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# *The Literacy Journey of Harry Potter: A Study in Versatile Sponsorship via Multimedia*

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## **Introduction**

Our literate lives are shaped by our many different experiences and encounters with writing, reading, and life in general. Some experiences have a large impact on our literate lives, such as our schooling and how it teaches us the basics of reading and writing, while other things seem to come and go, such as an assigned reading book from high school you hated to read and were forced to write essay about. However, sometimes something comes along that stays with you for your entire life, an inspiration about what you learn, how you learn, and what you do. It becomes something you love and connect to so much that you care about, learn and pursue it without pressure. For me, as well as many others in my generation and previous ones, this passion has been the major pop culture franchise: Harry Potter. This series boasts an amazing story in seven books, an eight film saga and two theme parks, allowing its millions of fans, young and old, worldwide, to truly enter its magical world. Now, why has a children's book series about magic become such a strong factor in the literate lives of not only children, but adults, too? This very question is a subject of conversation for literacy researchers looking at every facet of the series to find what made it such a phenomenon for all ages. Through the conversations writers are having, I've come to see that the strength of this series is its versatility in what it teaches, how it teaches these things, and the wide range of people it can reach to teach these skills to (Beach and Willner 102-03; Radigan 694; Padak and Rasinski 350; Beaton 100-01; Nilsen and Nilsen 128-29). While the researchers who inspired me cover many of these topics, they have left out a huge part of the series' sponsorship power stemming from its multimedia empire, as they only focus on the books. While the books are indeed the heart of the series, the many forms of media connected to Harry Potter also allow different avenues for people to encounter the series. These other forms of media also give the series the ability to grow with the fan's interest by looking into other forms in addition to the one that introduced them to the series. I plan to fill this gap in research by reflecting on my own literacy journey via multimedia and by expanding the traditional definition of literacy sponsorship to include my findings.

## **Literature Review**

The conversation about the series as a literacy tool begins with the work of Deborah Brandt, who coined the term "literacy sponsor" for such a force in literacy learning. Deborah Brandt defines a sponsor as "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model" literacy skills of reading and writing (Brandt 46). In her piece, she focuses on economic trends and

the job market as major sponsors pertaining to writing skills and adaptability, which are indeed more abstract kinds of sponsors. This view allows for social trends to also be seen as sponsors and thus the idea of popular culture trends as sponsors is of great interest to the literacy research community. Literacy also reaches out into the sphere of skills taught through reading and writing, such as math, science, and even life lessons or morals (Beaton 100). This broad sense of literacy shines in Harry Potter through the sheer range of skills it can teach as amplified by the multiple forms of media it holds. This trait is the focus of my research that I will dub “sponsorship versatility,” as it builds on the foundation set forth by Brandt. I’ll look specifically into the many facets of sponsorship that this series covers in how it teaches through its unique multimedia spheres. Sponsorship versatility applies to how a single sponsor—the umbrella of the Harry Potter series—can reach its audience in many ways, allowing new avenues of introduction for different tastes. It also allows for growth by looking into the other avenues after being introduced to one, such as, for example, starting with the books and then seeing the films. Watching a film and having personal experiences in a theme park can teach very different lessons to a person in very different ways than reading a book can. Thus this term also relates to the many skills a sponsor can teach, from traditional reading and writing to math, science, and life lessons. Sponsorship versatility shows just how many ways a literacy sponsor can reach beyond the simple definition of teaching literacy skills through reading, but teach a wide range of skills through an even wider range of means.

A key trait of the sponsorship versatility of Harry Potter is how it has reached beyond the audience of children by appealing to older readers as well. This appeal heavily relies on emotional connections and experiences at the core of many fans’ love of the series, including mine, as I found in my research into the effectiveness of the series in all of its forms (Radigan 694). Sara Ann Beach and Elizabeth Harder Willner look at how the series has attracted kids into its magical world via the books, specifically by interviewing young readers to show how “Rowling opens the door for adolescent readers to share the characters’ power while experiencing a connection to literature that has the potential to enrich their lives” (Beach and Willner 104). The story begins with 11-year-old Harry and follows his journey, not only through amazing magical events and a battle of good versus evil, but also through everyday happenings at school, such as classes, friendships, and the trials of adolescence and growing up (Beach and Willner 103). This balance of the ordinary with the fantastic provides both an interesting escape and a very real mirror to the lives of the children reading. By relating the book’s themes to their own lives, it allows readers to learn life lessons while honing literacy skills of reading comprehension and symbolic thinking (Beach and Willner 104). Winifred M. Radigan asserts that these very same factors connect to older readers as well with “how the books console that inner child who still longs for her magic to be discovered and nurtured; the child within remembers all the times she stood on the outside of the inner circle” (694). How does she know this? Because she herself is one such adult fan who was deeply touched by the series and has had her life impacted in a huge way, as she looked back to her own childhood and saw a little girl much like those characters in the story. Children connect and grow with the characters and emotions as they read, while older fans can reflect and continue to grow via introspection and memory (Radigan 694).

This explains the versatility regarding who the series reaches, but what about what it teaches? While the authors above touch on the emotional teachings and life lessons, two other researchers answer this question by looking at a range of skills in both literacy and other academics. Tisha Beaton used the series as a thematic guide for a unit in her sixth grade class due to its popularity with the students. One of her class activities focused on traditional literacy with reading comprehension and writing: students pretended to be reporters in the Wizarding World, analyzing themes and events to write an article. Other activities reach beyond this common definition of literacy. One included a budgeting activity in which students planned out buying the supplies they would need to attend Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; another included

a science lesson on field research of plants based on the in-story textbook, *101 Magical Herbs and Fungi* (Beaton 100). This kept students involved and interested, learning new skills through the series pertaining to literacy and beyond. The study done by Pace Alleen and Don L.F. Nilsen looks deeper at one high level skill, as opposed to many entry-level skills taught by the series. They look at how the series can teach an advanced linguistic skill, that of traditional literacy via the Latin vocabulary used in the magical incantations used to cast spells in the books. The roots of Latin can teach high-level English vocabulary that is often seen in the SAT exams taken by high school students around the U.S. It can even reach out into other languages to teach, “Because of the ubiquitous influence of Latin on the romance languages (Italian, Spanish, and French) as well as on English, which has borrowed heavily from them, Latin roots are such a productive source of English words that Rowling does not need to provide a glossary, nor do most translators need to find replacements” (Nilsen and Nilsen 128). Not only can this series teach children basic skills, but it can also teach high school students and even adults of different nationalities and languages high level literacy skills while just enjoying a book. Now that is versatility.

However, for all this versatility, there are skeptics. Nancy Padak and Timothy Rasinski argue in their piece that the series alone is not a strong sponsor at all. They argue that Harry Potter is not enough and that parents must work with their children to expand their literacy beyond just the series in order to learn best (Padak and Rasinski 350-53). This seems like a harsh dismissal of all of the above research, but in truth, it is actually backhanded support. These authors ask parents to expand their children’s literacy by using Harry Potter as a basis to recommend new books to read by finding more in the fantasy genre. This actually proves the power of sponsorship versatility by showing how the series can introduce readers to even more ways to learn, opening the door to new books and experiences. The idea of multimedia sponsorship extends the reach of the series as a whole through audience, and even time and age, thus also amplifying the many skills that can be taught, as detailed above. This made me see that my own journey with the series was based on this principle of growing and expanding literacy and learning through a love of Harry Potter. In fact, this was the piece that made me realize my main argument and the gap I wish to fill: the Harry Potter series’ greatest strength comes from its versatility and the root of this power is its status as a multimedia franchise.

## Methodology

I have already mentioned that I have reflected on my own literacy journey in order to collect data to make my point about the power of sponsorship versatility via multimedia. This method is best categorized as a self-case study: I look in depth at key events in my literary life connected to the series as they demonstrate the power of the franchise. The many forms of media connected to Harry Potter allow different avenues of entering the series as well as the ability to grow with the fan’s interest. The events in my life are each tied to a particular avenue of the series, the age I was when I encountered them, and the skills they taught me. Due to this data coming from my own life—the life of a very huge fan of the series who has been deeply affected by it in many ways—it is safe to say there is a bit of bias here. However, this data is still valid because it is a start to the conversation about multimedia sponsorship in that it opens the door for others to share their own stories and how it affected them. An example of this comes in the stories of my parents. When talking to them about my younger days with the series they gave me an adult viewpoint, which highlights the versatility of the appeal of the series and is mentioned in each section of my analysis. The first event I discuss is the impact of the films on my reading skills in elementary school. This love of reading grew into how the books impacted my writing skills in my high school days and how the symbols in the series impacted my dreams for the future. Finally, I look at my experiences in college so far and how the series has impacted the social aspects of this leg of my journey. These examples build on the conversation of sponsorship by giving the theme a name—sponsorship

versatility—and demonstrating it by examining a new facet of sponsorship altogether in multimedia. It opens a new door for researchers to enter by contributing their own stories, or those of others, just as Brandt’s original piece on sponsorship did for previous authors and for me.

## Results and Discussion

### Elementary Literacy ~ Introduction through Film

Upon reflecting on my journey with this series, I found that it was the films that first brought me into Harry Potter during my early days in elementary school. I had just begun to learn basic reading skills, mostly through the simple storybooks or focused books teaching topics like colors or animals, to sharpen letter recognition and other basic skills in my classroom. This was until the film adaptation of the first Harry Potter book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, hit theaters, and my parents and I went to see it. Suddenly a world of fantasy opened up to me that I had never seen quite that way before. It was different from the colorful and clean fantasy of Disney I also enjoyed; it felt more real and close, like I could touch it. The idea of being able to go to a school to learn magic spells, study amazing creatures like dragons, receive mail from owls, and go on adventures with friends flooded my mind. I wanted to know more right away. But movies take time to come out and I had no clue when the next part would come around. This is where my parents came into my literacy. They began reading the first book with me a chapter or two at a time before bed, teaching me new words when I had questions and indulging in my imagination. However, this still wasn’t enough for me. I wanted to read faster, to learn more and continue the story, but the book was still a bit above my skill level. So, my parents again encouraged me by giving me books about fantasy that were at my level to read such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, another series about children in a fantasy world. This boosted my reading skills, and my love of reading in general, as I sought out books on any topic I found interesting in order to boost my skills enough to read *Harry Potter*. I found books on dragons and mythical creatures, which led me to books about our own real world wildlife. In addition, I found compendiums of mythology from other nations, and fairy tales of all kinds, which got me interested in travel. If it sparked my interest, I would read it. Suddenly, I was far above the reading level of any of my classmates and nearly always had my nose in a book. I had finally reached the skill level to read *Harry Potter* at a very young age, which sparked a love of a series that would influence my entire life for years to come.

The above anecdote shows the very strong sponsorship versatility the Harry Potter series has simply through the films. The films are a very easy way into the series for many types of people, thus allowing an introduction to literacy learning. For a young child, the visual medium is much easier to grasp, with a clearer story and language, as well as the ability to see what is happening and interpret it from the actions and expressions of characters, as opposed to using high level reading skills. For adults, it is much more feasible to find a few hours to watch a movie as a family, as opposed to reading a book alone; yet, all the same, you enjoy the story. In the case of my parents, this grew into a love of the books much like my own. When speaking to them about my younger days, I found out that while I was sharpening my skills, and even after I could read on my own without our nightly sessions, they were continuing to read the series ahead of me. The films and our reading together had rekindled their own love of reading for fun. This is a huge example of sponsorship versatility, through which the films encourage further exploration into the main avenue of the series through the books. This exploration allows more skills to be learned through the cooperation of the two mediums. This also expands upon Padak and Rasinski’s idea that parents should work with kids to expand their horizons beyond Harry Potter books by using the films as a springboard (Padak and Rasinski 351). My parents gave me other stories to motivate me to read, much like Padak and Rasinski suggest. However, I also took it upon myself to find new material to read that was related to my interests, which my parents supported by buying me books, reading

along with me, and answering my questions. In addition, my searching for other subjects based on my love of the films connects to Beaton's idea of using the series to teach skills beyond literacy. For example, my interest in mythical creatures became an interest in real world zoology. Overall, the films as a multimedia sponsor make for a very strong introductory power that can encourage reading in both children and adults, gradually bringing them into the world of in-depth and progressively more mature novels.

### **High School Literacy ~ Growth through Writing**

My love of the series continued from the films, as I grew up. I read and often re-read every book, slowly maturing and growing with the content of the books. Themes such as prejudice, betrayal, envy, fear and even death appeared in the books. Even the issues the beloved characters faced were similar to my own: standardized tests called OWLS mirrored the SAT's looming in my future. A school dance and major event caused tension between friends and explored what they may want to do in the future. This coincided perfectly with my adolescent experience, allowing me to dig deep into these themes and dilemmas to help me in the very emotional and confusing time of high school. I found that I connected most to the character of Hermione in this time, her being an outsider among her peers. She was a girl different from the others, who loved to read and was unconcerned with looks, caring more about what is in the heart. She was happy with her interests in nerdy pursuits. Also, she was a very anxious girl who often worked herself into the ground in school due to perfectionism. Her flaws called to me as well as her strengths: her vast wisdom, strong heart, loyalty, skillfulness, pride in herself, and her caring support of her friends, set her at a higher level skillset than even the Chosen One, Harry. It touched my heart that my family called me their Hermione. This encouragement led me to take Latin, to continue my love of mythology and other cultures. In addition, it boosted my SAT vocabulary.

**The films increased my skills in reading, and in turn, these reading skills led me to write my own stories and use the themes as inspiration.**

I also elected to take creative writing as an outlet for my imagination as fostered by the novels. It was a chance to try and touch others with symbols and characters the way Harry Potter had for me. Here, I wrote a deeply emotional story entitled, "Finding My Wings," about a little bird in its home who was different from the others. It had dull feathers different from the others, causing it to worry about being liked. It became quiet and felt isolated from those it loved even though it knew it was indeed loved. However, the love of its family and friends allowed it to grow to be reborn as a phoenix; the flames of its worries and fears became bright feathers full of pride and hope. The newborn phoenix then spread its message of self-pride and as well as its unconditional love to its forest home. This little bird was a symbol for me, and the phoenix idea came from a key symbol of the novels. In Harry Potter, the phoenix is used as the symbol for the rebellion fighting against the Dark Lord, symbol of hope, rebirth, and pride in being yourself and encouraging others to do the same by banding together people of all types to create a united world. I ended up reading the story aloud to my class, tears in my eyes, as I told the true story of my own struggles with confidence through the story of the bird. The result was the biggest surprise for me. My class praised my story as light due to the fantastic elements making it easy to digest and teach a lesson to young readers, while having deep emotions and dilemmas that also connect with older readers. These are words I had used to explain Harry Potter, and my teacher even compared my writing to Rowling's. I truly grew and expressed myself through learning to write stories due to the inspiration of Hermione and the themes and symbols of Harry Potter.

The films increased my skills in reading, and in turn, these reading skills led me to write my own stories and use the themes as inspiration. The books, as part of the multimedia sphere of Harry Potter, provide a deeper look at themes and issues than the films. Being very long novels heavy with

symbolism, dialogue, and description, much more is left to the reader to interpret and incorporate into their own life. Interpreting these novels often makes for fun and interesting conversation among fans. My parents and I often discuss many aspects, such as what houses we would be in, what our job in the magical world would be, and which characters we connect to. Talking about characters works as a link to talking about our feelings and problems. These feelings and problems grew with me from my elementary school days into high school through the books, just as Beach and Willner described. This experience grew into writing my own stories in order to find my own voice and confidence, just like the characters in the book; perhaps I was not conquering a dark lord, but instead fought the darkness inside of my own heart, stemming from anxiety and low self-confidence. The emotional connection fans have with characters are often the strongest inspiration, much like Radigan's findings of her inner child who was:

Like Hermione, constantly reading and prone to speaking the unpalatable truth, she was avoided until needed for help with homework. Like Harry, she felt that something was wrong with her, that she didn't belong. Like Ron, she didn't have the money for sleek, new toys of the moment or the current style. Like Nigel, she was clumsy at sports and timid. (694)

These characters are yet another form of the sponsorship versatility of the series: they are dynamic role models for readers that grow alongside them as children or help older readers reflect on their lives. Every reader can find a character to connect to and use as an inspiration in life and in literacy. For me, I learned how to speak my mind and reveal the words hidden in my heart that I was too shy to speak out loud, so I spoke through writing in a style much like Rowling's, mixing light fantasy with deep emotions. In addition, the characters can help one find pride in their own traits. Taking Latin improved my academic skills and taught me about mythology. It taught me many new vocabulary words with Latin roots, which aided me on the SAT and taught me new words in other languages, just as Nilsen and Nilsen pointed out. I worked this knowledge into stories I wrote in creative writing, with another fantasy story focusing on the key themes of friendship and embracing differences for the better, which are themes found in Harry Potter. I named the characters using Italian words, like Fiore, meaning flower, and Fiamma, meaning flame. The characters themselves were reimagined mythological angels and demons. Overall, the sponsorship versatility in the books demonstrates the strengths of the series' storytelling as well as the emotional and relatable characters and themes for all ages. The books are coated in a layer of fantasy to make things interesting, which is an inspiration for growing readers, or adults, to look inside themselves and learn to grow further as people and, for some, as writers, too.

### **Theme Parks ~ Personal Growth via Friendship**

Finally, I will speak about how the series has helped this past year; that is, at a time in which I moved from Connecticut all the way to Orlando to attend the University of Central Florida. My friends and I joked about me being in the same city as the newly opened Harry Potter World at Universal Studios, saying that I was, in fact, going to Hogwarts for college. It was all very fun, and I admit having fun theme parks nearby is appealing, but it did not change that I would be moving far away from these dear friends and would be alone on a campus where I knew nobody. The other students may know each other from high school, but I was isolated. All of the confidence I gained through my stories in high school seemed to be fading quickly as I moved in and began classes without anyone to lean on for support. My parents tried to relight my spark with encouragement, often telling me to be like my favorite character Hermione, or by telling me how much I already am like her, but my fears persisted. However, it was then that Harry Potter came to my rescue again: not through films, or books encouraging me to write, but through the parks as well as people who could be new friends. UCF has a Harry Potter Club on campus and it is there I went, hoping to make new friends. I was afraid, as a freshman surrounded by a loud and enthusiastic group of fans that all knew each other for years. Yet, this enthusiasm was just like my own, only hidden inside because of



shyness. When they welcomed me with open arms, embracing my quirks just as my friends back home did, it allowed me to open up. Their warmth and love of the series just made me feel so welcome and happy. I became a Gryffindor and joined the club as a full member, where at weekly meetings we would discuss every facet of the series, play games related to the series, and most recently go on a club trip to the park. This trip is a memory that will live on in my heart for years. It was such a fun trip and it really showed how far I have come from the scared freshman I once was. I am thriving in college, despite my early worries, with a group of amazing friends. I have even become a member of authority in the group as a prefect, a leader for my house in charge of communicating with all members of the club about planning events, as well as trivia. In my application for the position, I wrote,

I enjoy helping people as much as I can and would be happy to help people feel comfortable and have fun in this amazing club, just as the officers did for me last year as a scared freshman from Connecticut. Members can always come to me for whatever they may need, club-related or not. I am always happy to lend an ear and some advice.

Today my family and old friends use the parks as an excuse to visit me often, while my newfound friends and I go on trips for events. They are all happy to see how much I have grown and

how comfortable I am in such a new place thanks to the kindness of a bunch of fans of a series about magic.

**The theme parks may seem like a superficial piece of the multimedia franchise of Harry Potter, but they actually have a large impact in terms of sponsorship versatility.**

The theme parks may seem like a superficial piece of the multimedia franchise of Harry Potter, but they actually have a large impact in terms of sponsorship versatility. Sure, it is a way for the series to make huge amounts of money, which may make it seem manipulative, but it is so much more than that. It allows fans to truly step into the magical world of the series and it provides a crucial social link. People of all ages gather at these parks, dressed in full robes and gear bearing trademark colors of the house with which they identify, waiting in line to go on rides themed around

events from the books, and waiting to enter the perfectly replicated shops and purchase a wand, just as they have always dreamed. It brings people together on a very deep level, allowing a common ground to be found while, creating a perfect space for new bonds to form, regardless of shyness. After all, “[W]e all have felt left out and misunderstood. We all have had our fears and embarrassments made public. We all have been misunderstood and mocked. We all have had to find the desperate courage to go on” (Radigan 694). Perhaps our love for what many see as a childish series about magic, for discussion, and for bonds with fictional characters is ridiculous. However, together we have, to quote Radigan, “all felt the wonder of things going just right. We have huddled with our friends in laughter and mischief and enjoyed the moment” (Radigan 694). It is in the parks or in clubs with other fans that we come together and find these friends and amazing joys. It creates a truly magical feeling of fellowship and camaraderie that allows one to feel comfortable and welcome. It also allows for personal growth for all ages. For myself, it allowed me to make new friends and conquer my fears about being in a new location, as well as conquer a more superficial fear of rollercoasters that is now helping me face my fears of the unknown. My mother has expressed her thanks to my friends in the club for helping me do so well in adjusting, and she firmly believes that it is thanks to these friends and a love of a series about magic that I am happy, healthy, and loving college. This facet of sponsorship versatility reaches beyond literacy skills and even personal life lessons. It reaches into the social sphere to provide support and growth among others who enjoy the series. They can be new fans or old, with knowledge of every book and film or a first time visitor to the park. Overall, the parks are a crucial link in social and personal growth for fans

by allowing their dreams to become a reality, both those related to the series, and those related to being better people in their hearts through the bonds they create.

## Conclusion

To summarize, the Harry Potter series is such a phenomenon in literacy learning due to the immense multimedia sponsorship versatility that it provides. The series can grow with its audience and teach them many lessons. All of these forms of media are good for all ages thanks to their varying strengths and mediums allowing variety and multiple points of entry. The films work as a great starting point for any who are interested, as they are quick and easy to absorb, as opposed to reading a novel, while having the inherent strength of a visual medium to affect its audience. The books allow for a deeper look at themes and characters that can greatly inspire fans to write their own works and look inside themselves to find what is important to them. Finally, the parks bring all of the vast fans together into the world of their dreams to bond, enjoy the fun of the rides, and share in imagination made real.

This series defines a generation for a reason; it has so much to give and so many ways to give it. However, my story and that of Harry Potter is only one of so many that are out there in this world. I hope others will look into popular culture as a literacy sponsor and examine how it has impacted their life beyond just a fun pastime or love, but as a major sponsor in literacy and life. The wide range of pop culture and its impact on literacy skills is a very interesting area of study in which so much more can be explored. This can go beyond Harry Potter and into so many other series of film, novels, or even games and television shows. These many forms of media, and possible skills and lessons to learn from them, are the very heart of sponsorship versatility. Other series and forms of pop culture could also be researched as literacy sponsors. Perhaps by doing this we can find new ways to teach children, encourage reading for fun to those who may not like reading, and find new ways to teach literacy, breaking down barriers for a children series so that it is accessible to everyone. By looking into pop culture, sponsorship, and sponsorship versatility, new literacy skills and new ways to teach them can be found through the stories and experiences of characters, and these can, in turn, be applied in one's future.

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Samantha Glaser is currently a sophomore at the University of Central Florida. Her major is Elementary Education. She enjoys working with children and helping them learn. She particularly enjoys introducing children to the joy of reading because it opens up not only a world of learning and information, but also a world of imagination and adventure. She would love to teach any grade in elementary school in the future. She regularly attends UCF's Harry Potter Club and would like to thank the wonderful friends she has made there as well as her amazing family for helping to inspire this paper.