The Boy Who Was Cancelled: Inclusivity and Integrative Complexity in Harry Potter Fanfiction

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Abstract

J.K. Rowling's recent public statements regarding transgender issues have prompted many *Harry Potter* fans to reevaluate their relationship with the franchise; while some fans have chosen to disengage from the franchise entirely, others have sought to reclaim the Wizarding World as a more inclusive and diverse space by creating fanfiction that celebrates queer identities and offers an alternative to Rowling's canon. This situation presents a unique opportunity to explore fan-made content as a form of cultural critique and the psycholinguistic processes that underscore creative production. The present study utilises integrative complexity – a rhetorical construct that evaluates a text's structure – to linguistically compare differences in how Rowling's books and *Harry Potter* fanfiction are written and to discuss what the linguistic patterns reveal about depictions of heroism, queerness, and gender. The statistical analysis found that the *Harry Potter* fanfiction scored significantly higher than the source material, indicating that the fan-made content is rooted in multidimensional thinking while the books reflect a more black-or-white thought process. Our findings reflect previous research that posits a connection between inclusive, diverse environments and higher integrative complexity levels, and they provide a strong foundation for future research to build upon in multiple ways.

Keywords: Harry Potter, Fanfiction and fandom, Integrative complexity, LGBTQ+ representation, Queerness

Introduction

With over 500 million copies sold (Plath et al., 2019), *Harry Potter* is one of the most popular novel series in the world, a cornerstone of the pop-cultural landscape. With such popularity, the *Harry Potter* franchise (also known as the Wizarding World) has amassed a huge following of all ages in both in-person and online communities; notably, online fandom spaces have long been environments for marginalised communities to discuss, create, and engage with the source material through different forms of media such as videos, podcasts, music, and fanfiction. In 2020, author J.K. Rowling made several public statements on social media concerning transgender issues and policies, which led many fans to reassess their previous perception of her as an advocate for marginalised communities. With 21% of fanfiction writers within the *Harry Potter* community identifying as nonbinary and 11% identifying as transgender (Duggan, 2020), long-term fans notably have struggled to reconcile the inclusive community they found within fandom spaces and the author's comments. This has caused a rupture in Rowling's involvement with the fandom and the series as a whole; while some individuals have chosen to leave the fandom entirely, others have decided to use fan-made content like fanfiction to reclaim the Wizarding World as a queer- and trans-inclusive and -accepting space (Gulley, 2022).

This unique situation – one in which a highly prominent author's actions and sentiments create substantial discord within their own fandom, resulting in fans and others disavowing the author – presents an interesting opportunity for communication and media studies scholars to study critical fan-creator interactions. According to previous fandom research, fan-made content functions both to celebrate a source text and as a powerful form of cultural critique (e.g., Jenkins, 1992, 2006; McCullough, 2020). In the present study, we use computational linguistics to examine the underlying psychology behind the reclamation of the Wizarding World by fans, focusing on exploring how individuals use online fandom spaces to communicate their desires for greater inclusivity and representation. Specifically, we use integrative complexity – a psycholinguistic variable that provides insight into the behind-the-scenes aspects of the human experience (McCullough and Conway, 2018b) and into development and depiction of fictional worlds and characters (McCullough, 2021c) – to compare the structure of how Rowling's original books and *Harry Potter* fanfiction are written, analysing the different ways gender[1] and heroism

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[1] When exploring gender in any context, including fictional narratives, it is both essential and necessary for scholars to understand the nuances and intricacies of gender. According to Buck (2016: 466):

> gender identity is the personal psychological experience of one's own gender, and […] it might at times be overlooked by cisgender men and women. One possible explanation for this could be that for cisgender people, assigned sex and gender identity could conceivably serve as proxy terms. Without a personal discrepancy to help practically distinguish the two constructs, making an abstract conceptual distinction between them might not be intuitive.

Additionally, 'gender identity is by definition internal, it is only discernible to the extent that is explicitly disclosed or reflected by an individual's gender expression' (Buck, 2016: 466). In fiction, audiences primarily perceive gender expression—the outward identity characters present. Assuming full alignment between biological sex, gender expression, and identity reinforces a problematic cisnormative framework.

are depicted and what those depictions communicate about the pop-cultural landscape and social ideals/values.

Fanfiction and Fandom: A Brief Overview

Traditionally, fans of pop culture and entertainment have occupied a degraded social status in the mainstream, frequently criticised for supposedly not being able to distinguish reality from fantasy and for preferring the latter over the former (Dill, 2009; Larsen and Zubernis, 2013). However, from a scholarly perspective, fans are an invaluable focus of research because they are more critically engaged with the media they consume than the average viewer (Bartsch and Hartmann, 2017). One such way fans critically engage with pop culture and entertainment is the creation of fanfiction. According to Vinney and Dill-Shackleford (2018: 18), 'fan fiction uses the settings, plotlines, and characters of a source text, such as a movie, TV show, or book [or the lives of real people], to create new narratives'. While some scholars argue that fanfiction originated in the science fiction fanzines of the 1930s (Coppa, 2006), older examples can be found throughout literary canon (Lantagne, 2011). An argument, for example, can be made that most of William Shakespeare's work, from the historical plays (inspired by actual people like the Plantagenet kings of England) to *Cymbeline* (based on the stories from *Decameron* by Boccaccio), are fanfiction (McCullough, 2020). Currently, the internet allows fanfiction to proliferate and be disseminated at a truly incredible rate (Thomas, 2011); as such, the amount of available fanfiction continues to grow, making it commonplace in many fan experiences.

Unsurprisingly, fanfiction is a popular topic of scholarly inquiry; for example, Floegel (2020) explored how fanfiction can be a tool for reorienting cis/heteronormative entertainment towards queer-inclusivity, and Tosenberger (2008) studied the cultural relevance of *Harry Potter* by analysing the series' fanfiction. Furthermore, fanfiction provides 'voice to those who could not affect the source text directly, empowering fans to transform the source text in ways that were more reflective of their desires and interests' (Vinney and Dill-Shackleford, 2018: 19). This quote highlights the critical engagement of fans and the dual origins of fanfiction; fanfiction is born from both a deep fascination with source texts as well as feelings of frustration of equal or greater intensity. This seemingly contradictory mental state can lead to fans taking authorship into their own hands and transforming the stories to better reflect their interests (Jenkins, 1992), which makes fanfiction a unique method of cultural critique (Jenkins, 2006) and an insightful topic for media studies and communication studies research.

It not only overlooks gender's fluidity but would also 'discount the fluid nature of gender as a concept, and more importantly, it would discount the real, lived experiences of many individuals' (McCullough, 2021c: 2).

Revaluations of J.K. Rowling by *Harry Potter* Fans

When *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* was released in June 1997, Scholastic bid $105,000 for the rights to publish the book series in the US (Gunelius, 2008), and cultural prominence of the series/franchise has only grown since. As of 2022, there are multiple websites, theme parks, movies, and many other creative works within the *Harry Potter* universe; according to Meyer (2016), the franchise is worth more than twenty-five billion dollars. However, as previously noted, the brand became the centre of significant controversy in 2020 following Rowling's public statements on transgender issues. When Rowling's comments were met with widespread criticism, she maintained and reiterated her position through additional public statements, a blog post outlining her views—criticised as containing misinformation—and the publication of several books under her pen name, Robert Galbraith, which have been described by various commentators as transphobic and controversial (see Breslow, 2022; Duggan, 2022; Romano, 2020; see ContraPoints, YouTube, 2021 for details).

The nature of her tweets surprised both celebrities and fans; for many, the *Harry Potter* series had come to symbolise themes of acceptance and love, and Rowling's repeated comments about transgender individuals and advocacy led to substantial backlash. Notably, Daniel Radcliffe, who played the titular character in the movies, in association with the Trevor Project, an organisation that provides services and education for and about the LGBTQ+ community, released a statement that confirmed their support of the transgender community (Trevor News, 2020). Other members of the movies' casts similarly criticised Rowling's comments and posts.

Rowling's statements have led to significant backlash from members of the LGBTQ+ community and segments of the *Harry Potter* fanbase, with many expressing strong disapproval of her views (Gulley, 2022). This has resulted in many fans recontextualising their relationships with the source material. According to Gulley (2022: 36), 'in some cases, fans even swore off a series that they've loved and identified with for most of their lives. Many found a middle ground of denouncing Rowling but holding on to their love of the series and of fandom'. In terms of the latter approach, reader-response theory, as exemplified by 'Death of the Author' (Barthes, 1977), is now often used as a framework for engaging with and reimagining the Wizarding World. 'Death of the Author' posits that the actual interpretations of a text exist somewhere between the reader and what is written and that any text can have a multitude of different but valid interpretations because 'no reading can ever exhaust the full potential [of a text], for each reader will fill in the gaps in [their] own way' (Iser, 1972: 285). According to Romano (2020: par. 24),

> by repudiating Rowling's anti-trans comments, millions of *Harry Potter* fans are also turning the series into a symbol of the power of a collective voice to drown out an individual one. The power of fans' love and empathy for trans people and other vulnerable communities, and their steady rejection of Rowling's prejudice, is a potent, raw form of cancellation.

As such, many fanfiction writers seek to reinterpret the *Harry Potter* series by creating stories that emphasise greater diversity, inclusivity, and, in some cases, added narrative complexity compared to the original texts.[2]

What is Integrative Complexity?

As a psycholinguistic variable and rhetorical construct, integrative complexity assesses information processing; it focuses on *how* information is communicated (i.e., the structure of a text) as opposed to *what* exact information is communicated (Baker-Brown et al., 1992), meaning that with few exceptions, the variable can be applied to any verbal text (Suedfeld, 2010). Integrative complexity functions as 'a unique indicator of psychological processes that are not necessarily influenced by overt factors' (McCullough and Conway, 2018a: 393; see also, Conway et al., 2014) and provides a 'window into the behind-the-scenes psychology of the human experience' (McCullough and Conway, 2018b: 519).

More specifically, integrative complexity evaluates the cognitive structure of a text, which is defined in terms of differentiation at the lower levels and integration at the higher levels.[3] According to Thoemmes and Conway (2007), low levels of the variable are marked by black-or-white thinking and an unwillingness to accept divergent opinions and uncertainty, while high levels are associated with multidimensional thinking and an acceptance of differing perspectives and uncertainty. Both various internal characteristics of the writer/speaker (e.g., fatigue, emotional arousal, etc.) and external factors of the situation (e.g., time pressure, danger, etc.) impact a text's integrative complexity levels (Suedfeld, 2010).

Integrative complexity is assessed on a scale of 1 to 7:

> 1 reflects the absence of both differentiation and integration, 3 indicates the
> presence of differentiation but the absence of integration, 5 reflects the presence
> of both differentiation and integration, and 7 indicates differentiation as well as

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[2] For example, in 2021, the TTRPG (tabletop roleplaying game) channel *Stories Told* launched The Fifth House, a *Harry Potter*-themed campaign led by trans players and people of colour, aimed at reclaiming and subverting Rowling's narrative. The campaign featured a villain echoing Rowling's controversies and raised funds for Mermaids UK, a charity supporting transgender and gender-diverse individuals (Delgreco, 2021).

[3] Differentiation, according to Gruenfeld (1995: 5), 'refers to recognition of multiple perspectives on, or dimensions of, an issue', while integration 'refers to recognition of conceptual relations among differentiated dimensions'. For example, the sentence '*We are attempting to find solutions to better the program*' lacks differentiation, as it omits specific solutions or evaluation criteria. A more differentiated version might be '*We are attempting to find solutions to better the program by consulting stakeholders and weighing costs, benefits, and challenges to select the best option*'. To achieve integration, it could be expanded further: '*We are attempting to find solutions, consulting numerous stakeholders and weighing costs, benefits, and challenges so we can select the optimal option; although, we must consider the overall value of the program to decide if its resources might be better spent elsewhere and if the obstacles that prevent the program from working are ultimately insurmountable*' (adapted from examples given in McCullough et al. [2023] and Suedfeld [2010]).

the specification of higher order integrative principles. Even numbers (i.e., 2, 4, and 6) are assigned as transitional scores when a response implies the next high level of complexity but does not explicitly meet the scoring criteria for that level. (Tadmor et al., 2012: 525)

A prominent model for understanding higher levels of integrative complexity is the value pluralism model (Tetlock, 1986):

when an individual's core beliefs or ideals come into conflict and said individual must contend with this conflict, higher levels of integrative complexity are induced. As such, the more core beliefs someone has that can come into conflict, the more likely they are to achieve higher scores on the integrative complexity scale. (McCullough, 2021a: 51)

Understanding this model is essential to complexity research that focuses on fictional characters because unlike real people, fictional characters are imaginary creations, inherently lacking 'the loves, the hates, self-doubts, recreations, yearnings and so forth that are so common to the human condition' (McCullough and Conway, 2018b: 520) unless their creator bestows the characters with them.

Because entertainment media allow people to question their values, beliefs, morals, and feelings (Dill-Shackleford et al., 2016) and because integrative complexity provides insight into the more implicit aspects of human experience that are not influenced by overt factors necessarily (Conway et al., 2014), fictional characters' complexity levels can inform our understanding of 'narratological needs and genre customs, but also [inform our understanding of] the greater cultural and societal implications of storytelling trends and individual stories' (McCullough, 2021c: 6).

Relevant Previous Integrative Complexity Research on Fanfiction

Integrative complexity has a well-documented research history in many scholarly fields, particularly political psychology.[4] Recently, it has seen greater application in the fields of communication studies[5] and media studies; in terms of the latter, integrative complexity has been utilised to study the psychological differences between fiction and reality (McCullough and Conway, 2018b), media awards (McCullough and Conway, 2018a; McCullough, 2021b), video games (McCullough, 2021c), horror films (McCullough, 2021a), and of course, fanfiction (McCullough, 2020).

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[4] For example, integrative complexity has been used to study international conflict (e.g., Conway et al., 2003), political leadership (e.g., Thoemmes and Conway, 2007), attitude formation (e.g., Tetlock, 1986), political ideology (Houck and Conway, 2019), and election outcomes (Conway et al., 2012).

[5] Demeter (2017) and Shulman (2008) are examples of integrative complexity research in the field of communication studies.

Markedly, McCullough (2020) examined popularity trends across three types of fanfiction – Anime/Manga, Live-Action TV, and Video Games – and used integrative complexity to compare the structure of the most popular pieces of fanfiction to the structure of the least popular. To our knowledge, it was the first study to apply integrative complexity to the study of fanfiction. The primary finding was a positive relationship between integrative complexity and popularity; works of fanfiction that had higher numbers of Hits and Kudos, metrics for assessing popularity, also had higher integrative complexity, meaning they demonstrated greater multidimensional thinking than less popular works.

Several potential explanations were put to explain the linguistic pattern seen in McCullough (2020); of those, the most relevant to our study of the *Harry Potter* fandom is the conclusion about the relationship between integrative complexity and criticism. As previously mentioned, fanfiction functions as a form of cultural critique (Jenkins, 2006) because fans are 'actively engaged in dealing with cognitive and affective challenges posed by media content' (Bartsch and Hartmann, 2017: 30). According to McCullough (2020: 66), 'higher levels of integrative complexity may be inherent to the execution of well-done criticism' and this conclusion is supported by other complexity studies of media (see McCullough et al. [2023] for more details). In the context of our study, not only does McCullough (2020) justify our application of integrative complexity to the study of *Harry Potter* fanfiction, but it also informs our general expectation – that *Harry Potter* fanfiction will score higher than Rowling's original books.

Harry Potter, Fanfiction, and Integrative Complexity: Expectations and Hypotheses

As stated above, our study functions under the hypothesis that *Harry Potter* fanfiction will score higher in terms of integrative complexity than Rowling's books. Any idea, opinion, perspective, etc. can potentially be expressed at any level of integrative complexity (Suedfeld, 2010); however, prior research of the entertainment industry does suggest that environments that promote inclusive thinking and diverse storytelling appear to be spaces that prioritise higher levels of integrative complexity and the multidimensional thought that comes with (see McCullough, 2020; McCullough, 2021b; and McCullough et al., 2023 for more in-depth discussions). Fanfiction in general is often considered to be incredibly inclusive and diverse as fans use fanfiction to process and combat issues related to representation in source texts and in mainstream entertainment media (McCullough, 2020).

The *Harry Potter* fanfiction community has consistently demonstrated the promotion of ideals related to inclusivity and diversity with a plethora of stories that centre and celebrate queer experiences and identities (Tosenberger, 2008; Duggan, 2022). In contrast, while Rowling maintains that her books promote acceptance, with love triumphing over hate as a central theme, several critical analyses of the texts (and their film adaptations) have highlighted elements that some scholars and commentators view as problematic or outdated. Duggan (2022), for instance, discusses how Rowling's books express many exclusionary implicit ideologies that undermine the supposed progressive explicit sentiments of the texts. While the *Harry Potter* story on the surface seemingly promotes the championing of 'the abnormal over the normal'

(Duggan, 2022: 150), they also heavily emphasis heteronormative ideals by having all the most visible and principal relationships be married, procreative couples (e.g., Harry and Ginny, Ron and Hermione, etc.). They thereby suggest 'to readers that the traditional family is the sole viable way of living, or at very least, the preferable one' (Duggan, 2022: 151). Moreover, throughout the septet, there is a strict usage of only binary gender pronouns, which strongly 'implies that only two gender identities are available to characters and, by extension, readers' (Duggan, 2022: 151), thus supporting a cisnormative view of people that disregards the lived experiences and realities of many gender-diverse individuals. This key difference – between *Harry Potter* fanfiction, which is often characterised as inclusive, diverse, and welcoming, and Rowling's books, which some scholars describe as more exclusionary and restrictive (Duggan, 2022) – likely impacts their integrative complexity levels (i.e., the rhetorical structure of their writing).

Our study does not just perform a straightforward comparison of the fanfiction and source text; we also consider variables like gender (Female vs Male)[6] and character type (Heroes vs Villains) to provide a deeper look into the psychology of representation in media, of writing stories, and of the *Harry Potter* fandom specifically. While McCullough (2020) did not explore aspects like gender and character type in its analysis, other previous works of integrative complexity research can help form expectations for our other two points of comparison.

Gender

Using integrative complexity to study gender depictions within entertainment media is a rather novel application of the variable. The findings so far indicate that the relationship between gender and complexity in pop culture is not wholly clear cut and is impacted by factors like genre (McCullough, 2021a, 2021c). Because (to our knowledge) this is the first complexity study of gender in the context of the urban fantasy genre, which *Harry Potter* classifies as, we are open to the possibility of finding a different linguistic pattern than previous research.

Character Type (Hero versus Villain)

The value pluralism model (Tetlock, 1986) illustrates the connection between conflict and higher levels of integrative complexity, and previous complexity research on fiction has posited that the characters that introduce conflict actively into a story are more likely to score high on the

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[6] As touched upon prior, gender is very fluid and dynamic in nature, meaning it is not a binary that features only male and female expressions and identities. According to McCullough (2021c: 2), 'gender exists on a vibrant, multidimensional spectrum and includes a plethora of diverse, unique, and fluid identities;' however, 'character depictions that do not conform with the male and female sections of the gender spectrum are incredibly rare – some to the point of nonexistence' within the realms of modern mainstream media. Although, there are positive indications that the amount of queer inclusivity and diversity in media are increasing (GLAAD, 2022). However, in the context of the present study, we work within the constraints of the Harry Potter books, which present a predominantly binary view of gender (Duggan, 2022), meaning our analysis compares canon and fanfiction-versions of female and male characters. In many ways, entertainment media could benefit from moving beyond cisnormative frameworks toward greater inclusion and diversity.

variable's scale (McCullough, 2021c). Villains are often the main source of conflict within a narrative because their primary goal is the disruption of the status quo (Ramaswamy, 2010), which suggests that the villains of the Wizarding World will likely demonstrate high complexity scores. Additionally, people tend to prefer simplicity over complexity (Conway et al., 2012); because heroes typically are the characters audiences are intended to prefer, we can expect that they display low integrative complexity levels. Together, these two points present a strong case for a hypothesis that the heroes of *Harry Potter* will score lower in terms of integrative complexity than their villainous counterparts.

Methods

The amount of available fanfiction continuously increases; as such, studying fanfiction requires researchers to condense the eligible amount of fanfiction into manageable and meaningful sets of data. This can be accomplished in several ways, but for the present study, we focused exclusively on Archive of Our Own. This website is popular with fanfiction writers due to its ability to host a wide variety of fanfiction, its extensive tagging system, and its commitment to not restricting content. Data collection was completed between 15 August 2022 and 3 September 2022. We sampled prominent *Harry Potter* characters based on gender (Female vs. Male) and character type (Hero vs. Villain); see Table 1 for the complete list of characters. For each character, we randomly selected twenty pieces of dialogue from the source material (Rowling's books) and twenty pieces of dialogue from the most popular works of *Harry Potter* fanfiction.

For the source material, a random number generator selected a book from the series as well as a page number. From there, we would select the first line of dialogue that came from the selected character. For some characters, such as Narcissa Malfoy, most of their dialogue did not appear until a specific book. As such, we were required to pull only from specific books for certain characters to meet the minimum dialogue requirements. Fanfiction samples were selected by utilising Archive of Our Own's filtering system within the *Harry Potter* fanfiction category. Fanfictions were then filtered by the number of Kudos on each work. Kudos are a way to determine community approval and the popularity of fanfiction, and previous research has found that works of fanfiction with higher numbers of kudos displayed more integratively complex rhetoric than those with lower numbers (McCullough, 2020); thus, we decided to focus exclusively on the most popular works of fanfiction to mitigate potential confounds.

Archive of Our Own allows users to filter content based on Kudos, character tags, and relationship tags, and exclude content. We first sorted through *Harry Potter* fanfiction using kudos and character tags to determine the most popular stories that individually featured our sampled characters. To avoid other potential confounds, we excluded the 'Alternate Universe', 'Crossover', and 'Podfic' tags to match the fanfiction to the source material as closely as possible.

Table 1: Sampled *Harry Potter* Characters by Character Type and Gender.

Character Name	Character Type (Hero vs Villain)	Gender (Female vs Male)
Harry Potter	Hero	Male
Ron Weasley	Hero	Male
Neville Longbottom	Hero	Male
Sirius Black	Hero	Male
Albus Dumbledore	Hero	Male
Hermione Granger	Hero	Female
Ginny Weasley	Hero	Female
Luna Lovegood	Hero	Female
Nymphadora Tonks	Hero	Female
Minerva McGonagall	Hero	Female
Draco Malfoy	Villain	Male
Lucius Malfoy	Villain	Male
Voldemort/Tom Riddle	Villain	Male
Peter Pettigrew	Villain	Male
Vernon Dursley	Villain	Male
Bellatrix Lestrange	Villain	Female
Dolores Umbridge	Villain	Female
Narcissa Malfoy	Villain	Female
Rita Skeeter	Villain	Female
Petunia Dursley	Villain	Female

From the top twenty-five fanfictions for each character according to the number of Kudos, we then randomly selected five works of fanfiction using the same number generator. We then randomly selected dialogue (n = 4 for each fanfiction, totaling n = 20 for the total dialogue samples for each character) from each work of fanfiction. Any works of fanfiction that did not feature enough dialogue to satisfy our methods were also excluded from the sampling pool.

Once data collection was completed, the dialogue was scored by using AutoIC – Automated Integrative Complexity. A computerised scoring system that was developed by expert complexity researchers (Conway et al., 2014; Houck et al., 2014), AutoIC functions under the same guidelines as trained human-coders (see Baker-Brown et al., 1992):

> Words/phrases are weighted according to the probability that they would indicate complexity. Some words/phrases are so frequently indicators of complexity, and have few or no low complexity uses, that even one mention of them deserves full differentiation (e.g., "on the other hand"). Some words/phrases indicate complexity, but they often also indicate something else that is not complex at all— and these words/phrases get lower scores as a result. The exact score is based on the estimated ratio of complex to noncomplex usage. (Conway et al., 2014: 614-615)

Importantly, the system demonstrates higher computer-to-human reliability scores that other available coding programs (Conway et al., 2014; Houck et al., 2014), and it has employed in previous research that examines cognitive structure in the context of pop culture (e.g., McCullough et al., 2023; McCullough, 2020, 2021a), justifying its application here.

Results

A series of ANOVAs (analysis of variance) revealed a significant main effect for our primary comparison of *Harry Potter* fanfiction to Rowling's books – $F[1, 798] = 23.80$, $p < .001$. As hypothesised, the fanfiction produced by a community that generally prioritises inclusivity exhibited higher integrative complexity scores than the original books, which were authored by an individual whose public statements have been associated with an exclusionary perspective on gender issues (Breslow, 2022; Duggan, 2022; Romano, 2020; see ContraPoints, YouTube, 2021).
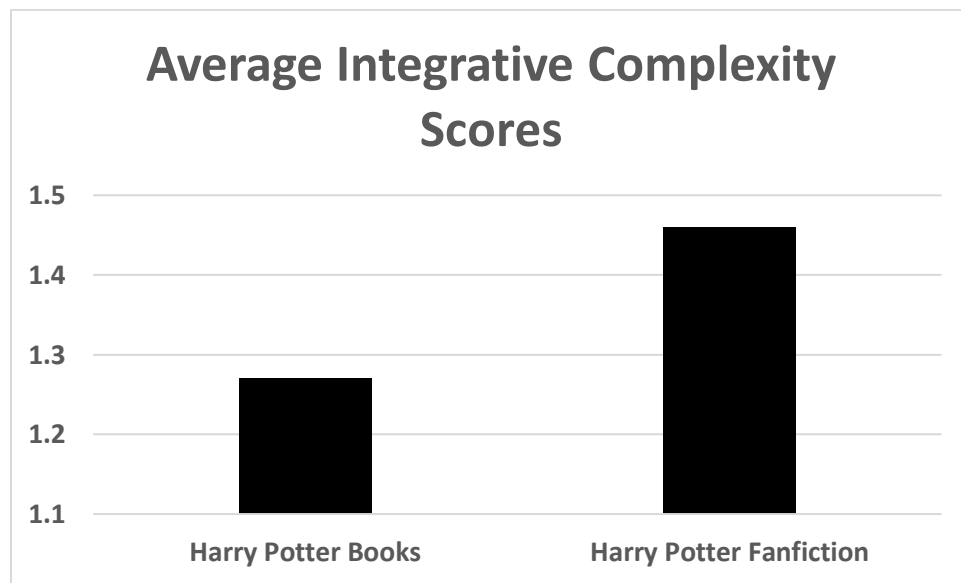

Figure 1. J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* Books versus *Harry Potter* Fanfiction Results: Source Material Integrative Complexity M = 1.27; Fanfiction Integrative Complexity M = 1.46.

The statistical analysis also revealed a significant main effect for character type that diverged from our hypotheses; across both the original books and fanfiction, the heroes in the Wizarding World scored higher than the villains – $F[1, 798] = 7.25$, $p < .007$. Furthermore, we did not find a significant main effect for gender ($p > .37$), nor did we find any significant interactions

between our three points of comparison of our independent variables (p's > .13). See Figure 1 and Table 2 for mean scores.[7]

Table 2: Source Material versus Fanfiction Mean Complexity Scores by Gender and Character Type.

Source Material versus Fanfiction	Gender	Character Type
Source Material (Rowling's Books)	Female M = 1.27	Hero M = 1.33
	Male M = 1.27	Villain M = 1.22
Harry Potter Fanfiction	Female M = 1.43	Hero M = 1.51
	Male M = 1.50	Villain M = 1.22

Discussion

For starters, our results show a significant difference between how *Harry Potter* fanfiction and Rowling's original books are written; overarchingly, the works of fanfiction display more multidimensional thinking than the books. This finding aligns with our main hypothesis for the present study and provides further support for the conclusions of McCullough (2020, 2021b) and McCullough et al. (2023). Within the context of entertainment media, spaces that promote nuance, inclusivity, and open-mindedness appear associated with higher levels of integrative complexity, while stories that implicitly or explicitly present a more exclusionary perspective are seemingly associated with lower complexity scores.

Our results also lend additional credence to the conclusion that there is a link between high integrative complexity levels and criticism. As previously mentioned, fanfiction functions as a form of cultural critique (Jenkins, 2006) because it allows 'fans to play out what they *wish* happened' (Goodman, 2015: 666), and often, this type of engagement produces texts that are more inclusive of gender, sexuality, race, and other identities (McCullough, 2020). While Rowling's books primarily focus on cis-gendered, white, and heteronormative characters (Duggan, 2022), Wizarding World fanfiction often depicts narratives around characters discovering and embracing queer identities, which requires fanfiction writers to become a more active and introspective agent of the story. It also allows these writers to explore the boundaries of the canon world, placing characters in unique situations that test the limitations of fictional and real-world societies. By extension, fanfiction also challenges the boundaries of the real-world cultures that initially produced the stories since fictional narratives are a way for individuals to test or reinforce their beliefs and worldviews (Dill-Shackleford et al., 2016). According to McCullough (2020: 67), because fan-spawned content garners little respect from those outside fandom communities, 'writers of fanfiction are not intrinsically bound by the conventions of the

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[7] The full dataset of dialogue and scores is available upon request.

mainstream. They can openly and deeply explore concepts, identities, and boundaries of the culture that are not always'.

Fanfiction allows for fans – who are often members of marginalised communities themselves and viewed as 'deviants' and/or 'outsiders' (Jenkins, 1992; Duggan, 2022) – to emphasise their own experiences by transforming preexisting works to be more supportive of their identities than the real world. Because of this, '[fanfiction can] center these disavowed bodies – bodies that are explicitly raced, queered, transed, cripped, or speculatively nonhuman – fanfiction allows fans also to recognize their own uncertain desires as well as multiple (dis)identificatory possibilities' (Munoz, 2013: 115). Where mainstream entertainment may often reflect non-diverse worlds built around exclusionary perspectives (whether intentional, unintentional, or forced), fanfiction not only becomes an active critique of the lack of representation but also a project in bringing more multidimensional, nuanced thinking to the act of worldbuilding and characterisation.[8]

Furthermore, it is important to note the potential role of target audience may play in our findings. While the series matures as it progresses, the first *Harry Potter* books are unarguably for children. The target audience of fanfiction generally speaking is a trickier demographic to pin down as it is not necessarily the same target audience as the source text (e.g., the erotica series *Fifty Shades of Gray* originating as fanfiction of *Twilight* – a young adult series. See Tosenberger [2014] for a more in-depth discussion). This changeability is often acknowledged within the interfaces of fanfiction-hosting websites with Archive of Our Own, for example, allowing authors to rate their narratives from General (stories that are appropriate for all audiences) all the way to Explicit (stories that include overt sexual content). There is the possibility that fanfiction's greater range of target audience members may play a role in our findings; however, it is noteworthy that the previous research on integrative complexity and age does not present a clear picture. Some studies have found connections between higher levels of integrative complexity and age (e.g., De Vries and Walker, 1987), and others have found the opposite (De Vries, 1988). Previous research has also indicated a more natural relationship between integrative complexity and age (McCullough, 2024).[9]

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[8] Notably, our study found no significant effect related to gender—despite the fact that, as Leetal (2022: par. 6.3) points out, fanfiction and fandom 'are inventing new ways to be nonbinary and may even be creating nonbinary genders'. Because the comparison is grounded in the *Harry Potter* books, which largely reflect a binary view of gender (Duggan, 2022), our study functions within the limitations of the source text. However, on Archive of Our Own, the *Harry Potter* fandom includes thousands of works tagged with trans, nonbinary, and genderfluid characters. Future research could focus on the translation of gender more specifically from source text to fanfiction by using integrative complexity to compare canonically cis-characters to their transgender and gender-nonconforming counterparts in fan-made works, either within this fandom or others with similar divergences between canon and fan-created content.

[9] *Harry Potter* as a series has a strong potential to explore the relationship between integrative complexity and age/target audience. Future researchers could linguistically compare the structural nuance of the writing across the series, exploring if there are marked increases or decreases in the complexity levels as the books become darker and mature as they progress towards and conclude in Book 7, *The Deathly Hallows*. Similarly, fanfiction as a medium could be used more explicitly to study the integrative complexity-age relationship by comparing works across Archive of Our Own's rating range.

Finally, our analysis also found a significant main effect for character type with heroes scoring higher in terms of integrative complexity than the villains across both the source books and fanfiction. A possible explanation for this linguistic trend may be rooted in the different levels of agency characters are allotted in the story; according to McCullough (2021c), characters with higher levels of agency within a plot – the characters that are more proactive in their decisions – appear to be those with higher integrative complexity levels. Furthermore, the difference may be rooted in plot prominence – how often characters actually appear in the narrative. For example, McCullough (2021d) analysed the structural differences in how superheroes and villains in the Marvel Cinematic Universe were written and found the characters with markedly more screentime (the superheroes) scored higher in terms of integrative complexity. These conclusions in the context of the present study suggest in both the original *Harry Potter* books and the franchise's subsequent fanfiction the heroes are more active and more centrally focused than their villainous counterparts.[10]

(Other) Directions for Future Research

The present study provides a strong foundation for future scholarship to build upon. For starters, alongside McCullough (2020), our results further support the applicability of integrative complexity to the analysis of fanfiction, which are excellent means through which to study human experience and the storytelling tradition (McCullough, 2023).[11] Of course, it also functions as a basis for additional research into the impact of critical fan-creator interactions on the creation and consumption of pop culture.

Likewise, our results raise questions about linguistic structure in the translations adaptations of stories; here, we saw an increase in integrative complexity as the *Harry Potter* story transitioned between the source text and fanfiction. Would we see similar or different

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[10] A limitation of the 'hero versus villain' condition is that characters often undergo role-swapping or moral reinterpretation in fanfiction (e.g., redeemed versions of Voldemort or Draco Malfoy, or 'Dark Harry' stories where the Golden Trio are villains). For this exploratory study, we classified characters based on their roles in the original books, not in individual fanfics, as the application of integrative complexity in the study of fanfiction remains fairly novel. It is possible that some differences in complexity scores may stem from these role shifts rather than hero/villain status itself – of course, more research is required to confirm. As McCullough and Conway (2018a: 397) note, 'All research must begin somewhere', and this study offers a strong foundation. Similar to the way future research could expand on this study by performing more targeted examinations of the roles target audience and gender play in the psychological and communicative process that underpin the act of writing fanfiction (discussed in Footnotes 9 and 8), future research could build on this by comparing fanfiction that portrays characters in both heroic and villainous roles—such as 'Dark Harry' versus fanfiction that has Harry remain a hero—or by exploring role-swapping across other fandoms.

[11] Future research could also build on this study by adopting a mixed methods approach. While this project highlights the value of quantitative, computational analysis in fandom studies (once again), we (the authors) do not discount the insights gained from previous inquiries that employ qualitative methods. Combining integrative complexity with approaches like close reading or discourse analysis could offer deeper understanding of fanfiction's narrative structures and the cognitive processes behind its creation.

linguistic patterns when a story is rebooted (e.g., shows like *DuckTales, Boy Meets World, iCarly,* etc.) or when a story is adapted from one medium to another (e.g., JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* books versus Peter Jackson's films)? Is the act of reworking a story alone enough to bring about higher levels of integrative complexity? More research is needed to draw definitive conclusions.

Moreover, the present study justifies integrative complexity research into the psychology of children's fiction and their associated fandoms. Would we witness similar linguistic patterns in an analysis of Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*? What about Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and The Olympians*? How about older series like Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House of the Prairie* and Carolyn Keene's *Nancy Drew Mystery Stories*? These examples (and many others) all represent possible opportunities for future complexity research to explore.

Concluding Thoughts: The Death of the Author and Blurring Canon

As previously stated, 'Death of the Author' argues that the interpretations of any text/story lay somewhere between what is written/communicated and what the reader brings to the narrative (Barthes, 1977; Iser, 1972). In many ways, once a story goes beyond a creator's head – once it is shared – it is no longer their story solely; it is the community's story. Yet, in the case of *Harry Potter*, there is evidence of Rowling seeking to reassert control over fan interpretations in an effort to reinforce her authorial intent: 'Rowling's actions attempt to disallow the reader's interpretative space by continually reaffirming hers as the legitimate authorial voice of meaning-making' (McLeod and Holland, 2016: 5).

Rowling uses the internet to assert her authority with social media being the primary platform where she shares both her views on gender identity/expression and retroactive additions or revisions to the lore and logic of the Wizarding World – additions that are often met with mixed reactions from fans. However, digital spaces also serve as platforms where readers assert their own interpretive authority and challenge dominant narratives; currently, there are over 400,000 individual works of *Harry Potter* fanfiction on Archive of Our Own alone.

According to Romano (2020: par. 10), many individuals 'have spent years if not decades calling out the *Harry Potter* books for their shortcomings, and often actively transforming the world of *Harry Potter* into something better through fandom and its many offshoots'. While it is too early to determine whether this wave of fan reclamation – marked by fan-driven celebrations of LGBTQ+ identities within the Wizarding World – will ultimately overshadow Rowling's views, the *Harry Potter* fandom's use of fanfiction as a means of responding to the author's stance on transgender issues represents a notable moment in the history of storytelling. It illustrates how digital spaces can foster the creation of 'community-based, crowd-sourced, ever-evolving canons' (McCullough, 2022: 241). Moreover, 'it appears […] that the more technology surrounding the storytelling tradition advances, the greater the push is for a return to its decentralized roots' (McCullough, 2022: 241).

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