. The final step of detailed reading of the text involved analysis of every sentence or

sentence cluster of each interview in order to examine how this specific sentence may provide insight into the meaning of the text (Van Manen, 2014). Preliminary themes were then created by aggregating these insights of meaning. Themes were finalized while constructing the phenomenology of participants' lived experience in the Findings section of this manuscript (Chapter IV).

The timelines submitted by each participant provided richer information about each participant's process of meaning-making by documenting subjective milestones in participants' coming out and fandom engagement journeys. As an additional data source utilized for crystallization of data, this provided a facet of the lived experience that "open[ed] up a more complex, in-depth, but still thoroughly partial, understanding" of the phenomenon (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). This artifact was explained to participants as a "creative activity," and participants were given free rein to document their responses in whichever format they believed would best communicate their experiences. Participant timelines varied from scanned images of handwritten narratives on notebook paper, to a single-page graphic of a timeline with chronological milestones visually depicted, to multi-page narratives including photographs and, in one timeline, links to websites containing a participant's fan works.

Due to the varied formats and styles of presentation of these timelines, there was not one specific method utilized to analyze this source of data. Timelines were primarily reviewed alongside their corresponding interview transcripts in order to more fully capture the lived experience of participants. For timelines that included narrative descriptions of participants' fandom and LGBTQ identity milestones, this was used as an additional source of thematic data and was subjected to the same three-step thematic analysis described by van Manen (2014). Timelines that were more visual in nature primarily served to emphasize the importance of certain milestones as well as to add to the richness of these participants' stories. While the creative element of this data source made it impossible to use a consistent method of data analysis across

participants, a more rigidly defined timeline process could have resulted in loss of depth and complexity of data from the participants' interpretation of the task.

Reflexivity Statement

In accordance with the bridling process discussed previously, I kept a journal documenting my assumptions and potential biases as well as my reactions throughout the research process. Salient aspects of my identity that could provide undue bias include that I am a queer/bisexual, white, cisgender woman, and I identify as a member of the Harry Potter fan community. Therefore, I share characteristics and experiences with many of the participants of this study. I currently practice therapy as part of my training to become a counseling psychologist, and therefore have pre-formed knowledge and expertise in identifying and treating mental health conditions, as well as firm opinions regarding social justice and advocacy. I practice and view the world through a feminist lens that is critical of heteronormative and patriarchal power structures and utilize intersectionality as a means of understanding systems of oppression. I believe that there are unavoidable relational dynamics between myself as the researcher and each participant, which will be inherently unique and subject to positional influence.

I came by my interest in this study honestly. As a child of the 1990s, I first read the Harry Potter book when I was seven years old. I essentially grew up with the series, and alongside Harry, and the final book came out when I was a teenager. I talked about the books constantly and made some friends by doing so (as well as probably alienating myself from other peers). I read (and attempted, very poorly, to write) fanfiction and became enamored with the Wizard Rock scene from a distance from middle to high school. I attended wrock concerts and midnight releases, and dressed up as Harry Potter for Halloween in elementary school, gender roles be damned. Harry Potter was my own coping strategy, as well as my way of finding connection. I

found acceptance in fandom spaces more readily than "in real life," and I heard anecdotally from others that they did the same.

I tend to be reflective to begin with, and throughout the process of gathering, transcribing, and analyzing data, I found myself subject to the triumphs and stressors of a truly unique year that included a pandemic, significant civil unrest, political upheaval, and a personal move across the country. Therefore, it was crucial to have a space in which to process my assumptions and biases that were being actively influenced by world and national events. I will provide an example of how this bridling process was useful during the data collection phase:

As an avid user of social media, including Twitter, I experienced moments of being "in resistance" during participant interviews (i.e. Vagle, 2010) that involved discussions of J.K. Rowling's recent anti-transgender rhetoric during the first month of interviewing participants for this study. I found myself wanting to embrace my biases and to commiserate with participants who were sharing strong opinions that I found myself agreeing with. Rather than shut down that impulse completely, which may have led to not discussing this topic as fully, I was intentional in how I followed up on comments related to the author. Any prompting was focused on the participant's experience and using open-ended phrasing so as not to influence the participant's response. Any value laden language (i.e., calling the author names) was not instigated by myself. By following up with participants in this manner, this still could have communicated my values and consequently influenced participant discussion; however, this also led to depth and richness of data that may not have otherwise surfaced. I have included a brief part of the written transcript with participant Emma as an example of this:

> Emma: …But we have essentially like renounced JK Rowling as canon and been like, well, we're just going to make all these characters gay, and you can't do anything about it. Sorry, like, you don't own this anymore. It's just us, and we're gonna make of this what we want. And that's the way it's been for a really long time. And that's really cool.
>
> PI: You've mentioned being on Twitter and interacting with people in that space. And, I mean, as we're doing this interview, still kind of in the midst of, she keeps saying more and more things, and becoming a trending topic.

Emma**:** Yeah, she does. Yeah, it's interesting. She has a very strange place in the fandom…Yeah, she wasn't a trending topic, but we already saw her as like, just someone who doesn't support our community.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative studies, trustworthiness of data must be established in order to ensure rigor and quality of the research (Nowell et al., 2017; Tracy, 2010). Trustworthiness can be demonstrated by ensuring credibility of data. Credibility in this study was operationalized using two methods: (1) utilizing multiple sources of data for crystallization (Tracy, 2010), and (2) a member-checking process in which participants provided feedback on whether their interview transcript accurately reflected their experience, with the option to make edits if necessary (Tracy, 2010). Six of the 17 participants agreed to engage in the member-checking process, and all six returned their transcripts with minimal feedback and confirmed the data was accurate. This had the additional benefit of providing participants with the opportunity to be more involved in the research process, which is congruent with the feminist perspective through which this study was designed (Simms & Stawarska, 2013, p. 13). Additionally, the researcher kept a traceable reflexivity journal via the bridling process (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2010), further contributing to credibility and, thus, trustworthiness of the study (Tracy, 2010).

The data was also analyzed by an internal reviewer. The reviewer did not consider themselves to be a member of the Harry Potter fandom but did identify as part of the LGBTQ community. The reviewer completed the first two steps of the thematic analysis process (wholistic and selective reading; van Manen, 2014) on two randomly selected interview transcripts. The reviewer did not have any prior indication of sentences and sentence clusters selected by the primary researcher, and each transcript was compared between reviewers in order to demonstrate confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017).

Ethical Considerations

Participant names and information have been deidentified and pseudonyms are used throughout this manuscript to protect participants' privacy. Recordings of participant interviews will be deleted after transcription (unless otherwise indicated by participants for the purpose of donating to the OSU Oral History Program, in which case audio recordings will be kept electronically in encrypted and secure files until they have been donated by participant). Data provided by participants (including demographic information, interview transcripts and timelines) were kept electronically in an encrypted and password-protected hard drive that was stored in a filing case secured by a combination lock. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Oklahoma State University before participant recruitment and data collection commenced.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Setting

Participant interviews were conducted via Zoom videoconferencing service in order to accommodate large geographical spread of participants. Interviews were completed between May 2020 and April 2021 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many participants were confined to their homes due to local and national restrictions set forth as recommended by public health authorities during this time. Therefore, many participants had to make additional efforts to find a private location in which to complete their interview, often with the possibility of interruptions from partners, family members, and/or pets, which may have influenced participants' experiences while completing the interview.

Participant Demographics

Out of the 24 individuals who attended a phone screening and met criteria for the study, a total of 17 participants fully completed the interview process. Participants completed a questionnaire in which they were asked to self-report demographic information to the best of their ability. Participants ranged from 20 to 35 years of age ($M = 28.9$). The majority of participants ($N = 16$) identified as white or Caucasian (in addition, one participant identifying as British and

another as Jewish) and one participant identified as Latina (Chilean). Most participants ($N = 14$) listed their country of residence as the United States, and the remaining three participants reported living in Chile, Germany, and Scotland (respectively). All participants had acquired at least a high school degree of education or similar, and highest degree of education attained included Associate's Degree ($N = 2$), Bachelor's Degree ($N = 6$), Master's/Professional Degree ($N = 7$), and Doctoral Degree ($N = 2$).

Participants provided their gender identity and sexual orientation in open text fields that allowed them to describe their identity with whichever labels felt the most salient to them. Most participants ($N = 14$) identified as female/woman or cisgender female/woman, while two participants identified as gender nonbinary and one participant identified as male. In terms of sexual orientation, 5 participants included multiple identifiers; for simplification, only the primary identifiers provided are listed here. (Full sexual orientation identifiers as well as participants' pronouns will be provided throughout the results section as relevant, as well as listed in the demographic table (Table 1) Primary identifiers of sexual orientation included: queer ($N = 5$), bisexual ($N = 5$), asexual/aromantic ($N = 3$), pansexual ($N = 2$), and lesbian ($N = 2$). Participants were also asked to provide their Hogwarts "House" affiliation, which included nine Ravenclaws, four Hufflepuffs, two Slytherins, one Gryffindor, and one participant who identified as Hufflepuff/Gryffindor. While occupational data and location with the US were also collected, this has not been included in order to conceal identifying information and protect participant anonymity from other members of the Harry Potter fandom if they were to read this manuscript.

Data Collection

After the researcher confirmed eligibility to participate in the study and acquired consent to participate, participants were sent instructions to complete a demographic survey and the Coming Out and Fandom timelines. Once all materials were complete and uploaded to the secure data management system, participants were scheduled for a semi-structured interview regarding

their experience as an LGBTQ-identifying member of the Harry Potter fan community. Interviews took place over Zoom videoconference application and lasted between 30-90 minutes. The researcher utilized two recording devices (one primary, one backup) and all recordings were transferred to a secure, password-protected external hard drive that was locked in a secure location when not in use. The backup recording was typically deleted after verification of recording quality from primary recording device (the backup recording was only kept on one occasion when the primary recording device stopped halfway through one participant's interview). It should be noted that due to nature of interview taking place over video call and in participants' (and researcher's) homes, there were often unplanned interruptions by participants' (and researcher's) pets, which were captured in the recording process and documented in transcripts for additional situational context. Researcher utilized ethernet connection in order to guarantee adequate internet bandwidth; however, the video call occasionally "froze" when participants' internet connection was unstable. If necessary, researcher asked participant to repeat themselves to prevent loss of data; however, there is no way to confirm whether this had an undue influence on data collection.

Phenomenological Themes

Themes are presented with subthemes to further make sense of the data. Quotations are included and have been "cleaned up" (i.e., removed repeated words or phrases, filler words such as "like" or "um,") to reduce difficulty in following flow of conversation. Pseudonyms were used in place of participants' real names to keep their identities private. Names were chosen based on the names of actors and minor characters in the Harry Potter series (e.g., "Emma" refers to the actress Emma Watson; "Ruby" was inspired by Rubeus Hagrid) as well as LGBTQ-identifying characters from other media (e.g., Willow from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; 1997; and Syd from *One Day at a Time;* 2017).

Fandom Engagement

Official Fan Events

Many participants recounted early experiences of feeling part of the Harry Potter fandom by attending release parties and midnight premieres affiliated with the canon of the series itself. When asked to provide a definition of fandom, Ayda reflected that fans are those "probably going to the midnight parties for the book releases, because reading is very individual… Being a fan to me is louder and sort of more active than the actual act of reading or watching something that you enjoy." Bonnie realized while attending the midnight film premiere of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (2009)*, "*That was the first time that I felt excited to be around that many Harry Potter fans."

While all books in the series had been published by 2007, the movie franchise supported midnight premiere events through the release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part II* in 2011. Stevonnie attended one such event at the Wizarding World of Harry Potter theme park at Universal Studios in Orlando that was hosted in conjunction with their first Harry Potter fan convention, LeakyCon 2011.

> It was a huge deal. Like, there are a bunch of the actors from the movies that were down there for the panels and we got to meet a bunch of them. And it was just ridiculous…We got to see the movie at like, 6:00 pm the night before it was released at midnight, which was so cool, in Orlando [Universal] Studios. The park stayed open until 1:00 am or something like that. And since we had LeakyCon passes, we had three hours of the park being open after everybody else had to go home.

Bonnie reported that she has a part-time job as travel agent with the primary purpose of allowing her to visit Orlando theme parks, including the Wizarding World. For her, the experience is magical: "I don't know how they do it, it's like, tear-jerking. But I swear, when you're walking into Diagon Alley, it's playing the music that plays when Harry is having his 'oh my gosh, magic is amazing' moment [in the movies]." Willow also noted the emotional impact of this immersive experience. Growing up in the United Kingdom, was unable to visit the theme park due to the high price of international travel, until her parents unexpectedly came into some

30

money that allowed them to book plane tickets to Orlando, Florida. Willow reflected, "This trip was incredible. I wore a different wizard rock t-shirt every day and couldn't stop crying the first time I saw the castle."

Fan-Created Community

While many participants identified significant milestones in their fandom journey through interacting with products and events officially affiliated with the Harry Potter franchise, the majority of participant discussion regarding their experiences within the fandom were situated in fan-created spaces. Fan creations are a crucial part of Oliver's definition of fandom:

> [Fandom is] when something grows beyond its creator and really starts to take on a life of its own…When you can hold not just one, but several conventions all over the world, for just this specific thing that started from a series of books, and then you have fanfictions, you have plays, you have a whole sub-genre of rock music, that all came from this one thing that this single person came up with, that's what a fandom really is to me.

Several participants involved in Wizard Rock subculture emphasized the importance of live music performances in creating sense of community in fans. Emma reported that her favorite fandom experiences "are going to Wizard Rock concerts and being surrounded, like literally surrounded by people that I know in the crowd…[and] dancing really hard and screaming our lungs out." Willow explained her experience with this phenomenon:

> I think the best way to describe [the fandom]…is Harry and the Potters. When I first listened, and I know this is blasphemous to say, I didn't really like them. Because on the album I was like, these guys can't sing. Like, is this is this what started it all? Is this it? And then you see them live, and it's just electric… when you're in a crowd singing along, everyone's screaming, everyone's like cheering, jumping up and down. You haven't been able to feel your body underneath all the sweat for hours. But you're there and you're together. And you're, you're yelling about how love is going to save the world. And it's just incredible.

Members of this subcommunity also reflected on another significant fan-created space that promoted community within the fandom. Emma explained that the house shows hosted by Brian Ross (aka the wrock band Draco and the Malfoy) were legendary within wrock fandom:

> Brian invites anyone who wants to over to his house about four times a year and has wizard rock bands perform in his basement and he allows people to stay like on his couches and stuff. But that has always felt like a very safe space. It's very intimate, it's

somebody's home. It's where I met most of my friends who I interact with regularly… If we ever write a history book, there would be a chapter on Brian's basement.

Ayda, who has written and performed wrock music, noted, "I've been able to explore that music side of me while also exploring the [fandom] side. I enjoy getting to put those things together and meet a lot of people who interact with this thing the same way I do." Brienne has been involved in numerous fan projects, including writing fan fiction, managing web content, organizing events, and music production. They reported, however, that the wizard rock community is [where] "I really flourished and made a lot of really strong connections that have carried me through till the present day." Brienne continued, describing a significant moment:

> I have a couple of standout music performances that are real highlight moments in my life. Um, there was a wizard rock festival called Wrock Stock. That was like the end all, be all of wizard rock for a while there and I was invited to play…and I got a standing ovation at the end of my set, during my encore. It was like one of those like, "you couldn't have written this" movie moments.

Impactful fan communities within the Harry Potter fandom were not limited to IRL ("In Real Life") spaces. Oliver's engagement with fan-created content began after he got an iPhone and discovered Harry Potter fan podcasts. They reported, "Podcasts have become my happy place in the fandom because it's a regular meeting of people who want to discuss and analyze the books and films and talk about the effect it is having/has had on our culture and community." Bonnie found her podcast niche only within the last couple of years:

> In 2018, I discovered a podcast where the hosts read erotic Harry Potter fanfiction, and I felt like I had found MY PEOPLE. There were Facebook groups for listeners of the podcast [and] the people who listen and engage in the podcast are extremely open and accepting. It's a very sex positive and inclusive environment.

Other participants referenced forums and social media platforms such as Facebook and Tumblr as essential to their experience of fandom. Angelina recalled joining a Facebook group called, "Fuck This, I'm Going to Hogwarts" in 2007. "The group had discussion posts, fan art, trivia, fun games, and allowed me to meet and become friends with Harry Potter fans around the world." Emma first found fan community on Tumblr following the release of "A Very Potter Musical," a

parody musical created by a group of college students who eventually became the acting troupe

Starkid Potter. Emma said,

> I watched 'A Very Potter Musical' as soon as I heard about it… and was instantly
> obsessed. I soon found out that there was an active and thriving fandom for this musical
> on Tumblr , so I made an account and joined in the fun. This is where I made my first few
> fandom friends.

Ruby shared a nearly identical recollection of her introduction to the Harry Potter fan community,

stating that after watching the musical, she "went to Tumblr and saw a bunch of people talking

about it, blogging about it and creating fan art." She continued, "That is when I first felt like I was

building a community even though it was only online because there is still that

interconnectedness."

Fan-Created Representation

Another theme related to fan engagement included the lack of diversity of characters in

the original canon of the series. Alice noted, "There was speculation about like Dumbledore being

gay or whatever and then later when J.K. Rowling said that he was, that was really the first

conversation we ever had about like, any sort of 'abnormal' relationships in Harry Potter." She

added that she does not consider materials outside of the original seven books to be canon, which

informs her opinion that "I just don't think that we are really justified in saying that any one of

[the characters] identifies in the community." Bonnie had similar doubts that Albus Dumbledore

was canonically gay, and stated "It felt like fan service almost…I don't know if she could actually

ever have any proof that shows that that has always been in her mind." However, while Alice was

uninterested in "fanon" interpretations of characters' sexual and gender identities, Bonnie

discussed how the fan community surrounding her favorite podcast reimagines characters. She

said, somewhat tongue in cheek, "The new Harry Potter canon is Draco and Harry – I mean, it's

obviously a relationship – and Luna is a polyamorous bisexual woman, and people in that

community have just accepted that."

If the original story contains characters that are so homogenous (and heterosexual), then how do so many LGBTQ fans find community within the fandom? Ayda shared why she identifies so strongly with the series as a queer person despite lack of LGBTQ representation:

> Harry Potter's experience…is very similar to a queer person's experience of not really understanding the world that you live in. Literally living inside of a closet, and then getting this letter and realizing that there's so much more. Like, so many queer people identify with that in such an interesting way. Because while I have many straight friends who love Harry Potter…I feel like there's something about Harry Potter that sticks different with queer people than it does with people who are not.

Regarding fan works, Poppy said simply, "If no one else is going to make the thing I want, I guess I have to make it." Oliver discussed LGBTQ representation in Harry Potter fan works such as wizard rock and fanfiction, stating, "a lot of the representation of the LGBTQ plus community in the fandom comes from the fandom in the community itself… we were only ever going to get so much of all of that from the author anyway." Stevonnie, for example, expressed that they are very interested in "queerifying Harry Potter characters" through their fan works (for example, reimagining Luna Lovegood as asexual, or Remus Lupin as transgender). Stevonnie was especially interested in bringing in queer representations of gender, and expressed, "It's so nice because it feels like it's giving the trans community more visibility within the Harry Potter community."

The concept of "slash shipping" (portraying characters of the same gender in a relationship) was also a theme in several interviews. Ruby reflected on her experience reading fanfiction: "I started reading Draco/Harry, Hermione/Ginny, Ginny/Luna, like all those different kinds of ships and saying, Hey, this is more interesting and better than straight fanfiction. I like this more." Emma reflected,

> There has always been a fanfiction subculture of shipping subtextual gay characters – you know, like Draco and Harry. And I think among the Harry Potter fandom, a lot of LGBT people are just like so much more likely to just see Remus Lupin and be like, Oh, yeah, he's obviously gay. And so it just becomes something that also binds us together because we have the same opinion and we queer code everything. It's already there in the text to us.

Ruby, who is also heavily involved in writing fan fiction, said that she wants "to have queer characters, but not have their sexuality be the only thing about them…because you can do so much more. Sexuality defines you in a way, but it's not everything there is to know about you."

Developing LGBTQ Identity

Identity Exploration through Fandom

A major theme discussed by participants was the ways in which fandom enabled LGBTQ identity exploration. Many found that engaging in online fan spaces was particularly conducive to understanding identity. For Tina, who lives in a rural and conservative area, it was also protective. She said, "It's a little bit scarier for me to engage in person with queer spaces. Mostly because my wife and I worry about our safety…. So online spaces have been super helpful." Willow expressed how online spaces provided her with a less intimidating entry to LGBTQ spaces. She said, "Like my initiation into Harry Potter fandom, my initiation into like LGBT stuff was also online because I'm not too comfortable with putting myself out there physically….And through meeting queer people, I've been able to talk about my identity."

Emma discussed her experience navigating new ideas about gender and sexuality she came across in fan spaces on Tumblr, a blogging website: "People [were] critiquing heteronormative society in ways that I had never considered as a high schooler. And that's when I began to sort of question where I would place myself on the sexuality spectrum." Similarly, Molly shared,

> Getting involved in fandom and seeing other people's perspectives was a huge reason why I kind of started to turn around on my religious beliefs that I grew up with that were pretty homophobic. Being in that inclusive space, I was able to get rid of those beliefs and also realize that I am queer as well.

Helena also found the culture of slash shipping in fandom spaces to be helpful in both understanding and normalizing LGBTQ identities. She reported, "People would openly talk about stuff like shipping Draco and Harry, or Ginny and Hermione. And then you would say like, Okay, so this is not a bad thing. So I found [my LGBTQ identity] there in the fandom." Ayda lamented

the fact that she was unaware of fanfiction and fan art works that could have helped her to explore

her queer identity: "Fanfiction is how [some people] discovered their queer identity. Having no

queer characters in Harry Potter, or any of the media I consumed as a child, just contributed to the

fact that we didn't have it in my house, either."

Participants also spoke about utilizing fandom spaces to learn more about aspects of

sexual and gender minority identities that they were unfamiliar with. Ayda mentioned, "I've

learned the most about different identifiers probably from, like meeting different people in the

Harry Potter fandom and then like, attending panels at different conventions and things like that."

Stevonnie discussed using online fan spaces to better understand and support someone they cared

about:

> [My roommate] came out to me as nonbinary, said that their pronouns were they/them
> and I had never heard of this before. And so I was like, I don't know what to do. So of
> course, as a Ravenclaw, the first thing I do is I go to Tumblr and I start following like
> educational LGB and like Trans blogs because I'm like… I don't know how to use
> they/them pronouns, but I will try my best. And as a Ravenclaw I initially had a lot of
> problems with the they/them part because I'm like, that's not grammatically correct, and
> now, years later, here I am using they/them pronouns!

Oliver also spoke with excitement about continued opportunities to learn about LGBTQ identity:

> I feel like I learn something new every day as part of this community. When I started
> realizing that I was not a straight person, I identified as bisexual because I thought that's
> all there was. So as time goes by, I started to learn, okay, there is a spectrum. And then as
> even more time goes by the spectrum gets wider. There are more terms, there are
> different ways to identify yourself.

Culture of LGBTQ Acceptance

By and large, most participants considered the Harry Potter fandom to be a safe space to

be authentically themselves due to the normalization of LGBTQ identity in the fandom. Poppy

found that the Harry Potter fandom made her queer identity "simple, more secure." She noted,

"The Harry Potter community, to me, is inclusive and supportive and uplifting. You know, fanfic

authors are very expressive and free and all of the best wizard rockers – I say that incredibly

subjectively – are queer." Ayda similarly shared, "I definitely feel like I've gotten gayer since

joining Harry Potter fandom." Helena reflected on fandom's role in providing a supportive space

to come into her own identity as bisexual while living in an unaffirming environment:

> I figured out that I was part of the LGBTQ plus community while I was in the Harry
> Potter fandom. Because a lot of people in the fandom were part of the community in a
> time where the community was not accepted. You know, it wasn't that normal to be
> publicly bisexual, for instance, or to be publicly gay or bi or lesbian. I mean, you would
> hear that people were, but it was treated like an illness, at least in my country.

> Molly identified the Harry Potter fandom as a space "where I have had some experiences

that I feel that I'm most able to be just openly myself and where everyone is celebrated for their

differences." Brienne reported, "I use they/them pronouns in certain spaces, mostly in fan

communities...And because they're not related to my family, they're like a different kind of safe

space where I could experiment with pronouns." They continued, "Because it was people within

my own community, there was already that relationship and that trust there that made it really

easy for me to engage with those ideas and discuss them with my peers." Syd discussed

navigating her gender identity and expression at Harry Potter conventions:

> I didn't fall into a category easily…And so [that acceptance] was very helpful because I
> was able to decide to bind if I wanted to, I was able to decide to dress differently for the
> ball if I wanted to. And like, there didn't have to be like a paper trail of it…whenever I
> went to Harry Potter fan spaces, it felt like the first time in my life that like I was not only
> in the majority but also like, not even the queerest person in the room.

Korra, reflecting on the connections she has made through fandom, simply stated, "I can be more

myself around my fandom friends, which is why I haven't come out yet to my family… Fandom

community is just more willing to accept people for who they are. Not what they want them to

be."

In addition to generally being an accepting environment for LGBTQ folks to be

themselves, participants also noted the impact of seeing key members of the Harry Potter fan

community coming out as LGBTQ on their own process of identity development. Stevonnie

recalled witnessing an influential member of the Harry Potter fandom discussing his coming out

journey. They reported, "That gave me the courage to come out to the community….Everybody

was so supportive of it. And I was like, oh, yeah, if I come out to these people, they're totally

gonna be supportive." Molly also discussed the significance of seeing an influential fan creator

come out on her own development as both an ally and a member of the LGBTQ community

herself:

> He was the first person I had any sort of relationship with to come out as queer, even if it
> was just a YouTuber I really liked. Then, I talked to my best friend about it, and how I
> felt like if [he] was trans, I should support that, despite what we were taught in church.
> During this conversation, she came out to me as asexual, the first time I had heard the
> term. Once I knew what the term asexual was, it felt right, and I quickly figured out that I
> was asexual as well.

Emma reflected on experiences at the infamous wrock house show that helped her to

better understand her own LGBTQ identity. She stated, "[Brian's house show] has always felt

very queer to me." She also recognized a specific wizard rock song as becoming instrumental in

how she has come to identify herself:

> I actually didn't use the label queer until, until I started going to the house shows, until I
> heard Abby Ritter sang, "It's Intersectional" and I heard that chorus and it just felt so
> powerful and that word became the word that I overlapped with community. "We're here,
> we're queer." Before that I had identified as bisexual. But then, queer also felt more like a
> community-building word, especially within the Harry Potter community. Everybody's
> singing that chorus together. So it kind of directly impacted the label that I put on myself.

Brienne credited the Harry Potter fandom as responsible for "two thirds of my understanding of

myself as a queer person, honestly, because of the people that I knew in this community who

were speaking openly about their experiences." Emma reflected,

> I don't think I felt like I was in like a queer community until…the past couple of years.
> Because most of if not all, my friends who regularly go to these wizard rock house parties
> are queer, and so that became my queer community. And then we went to Pride together
> and I connected the dots that…Oh, I'm kind of already here.

Navigating Marginalization

Another common theme across participants was the uncertainty around navigating how to

express themselves as marginalized individuals within an oppressive system. For individuals with

less "visible" identities (i.e., bisexual, asexual, nonbinary), their desire to be recognized as part of

the LGBTQ community was often hindered by others' heteronormative assumptions. Ayda

reported, "I'm definitely more of the label 'femme.' So I'm definitely a person that can sort of

38

pass for a straight cis person…it's never presented to people outside of the LGBT community

unless I literally tell them."

Several participants shared that others' perceptions of their identity seemed to be based

on whether they had a sexual or romantic partner. Sybil shared,

> The thing about being [asexual] or [aromantic] is that an absence is not something that
> you have to like, say to people. So we're a little less visible, just from the fact that if
> you're asexual, you're not bringing anyone home. So like, why would there ever be a
> conversation?

Syd noted, "I am queer whether or not I'm engaging in a 'queer' behavior or I'm like, 'acting

gay.'…People would think that because I wasn't like partnered, it didn't matter that I was gay.

And that was the worst experience ever." Others reported that being in a relationship with

partners of the perceived opposite gender seemed to affect whether others recognized their

identity. Poppy said that she intentionally uses the label 'queer' for this reason. She said, "Being a

cisgender woman in a [heterosexual] marriage, people tend to be unkind about identifying as

bisexual, so queer is just a nice broad cover." Brienne discussed that because they are married to

a cisgender man, they experience "passing privilege." They noted, "People very often just read

me as female in a heterosexual relationship. Even though that's not accurate, it's not something I

need to confront most of the time because it doesn't change much of those interactions."

This concept of passing privilege showed up for several participants. Poppy shared,

> I am always hyper aware that…bisexuality is a very hotly debated subject, especially
> amongst lesbians, and is potentially a point of conflict. So I tend to try to stay quieter and
> not be center of attention, I guess, in most places. I guess that's one of those times when I
> tend to think of myself more as an ally rather than actual member of the LGBTQ
> community, just because I don't face any of the abuses or the struggles that everyone else
> does.

Molly shared a similar opinion. She stated, "I've had a few ignorant comments when I tell

someone I'm asexual…But overall, I think I've been pretty lucky… asexuality doesn't experience

as much blatant discrimination as if you're gay or bisexual or transgender, etc." Oliver shared,

"I'm lucky, because a lot of the stories that I've heard of people of who have had to deal with

homophobia, transphobia…And that's the worst, because if I encounter a homophobe on the

street, I can walk away from them."

A number of participants spoke about their negative interactions with others who did not

understand or acknowledge their identity. Bonnie said that as someone who identifies as bisexual,

she has struggled to find acceptance from individuals both outside of and within the LGBTQ

community. She said,

> [I have] definitely been 'not enough' from [the lesbian] side and then from the hetero
> side, yeah, I'm bisexual, but that doesn't mean that you're just going to get threesomes
> whenever you want or anything like that. That's been tough to try to make some men
> understand...That it's not just for their fun and pleasure.

Helena agreed, stating, "It's been hard mostly because I've experienced a lot of biphobia within

the [lesbian] community. Like lesbian girls don't date bisexual girls…I've heard people call me

immature and people call me like, that I'm like halfway there." Angelina shared the varying

reactions from others she has received after coming out as bisexual:

> There's the supportive [reaction], and then there's the, 'Ooh two hot girls, so hot'
> reaction. Then, there's the, 'Oh it's just a phase, you're really gay,' or it's 'Oh, it's just a
> phase, you are really straight." Or, it's, 'I don't date bi women because they'll just go back
> to men.' I know that I know who I am, [but] it really sucks and it hurts.

Willow discussed how invalidating experiences from others impacted how she viewed her own

identity when she first came out as bisexual. She shared,

> My mom did say to me, to my face, that she didn't think bisexuality was real when I was
> young. And so I never felt like it was a valid option for me because I had negative
> experiences and I had a lot of like, external and internal biphobia that I was dealing with.
> And so it was either, I'm going to be attracted to girls or not…And it's funny, because I
> didn't apply that to anyone else in my life. They could be bi, [but] I can't be bi.

Within the Harry Potter fandom, a couple of participants noted that the fandom's

acceptance around LGBTQ identity often did not feel inclusive of all sexual and gender minority

identities. Sybil shared how the presence of more prominent LGBTQ identities within the Harry

Potter fan community actually made it more confusing to understand her identity as an aromantic

bisexual woman. She said, "[I thought] there's clearly something wrong with me.

Because…especially if you're in the Harry Potter fandom and…places where the queer

community is, like, you see gay, lesbian, bisexuals, even pansexuals, and also trans a lot more

recently." Syd reported,

> [Being] asexual was not something that I felt safe really discussing in any fan space…
> There were definitely times that I look back now and I'm like, you weren't actually
> sexually interested or physically attracted to what you were saying you were…you felt
> you needed to do this to be accepted within the space.

She also noted that she has only recently felt supported in exploring gender expression in fan

spaces. Syd said, "It wasn't as inclusive as I would have assumed. I don't really remember starting

to see a lot of visibly of gender nonconforming or trans people or much discussion about that

until a couple of years ago."

Supporting Mental Health

Sense of Community

A common narrative across participants was, through the Harry Potter fandom, finding a

community where they not only were able to be their authentic selves and make connections with

others, but also feel like a part of something larger than themselves. When asked whether they felt

like they belonged to the Harry Potter fan community, every participant said, "Yes." For some,

belonging to this community offered a space to be themselves more so than with family or other

significant relationships in their lives. Stevonnie reflected on their relationship with fandom, and

said, "[It] is a lot like found family in a lot of ways. I met a lot of my really closest friends

through fandom…[who are] people that you can be yourself around without being apologetic for

it." Korra shared, "I'm comfortable being myself with this group of nerdy people and it's

amazing. Fandom spaces have given me a safe space to escape 'real world' problems and

freedom to express things I maybe wouldn't to IRL friends and family." Angelina reported,

"Finding those people like me has been really wonderful and I've cried a lot of really happy tears

talking to other people like me."

Several participants also discussed the support they received from the Harry Potter fan

community during difficult times in their lives. Helena shared how her relationship with members

41

of the fandom helped her through struggles with mental health, naming it a "beacon of light on my life." She said, "The fandom kind of became my family in a way. I felt more comfortable discussing my mental health issues with people in the fandom than I was with my own family, you know…I found understanding there, I found love." Korra similarly shared, "I feel like my fandom friends always seem to know when something's wrong…like their timing is perfect…and I think that's amazing, because my mom is great, and my best friend is great. But that's about all I have." Oliver noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, their online relationships with members of the fandom brought a renewed source of connection into his life. He said, "We do podcasts together, we get on Skype, or we get on Zoom, and we have breakfast together. We watch *Wandavision* together. It's just, I feel like I've never been less lonely."

Molly reflected on how her relationship to fandom has shifted as she has gotten older. She shared,

> When I was going through high school, I think [fandom] really was a big comfort…it really positively affected my mental health to know that there was a place that I was accepted. And I think that now I have enough spaces and support outside of fandom that I maybe don't need it as much. But I think that when you feel like you maybe don't have as many places that you belong, fandom can really help give you that.

Willow stated that fandom "gives me a lot of support and it gives me a lot of places to go. I've got some of my closest friends from the Harry Potter community, I've got some really wonderful memories…[to] fall back on." However, in recent years, she feels like she has not been as engaged in the fan community:

> Maybe I'm just not that, like, connected or I just don't know about what's going on right now in Harry Potter fandom stuff, but I haven't found things where I can connect with people in the same kind of way and that scares me. So, yeah, it's a very big help. But it's also something that I'm scared of losing.

Tina shared a similar concern about the potential effect of losing or feeling excluded from the support of fandom on mental health. She said, "I think fandom can also be harmful to mental health…if it's just a not good space where people are constantly argumentative or gatekeeping, or

42

making you feel excluded. Basically, the opposite of that feeling of community and safety." Syd

shared feeling this way at times within the Harry Potter fandom. She said,

> It feels like a generational divide …[there were] cliques that I see that I don't love. And I
> feel like I've been there longer … That affected how I felt within the fandom at large,
> because there were different sections that I felt were mine and sections I felt were not.

A number of participants discussed a difficult period of time in the fan community in

which several prominent members of the fandom, including some popular wrock performers,

were implicated in a sexual abuse scandal. Poppy remembered, "I think it killed [the fandom] for

a while, especially for me since a lot of the big new bands that I had easiest access to, I couldn't

listen to for a long time." Willow shared how challenging it was for her reconcile this supportive

and welcoming community with the reality that abuse had occurred. She said, "I'd had really

special moments with some of them, [so] to then know like, oh, they're not that great, that was

really difficult." Ruby discussed the personal impact of learning about the allegations of sexual

abuse about a particular fan creator she previously considered to be a friend. She reflected,

> It just was like getting stabbed in the chest, seeing that…he took advantage and did so
> much bad. And he had made himself such a huge part of the community that when the
> news broke, it kind of tore out the center of what I knew of as the Harry Potter
> community…Before it happened, it really felt like, and maybe this was a bit of naiveté,
> but it really felt like the Harry Potter community was the safe place…[and] was like one
> big family. And…it kind of just went away after that.

Ruby then discussed how this changed her perception of the fandom, as well as how she

chose to engage with it. She shared, "Everything changed after that at the conventions. They got

smaller and the organizers got a little bit worse about how they reacted to people about

everything…I think maybe I gave it two years… after that, I just stopped going." Willow had a

slightly different perspective of the impact of these events on the community. She stated,

"Immediately after, everyone spoke up about rules of consent, and, like, tried to come together to

make sure that these people were no longer welcome in our community, which was really

encouraging." Willow also noted, "This didn't help the fact that my experience had been soured."

Tool for self-understanding

Participants spoke about how being a Harry Potter fan has impacted their understanding of themselves and how they interact with others. Brienne discussed resonating with parts of Harry's story and character:

> Part of what I like about the Harry Potter books is his emotional journey…There was a period of time where I really strongly identified with his journey in *Chamber of Secrets,* which is all about coming to understand yourself, learning your own identity and the parts of you that you didn't know you were there or that you didn't understand, and how to balance that with the things people are saying about you or telling you that you are.

Alice shared how she has come to better understand herself through her Hogwarts House affiliation. She stated, "I identify really strongly with all of those characteristics and so I feel like I've leaned more toward exhibiting those and displaying them because I always want people to think that I'm a Ravenclaw if they meet me."

Alice also discussed the implications of identifying as a Harry Potter fan in her relationships with other people. She said that during a recent trivia night, there was a question about Harry Potter and "everybody in the room looked at me. That's just who I am now to everybody…I'm the contact point into the fandom for people who aren't, so I definitely represent that to other people, too." Willow shared, "It's so integral to who I am… It's all over my room. It's all over my life. If I ever stop feeling like a part of the Harry Potter fandom, I don't think I'd be me anymore."

Building resilience

Several participants discussed the ways in which the Harry Potter series and fan community have provided them with ways to build resilience and cope with mental health concerns. Stevonnie talked about ways in which they have seen the Harry Potter series utilized for supporting mental health. They described a mental health campaign run by Harry Potter Alliance, including promotional messaging "being like, 'Okay, Ravenclaws. What do you do to improve your mental health?' And it was like, read a book, make some tea, write down a list of things that you like, etc.…it was like, self-care for all the Houses."

Bonnie spoke about rereading the books and watching the movies as a means of comfort and to cope with anxiety: "I found out recently, the reason I like to re-watch the same movies that I've watched over and over again is because I know how it's going to end. There's no anxiety of…[not knowing if] something [will] upset me." She also shared that she turned to inspirational quotes from the characters to help keep her moving forward. Bonnie reported, "The quote from Dumbledore about in the darkest of times, you only need to turn on the light…definitely affected [my] emotional health." Stevonnie also found a concept from the Harry Potter series to be a useful reminder. They remarked, "My favorite thing from the Harry Potter books is like if you're feeling at your lowest of lows, and you feel like nothing is gonna get you out, just have a piece of chocolate…Eventually it's gonna get better."

Helena discussed using the books as a source of comfort when experiencing suicidality. Helena shared, "The books were a shelter, were old friends that we would go to when things were bad. I was admitted to a mental hospital at one point and the first thing I did was pack my HP books." Helena also shared how the Harry Potter fan community provided her much needed support during times she was struggling with mental health:

> When I needed to speak with someone that was not going to run away afraid when I would say hard stuff, like I want to kill myself or I'm stuck in this mental health loop of misery, people in the fandom would not run away. They [would] tell you stuff like, 'You're strong because you're Gryffindor.' They would mix this incredible support they had for you with Harry Potter themes. It was a very weird thing, but it was also very useful and very important for my mental health.

Tina shared that a friend from high school who struggled with suicidal thoughts also found resilience through the series. Her friend's connection to the series and to the characters "kept her from acting on those thoughts and urges and kept her going, because she wanted to continue reading and seeing the movies and kind of just continue her life, even if it was just for that." Tina emphasized that, in her opinion, "finding characters that you really connect to and form that relationship with, even if it's obviously one sided, can help you cope through stuff without even consciously realizing it. Because there's a reason that you form that connection."

Participants also discussed creating fan works as therapeutic. Ayda reported that writing

wizard rock is a creative outlet for processing real life situations:

> I like to talk about my "nerd filter." I will take something that's going on in my life that I'm struggling with…and then I will sort of try and compile some of those feelings and be like, what does this relate to?... So a lot of my songs are about real life things that I'm dealing with, but I just wrote it in the perspective of like, Remus Lupin. [Fandom] has given me this sort of outlet to express feelings that I've been struggling with, which has helped me immensely.

Similarly, Ruby reported that writing fanfiction gave her a medium through which to process

trauma associated with a past sexual assault. She shared,

> Part of it was that I had actually completely blocked it out my memory for a couple of years, and so then when I remembered it, I needed to write it, I needed to get it out of my head. And writing really does that for me…it helps me to break myself of it and to come to terms with [what happened].

Oliver discussed how fandom has helped him learn to accept and have pride in himself.

He said, "If I start letting other people limit who and what I get to be and what I get to do, then

that's a slippery slope towards just conforming so that I don't ever have to deal with any kind of

adversity at all." They paused, and added, "And that's not a life worth living."

Empowered Voices

Throughout their interviews, participants demonstrated values and attitudes related to

social justice, and often discussed the ways in which fandom influenced change "IRL." Angelina

reported appreciating this quality in fellow fans. She said, "So many people in my life use what

they've learned in Harry Potter to make real world change…You know, there's some really

incredible organizations that have been built." Willow similarly shared, "Every single Harry

Potter fan that I have interacted with in real life has … this sentiment that the weapon we have is

love. We are accepting, we are loving and we just want to make the world a better place."

Stevonnie discussed some of the charity work they participated in as a member of The Harry

Potter Alliance. They shared frustration regarding those outside of the fan community who are

unaware of this aspect of this work:

It's like, 'Oh, you're just Harry Potter fans.' Okay, but we've also donated like 6000 books just with our one chapter, locally, so like, can you take us seriously now? So that's kind of annoying, when people are like, 'Oh, you're just a bunch of nerds.' And it's like, okay, but we've actually made real differences in the world. Because we're nerds.

Willow shared an example of a time she witnessed the shared attitudes towards social justice in real life fan spaces. She reported that during a live performance of Harry and the Potters after the 2016 election, the band members "yelled into the crowd: 'the LGBT community are valid, Black people are valid, trans people are valid, immigrants,' … all these people, welcome everywhere. It's fantastic, like, I'm not going to hear anything against that." She further reflected on what felt like, to her, an empowering experience: "Hearing everyone shout 'Yes!' was such a uniting moment. Because when you're online and you're talking into the void,… all these different people do understand your experiences, but you can't hear them all shouting at the same time."

Oliver spoke about "people outside the community" criticizing the ever-evolving labels and identifiers used by marginalized communities to describe themselves and their lived experience. He asked, "But isn't that a good thing? Because the more there is, and the more we discover, and the more we expand, the more…opportunity for me to learn, and to connect to all different kinds of people every day." In a similar vein, Syd intentionally searched for diverse fan spaces in order to more critically engage with the fandom. She found a collective of Harry Potter fans called Black Girls Create whose mission is to create diverse and inclusive fan works, and found that there was a lot she was unaware of. Syd recollected,

> I started looking for spaces that cared deeply about things that I didn't understand much… [because] I was raised in a very white place, and…there's a social justice element that I don't have much context for. And so with following [Black Girls Create], part of what that did for me is that made me realize years ago when J.K. Rowling was already being terrible, and the ways in which she was terrible that I didn't pick up on.

Poppy also spoke about her admiration for fan spaces focused on diversifying the fandom: "I'm not ignorant enough to think that Harry Potter is a flawless fandom. But the parts that I spend time in are so uplifting and I always want more of that. I want more of [spaces like]

47

Black Girls Create." Molly shared her concerns that the prominence of white voices in fan spaces could be pushing aside the perspectives of BIPOC Harry Potter fans. She reflected,

> [We've] done a really good job of promoting queer voices in the community. But my big concern is that we're still an incredibly white community. We're not getting the diversity of cultural experiences…I don't want us to be as exclusive and monochromatic as we are as a community because I think that's how you end up in situations like the YouTube scandal when everything's just so insular and homogenous, you fail to see things that aren't the way they should be.

Throughout the interview process, nearly every participant shared their reaction to and thoughts regarding the author, J.K. Rowling utilizing Twitter to promote anti-transgender messages. These remarks were often not shared in response to a specific question, as well as stated with some level of intensity, likely due to this being a topic of discussion not only in fandom spaces, but also spotlighted in mainstream media during the primary period of time in which interviews took place.

For many participants, it was difficult to reconcile the messages of acceptance and love in the books with the author's support of anti-transgender rhetoric. Helena questioned, "How can you write a book about all these people that were so accepting and wonderful and amazing, and you turn out to be so intolerant? It makes no sense." Tina found herself wondering how to engage with the fandom now as a lesbian woman: "You know, I like Harry Potter, [which is] something she created. But how does that work with my identity as part of the LGBT community?" Sybil shared, "Harry Potter is an integral part of my life. And the Harry Potter fandom is an important part of my life. But it has been really hard to see that somebody that created something that we have found so much love and acceptance and creation in could be so judgmental." Angelina said, "She's kind of helped me to be able to not believe what she's saying and not take it too seriously. But then again, it really, really hurts because it was her voice that taught me that, you know?" Sybil made a connection between Rowling's disappointing behavior as similar to the sexual abuse scandal in the fandom several years ago: "It's like, there's a lot of music that you really like, but it turns out that it's been made by some horrible people. And how do you grapple with that sort of

thing?" She continued, focusing her remarks on her transgender friends in the fandom. She stated, "That's always really difficult, especially in a fandom space where everything means so much to us, like watching my friends grow. Watching the people that I've known in Harry Potter fandom for years and years and years become essentially who they've always been."

Other participants, however, had been distancing themselves from Rowling for some time and consider this recent incident as simply confirmation of her problematic stance. Poppy stated, "We've always known that she is transphobic," and discussed her primary concern following Rowling's tweets, which has been defending the fandom as a separate entity from the creator:

> The hardest part is just people outside the community being nasty to fans as if this isn't basically old news…[I] get defensive not just for myself but for fans who are then feeling guilty or doubting themselves over it. So for me, it's been really important to be an extra loud and proud Potterhead lately. Like we are not the first fandom to have an embarrassing, horrible creator…but that doesn't make what we have any less valid or important.

Emma noted, "[Supporting anti-transgender organizations] is something that she has done for a few years, but she has recently become more vocal about it on Twitter…[which] has been very harmful to many of my friends who are trans." She further discussed how many individuals in the fandom had been disregarding her statements since the early 2000s:

> I just see it as an amplification of us pushing her out of the fandom in the same way that we have been doing since 2005. Yeah, she wasn't a trending topic, but we already saw her as someone who doesn't support our community. She doesn't write queer characters, and she keeps, I don't know, retroactively trying to make her books more diverse…and it's just been a whole mess. We're like, I can't stand behind this...It's been a long time coming and then it just like exploded when I feel like people were ready. You know, we saw that tweet and we were like, finally, we got her. Here's the final straw.

Willow spoke about her appreciation for the united fandom response. She noted, "I think that some communities would go on the defensive and like, try and protect what they had. Whereas I think the Harry Potter fandom tends to be quite reflexive." Poppy said, "The things that we learned from her books, [even] if she didn't learn them, are real and important, and there's no shame in still loving the series." Ruby also shared her attitude towards Rowling, stating, "I separate her from Harry Potter in the community. What came from Harry Potter was so beautiful

– and terrible at times, of course – but it's been such an important part of my life. I'm still actively creating with so many wonderful people."

Many participants pointed out the irony of the fan community using the anti-establishment messages portrayed throughout the Harry Potter series to push back against Rowling herself. Angelina reflected on the lessons she gleaned from the books: "She taught me through Harry Potter so much about not listening to people in power that it almost makes it easier to deal with her comments regarding the trans community." Tina said, "It's really funny and appropriate that the fandom has kind of done the same thing with this series and the world building and everything. They've said, 'Okay, this is ours now. And we're turning into something that she can't touch.'" Stevonnie stated, as if directly to Rowling, "Thank you for the books, but you can stop talking now. Because your ideas that you wrote down in these books are not equal to the ideas you have now…You're not being inclusive, which is what Harry would have done."

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This study explored aspects of belonging to the Harry Potter fandom that may be

psychologically impactful to its members who identify as LGBTQ individuals. A qualitative

phenomenological approach was utilized to explore the experiences of LGBTQ individuals who

are involved in the specific phenomenon of engagement in the Harry Potter fan community while

using Relational-Cultural Theory as a conceptual framework to make sense of this phenomenon

due to its emphasis on relationships and cultural context. The current study sought to answer the

following questions:

(1) What are the experiences of LGBTQ individuals in the Harry Potter fan community?

(2) How might involvement with the Harry Potter fandom have contributed to LGBTQ identity formation?

(3) How has belonging to the Harry Potter fan community contributed to the lives of LGBTQ individuals?

Following thematic analysis of the data, five themes emerged: (a) fandom engagement, (b)

developing LGBTQ identity, (c) navigating marginalization, (d) supporting mental health, and (e)

empowered voices.

Two themes, (a) fandom engagement and (c) navigating marginalization, addressed the first research question regarding lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals in the Harry Potter fan community. Fandom engagement was, unsurprisingly, a significant aspect of membership within the Harry Potter fan community. However, the vast majority of participant discussion surrounding these topics had less to do with engagement with official franchise materials such as the book series or movies, but with fan-created works and spaces that were supportive, creative, and inclusive of LGBTQ expression. This is consistent with previous research on stigmatized individuals' experiences in fandom indicating that those who hold a marginalized identity often feel they are heard and accepted more so than in traditional communities (i.e., Bacon-Smith, 2000). These results also indicate alignment with previous research regarding the Harry Potter fan community in particular to be a supportive, accepting environment (i.e., McCracken, 2013). However, participants in this study appeared to also value the inclusion of fan-made works and spaces as part of the community building process (for example, LGBTQ acceptance and inclusion emphasized within the wizard rock community). LGBTQ Harry Potter fans, upon recognizing the lack of queer representation in the series as well as in traditional community spaces, took it upon themselves to create spaces that were built for them and reimagined characters that represented their experiences. This kind of transformative fandom has been shown to bolster relationships between fans (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen, 2016). From a relational-cultural perspective, a community that is designed to be inclusive and accepting offers opportunities for authentic connection and growth-fostering relationships (Jordan, 2010).

However, authentic connection can be difficult when individuals must navigate experiences of marginalization. Participants with less "visible" identities (such as bisexual, asexual, and nonbinary) seemed to experience shame regarding their identities, as well as pressure to conform to societal expectations. People who have been marginalized, such as those identifying as a sexual and/or gender minority individual, often feel shame as a result of controlling images impressed upon them by the dominant society (Jordan, 2010; Miller, 2008).

Controlling images tell individuals in a power-down position in society that in order to be accepted by society, they must adhere to certain expectations based on their identities. Prevailing controlling images of bisexuality and asexuality, for example, were indicated through individuals perceiving both the ways in which they are "privileged" (e.g., being perceived as heterosexual when in a relationship with someone of the perceived opposite sex or non-partnered), but also the experiences of invalidation and oppression of those identities (e.g., comments about being "halfway" to being gay, or about "just not having found the right one"). Bisexuality research is limited, and is often combined within research on lesbian and gay communities (Barker & Langdridge, 2008), and identifiers such as pansexuality, asexuality, and gender nonbinary have even less representation in research (McInroy et al., 2020; Price-Feeney, 2020). However, recent research on bisexual identity and mental health indicates that bisexual individuals report poorer mental health outcomes than their heterosexual, gay, and lesbian peers (Bostwick, 2005; Johnson, 2016) and are less likely to come out to their parents than lesbian and gay individuals (Pistella, 2016). Individuals who experience internalized biphobia were likely to experience greater distress and lower well-being or to be "out" (additionally, outness was linked with mixed outcomes and included some costs and benefits; Brewster et al., 2013). Pistella (2016) noted that while bisexuality was more negatively viewed than lesbian or gay orientations, bisexual people could also experience less pressure from society to come out due to the perception that they can choose to conceal their identities. However, positive health outcomes were indicated when connecting with other bisexual-identifying individuals (Ebin, 2006).

Again, there is a dearth of information regarding the experiences of asexual individuals. However, one recent study found that asexual youth had significantly higher internalized "LGBTQ-phobia" and higher rates of depression, despite having experienced less discrimination and prejudice than their LGB peers and engaging in less risky behaviors such as substance use (McInroy et al., 2020). There is also a need for more research focusing on nonbinary individuals. One recent study found that transgender and nonbinary were at "increased risk of experiencing

depressed mood, seriously considering suicide, and attempting suicide compared with cisgender lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and questioning youth," and this was especially true in trans males and nonbinary individuals assigned female at birth (Price-Feeney et al., 2020). For LGBTQ folks, these experiences of disconnection and oppression could lead to self-disparaging relational images, further adding to feelings of shame, internalized stigma, and associated negative mental health outcomes (Miller & Stiver, 1997, as cited in Mereish & Poteat, 2015). It is also worth noting that, while the majority of bisexual/queer/pansexual-identifying individuals indicated experiences of marginalization outside of fan spaces, participants who identified as asexual, aromantic, or nonbinary reported experiencing marginalization within the fandom as well as outside, which further indicates the importance of more focused research regarding marginalization and mental health outcomes with this population.

The second research question asked how involvement with the Harry Potter fandom may have contributed to LGBTQ identity formation. Results indicated, within the theme of (b) developing LGBTQ identity, identity formation occurred by facilitating identity exploration through fandom spaces, as well as the pervasive culture of LGBTQ acceptance within the Harry Potter fan community. Participants reported exploring LGBTQ identity through exposure to and engagement with sexual and gender minority identities as represented in fan works such as fan fiction, fan art, and wizard rock. This is consistent with findings from previous studies that indicated fandom as an enabling force for self-exploration (i.e., Chadborn, Edwarts, & Reysen, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2018). Findings from this study also illustrated the importance on online fan spaces as a tool for authentically connecting with others, especially when in an unaffirming environment or for those uncertain about aspects of their identity. This is also consistent with previous research that fandom-participating youth may initiate the LGBTQ identity development process sooner than non-fandom participating peers (McInroy & Craig, 2018).

This study also found that, overall, LGBTQ-identifying members of the Harry Potter fandom perceived the fandom as "very gay." In fact, several individuals noted the dwindling

presence of heterosexual and cisgender members of the fan community, and the fact that feeling

like they belonged to the Harry Potter helped them to better understand their sexuality and gender

identity. Findings also indicated that witnessing individuals that hold leadership positions in the

fan community helped participants feel safe in coming out to other members of the fan

community, even if they did not choose to come out to family members or other significant

people in their lives. Several individuals discussed feeling like the Harry Potter fandom was one

of the only places in which they truly felt they could be their authentic selves without fear of

judgement or discrimination. Approximately one-third of participants also labeled themselves

with multiple identifiers rather choosing one, indicating another aspect of identity for further

exploration.

The third and final research question asked how belonging to the Harry Potter fan

community has contributed to the lives of LGBTQ individuals. Findings from this study indicated

that belonging to the Harry Potter fandom was a key component of mental health support (the

fourth theme) for several participants, as well as a source of empowerment (theme number five).

In terms of mental health, this study found that LGBTQ members of the Harry Potter fandom

identified the fandom as a source of community and integral to their sense of self. Several could

not imagine who they would be without the influence of Harry Potter, and others considered

fandom-made friends to be their found family. However, others who have experienced difficult

interpersonal interactions within the fandom, including both negative individual experiences as

well as a community-wide sexual abuse scandal, noted that this feeling of disconnection felt even

more impactful due to the perception that the fandom was a safe, welcoming space. For some, the

harm that was done felt too painful, causing them to step back into less visible roles in fan spaces.

For others, an even stronger commitment to social justice bolstered their fandom engagement and

inspired more purposeful participation ("turning challenges into opportunities and strengths;"

Asakura & Craig, 2014). Several participants also indicated the important role of fandom in

providing comfort, connection, and reasons to continue living when faced with anxiety, depression, suicidality, and other mental health concerns.

This study also found that participants utilized their passion for engaging with fandom with passion for advocacy, social justice, and continued learning (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2015; Vezzali et al., 2015).Participants by and large demonstrated renewed dedication to social justice and advocacy in the wake of what to some felt like the ultimate betrayal: the creator herself, who inspired a generation of readers to think critically and question authority for authority's sake, espousing views that seemed antithetical to many to what the Harry Potter books taught them. Some participants had already been disappointed with Rowling's lack of satisfactory representation of a diversity of characters, as well as problematic actions she had taken previously, if more quietly. However, the author's announcement of her firm stance against transgender acceptance provoked outrage, betrayal, disappointment, and apathy in members of the Harry Potter fandom. Within these initial reactions, however, participants reflected on the ways in which the fandom has "outgrown" Rowling. Participants in this study demonstrated that despite finding the author's recent stance to be disappointing and harmful, they feel empowered to speak up against Rowling and advocate for transgender rights more fervently than before. A recent project in the wizard rock community serves as an example of this. Wrock artists wrote, performed, recorded, and submitted songs to create a compilation album entitled, "Transfiguration: A Wrock Comp for Trans Rights." As stated on its Bandcamp streaming page, "The fandom is ours: Let's take it back…Emphasizing trans artists and artists of color, the proceeds of this album will go to Camp Lilac [a camp for transgender youth] and The Black Trans Advocacy Coalition" (Various Artists, 2020).

Findings from this study highlight the importance of connection for LGBTQ identifying Harry Potter fans. Even throughout the process of interviewing participants and collecting data about their lived experience, I found myself both feeling invited and personally wanting to connect with this community on a deeper level. I didn't just want to study this phenomenon; I

wanted to be a part of it. Shared interests and experiences provide the foundation for relational

and cultural connection, which makes fan communities particularly enticing to those who may

feel disconnected from other relationships and communities in which they do not feel able to be

fully authentic. This is not limited to those involved in fandom: authentic, relational connection is

something all people from all walks of life crave and must have in order to truly thrive.

<p style="text-align:center">Limitations</p>

As in all empirical research, this study was not without its limitations. Because this study

utilized a qualitative research design, it should be noted that the results are not intended to be

generalizable to the entire population studied. Additionally, the sample of participants in this

study was fairly homogenous in terms of gender identity and racial/ethnic cultural identity. The

sample was primarily composed of women with one man and two gender nonbinary- identifying

individuals (although one woman and the male participant indicated during their interviews that

they are relatively fluid in their gender expression). None identified as transgender, either, despite

several participants discussing their support for trans acceptance and appreciation. The sample

was almost entirely comprised of white/Caucasian-identifying individuals. One participant

identified as Latina, and there were no BIPOC individuals in the sample. While this could be

representative of the demographic makeup of the fandom, this could also be indicative of (as

pointed out by one participant) the fandom not doing enough to promote a diversity of voices.

Another limitation is that due to COVID-19, recruitment occurred primarily online via

dissemination of flyers on social media platforms, as well as snowball sampling. This could have

limited participant selection to those who are active in online fan spaces and excluded fans who

exclusively participate in fandom in more traditional ways (i.e., in-person conventions).

<p style="text-align:center">Recommendations for Future Research</p>

A large amount of data was collected for this study. While the timelines were utilized

primarily for the purpose of data crystallization, a future study could focus on the developmental

aspects of the coming out and fandom engagement journeys by comparing the chronological

milestones documented in participant timelines. Additionally, future research could include a more in-depth exploration of the impact of JK Rowling's recent anti-transgender statements on the Harry Potter fan community as a whole, as well as focusing solely on the impact on transgender and gender nonconforming fans. Another areas for future studies could regard the efficacy of fandom-inspired treatment interventions on mental health outcomes, as well as clinician attitudes towards inclusion of such interventions.

Findings from this study indicate that future research regarding LGBTQ identity formation may benefit from considering the role of online fandom spaces as impacting the ways in which identity is explored and shared. In particular, research into the experiences of less "visible" sexual and gender minority identities is currently very limited in both qualitative and quantitative traditions. In particular, there is a wide gap in the literature regarding mental health outcomes of asexual and nonbinary identifying individuals. As a population whose identities are often subject to invalidation and discrimination, more information is needed about mental health outcomes as well as potential factors that promote resilience. An additional area for future research could focus on the ways in which individuals with mental health concerns utilize fandom and fan works as coping tools as well as their potential role as protective factors. Finally, future research on the topics of race, fandom, and mental health could provide fruitful information regarding the ways in which marginalized communities utilize fandom in identity development and mental health support.

Implications for Clinical Practice

One contribution from this study is the important role fandom membership can play in supporting mental health through bolstering sense of community, providing tools for self-identity exploration, and providing methods for coping with mental health distress. As this could be an incredibly important area of social support, creativity, and understanding of the self, fandom involvement should be welcome and utilized as relevant by mental health practitioners. Therapists can utilize fandom and popular culture not only as a means to build rapport, but also as

creative interventions: for example, as a narrative tool to externalize mental health concerns, as a way as to explore identity through client engagement with fan works, or for exposure therapy purposes. This seems particularly indicated for LGBTQ-identifying clients who may experience unaffirming spaces in their own environments and could be encouraged to engage in supportive fan activities. As fandom can be an important part of client identity, this is also important to attend to from a multicultural perspective. How does one's identity as a fan interact with salient cultural identities? How do salient cultural identities influence fan engagement?

The perceived impact of fandom engagement on identity development found in this study additionally points to its utility within therapeutic spaces, particularly in (though not limited to) supporting adolescents, young adults, and university students. During the intake process, for example, clinicians can ask a few simple questions in order to assess a client's perceived importance of fandom activity (i.e., "Do you consider yourself to be a fan of any books, movies, TV shows, podcasts, etc.?" "How do you socialize with others in online spaces?" "Do you engage with/create fan works such as fan art, fan fiction, fan videos, etc.?") Simply hearing these questions may communicate to clients not only that the clinician considers fandom involvement to be a salient aspect of cultural identity and mental health, but also that therapy is a welcoming space for authentic expression.

Implications for Advocacy

In terms of advocacy, fandom has already been utilized as an educational tool (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2015) and has provided a platform for making real world change. Findings from this study indicate the importance of advocating for sexual and gender minority individuals and providing accessible resources for education about and community for individuals who may be experiencing marginalization. In particular, there is a clear need for education to correct common misinformation regarding less visible queer identities such as bisexual, asexual, and gender nonbinary. Additional avenues for advocacy include partnering with a fandom, such as the Harry Potter Alliance, to advocate for communities that are being actively oppressed. There is passion

and resolve in these communities, and it is the professional responsibility of professionals in the mental health field to advocate on behalf of those who are receiving negative and false attention, as the trans community is currently experiencing. Finally, it is important to engage in intentional and reflective efforts to promote voices of BIPOC folks in the LGBTQ community as well as in fandom spaces. Again, there is a wealth of creativity and passion that has historically been suppressed by those in dominant positions (including academic spaces) that are already providing invaluable resources and services, such as Black Girls Create (2021).

REFERENCES

American Psychological Association. (2020). Bias-Free Language Guidelines. In *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.). American Psychological Association

Asakura, K., & Craig, S. L. (2014). 'It Gets Better' … but how? Exploring resilience development in the accounts of LGBTQ adults. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 24*(3), 253-266. doi:10.1080/10911359.2013.808971

Bacon-Smith, C. (2000). *Science fiction culture*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Barr, S. M., Budge, S. L., & Adelson, J. L. (2016). Transgender community belongingness as a mediator between strength of transgender identity and well-being. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 63*(1), 87-97. doi:10.1037/cou0000127

Bartoli, A. (2019). Every picture tells a story: Combining interpretative phenomenological analysis with visual research. *Qualitative Social Work, 0*(0), 1-15. doi: 10.1177/1473325019858664

Black Girls Create. (2021). About us. Retrieved from https://blackgirlscreate.org/about/

Brewster, M. E., DeBlaere, C., Moradi, B., & Velez, B. L. (2013). Navigating the Borderlands: The Roles of Minority Stressors, Bicultural Self-Efficacy, and Cognitive Flexibility in the

Mental Health of Bisexual Individuals. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 60*(4), 543-556. doi:10.1037/a0033224

Brumbaugh-Johnson, S. M. & Hull, K. E. (2019). Coming out as transgender: Navigating the social implications of a transgender identity. *Journal of Homosexuality, 66*(8), 1148-1177. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1493253

Cass, V. C. (1979). Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality, 4,* 219-235.

Carrion, V. G., & Lock, J. (1997). The coming out process: Developmental stages for sexual minority youth. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 2*(3), 369–377. doi:10.1177/1359104597023005

Chadborn, D., Edwards, P., & Reysen, S. (2018). Reexamining differences between fandom and local sense of community. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture, 7*(3), 241-249. doi:10.1037/ppm0000125

Coleman, E. (1982). Developmental stages of the coming out process. *Journal of Homosexuality, 7*(2–3), 31–43. doi:10.1300/J082v07n02_06

Comstock, D. L., Hammer, T. R., Strentzsch, J., Cannon, K., Parsons, J., & Salazar, G. (2008). Relational-Cultural Theory: A framework for bridging relational, multicultural, and social justice competencies. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 86*(3), 279-287. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6678.2008.tb00510.x

Craig, S. L., McInroy, L., McCready, L. T., & Alaggia, R. (2015). Media: A catalyst for resilience in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 12*(3), 254-275. doi:10.1080/19361653.2015.1040193

Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Deanow, C. G. (2011). Relational Development Through the Life Cycle: Capacities, Opportunities, Challenges, and Obstacles. *Affilia, 26*(2), 125-138. doi:10.1177/0886109911405485

Dempster, S., Sunderland, J., & Thistlethwaite, J. (2015). Harry Potter and the Transfiguration of

    Boys' and Girls' Literacies. *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship,*

    21(2), 91-112. doi:10.1080/13614541.2015.1078623

Dunlap, A. (2016). Changes in coming out milestones across five age cohorts. Journal of Gay &

    Lesbian Social Services, 28(1), 20-38.

    https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2016.1124351

Faber, M. A. & Mayer, J. D. (2009). Resonance to archetypes in media: There's some

    accounting for taste. Journal of Research in Personality, 43, 307-322.

    doi:10.1016/j.jrp.2008.11.003

Fiske, J. (1992). The cultural economy of fandom. In L. A. Lewis (Ed.), The adoring audience:

    Fan culture and popular media (pp. 30–49). New York, NY: Routledge.

Fonow, M. M. & Cook, J. A. (2005). Feminist methodology: New applications in the academy

    and public policy. Signs, 30(4), 2211-2236. http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/428417

Frankel, V. E. (2019). Fan phenomena: Harry Potter. Chicago, IL: Intellect Ltd.

Haas, A. P., Eliason, M., Mays, V. M., Mathy, R. M., Cochran, S. D., D'Augelli, A. R.,

    …Clayton, P. J. (2010). Suicide risk in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

    populations: Review and recommendations. *Journal of Homosexuality, 58*(1), 10-51.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2011.534038

The Harry Potter Alliance. (2015). What we do. Retrieved from

    http://www.thehpalliance.org/what_we_do

Hawkesworth, M. E. (2006). *Feminist inquiry: From political conviction to methodological*

    innovation. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Heppner, P. P., Wampold, B. E., Owen, J., Wang, K. T., & Thompson, M. N. (2016*). Research*

    design in counseling (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Cengage Learning.

Jordan, J. V. (2009). *Relational-cultural therapy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological
Association.

Jorm, A. F., Korten, A. E., Rodgers, B., Jacomb, P. A., & Christensen, H. (2002). Sexual

orientation and mental health: Results from a community survey of young and middle-aged

adults. *The British Journal of Psychiatry, 180*(5), 423-427. doi:10.1192/bjp.180.5.423

Kenneady, D. A. & Oswalt, S. B. (2014). Is Cass's model of homosexual identity formation
relevant to today's society? *American Journal of Sexuality Education, 9*(2), 229-246.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2014.900465

McCrae, R. R., Gaines, J. F., & Wellington, M. A. (2013). The Five-Factor Model in fact and
fiction. In H. Tennen, J. Suls, & I. B. Weiner (Eds.), *Handbook of psychology:
Personality and social psychology (*pp. 65-91). Hoboken, NJ, US: John Wiley & Sons
Inc. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118133880.hop205004

McCracken, A. (2013, August 13). From LGBT to GSM: Gender and sexual identity among
LeakyCon's queer youth (LeakyCon Portland) [web log post]. Retrieved from
http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu/2013/08/06/from-lgbt-to-gsm-gender-and-sexual-identity-
among-leakycons-queer-youth-leakycon-portland/

Mereish, E. H., & Poteat, V. P. (2015). A relational model of sexual minority mental and physical
health: The negative effects of shame on relationships, loneliness, and health. *Journal of
Counseling Psychology, 62*(3), 425-437. doi:10.1037/cou0000088

McInroy, L. B & Craig, S. L. (2018). Online fandom, identity milestones, and self-identification
of sexual/gender minority youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 15*(3), 179-196.
https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2018.1459220

McInroy, L. B., Beaujolais, B., Leung, V. W. Y., Craig, S. L., Eaton, A. D., & Austin, A. (2020).
Comparing asexual and non-asexual sexual minority adolescents and young adults:

stressors, suicidality and mental and behavioural health risk outcomes. *Psychology &*

Sexuality, 1-17. doi:10.1080/19419899.2020.1806103

McLaren, S. (2009). Sense of belonging to the general and lesbian communities as predictors of

depression among lesbians. *Journal of Homosexuality, 56*(1), 1-13.

doi:10.1080/00918360802551365

McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal*

of Community Psychology, 14, 6 –23. doi:10.1002/1520-6629(198601)14:1<6::AID-

JCOP2290140103>3.0.CO;2-I

Miller, J. B. (2008). How change happens: Controlling images, mutuality, and power. *Women and*

Therapy, 31(2-4), p. 109-127. https://doi.org/10.1080/02703140802146233

Morris, S., McLaren, S., McLachlan, A. J., & Jenkins, M. (2015). Sense of belonging to

specific communities and depressive symptoms among Australian gay men. *Journal of*

Homosexuality, 62(6), 804-820. doi:10.1080/00918369.2014.999491

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., Deborah, E. W., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic analysis: Striving

to meet the trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 16*(1),

1-13. doi: 10.1177/1609406917733847

Nylund, D. (2007). Reading Harry Potter: Popular culture, queer theory and the fashioning of

youth identity. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, *26*(2), 13-24.

doi:10.1521/jsyt.2007.26.2.13

Obst, P., Zinkiewicz, L., & Smith, S. G. (2002). Sense of community in science fiction fandom,

Part 2: Comparing neighborhood and interest group sense of community. *Journal of*

Community Psychology, 30(1), 105-117. doi:10.1002/jcop.1053

Pichon, H. W. (2016). Descubriendo mi lugar: Understanding sense of belonging and community

of black STEM-H students enrolled at a Hispanic serving institution. *Journal for*

Multicultural Education, 10(2), 135-151. doi:10.1108/JME-01-2016-0008

Price-Feeney, M., Green, A. E., & Dorison, S. (2020). Understanding the Mental Health of

    Transgender and Nonbinary Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 66*(6), 684-690.

    doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2019.11.314

Ray, A., Plante, C., Reysen, S., Roberts, S., & Gerbasi, K. (2017). Psychological Needs Predict

    Fanship and Fandom in Anime Fans. *The Phoenix Papers, 3*, 56-68.

Reysen, S., & Branscombe, N. R. (2010). Fanship and fandom: Comparisons between sport fans

    and non-sport fans. *Journal of Sport Behavior, 33,* 176 –193.

Reysen, S., Plante, C. N., Roberts, S. E., & Gerbasi, K. C. (2015). Social identity perspective of

    the furry fandom. In T. Howl (Ed.), *Furries among us: Essays on furries by the most*

    prominent members of the fandom (pp. 127–151). Nashville, TN: Thurston Howl

    Publications.

Ryan, W. S., Legate, N., & Weinstein, N. (2015). Coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual: The

    lasting impact of initial disclosure experiences. *Self and Identity, 14*(5), 549-569.

    https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2015.1029516

Various Artists. (2020, October 11). *Transfiguration: A Wrock Comp for Trans Rights, by*

    Various Artists. Trans Wrock Comp. https://transwrockcomp.bandcamp.com/.

Vezzali, L., Stathi, S., Giovannini, D., Capozza, D., & Trifiletti, E. (2015). The greatest magic of

    Harry Potter: Reducing prejudice. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 45*(2), 105-121.

    doi:10.1111/jasp.12279

Wann, D. L. (2006). Understanding the positive social psychological benefits of sport team

    identification: The team identification-social psychological health model. *Group*

    Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice, 10, 272–296.

    http://dx.doi .org/10.1037/1089-2699.10.4.272

Wann, D. L., Waddill, P. J., Polk, J., & Weaver, S. (2011). The team identification-social

    psychological health model: Sport fans gaining connections to others via sport team

identification. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice, 15,* 75–89.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a00207

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: EXTENDED REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

What exactly pulls people towards identifying with certain works of fiction? According to McCrae, Gaines, & Wellington (2013), authors of fictional works must be able to accurately portray human psychology in order to create works and characters of quality. Therefore, a story with realistic and believable character development is more likely to be viewed as relatable by its readers than one that is perceived as unrealistic. Reading has been viewed as serving an "important psychological function" due to simulation of social experiences (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 1999, as cited in McCrae, Gaines, & Wellington, 2013, p. 76). For example, individuals can indirectly learn from character experiences, develop empathy and "an understanding of emotional responses in themselves and others," and expand their appreciation of diversity by the vicarious experiences gained through reading (McCrae, Gaines, & Wellington, 2013, p. 76). Additionally, such resonance to "quality" stories is not limited to individual experience. Community engagement with stories that appear in mass media is an "essential means of sharing human experience with one another" and indicates "that there exist internal, psychological forces that allow us to respond in common ways to stories and story characters" (Faber & Mayer, 2009, p. 307).

The Harry Potter series, written by J.K. Rowling, constitutes one of the most well-known pop culture fandoms in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This seven-book saga about an

orphaned boy who discovers the ability to use magic inspired a generation of readers who, in growing up alongside the fictional Harry Potter, were able to find their own kind of magic. The "Harry Potter effect" has been cited as a transformative medium into the literacy rates and reading behaviors of children growing up in the 1990s and 2000s (e.g. Dempster, Sunderland, & Thistlethwaite, 2015). As the series' popularity expanded, a multitude of additional franchises entered popular culture and engaged fans through an eight-part movie series, theme parks, an award-winning play, and a spinoff movie series, to name but a few.

Fans have created sub-communities within the Harry Potter fandom in both online and real-world spaces. Online fan activities include both fan-creations (i.e. fanfiction, fanvids, and fanart) and communal spaces through which discussion over shared interests can occur (i.e. text blogs, video blogs, and forums). Fans have also gathered "IRL" ("in real life") for fan-related activities and events such as: popular culture conventions, Wizard Rock ("Wrock") concerts, midnight releases of books and movies, and a real-life Quidditch league based on the magical sport introduced in the books (Frankel, 2019). However, community engagement within digital and real-world spaces often overlap. One such example, the Harry Potter Alliance (HPA), is dedicated to "changing the world by making activism accessible through the power of story" (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2015). The HPA boasts over 100 local chapters across six continents and have completed numerous campaigns designed to "decrease world suck" including convincing Warner Bros. to change the source of the chocolate in their edible products to be 100% fair-trade, raising over $123,000 dollars for Haiti in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, donating over 250,000 books across the world through their Apparating Library initiative, and many more (The Harry Potter Alliance, 2015).

Because much of day to day fan engagement occurs online, opportunities to meet with other fans in person are attractive to members of the Harry Potter fandom. Wrock ("Wizard Rock") is an underground music movement in which fans create bands and songs based on characters and concepts in the Harry Potter universe (notable groups include: Harry and the

Potters, Draco and the Malfoys, Moaning Myrtle, and The Whomping Willows; Do Rozario, 2011; Rohlman, 2010), and performances often attract fans of all ages to dance, sing, and dress as their favorite characters (cosplay) in concert venues that often include libraries. A number of fan conventions have also provided dedicated spaces in which fans of the series can cosplay, meet featured celebrities and artists who have been involved with the series, and meet other fans. One of these conventions, LeakyCon, celebrates its tenth anniversary at LeakyCon Boston in October 2019.

Gathering in fandom-dedicated spaces, whether online or in person, can provide individuals with a sense of community. The sense of belonging to a community in which one gives and receives social support is known as psychological sense of community (PSOC; Chadborn, Edwards, & Reyen, 2016. PSOC is associated with a positive mental health outcomes including: greater social support (Li, Sun, He, & Chan, 2011), life satisfaction (Farrell & Coulombe, 2004), quality of life (Gattino, Piccoli, Fassio, & Rollero, 2013), and social and subjective well-being (Albanesi et al., 2007; Davison & Cotter, 1986; Pretty, Bishop, Fisher, & Sonn, 2007; Sonn & Fisher, 1996). Marginalized individuals are highly susceptible to feelings of isolation and low self-worth due to societal stigmatization and discrimination, which can lead to negative mental health outcomes (Jorm, Korten, Rodgers, Jacomb, & Christenson, 2002). People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and/or another sexual or gender minority orientation (LGBTQ) are particularly vulnerable to experiences of marginalization and discrimination and associated rates of substance use, suicidality, and mental health concerns (Haas et. al., 2010). LGBTQ individuals have been shown to have increased resilience when sense of community is heightened, which serves as a protective factor against mental illness (i.e. Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2005; Barr, Budge, and Adelson, 2016). The experience of belonging to a fan community, or "fandom," has been shown to heighten sense of community and be involved in LGBTQ identity development. The Harry Potter fandom in particular has been described as a "supportive and progressive" space which LGBTQ-identifying

70

youth felt was crucial to "renegotiating their identities and developing alternative concepts of sexual difference" (McCracken, 2013). At an LGBTQ meetup during LeakyCon 2013 in Portand, Oregon, fans emphasized "how LeakyCon's fandom community…provided accepting, inclusive spaces for them to develop and affirm their non-normative gender and sexual identities" (McCracken, 2013).

This study will explore the aspects of belonging to the Harry Potter fandom that may be psychologically impactful to its members who identify as LGBTQ individuals. A qualitative phenomenological approach will be utilized to explore the experiences of LGBTQ individuals who are involved in the specific phenomenon of engagement in the Harry Potter fan community. Relational-Cultural Theory will be utilized as a conceptual framework to make sense of this phenomenon due to its emphasis on relationships and cultural context. The current study seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What are the experiences of LGBTQ individuals in the Harry Potter fan community? (2) How might involvement with the Harry Potter fandom have contributed to LGBTQ identity formation? (3) How has belonging to the Harry Potter fan community contributed to the lives of LGBTQ individuals?

LGBTQ Mental Health

Sense of belonging has long been associated with mental health and well-being in marginalized communities. Recently, psychology research has begun to explore the relationship between sense of belonging and positive mental health outcomes in sexual and gender minority individuals. One such study by Barr, Budge, & Adelson (2016) examined sense of belonging to the transgender community as a mediator between "strength of transgender identity and well-being" (p. 87). Five hundred and seventy-one transgender adults completed an online survey including measures such as a modified Community Belongingness Scale and a Strength of Transgender Identity scale with items specifically designed for the transgender community (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016). Additional responses aimed to measure self-esteem, satisfaction with life, and psychological well-being (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016). Through structural equation

modeling, the study found that "community belongingness fully mediated the relationship between strength of transgender identity and well-being" (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p. 92), implications being that increasing sense of belonging in transgender individuals through heightened engagement with the transgender community is linked to greater psychological well-being (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016).

An earlier study conducted by McLaren (2009) investigated whether sense of belonging in the general and lesbian communities was a predictor for depression in lesbians. One hundred and seventy-eight self-identifying lesbian participants completed a survey with items corresponding with the Psychological subscale of the Sense of Belonging Instrument and the Depression subscale of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (McLaren, 2009). The study found that sense of belonging to the lesbian community did indeed predict depression in participants; however, it also found that for those that did not feel a heightened sense of belonging to the lesbian community, greater sense of belonging to the general community helped to mediate depressive symptoms (McLaren, 2009). In other words, for those that did not feel connected to a community based upon their sexual orientation, sense of belonging from an additional source positively impacted mental health outcomes.

Morris, McLaren, McLachlan, & Jenkins (2015) conducted a similar study, this time exploring the relationship between sense of belonging to communities and depression in Australian gay men. One hundred and seventy-seven gay men completed the Sense of Belonging Instrument- Psychological Subscale, the Center for Epidemiological Studies- Depression Scale, and the Sense of Belonging within Gay Communities Scale (Morris et al., 2015). Again, this study found that sense of belonging to specific communities helped mediate lowered sense of belonging to the gay community on depression in gay Australian men (Morris et al., 2015). Notably, the authors stated that "it is likely that only meaningful interaction with valued others can reduce the likelihood of depressive symptoms" (Morris et al., 2015, p. 815).

Minority Stress and Resilience

The mental health of LGBTQ individuals is thought to be influenced by minority stress. In a meta-analysis of the prevalence of mental disorders in sexual minority individuals, Meyer (2003) found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals have a higher prevalence of mental health concerns than their heterosexual peers. This phenomenon can be understood through the concept of minority stress. Minority stress refers to the "excess stress to which individuals from stigmatized social categories are exposed as a result of their social, often a minority, position" (Meyer, 2003, p. 675). The experience of stress from external circumstances, such as social stress, has the potential to induce psychological and somatic distress (Meyer, 2003, p. 675). Therefore, the stress induced by experiences of heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, and other forms of sexual prejudice may "lead to adverse mental health outcomes" (Meyer, 2003, p. 676).

Meyer (2003) proposes a conceptual framework through which to understand the processes by which minority stress affects mental health in LGB individuals. In this model, general stressors are compounded with distal and proximal minority stress processes such as prejudice events (i.e., discrimination and violence), expectations of rejection based upon identification as L, G, or B, concealment of sexual identity, and internalized homophobia (Meyer, 2003, p. 679).

A study by Asakura and Craig (2014) explored the messages of the viral "It Gets Better" campaign. In this campaign, adults who identified as LGBT or allies posted videos on the popular video sharing website YouTube to communicate positive, hopeful messages to LGBT youth (Asakura & Craig, 2014). The goal of this campaign was to show that despite the difficulties LGBT youth may be facing in their lives, there are other people (including celebrities, online influencers, and "normal" people not in the public eye) who were able to overcome challenges unique to LGBT youth and live fulfilling lives (Asakura & Craig, 2014). Many of these individuals recounted experiencing physical and emotional disconnection from others, sometimes creating a hostile or unsafe environment as well as negative mental health symptoms such as suicidal thoughts and attempts (Asakura & Craig, 2014, p. 260). However, in these messages, the

researchers found the following themes of resilience: 1) Leaving hostile social environments; 2) experiencing "coming out" in meaningful ways; 3) re-membering their social environments within the LGBT community; and 4) turning challenges into opportunities and strengths (Asakura & Craig, 2014, p. 257).

Psychological Sense of Community

Psychological sense of community (PSOC) refers to:

> the perception of similarity with others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, [and] the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure. (Sarason, 1974, p. 157, as cited in Chadborn, Edwards, & Reyson, 2016).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) expanded this definition by explicating four elements of PSOC, including: (1) *membership* (feeling of belongingness or "of sharing a sense of personal relatedness"); (2) *influence* (sense of mattering or of making a difference within the group); (3) integration and fulfillment of needs, and (4) shared emotional connection (involving "commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences"; p. 9).

A study by Barr, Budge, and Adelson (2016) found that transgender community belongingness is a mediator between strength of transgender identity and well-being. Higher levels of transgender identification predicted increased levels of community belongingness, which in turn predicted higher well-being (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p. 92). This is consistent with McMillan and Chavis (1986), who stated that "shared connection with community members is a critical component of a sense of community" (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p. 92). Findings indicated that those with a strong identification with being transgender "may feel more belongingness to the transgender community due to an increased perception of a shared connection with transgender community members." (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p. 92).

Fandom

Fandom and Sense of Community

74

"Fandom" is described by Chadborn, Edwards, and Reyson (2016) as "loyal and enthusiastic admirers of any interest," which can include sports, hobbies, television shows, books, movies, etc. (p. 1). Those in a particular fandom tend to "perceive themselves to be part of [a] larger community" of individuals who share an interest in that fandom (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reyson, 2016, p. 1). Reysen and Branscombe (2010) denoted four distinct categories through which various fan communities can be defined: music, media, sport, and hobby. Music, media, and sport fans communities may passively engage in fan activities, (i.e. watching televised shows or events, following a celebrity on social media, etc.). "Hobby" fans, however, are defined by "active engagement in an area of interest" such as playing a sport, drawing artwork, writing stories, etc. (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reyson, 2016, p. 1).

While much of the psychological literature regarding fandom has historically focused on sports fans, recent sociological and communications research has included groups such as fans of science fiction (Bacon-Smith, 2000; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992) and video game media, as well as specific groups such as fans of the television show *Doctor Who* (Booth, 2013) and the *Star Trek* franchise (as cited in Chadborn, Edwards, & Reyson, 2016). Self-identification as part of a fan community can have an impact on the emotions, perceptions, and behaviors of individual fans (Reysen et al., 2015). Psychological needs such as self-esteem, need for meaning in life, and distinctiveness have been recognized as predictors of anime fandom membership, as well as belongingness as a predictor of fanship in female anime fans (Ray, Plante, Reysen, Roberts, & Gerbasi, 2017). Similarly, those who identify as fans have reported greater subjective well-being due to their connection with fan communities (Wan, 2006; Wan, Waddill, Polk, and Weaver, 2011).

Considering how individual fans perceive sense of community within media fandom may illuminate both the positive and negative mental health implications of fandom membership. Productive engagement (i.e. production of fan-related fiction, video, music, and art; Fiske, 1992) within fan communities helps to "better define fan identity" and includes "production and

publication…of art and analysis of fan-related material" on both the individual and community

levels (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen, 2016, p. 3). Actively engaging with the fandom in this

way and transforming (or "rebranding") canon can create a sense of bonding between fans

(Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen, 2016).

Fandom membership also enables individuals to express, explore, and accept any and all

aspects of self-identity, including in marginalized individuals (Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen,

2016). According to Bacon-Smith (2000), fandom has allowed avenues for stigmatized voices

(such as racial, sexual/affectional, and gender minority individuals) to be heard and accepted

within the fan community, whereas traditional communities may be more likely to silence these

voices. McInroy and Craig (2018) examined associations between online fandom communities

and: (1) "socially-mediated identity milestones" and (2) self-identification in sexual and/or

gender minority youth (p. 179). Previous research has established that online information and

communication technologies (ICT) such as social media and other online platforms can facilitate

sexual and gender minority identity development (e.g., Craig & McInroy, 2014; DeHaan, Kuper,

Magee, Bigelow, & Mustanski, 2013, as cited in McInroy & Craig, 2018, p. 179). Findings from

McInroy and Craig's (2018) study indicate that fandom-participating LGBTQ youth (ages 14-29)

tended to be younger than non-fandom peers, had greater online daily activity, and "hit

established identity milestones" (such as recognizing and/or naming their identity, coming out to

an online friend, coming out to an offline friend, and coming out to a family member) earlier and

more rapidly (p. 187). It is important to recognize the context in which identity development

occurs in LGBTQ youth, which for some appears to be increasingly related to online fandom

participation.

Fan studies research tends to over-generalize media fandoms and attributes "a general

sense of community for fans (in general)" (Hills, 2014). However, all media fandoms may not be

comparable to one another due to the differing natures of specific fan communities (Chadborn,

Edwards, & Reysen, 2016). In a study comparing science fiction fans' sense of community within

their fandom to that in their neighborhood community, Obst and colleagues (2002) found that science fiction fans' ratings for the four elements of PSOC (as defined by McMillan & Chavis, 1986) in one's fandom were higher than ratings of their local neighborhood. In a different fan group of "Bronies" (adult fans of *My Little-Pony: Friendship is Magic*), "participants displayed higher PSOC for their fandom overall but reported higher emotional connection with their neighborhood" (Edwards, Griffin, Chadborn, & Redden, 2014, as cited in Chadborn, Edwards, & Reysen, 2016).

In an effort to understand how fan activists are uniquely posited to recruit young people into civic life, Kligler, McVeigh-Schultz, Weitbrecht, & Tokuhama (2012) conducted 40 semistructured interviews with members of two fan activist organizations: The HPA and Invisible Children (IC). Interviewees were initially recommended by organizers and additionally recruited by snowball effect, the sample tending to skew towards higher-involved members (Kligler et al., 2012). Respondents answered questions about their role in the organization, how they originally came to become involved in the organization, and their perception of the organization based on their experience (Kligler et al., 2012).

Three elements of experiences emerged from the interviews, including: "shared media experience, a sense of community, and the wish to help" (Kligler et al., 2012). For many in the HPA, the sense of community seemed to be a primary reason they initially joined, as "this world offers them a language, one they may mark off those who do not share the same acquaintance with the text…, an elaborate set of metaphors, and a common worldview" (Kligler et al., 2012). Thus, both organizations tended to agree that the key to recruiting and retaining members was building on existing communities and creating new community experiences (Kligler et al., 2012). Sense of community is closely related to sense of belonging in that in order for the community to impact an individual, he or she must perceive him- or herself as part of that community (Pichon, 2016).

Fandom and LGBTQ Identity

Sexual and gender minority individuals are more likely to experience marginalization than their heterosexual and cisgender peers, and, as a result, are more likely to feel isolated from their communities. Therefore, exploring how LGBTQ individuals experience fandom may illuminate the ways in which belonging to alternative communities serves as a positive source of acceptance as well as a buffer against prejudice and discrimination.

Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia (2015) examined the impact of media on the development of resilience in LGBTQ youth. "Resilience has been conceptualized as the ability to positively navigate through significant adversity or threat, necessitating the presence of both risk and avoidance of risk, and involving the development of skills to adapt and buffer the negative outcomes associated with risk exposure (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Mustanski et al., 2011)" (p. 255). Resilience theory "addresses risk factors but is more focused on protective factors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) that may help facilitate positive outcomes (Mustanski et al., 2011).

Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia (2015) note that media (including "traditional offline media" and "new online media") may provide sources of support to "facilitate the resilience of LGBTQ youth" (p. 256). Offline media refers to traditional forms of media, such as television, movies, print, and music, while online media describes newer forms of entertainment and connectivity such as websites, social media, blogs, and video sharing (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2005). They additionally report that while contemporary media representation of LGBTQ individuals has been increasing, traditional media tends to characterize them "predominantly by negative or one-dimensional portrayals" (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2005, p. 257). However, as LGBTQ youth tend to utilize "new" online media (such as websites and social media platforms), they may have "greater access to a diversity of representations of LGBTQ people" and could be "less bound to the stereotypical or limited representations available in offline media" (Marshall, 2010, as cited in Craig,

McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2005, p. 257). Active online participation is also thought to "offer innovative avenues for fostering sexuality specific community engagement, as well as enhancing social connectedness and support" (DiFulvio, 2011, as cited in Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2005, p. 257).

In this study, the researchers wanted to look at the influence of media representation on resilience development in LGBTQ youth while taking into account both traditional *and* online media, which is atypical in media research (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2005). They conceptualize media as its own ecological subsystem "comprised of both offline and online media, which are complexly interconnected and fluidly experienced by youth in the contemporary context" (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2005, p. 258). Findings indicated that participants identified four predominant ways in which "media was a catalyst for resilience by buffering discriminatory experiences," including: 1) coping through escapism, 2) feeling stronger, 3) fighting back, and 4) finding and fostering community (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2005, p. 262). Additionally noted was that the process of seeking out supportive media may itself provide resilience as "marginalized youth [seeking] out supportive content despite the many negative messages they encounter…already [takes] a certain amount of initiative" (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2005, p. 262).

Coming Out and Identity Development

Of interest to the current study is how LGBTQ individuals experience fandom not only in terms of mental health, but also in terms of identity development. Foundational research proposing stage models of LGBTQ identity development focused primarily on "coming out" as an individual and linear process (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989; Carrion & Lock, 1997, as cited in Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019, p. 1149). Various stage models have been proposed in order to explain the ways in which LGBT individuals experience important milestones regarding their sexual and/or gender identity. However, current research in the area of sexual and gender identity formation has focused more closely on the importance of social and

political environmental influences on how LGBTQ individuals experience the coming out process (i.e. Ryan, Legate, & Weinstein, 2015; Dunlap, 2016; McInroy & Craig, 2018; Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019). This relational approach modifies the perception that LGBTQ individuals must follow a narrowly defined path towards a final "stage" of identity synthesis and pride, instead bringing an acknowledgement that "coming out is a socially complex process that is mitigated by too many contextual factors to be understood linearly or moralistically" (Klein et al., 2015, p. 324, as cited in Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019, p. 1150). Instead of achieving a final stage of LGBTQ identity, this approach highlights sexual and gender minority identity development as "a primarily external, ongoing, and socially situated process" (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019, p. 1148).

For lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals, the initial disclosure of LGB identity to another person serves as an important moment early in the coming out process. Ryan, Legate and Weinstein (2015) surveyed 108 LGB-identifying individuals regarding the first time they disclosed their sexual orientation to another person (typically a mother, father, or friend) and included measures of autonomy need satisfaction, depression, and self-esteem. "Autonomy needs satisfaction" refers to the support one experiences from another person regarding their ability to "be truly themselves and act in accord with their internal values and feelings" (essentially, perceiving validation from another when being one's authentic self; Ryan, Legate, & Weinstein, 2015, p. 552). The study found that specifically negative reactions to disclosing one's sexual orientation significantly impacted well-being (positive reactions were not found to have had a significant impact on well-being; Ryan, Legate, & Weinstein, 2015, p. 561). Additionally, negative reactions to disclosure from fathers and best friends were found to be associated with lower self-esteem, and negative reactions from all relationship partners was found to predict greater depression (Ryan, Legate, & Weinstein, 2015, p. 561). However, if autonomy needs were satisfied following disclosure, this was found to have "fully mediated the reaction the relation between negative reactions and well-being" (Ryan, Legate, & Weinstein, 2015, p. 561). These

findings indicate that the reactions to coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual can have a long-term impact on mental health and sense of identity.

In a quantitative study, Dunlap (2016) examined "differences in the coming-out process across cohorts and genders" in LGB-identifying individuals (p. 23). Differences were evaluated between men and women (cisgender) and five different age cohorts; Cohort A, for example, was the "oldest" cohort and was composed of participants born before 1951 (deemed the "pre-Stonewall generation") while the youngest cohort, Cohort E, included participants born after 1988 (Dunlap, 2016, p. 23). The study found that in terms of gender, women in different cohorts tended to become aware of same-sex attraction at "significantly different ages," and women in the youngest group (Cohort E) "became aware of a same-sex attraction at significantly younger ages than all other women in the sample" ($M = 12.3$, $SD = 3.9$; Dunlap, 2016, p. 30). Men, however, did not have a significant difference in the average age they first became aware of same-sex attraction (Dunlap, 2016, p. 30). There were significant differences across all cohorts between gender groups except for the youngest cohort: There was not a significant difference in the age men in Cohort E ($M = 11.1$, $SD = 3.5$) were first aware of same-sex attraction when compared to women in the same cohort (Dunlap, 2016, p. 30). The findings from this study indicate unique cohort differences in the coming out process and necessitate further investigation of the coming out experience of younger sexual minority individuals.

The majority of research regarding identity development in people who identify as LGBTQ focuses on the experiences of sexual minority individuals (primarily, those identifying as gay or lesbian; Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019, p. 1149). While many aspects of transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) identity development are similar to those of sexual minority individuals (such as the desire for authenticity and importance of social support; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Galupo, Krum, Hagen, Gonzalez, & Bauerbond, 2014), facets of TGNC experiences are distinctive (e.g. transitioning). Brumbaugh-Johnson and Hull (2019) asked 20 transgender individuals questions about their coming-out experiences and noted that every one of

the coming-out narratives "focused on social interactions and relationships with others" rather than self-acceptance or "psychological processes involved with coming out" (p. 1158). The study found that coming out as transgender required navigating (1) others' gender expectations, (2) other's reactions, and (3) the threat of violence (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019, p. 1158). The participants' stories described the TGNC coming-out process as "an ongoing and situational process of navigating the social implications of one's gender identity and gendered behavior" (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019, p. 1158).

A recent mixed-methods study explored identity development of sexual and/or gender minority-identifying youth within the context of fandom. McInroy and Craig (2018) compared fandom and non-fandom participating sexual and/or gender minority youth (SGMY) by examining (1) socially-mediated "identity milestones" (i.e., coming out) and (2) the "complexity of self-identification (i.e., terminology)" in SGMY between the ages of 14 and 29 (p. 180). The "socially-mediated" milestones considered in this study included: (1) The age at which individuals thought they might be SGMY; (2) the age at which they first labeled their feelings as SGMY; (3) when they disclosed their SGMY identity to significant non-parental relationships (e.g., friends); (4) when they disclosed their identity to parents; and (5) when they first began to associate with other SGM people (Dunlap, 2016; Ryan et al., 2015, as cited in McInroy & Craig, 2018, p. 182). Findings indicated that "fandom-participating youth may begin the SGM identity development process earlier" and move through "socially-mediated milestones…more quickly than non-fandom participating peers" (McInroy & Craig, 2018, p. 191). Additionally, qualitative data indicated that "many participants perceived fandom instigated and expedited identity development" and introduced the concept of various SGM identities and terminology (McInroy & Craig, 2018, p. 191). Additionally, both fandom and non-fandom participants had more online friends than offline and disclosed their identity to an online friend before either an offline friend or parent/relative (McInroy & Craig, 2018, p. 188). Therefore, further investigation of identity

development in sexual and gender minority youth should consider the role of online social

relationships and participation in online fandom as important factors.

Relational Cultural Theory

In order to better understand the importance of community for those identifying as

LGBTQ, Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) offers a framework through which to understand this

phenomenon. RCT began as a developmental theory that describes optimum human development

as growing through and towards connection, rather than traditional developmental models which

assume peak identity development includes autonomy and independence (Deanow, 2011). These

traditional models (such as those proposed by Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, and Lawrence

Kohlberg) have been criticized for presuming that the development of boys and men (typically

assumed to be heterosexual, cisgender, and white) is the norm, while failing to capture the

experiences of women, people of color, and sexual and/or gender minority individuals (Deanow,

2011). RCT emphasizes the importance of connection for all individuals, including white,

cisgender, heterosexual men.

According to RCT, when humans continue to experience authentic connection with

others through growth-fostering relationships, they are better able to face adversity and

productively work through conflict with others. This is achieved by moving towards authenticity,

mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment within relationships. However, when individuals

continually experience disconnection from others (such as through shame or humiliation), they

become increasingly isolated from both others and their authentic selves. Chronic isolation is

therefore considered to be the source of many mental health concerns and has been shown to be

associated with heightened depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and substance use (Jordan,

2009).

RCT can be particularly useful as a "complementary perspective to the minority stress

model" in that psychological distress is positioned "within the context of relational and cultural

disconnections" for sexual and gender minority individuals (Mereish & Poteat, 2015, p. 426).

Jordan (2009) notes that relational and sociocultural disconnections are particularly harmful when "one individual in the relationship has power over another, as in the case of discrimination" (as cited by Mereish & Poteat, 2015, p. 426). LGBTQ-identifying individuals must also contend with controlling images, which are cultural messages regarding "what is acceptable and what is not, what people can do and cannot do" based upon their status in society (Miller, 2008, p. 112). Controlling images greatly influence the ways in which individuals act and construct relationships, which may lead to inauthentic behavior and relationships that lack mutuality (Miller, 2008).

For LGBTQ individuals, experiences of disconnection and oppression "might lead them to develop self-disparaging relational images, such as internalized homophobia and concealment motivation, which can also be harmful to health" (Miller & Stiver, 1997, as cited in Mereish & Poteat, 2015, p. 426). Additionally, people who identify as LGBTQ may have fewer social supports and experience loneliness associated with minority stress (Díaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001; Kuyper & Fokkema, 2011). Therefore, because "poorer social support, such as lower sense of community belonging and loneliness, is related to poorer mental and physical health among sexual minorities" (Díaz et al., 2001; McLaren, 2009; Spencer & Patrick, 2009), reducing the experience of chronic isolation (and consequently reducing mental health concerns) in LGBTQ individuals likely requires heightened social support and sense of community belongingness. Thus, if LGBTQ individuals experience fandom as a means of improving social support and a means of building growth-fostering relationships, positive fandom engagement could serve as a protective factor against minority stress.

Deanow (2011) brings the critique of androcentric theories of development into a chronological, age-related model of relational development. While this model is comprised of eight age "clusters," this study will predominantly focus on individuals in the fifth age cluster, "Authenticity/Voicelessness," which includes the ages of adolescence (12 to 25 years old; Deanow, 2011, p. 130). According to Miller and Stiver (1997), authenticity is defined as "a

person's ongoing ability to represent him/herself in a relationship with increasing truth and fullness" (as cited by Deanow, 2011, p. 130). In this age cluster, individuals do the "relational work" of "bring[ing] that evolving sense of self into relationships" with parents, friends, and romantic partners (Deanow, 2011, p. 130). According to Deanow (2011),

both male and female adolescents who identify as homosexual, bisexual, or transgender face even greater challenges in resolving the tension between authenticity (knowing what one knows, including one's sexual identity, and bringing it into relationships) and voicelessness or loss of voice. For them, *the choice to be authentic in their sexual expression may be life threatening or damaging to relationships with their families and friends* [emphasis added]. Certainly, the fear of such damage is frequently part of their coming-out process. (p. 132).

Harry Potter Fandom

The Harry Potter series follows the protagonist, Harry, primarily from the ages of 10 – 17 years old. Perhaps unsurprisingly, studies focused on identity development related to reading Harry Potter has predominantly focused on the formation of identity throughout adolescence. Nylund (2007) discusses a case study in which he uses the Harry Potter series as a therapeutic tool with an adolescent client, Steven, who is coming to terms with his identity as a gay person. Viewing this case through a cultural studies lens, Nylund explores Steven's identification with Harry's perceived "queerness" by his nonmagical ("Muggle") aunt and uncle, who wish to "squash out" Harry's magical abilities (2007). By conceptualizing Harry's magical abilities as a metaphor for nonheterosexuality, Nylund is able to use Harry's experience as a clinically therapeutic tool through which Steven can safely explore his own identity.

An example of Steven's identification of queer readings and messages in the Harry Potter series is defining Harry's "coming out" as entering the magical world, where he can finally be himself (2007). In the books, Harry is helped "out of the closet" by the character Rubeous Hagrid, who brings him to a place exclusively for the magical community for the first time. Nylund (2007) notes that Steven was able to identify his own "Hagrid," a friend who helped

create a safe space in which he felt comfortable coming out for the first time as gay. Though this case study is not necessarily generalizable to all sexual and/or gender minority adolescents, it serves as a clear example of the utility of the Harry Potter text as therapeutic and can be perceived as validating of LGBTQ identities.

Vezzali, Stathi, Giovannini, Capozza, & Trifiletti (2015) were interested in "whether the novels of Harry Potter can be used as a tool for improving attitudes towards stigmatized groups," and conducted a study examining whether reading the series improved attitudes towards stigmatized groups such as immigrants, homosexual-identifying individuals, and refugees. Vezzali et al. (2015) conducted three studies analyzing attitudes towards stigmatized groups. Study 1 explored an intervention involving reading the Harry Potter series with 34 Italian fifth-grade elementary students, a questionnaire given before and after the intervention assessing attitudes towards immigrants (Vezzali et al., 2015). Study 2 assessed a cross-sectional group of 117 high school students in Northern Italy who had read the series, assessing improved attitudes towards "homosexuals" through two groups: one was given a general questionnaire, the other receiving a questionnaire with items in "relation to homosexuals" (Vezzali et al., 2015). Finally, Study 3 recruited 71 undergraduate students in England as participants for an online cross-sectional study investigating the impact of reading the Harry Potter series on attitudes towards refugees (Vezzali et al., 2015).

As the social structure of Harry's world contains parallels to the "strict social hierarchies and resulting prejudices" present in mainstream society, Vezzali et al.'s findings that reading Harry Potter novels "improved attitudes toward stigmatized groups among those who identified with the main character (Studies 1 and 2) and those less identified with the main negative character (Study 3)" are not surprising (2015). This study bears implications for the importance of individuals identifying on the LGBTQ+ spectrum finding an increased sense of belonging by joining a fandom that is more open to acceptance of marginalized individuals.

86

APPENDIX B: IRB Approval Letter

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date:	04/08/2020
Application Number:	IRB-20-125
Proposal Title:	Coming out of the cupboard: A phenomenological exploration of fandom and LGBTQ identity
Principal Investigator:	Kathy Kavanaugh
Co-Investigator(s):	
Faculty Adviser:	Tonya Hammer
Project Coordinator:	
Research Assistant(s):	
Processed as:	Exempt
Exempt Category:	

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in 45CFR46.

This study meets criteria in the Revised Common Rule, as well as, one or more of the circumstances for which <u>continuing review is not required.</u> As Principal Investigator of this research, you will be required to submit a status report to the IRB triennially.

The final versions of any recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are available for download from IRBManager. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:
1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be approved by the IRB. Protocol modifications requiring approval may include changes to the title, PI, adviser, other research personnel, funding status or sponsor, subject population composition or size, recruitment, inclusion/exclusion criteria, research site, research procedures and consent/assent process or forms.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any unanticipated and/or adverse events to the IRB Office promptly.
4. Notify the IRB office when your research project is complete or when you are no longer affiliated with Oklahoma State University.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact the IRB Office at 405-744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu.

Sincerely,
Oklahoma State University IRB

APPENDIX C: Participant Screening Checklist

The participant:

is 18 years or older
identifies as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and/or Queer (or elsewhere on the LGBTQ+ spectrum)
identifies as a member of the Harry Potter fan community as signified by fulfilling at least three of the following:

Has attended a Harry Potter fan convention

Has consumed and/or created fan content (i.e. fanfiction, fan art, music, etc.)

Has attended a non-convention Harry Potter event hosted by fans (i.e. Wizard Rock concert, Harry Potter trivia night, etc.)

Has engaged in online fandom discourse (i.e. discussing fan theories) on platforms such as Tumblr, Twitter, Livejournal, etc.

Has identified as part of the Harry Potter fandom for at least 5 years

APPENDIX D: Research Protocol

Demographic Questions

1) Age
2) Race/Ethnicity
3) SES
4) Education
5) Geographic location
6) Gender identity
7) Sexual orientation
8) "Fan facts"
   a. Hogwarts house
   b. Favorite Harry Potter book
   c. Favorite Harry Potter movie
      1.

Interview Protocol

1) Tell me your definition of "fandom."

2) Tell me about when you first identified as a Harry Potter "fan."

3) Tell me about when you first considered yourself part of the Harry Potter fandom/fan community.

4) Tell me about your experience within the Harry Potter fandom/fan community. (Positive and Negative)
   a. Do you feel like you belong to the Harry Potter fan community? Why or why not?

5) Tell me about your journey of realizing that you identified as [LGBTQ IDENTITY].

6) Tell me about your experience with people who do not identify as part of the LGBTQ community. (Positive and Negative)

7) Describe for me your experience within the LGBTQ community.

8) Describe for me your experience as an LGBTQ-identifying person in the Harry Potter fandom/fan community. (Positive and Negative)

9) How do you think your identity as a member of the Harry Potter fandom has influenced your identity as [LGBTQ IDENTITY]?

10) Describe how your identity as [LGBTQ IDENTITY] has affected your experience within the Harry Potter fandom.

11) Do you think being part of a fandom has an influence on your emotional well-being or mental health? How so/why not?

12) Who is the Harry Potter character you most identify with? What about them reminds you of yourself?

13) Are there any other fandoms and/or communities with which you identify that we have not discussed?
    2.
14) Is there anything else you expected me to ask or that you would like to share at this time?

APPENDIX E**:** "Coming Out" and "Fandom" Timeline Instructions

1) Please design a timeline for your process of coming out as LGBTQ leading up to how you now identify. Because this is such a personal process, there is no "right" way or order for how to do this. However, it would be helpful if you could include the following:

   a. Coming out milestones such as coming out to self, to another person, to significant people in your life, etc.

   b. Any significant events that may have occurred throughout your coming out process (This is up to you. If it seems important to your story, please include it!)

   c. General age and year for each milestone

2) Please create a separate timeline to describe your experience as a Harry Potter fan. For this timeline, please include the following milestones:

   a. Book and movie release dates as relevant to your story (include age and year)

   b. Timeline of online fandom engagement (please include platforms, i.e. Livejournal, Tumblr, YouTube, fanfiction websites, etc.)

   c. Timeline of in-person fandom engagement (i.e. first friend you made through fandom, fan conventions, midnight release parties, and other fan events)

APPENDIX G: Recruitment Scripts

Email Recruitment Script

Dear faculty and colleagues,

I am currently looking for participants for a qualitative study that explores fandom identity and LGBTQ mental health. This study is being conducted through Oklahoma State University under the advisement of Dr. Tonya Hammer and has been approved by OSU's IRB.

Eligibility: Individuals in the United States who are 18 years or older and identify as part of both the LGBTQ community and the Harry Potter fan community (has engaged with others in the Harry Potter fandom via avenues such as: fanfiction, fanart, in-person fan conventions, the "Wizard Rock" music genre, etc.)

Participants will be asked to complete an activity (approximately 30 minutes) and answer interview questions (approximately 1 hour)

If you are interested, please ask potential participants to contact myself at kkavana@okstate.edu.

Thank you for your time in reading this email. I appreciate your consideration.

Respectfully,

Kathy Kavanaugh
Principal Investigator

Social Media Recruitment Script

Hello friends! I am conducting a study that explores fandom identity and LGBTQ mental health. I am looking for individuals in the US who are 18 years or older and identify as both part of the LGBTQ community and the Harry Potter fan community (has engaged with others in the Harry Potter fandom via avenues such as: fanfiction, fanart, in-person fan conventions, the "Wizard Rock" music genre, etc.). Please contact me at kkavana@okstate.edu for more details. I would greatly appreciate your help and contribution to research.

Please share this post!

CONSENT FORM
Fandom and LGBTQ Identity: Research Study and Oral History Project

Background Information
You are invited to be in a research study about the experiences of LGBTQ Harry Potter fans. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. <u>Your participation in this research is voluntary</u>. There is no penalty for refusal to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time. You can skip any questions that make you uncomfortable and can ask to stop the interview at any time.

This study is being conducted by: Katherine E. Kavanaugh, MS., under the advising of Tonya Hammer, Ph.D., in the School of Community Health Sciences, Counseling, and Counseling Psychology at Oklahoma State University (OSU).

Procedures
If you agree to this study, we would ask you to do the following things:
1) Construct a timeline of your coming out journey and fandom involvement (following provided prompts)
2) Participate in an approximately one-hour long audio-recorded interview about your experience as an LGBTQ-identifying Harry Potter fan.

Optional: If you are willing we would also like for you to participate in a "member reflection" process. For this study, it is important to the researchers that you agree with the themes discovered through the data analysis process. You may indicate whether you are interested in providing feedback on preliminary themes discovered by the researchers at the bottom of this form. This process would take place through electronic mail.

Optional: You will also have the opportunity to contribute your interview and timeline to the Oklahoma State University library's oral history archives. (See description under "Confidentiality" header).

Participation in this study involves the following time commitment: 90 minutes (Optional: 120 minutes)

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study
The study involves the following foreseeable risks: There is always some risk inherent in sharing personal experiences that may trigger discomfort or anxiety. You will receive a copy of this consent form with a list of mental health resources should you need additional support following your participation in this study.

The benefits to participation are: You may experience greater understanding of yourself and your peers. Information gathered may also inform future exploration of psychological factors such as LGBTQ identity development and mental health.

Compensation
You will receive a $10 Amazon gift card upon completion of the interview.

Confidentiality

If you choose to remain anonymous, records of your participation in this study will be kept private. Your identity will not be revealed in any publications, presentations, or reports resulting from this research study. Any discussion of individual participants will be relayed by using a pseudonym.

We will collect your information through audio recordings and collection of materials that you provide us. The recordings will be stored on a password protected hard drive in a locked filing cabinet until they can be transcribed, and the transcriptions will be stored on a password protected hard drive in a locked filing container. Additional research materials will be collected via the REDCap online platform and will exported and stored on the same secure hard drive. If you choose to remain anonymous, the audio recordings will be deleted and any directly identifying information (such as your name) will be deleted during the transcription process. This process should take approximately one month after the completion of the interview. Your contact information (including your email address, phone number, and/or Skype username) will be kept on a password protected hard drive in a locked filing cabinet until the study is completed and the data have been analyzed. This informed consent form will be kept for 3 years after the study is complete, and then it will be destroyed, unless you have chosen to have your material archived, in which case a copy of the form will be retained at the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program. Your data collected as part of this research project may be used or distributed for future research studies.

It is unlikely, but possible, that others responsible for research oversight may require us to share the information you give us from the study to ensure that the research was conducted safely and appropriately. We will only share your information if law or policy requires us to do so.

If you choose to donate your interview and timelines to be archived in the OSU Library as an oral history, you have the option to either use your real name or a pseudonym. Your contribution to the oral history project would be informed by the following:

Oral History Procedures and Informed Consent:

1. The interview will be audio recorded, transcribed, and made available for public and scholarly use through the Oklahoma State University Library. Copies may also be deposited with other repositories. Any member of the general public will have access to this interview and your words may be quoted in scholarly and popular publications. Unless you stipulate otherwise, your interview and any associated materials may be made available online.

2. While there are no risks anticipated with this interview, you can withdraw* from the interview at any time without prejudice prior to the execution and delivery of a deed of gift (see the attached form). You will also have the opportunity to make special provisions or restrictions in the deed of gift. During the interview you may request to stop the recording at any time to discuss or clarify how you wish to respond to a question or topic before proceeding.

    *In the event that you choose to withdraw from oral history project, any recording(s) or transcript made of the interview will not be archived. In that case, your interview and timelines will be kept solely for the purpose of the research study and will be deleted following transcription and data analysis.

3. Subject to the provisions of paragraph four below, upon completion of the interview, the recording(s) and content of your interview, the biographical information, and your digital timelines belong to the Oklahoma State University Library and can be used by the Oklahoma State University Library in any manner it will determine, including, but not limited to: future use by researchers in presentations, productions, public radio, the World Wide Web or other

digitization projects, and publications. This includes, but is not limited to, all rights, title, and interest in the interview and content, including the literary rights and copyright.

4. The Oklahoma State University Library agrees that:
   A. It will not use or exercise any of its rights to the information in the interview prior to the signing of the deed of gift.
   B. The deed of gift will be submitted to you for your signature before the interview or, if you choose, after the interview.
   C. Restrictions on the use of the interview can be placed in the deed of gift by you and will be accepted as amending the rights of the Oklahoma State University Library to the content of the interview.
   D. If you choose to remain anonymous, or utilize a pseudonym, your legal name will not appear in the transcript/recording or reference to any material contained in the interview. By choosing to remain anonymous, your interview will only be identified by an internal Oklahoma Oral History Research Program (OOHRP) tracking number and/or the pseudonym that you choose. (Anonymity is generally only used for handling personally identifiable information that might be a threat to one's employability, financial standing, reputation, criminal or civil liability; etc.)

5. Any restrictions as to use of portions of the interview indicated by you will be handled by editing those portions out of the final copy of the transcript. The original recording will not be edited, unless explicitly directed to do so. Unless this is explicitly stated, in the future the recording may be made publicly available in its entirety.

6. Upon signing the deed of gift, the recording(s), photograph, biographical information, and transcript will be kept in the Oklahoma State University Library.

7. If you have questions about the research project or procedures, you can contact the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at 405-744-7685.

Please indicate whether you would like to review a copy of your interview transcript before it can be shared publicly. Please note the process to create a transcript for review could take up to 6 weeks. If you choose not to make a selection, the default will be providing public access before a final transcript review takes place.

___   Yes, I require reviewing a copy of the interview transcript before it becomes publicly accessible.

___   No, I do not require reviewing a copy of the interview transcript before it becomes accessible publicly.

Voluntary Nature of the Study
Your participation in this research is voluntary. There is no penalty for refusal to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time. The alternative is to not participate. You can skip any questions that make you uncomfortable and can end the interview at any time.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Contacts and Questions

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human research participants at Oklahoma State University has reviewed and approved this study. If you have questions about the research study itself, please contact the Principal Investigator at kkavana@okstate.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer or would simply like to speak with someone other than the research team about concerns regarding this study, please contact the IRB at (405) 744-3377 or irb@okstate.edu. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential.

<u>Statement of Consent</u>
I have read the above information. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have my questions answered. I consent to participate in the study.

Indicate Yes or No:

I give consent to be audio recorded during this study.
    Yes___ No___

I give consent for my data to be used in future research studies.
    Yes___ No___

I would like to be involved in the member reflection process and give consent to be contacted after data has been analyzed.
    Yes___ No___

I give consent for my interview and timeline to be archived in the oral history program at the Oklahoma State University Library.
    Yes___No___

_____   _____
Name   Email address

_____   _____
Signature   Date
I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting the participant sign it.

_____   _____
Signature of Investigator   Date

TABLE 1: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Table 1. Participant Demographic Data

Name	Pronouns	Age	Racial and/or Ethnic Identity	Highest Degree Obtained	Country of Residence	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation
Alice	she/her	24	Caucasian	Master's	USA	Female	Lesbian
Bonnie	she/her	35	White	Doctoral	USA	Female	Bisexual
Angelina	she/her	31	Caucasian	Master's	USA	Cis Female	Bisexual
Ayda	she/her	31	White	Bachelor's	USA	Female	Queer
Willow	she/her	22	White, British	Bachelor's	Scotland	Female	Bisexual
Molly	she/her	20	White	Associate's	USA	Cis Female	Asexual
Stevonnie	they/them	30	White	Bachelor's	USA	Nonbinary	Pansexual
Ruby	she/her	30	Caucasian, Jewish	Master's	Germany	Cisgender Female	Queer/Pansexual
Emma	she/her	26	White	Master's	USA	Female	Queer
Syd	she/her	28	White	Doctoral	USA	Cis woman	Asexual, queer, and gay are all labels I use
Poppy	she/her	30	White	Bachelor's	USA	Cis woman	Queer/Bisexual
Brienne	they/them	32	White	Bachelor's	USA	Nonbinary	Queer (pansexual)
Sybil	she/her	32	White	Bachelor's	USA	Cis Female	Aromantic Bisexual
Helena	she/her	29	Latina (Chilean)	Master's	Chile	Woman	Bisexual
Oliver	He/him/his /they	32	Caucasian	Master's	USA	Male	Pansexual
Korra	she/her	32	Caucasian	Associate's	USA	Female	Bisexual
Tina	she/her	27	White	Master's	USA	Cis Female	Lesbian

VITA

Katherine E. Kavanaugh

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: COMING OUT OF THE CUPBOARD: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL
EXPLORATION OF FANDOM AND LGBTQ IDENTITY

Major Field: Counseling Psychology

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy in Counseling
Psychology at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July, 2021.

Completed the requirements for Master of Science in Educational Psychology at
Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in 2017.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and
Women's and Gender Studies at Texas A&M University, College Station, TX in
2014.

Experience:

2020-2021   Colorado State University Health Network – *Predoctoral
Psychology Intern* (APA-Accredited)
2019-2020   Laureate Psychiatric Hospital, Eating Disorders – *Practicum
Intern*
2018-2019   Oklahoma State University Counseling Services – *Practicum
Intern*
2017-2018   Oklahoma State University-Tulsa Counseling Center – *Practicum
Intern*
2016-2018   Oklahoma State University Counseling and Counseling
Psychology Clinic – *Assistant Director (2017-2018), Practicum
Intern (2016-2017)*

Professional Memberships:

American Psychological Association
American Psychological Association Division 17- Counseling Psychology