



“It just gives people hope”: A qualitative inquiry into the lived experience of the Harry Potter world in mental health recovery

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ABSTRACT

The *Harry Potter* universe is both widely accessible and incredibly popular, and this feature combined with its depth of narrative and genre may make it uniquely suitable to supporting mental health recovery. The current study aims to address a gap in the literature around how engagement with the *Harry Potter* universe, in the tradition of unguided creative bibliotherapy, may allow people to derive psychologically-relevant meanings from these narratives as part of their mental health recovery journey. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six individuals who identified as *Harry Potter* fans, had experienced mental health challenges, and were in recovery. Interviews were transcribed and analysed inductively to identify themes. Three superordinate themes were established that captured participants' experiences of using *Harry Potter* along their mental health recovery journey: Early Engagement, Immersive World, and Connection. Although participants employed *Harry Potter* in creative and individual ways, best suited to their lived experience of mental health recovery, the superordinate themes pointed to several commonalities in how these fans used the series, and these reflected contemporary models of mental health recovery.

Introduction

Translated into 80 languages and encompassing novels, films, games, adventure parks, merchandise, theatre productions and fan participation activities like quidditch competitions and fanfiction, J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series has been phenomenally successful. This success would not be possible if readers did not feel a strong connection with the world, the story and characters. Connecting deeply with stories can be a therapeutic intervention, known as creative bibliotherapy (Heath et al., 2005). Reading fiction that emotionally transports us into a story is pleasurable and rewarding, and certain fictional stories appear to provide an opportunity to engage safely with our emotional difficulties while the characters we connect with engage with their own (Oatley, 1995). Due to the way that our brains process and comprehend narratives, it is proposed that fiction improves our ability to understand other people's perspectives (Altmann et al., 2014), and in sharing the experience with others in the real world, it allows us to form connections and community, the building blocks of mental health recovery (Leamy et al., 2011). The research on this topic remains nascent, and the present study used a qualitative methodology to explore the role that engagement with the *Harry Potter* universe played in mental health recovery outside of

therapeutic settings from the perspective of six fans who were in recovery from mental illness.

Mental health recovery

Broadly, recovery from mental health difficulties refers to “being able to create and live a meaningful and contributing life in a community of choice with or without the presence of mental health issues” (Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 2013, p.2). Leamy et al. (2011) developed a model that provides a clear framework to guide recovery-oriented services and clinical practice, and as such is frequently used (Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council, 2013). The model characterises recovery as an active, iterative, and individual process, with five central categories: connectedness - with peers, the community, and support groups; hope and optimism about the future and the possibility of recovery; identity, including rebuilding or redefining a positive sense of identity; meaning and quality in life; and empowerment, encompassing personal responsibility and control over one's own life (CHIME) (Leamy et al., 2011). This model has been utilised frequently in mental health research (e.g., Honey et al., 2020; Wallström et al., 2020). Although many strategies have been used to

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support mental health recovery (for example, traditional forms of therapy and psychopharmacology), one currently under-explored strategy that warrants further research is bibliotherapy.

Bibliotherapy and mental health recovery

Bibliotherapy is various forms of content, often prescribed by a mental health professional, followed by discussion in order to promote reflection, healing, and change (McCulliss, 2012). Bibliotherapy also encompasses the use of fiction as a catalyst for mental health recovery, known as creative bibliotherapy (Heath et al., 2005). Reading and engaging with fictional stories in therapeutic contexts is intended to be a dynamic, interactive process, prompting real emotional responses (Eğeci & Gençöz, 2017). Through poems, short stories, novels, and audio-visual media, creative bibliotherapy can be used as a mechanism through which clients make meaning from life experiences, draw upon fictional characters to expand their own worldview and assimilate new knowledge (Ellis et al., 2019). Unguided bibliotherapy, with minimal or no professional involvement, has been flagged as a cost-effective and pragmatic intervention (Wang et al., 2020), and there continues to be research demonstrating the therapeutic power of fiction outside of structured clinical contexts, where engaging with stories seems to result in almost incidental improvements in psychological wellbeing (Holman et al., 2019; Levitt et al., 2009; Pettersson, 2018; Troscianko, 2018). Despite the multiplicity of form, structure and medium, the common thread of creative bibliotherapy (unguided or otherwise) is that the reader experiences a type of growth, insight or recovery as a result of engaging with that story (Canty, 2017).

Creative bibliotherapy has been utilised in fields such as clinical psychology, social work, and community mental health services to improve therapeutic outcomes for children and adults facing mental health challenges (Glavin & Montgomery, 2017). This therapy has been shown to reduce children's internalising and externalising behaviour (Montgomery & Maunders, 2015), improve their social and emotional skills (Heath et al., 2017; Suvilehto et al., 2019), and increase resilience and perceptions of personal and community resources (Theron et al., 2017). For both adults and children, creative bibliotherapy has been shown to reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Glavin & Montgomery, 2017; Vries et al., 2017), and has been found to be an effective, recovery-oriented style of therapy for adults with chronic pain (Billington et al., 2016, 2017).

Creative bibliotherapy-based programs including community reading groups are particularly widespread in the United Kingdom as important low-cost mental health services for vulnerable populations, including female prisoners (McNay et al., 2019) and older adults (Malyn et al., 2020). There has also been research interest in the use of the therapy for a range of conditions, such as addiction (Rus-Makovec et al., 2015), depression (Billington et al., 2010), and eating disorders (Troscianko, 2018). Yet, despite the burgeoning popularity of this approach to therapy, the process by which bibliotherapy elicits therapeutic change remains unclear.

Mechanisms of change

The exact mechanisms through which reading fiction may exert its influence are unknown. Empirical research has shown that fiction is processed differently from non-fiction (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013), with a respective difference in brain activation (Hsu et al., 2015). In a review of the literature, Oatley (2016) postulated that fiction is a vehicle through which people can improve their understanding of others and themselves, and that this stimulates change and growth. We are immersed in stories from birth, and narratives are far more than mere entertainment; they contain real social-cognitive heuristic value (Krueger, 2013). Neural mechanisms suggested as responsible for the therapeutic effect of creative bibliotherapy include stimulation of areas of the brain responsible for theory of mind (ToM), perspective-taking, and affective empathy

that are activated during story comprehension (e.g., Altmann et al., 2014; Breithaupt, 2015; Hsu et al., 2015; Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar et al., 2009; Mar, 2011; Panero et al., 2016; Tamir et al., 2016; Zunshine, 2006), with readers inferring the mental states of fictional characters as they do with people (Mar, 2011), and engaging moral and ethical inferences (Hakemulder, 2000). An example here is the phenomenon of the 'implicated reader', who actively involves themselves in the narrative through their empathic response to fictional characters' suffering (Breithaupt, 2015). Neural imaging studies have further indicated that the emotional response to reading is mediated through the reward system in the brain (Jacobs, 2015; Kringelbach et al., 2008). Reading fiction appears to bring pleasure, along with change. The complex role of fiction in this process is still being debated, and other theories propose different mechanisms of change, such as transportation theory, which suggests that fiction engages our emotions, our empathy, and our pleasure at a safe distance. When readers are provided with literature that incites high emotional transportation into the story, self-reported empathic skills improved significantly compared to fiction that resulted in low emotional transportation (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013).

The processes at work in creative bibliotherapy have also been compared with common psychological therapies, and potential mechanisms of change may lie in this direction. As cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) brings about enduring emotional and behavioural change by modifying an individual's thoughts and beliefs (Beck & Beck, 1995, p. 2), so too may the therapeutic benefit of creative bibliotherapy be due to being prompted to discover and rediscover different ways of thinking and feeling, creating new insights and shaping old ones for new contexts (Billington & Robinson, 2014). Further, Oatley (1995) suggests that when certain powerful events in stories remind us of our own experiences, they do so at a certain remove. This distance may allow what could have been an overwhelming experience to be "recognised, experienced, assimilated" (p. 63). Similarly, in investigating the impact of creative bibliotherapy in community mental health settings Robinson et al. (2019), found that reading fiction provided participants with an opportunity to relate to themselves and others differently. The text was described as an "intermediary object" between the reader and their experiences and emotions, and attunement to self and others grew as they attuned to the novel (Robinson et al., 2019, p. 169). Taken together, these studies suggest that connection, empathy, and emotional transportation are critical mechanisms through which bibliotherapy elicits change.

The role of connection

A recurring theme within the literature on creative bibliotherapy is connection being a potentially central mechanism of change. This includes both connection within the story and through the story. In this process, the reader for which the narrative has prompted real emotional responses may adopt the goals of the protagonist, creating a mental model of the fictional world and integrating the disparate elements on the page to create the characters and the world they inhabit (Oatley, 1995). The neurological and psychological research reviewed in the previous section supports the theory that creative bibliotherapy may promote mental health recovery through the person's identification and connection with characters in the story, both a process of self-recognition and a sense of universality (Rus-Makovec et al., 2015). This potentially important role of identification with fictional characters in the safe venue of the fictional world, and the sense of hopefulness and comfort this provides, has been supported by the results of several studies (e.g., Cohen, 1994; Levitt et al., 2009; Swaton & O'Callaghan, 1999). Recognition of self in fictional characters has been suggested to be a key mechanism underlying this process (Cohen, 1994).

The connectedness element of mental health recovery may not just be met by our ability to relate to story protagonists. Engaging with fiction in community with others may offer a unique platform for mental health recovery, with individuals benefiting both from connecting and

identifying emotionally with fellow readers as well. Interpersonality may then function as a crucial precipitant of reading-mediated benefits and may be achieved on both of these levels (within and through story) (Troscianko, 2018). The power of fiction does not just lie in the enriching simulation of social experience then but extends to our actual social world (Farrington et al., 2019; Mar et al., 2009).

The Psychology of the Harry Potter World

The success and broad appeal of the *Harry Potter* novels, written by J. K. Rowling (1997), has inspired considerable analysis and research across many disciplines, including psychology. According to Thunissen (2010), the novels essentially deal with the material of psychotherapy that is crucial to human growth and development, interwoven in a compelling fairy tale. The novels, while firmly rooted in the fantasy tradition, encompass many genres at different points, and delve into numerous social and psychological issues, including conflict, trauma, and identity (Vezzali et al., 2015). Rustin and Rustin (2005) also consider the novels to be brimming with psychologically rich material, as Harry Potter faces universal human anxieties such as death and abandonment, and fulfils his dream to find his “true” place in the world. Rosegrant posits that the devotion the series commands in fans can only have resulted from the way it broaches deep psychological issues (2009). The monumental success of the *Harry Potter* novels demonstrates that readers from vastly different cultural backgrounds have felt a strong, positive parasocial relationship with the protagonist, which may have grown with each novel and additional media entry point to this fictional world (Schmid & Klimmt, 2011). The series is exceptionally accessible in this regard; beyond the original seven novels, fans can interact with this fictional world through multiple films, games, applications, interactive websites, theatre productions, college quidditch matches, and many other media.

The *Harry Potter* series has regularly been promoted as a potential tool for mental health recovery itself. Quantitative and qualitative research has been undertaken around the *Harry Potter* novels to investigate various elements of the text as well as to understand its success and its interaction with many different psychological variables. The series has been investigated for its depiction of resilience, attachment styles, self-harm, and childhood development (Mulholland, 2009), and explored as a potential tool to help children and adolescents cope with grief (Markell & Markell, 2013) or generate therapeutic healing in the context of narrative therapy (Oldford, 2011). Katz (2003) has considered how the Dementors might be utilised to describe and understand inherited trauma, and Frank and McBee (2003) proposed that the first book in the series could be used as a starting point to discussions of identity development in gifted adolescents, in the tradition of Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development. Rosegrant (2009) adds to this, describing how the latter books depict the essential developmental issues specific to later adolescence, and do so in a way that is unique in its depth, detail and complexity. The main child protagonists have been explored as potential resiliency role models in the manner that they positively cope with trauma, loss and dysfunctional family systems (Panos, 2009). On the other side of the therapy room, Gibson (2007), used the first *Harry Potter* novel to promote the ability to empathise in counselling students, and found that the use of the narrative in this way increased counsellor self-awareness and understanding of counselling concepts. Its genre alone may foster its therapeutic use, as Hsu et al. (2015) found through fMRI neurological research, where participants presented with passages from *Harry Potter* novels experienced increased activation in the amygdala and increased feelings of pleasure compared to reading passages from other genres. Given the richness of the material and the ease with which readers appear to relate to the protagonist, it is not surprising that the series has been identified by mental health clinicians as a recurring source of unprompted insightful discussions occurring in the therapy context, and as such, a potential source of creative bibliotherapy for individuals recovering from mental health

challenges (Noctor, 2006). For example, through clinical work with children, McNulty (2008) utilises *Harry Potter* themes and metaphors as a therapeutic vehicle for helping children cope with loss, as well as other issues, again with a focus on building resilience. Research, however, has yet to examine the use of the *Harry Potter* series specifically for the purpose of mental health recovery, especially among those who have grown up with the series and who may have experienced mental health challenges alongside their engagement with the text.

The present research and research question

Mental health recovery can be understood as a positive, strengths-based and personalised way of responding to mental health challenges. The use of creative bibliotherapy to that end has been explored in a number of studies. Creative bibliotherapy exists in many different forms, in many different settings, and is delivered for many different purposes. The evidence so far appears to suggest that creative bibliotherapy may offer a number of the essential ingredients of mental health recovery, such as providing connection, opportunities for empathic response, and hope. However, despite the long-standing status of bibliotherapy as a means of negotiating mental health challenges, research on bibliotherapy remains limited. Indeed, there does not appear to be a standardised or commonly accepted approach to creative bibliotherapy, or a clear understanding of the mechanisms through which it affects change. It seems that creative bibliotherapy is far more practised than it is researched (Troscianko, 2018). Furthermore, the use of the *Harry Potter* novels as bibliotherapy is poorly understood, particularly from the perspective of those who have a strong engagement with the series, and their use in supporting mental health recovery has to date only been cited as a potential therapeutic resource.

Given these gaps in the extant literature, the present research aims to explore the role that engagement with the *Harry Potter* universe may play in recovery from mental health difficulties outside of therapeutic settings from the perspective of six fans who are in recovery from mental health challenges. Reflecting what is known in the literature about the multiple media through which creative bibliotherapy may be undertaken, engagement with the *Harry Potter* universe will be defined as any method through which individuals engage with the *Harry Potter* stories and concepts (e.g., reading the *Harry Potter* books, listening to the *Harry Potter* audiobooks, using the *Pottermore* website, utilising *Harry Potter* themed Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) tracks etc.). The research aims to address a gap in the literature around how engagement with the *Harry Potter* universe, in the tradition of unguided creative bibliotherapy, allows people to derive psychologically-relevant meanings from these narratives as part of their mental health recovery journey. The research addresses two questions: first, how do six fans in recovery from mental health challenges use *Harry Potter* narratives in their mental health recovery journey; and second, what elements do these fans identify as useful about the *Harry Potter* narratives for their recovery journey?

Methods

Research methodology

Despite creative bibliotherapy's long history, relatively little research has been conducted investigating the method. Given this paucity of prior research, a qualitative framework was chosen to explore the psychologically-relevant meanings that fans draw from the *Harry Potter* world as part of their mental health recovery journey, as it is an appropriate framework to guide research when little is known about a phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In preparation for the current research, a critical realist ontological perspective was adopted, which acknowledges the ways in which individuals make meaning of their experiences, and how the wider social context impinges on those meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In line with this, the researchers

employed a thematic analysis methodology to undertake analysis of the participants' transcripts. This methodology permitted the researchers to take an appropriately inductive approach to coding the data and developing themes without trying to fit the data into a pre-existing coding frame or theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and was therefore able to accommodate the exploratory nature of the investigation.

Participants

The student researcher interviewed six women, ranging from 19 to 34 years, ($M = 26$ years, $SD = 5.25$). Participants needed to be 18 years and older, have sufficient English language skills to participate in the interview without an interpreter, consider themselves fans of the *Harry Potter* universe, (regardless of the form that took), and consider themselves as in recovery from mental health challenges. Key participant characteristics are provided in Table 1.

Materials and procedure

Materials

A semi-structured interview protocol of six open-ended questions was developed to explore the participants' experiences of engaging with the *Harry Potter* universe and recovery from mental health challenges (see Table 2). No pre-existing framework was utilised to develop the interview protocol.

Procedure

Ethics approval was received by the university ethics committee (Code: 567280220). The student researcher posted the flyer for the study on several *Harry Potter* related Australian Facebook groups, inviting interested people to contact via email. Compensation was not offered to participants, and all were personally unknown to the researchers. After providing written informed consent, participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire. The interviews were conducted over video conferencing software (range 45 min to 1 h and 45 min). Each interview was audio recorded with participants' consent. Following the interview, participants were sent a debriefing sheet with a list of local support services. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and sent to participants for member-checking, with two weeks allowed for a response.

Table 1
Participant Demographics.

| Pseudonym | Age first engaged | Methods of engagement | Mental health difficulties | Length of recovery period |
|-----------|-------------------|--|--|---------------------------|
| Jo | 6 years | Books, games, movies, websites | Anxiety and PTSD | 4 years |
| Elizabeth | 10 years | Books, games, movies, websites, fan fiction | Anxiety, depression and PTSD | 6 years |
| Nancy | 11 years | Books, audiobooks, podcasts, ASMR, games, movies, websites, fan fiction | Anxiety, recurrent depression and low self-esteem, anger issues. | Less than 12 months |
| Catherine | 6 years | Books, audiobooks, movies | Anxiety and depression | 6–7 years |
| Matilda | 6 years | Books, podcasts, movies, websites, | Anxiety, depression, PTSD, Anorexia, OCD tendencies | 12 months |
| Hester | 14 years | Books, audiobooks, podcasts, games, movies, websites, collecting merchandise | ADHD and anxiety | 12 months |

Table 2
Interview Protocol.

| Number | Question |
|--------|--|
| 1. | Tell me about when you started getting into <i>Harry Potter</i> , and your experiences with the universe. |
| 2. | Can you please tell me about the different methods you have used to engage with the <i>Harry Potter</i> universe? |
| 3. | Do you identify with any of the <i>Harry Potter</i> characters? If yes, which ones and why? |
| 4. | Tell me about the role that <i>Harry Potter</i> either played or did not play in your mental health recovery. |
| 5. | (If the participant believes that <i>Harry Potter</i> has played a role in their recovery): What is it about the <i>Harry Potter</i> narratives which make them relevant to mental health recovery? How are they helpful for people on a recovery journey? |
| 6. | Is there anything you think I should know that we have not covered yet? |

Analytic strategy

The thematic analysis framework for psychological research outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyse participants' de-identified verbatim transcripts. The five iterative phases of thematic analysis were utilised: familiarisation with the data, systematically generating initial codes, comparing codes and reaching group consensus on the coding, and collating codes and data into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, each of the three researchers independently engaged in repeated reading of the transcripts, noting similarities and contradictions in the data set. These initial notes became the codes. Initial codes were then compared and triangulated across the researchers. The student researcher then clustered codes that referenced similar ideas and these clusters became the themes. The themes were then named and data excerpts that best represented each theme were chosen by the student researcher in conversation with her supervisors. Finally, the student researcher refined the themes to enable her to identify super-ordinate ideas in the data. These became the superordinate themes.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba's (1986) recommendations were used to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the research (Schwandt, 2007). Credibility was demonstrated through the use of data triangulation (checking the initial codes and extracts identified with the research supervisors, ensuring all perspectives were represented in the final analysis) and member checking (where each participant checked their verbatim transcript). Additionally, the final thematic map was sent to each participant, in order to allow them to assess whether the themes effectively captured their experiences. Three of the six participants responded and confirmed that the thematic map accurately reflected their experiences. Throughout all phases of the research, the researchers conducted memo-writing, noting theoretical assumptions and biases that arose, as well as to systematically document procedure. Both the student researcher and research supervisors have been engaged with the *Harry Potter* universe for many years, and likely held some preconceptions about how these narratives may influence mental health recovery, and the process of reflexivity enabled a bracketing of these preconceptions. To enable assessment of the dependability and confirmability of the research findings, analysis is grounded in quotations drawn directly from each participant, and verbatim data is available by request from the student researcher. These strategies are intended to increase the transferability of the research, the phenomenon wherein readers feel as through the research "story" overlaps with their own experiences, so that they may intuitively transfer the research to their own action (Tracy, 2010).

Results

The researchers identified three superordinate themes, Early Engagement, Immersive World, and Connection, with three to four subthemes falling under each theme that described the relationship between these participants' mental health recovery and their engagement with the *Harry Potter* narratives (see Table 3).

Early engagement

The first superordinate theme, Early Engagement, developed through participants' descriptions of their first memories of engaging with the *Harry Potter* series. For each participant, this occurred in childhood and involved closely following the novel and film release schedule, where participants effectively grew up alongside the protagonist, Harry Potter. The participants recounted vivid, positive memories of their early experiences with the universe, and how reading and re-reading the series permitted a return to a sanctuary of safe and happy early memories.

Growing with Harry

All participants described being of a similar age to Harry Potter and his friends as they read the books, growing as he grew, building momentum with each successive release, and the strength of the connection with the characters and story due to this sense of shared or related experience. For example, as Elizabeth describes: "[...] the first time I was reading them, I felt as young as - like I was Harry." A core component of this appeared to be the increasing depth and complexity of the novels as the series continued, matching participants' own developmental literacy and understanding. For example, Jo stated:

[...] it was released every year that I was growing older. So every year that Harry grew older, I grew older as well, and he was the same age as me basically, so it was a story that grew in the way that I grew, so it was exciting to see, like, the challenges he was up against, and it was a lot more relatable.

Comfort

Early engagement with the series was an overwhelmingly positive experience for the participants, and each participant spoke about the sense of comfort they felt when they engaged with the series as adults, a sense of returning to something safe and positive from childhood. For example, Nancy said: this to the fact that the series has been a companion of sorts since childhood: "[...] it was very much a... I think very much a comfort thing for me, you know, to go back read the books that I've always, always read and always loved, and they've always been part of my life."

Matilda described employing the series and the sense of comfort

Table 3
Final Themes.

| Superordinate Theme | Subthemes |
|---------------------|--|
| Early Engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing with Harry • Comfort • Hope • Re-reading |
| Immersive World | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice in medium • Made manifest • In Harry's head • Characters |
| Connection | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identification - Modelling - Complexity • Storylines & themes • Fans |

specifically to support her mental health recovery:

I've had a couple of inpatient treatments with my eating disorder. I'd always take my *Harry Potter* books. And I'd like, always read them when I was in hospital, because it was kind of like, comforting I guess, in that way [...] I think because ... It's kind of - just because it's something that I've loved for so long. So ...and it's like, familiar.

Hope

All participants similarly described feeling imbued with a sense of hope when they engaged with the series, and attributed this to closely following the characters from a young age as they faced and overcame increasingly complex obstacles, growing and learning from their challenges. For example, Hester acknowledged the developing complexity of the series as it was released, with characters experiencing more challenging situations and overcoming them, and for her that gave her a sense of hope grounded in reality:

I think that also helps, to see those characters go from, going through things that are quite simple and you know a little bit of drama, and it gets increasingly more difficult and more dramatic and bad things happen, and people are lost or, or relationships break down, but at the end even though some of those things are not repaired, everyone is going to be okay [...] It just gives people hope, in a realistic way.

The concept of hope also included this notion of normalising struggling to overcome challenges in our lives. For example, Elizabeth stated that "seeing them go through terrible things, but like still, like struggle, and still like not be totally okay like outside of it, like once it's over, but it just really normalized that for me?"

Re-reading

Finally, participants reported reading and re-reading the seven novels multiple times, and how their increasing familiarity with the material engenders deeper engagement and connection. As Nancy said: "I couldn't even tell you how many times. I've read them all a lot of times." Their familiarity with the stories does not diminish their enjoyment in each successive re-read, rather the participants reported that the complexity and richness of the material maintains their enjoyment. While the story remains the same, participants noticed that their own growth between each re-read, which allows them to engage slightly different with the plots, themes and characters. Elizabeth described this:

[...] because I like, reread them, having such a different take on them the second and third time round versus the first, because I feel like maybe the first time I was reading them I didn't pick up on the, like deeper themes, and maybe I didn't like relate to it as much at first as when I was older ...

Immersive world

The second superordinate theme is Immersive World. This theme emerged through participants' reflections on the immersive nature and richness of the novels themselves, as told through Harry Potter's point of view, as well as the accessibility, prevalence and freedom of choice in how they engage with the universe. The *Harry Potter* series is unique in that while presenting a story of magic, the worldbuilding remains very familiar. This, in conjunction with the availability of merchandise, ancillary websites that can sort fans into Hogwarts houses, and amusement parks designed as locations from the series, adds to the manifestation of Harry Potter's world.

Choice in medium

All participants spoke about the wide and varied *Harry Potter* universe that encouraged re-reading and theorising and discussion, from the seven novels to the films, games, spinoff series, websites and theatre

productions. The *Harry Potter* series is unique in its incredible accessibility, where there is seemingly a choice of medium to suit every context, fan, or mood. Each participant had moved beyond the novels and explored multiple other mediums of engaging with the universe. For example, Nancy described writing and reading fanfiction, and how that had deepened her connection with the series: “I suppose part of it is continuing the universe for me. You know, the books are - I can read the books 10 times but at the end of the day the story still finishes where it finishes.” For some participants there was a convenience in this wide accessibility, where they could choose to engage specifically with the medium that best met their immediate needs, as Elizabeth stated: “But yeah, I think I kind of just went to whatever kind of like suited my needs at the time”. Additional elements to read and interact with also appeared to contribute to participants’ deep engagement with the series, as Matilda stated when discussing the official *Harry Potter* website and the ancillary information about the world available there: “But I kind of liked the additions, and it was just like more to read and more to discover, I guess.”

Made manifest

The availability of activities, locations and merchandise appears to permit fans to truly embed themselves in the *Harry Potter* universe contributed to participants’ experience of both immersion into *Harry Potter*’s world, and the manifestation of his world in ours. Hester described this as part of the reason for her strong connection with the series:

[...] I think of the merch and the things that you can buy for *Harry Potter* fans, and they’re just so real? So, it just really brings magic into reality. [...] I can buy a wand that looks so real. And I can buy books that look so real, like from the series or I can you know, you can create crafts that look real...

Similarly, several participants discussed how they have the option to physically enter *Harry*’s world through visiting various theme parks or film sets. For example, Hester stated:

[...] there’s *Harry Potter* World and you can literally go there and feel like you’re in it and it’s not just like going to the set of *Friends* or something like that where you can feel like you’re in it, but it’s no different to being in your own local coffee shop. You can feel like you’re in it and it’s another world.

For several participants, the seeming manifestation of *Harry*’s world is bolstered by the many similarities between his world and our own. As Catherine explained, “So it’s almost like it could, it could be like a spin-off of like this world, because you like share these like historical things.”

In Harry’s head

A core element of participants’ immersion was being situated in *Harry Potter*’s point of view throughout the original novels, and being able to share his experiences, thoughts and feelings. Being in *Harry*’s head as he faces challenges and builds relationships was discussed by all participants as an element that contributed to their absorption into and overall enjoyment of the story for varying reasons. Jo described being in *Harry*’s head as a form of escapism: “But I suppose through the books, it’s also really good because you can just ... see a whole new world afresh from his perspective. And that’s a pretty exciting point, even if I have reread it and I know the outcome.” Elizabeth also had this experience of entering a new world with *Harry*: “But I think also because like, *Harry* is so new to that entire environment, when you’re reading it you feel like you’re with *Harry*.” For other participants, being in *Harry*’s head over the course of the plot met a social need. Catherine described this process:

I think it’s like, I guess because the character becomes, it’s like he’s like a real person, you’re so like familiar with like his whole life and like all of his like thought processes and stuff. I feel like it kind of

makes getting through some shitty things easier because it’s like, it’s not just like a chatting with a friend and they’re saying I’ve had this experience too, it’s like seeing how it plays out in someone’s mind which, um is really cool.

Jo also discussed how being so intimately in *Harry*’s head as he faces challenges helps her feel like she is coping:

But it gets a bit heavy sometimes, the things that he thinks and things like that? Um because sort of brings me back to my own childhood a little bit? So I guess like if I really want to be like, okay well, let’s cope with something, let’s go back to something that helped me cope as a young kid, I can do that.

Connection

The final superordinate theme identified, Connection, represents the connections participants described with other fans, with the narrative itself, and with the characters. An important aspect of this theme is the intimate and empathetic connections participants felt with the characters beyond *Harry Potter* himself, how they related to the characters, appreciated their depth and complexity, and learned from their mistakes.

Characters

Participants’ discussions of the characters in *Harry Potter* were especially rich, and thus this subtheme has its own three subthemes: Identification, Modelling and Complexity.

Identification. Each participant spoke about identifying with various characters in the *Harry Potter* world, often beyond the protagonist himself, as Hester described: “But it was actually not until the Cursed Child and I read that, that I really said actually, Ginny is me. It’s Ginny I identify with.” Connecting thoroughly with the characters and being able to see themselves in their actions and traits was a rewarding experience for participants, and one that met a real-life social need. Matilda described this:

I think it just makes me want to engage more, because it is available and it kind of makes me feel like, hmm, maybe I’m not alone. Maybe there’s other people like me and like, yeah. And like, I think particularly for like, with Hermione... I read a lot. I’ve read a lot of books, but I’ve never like, related as much to another character before?

Modelling. Related to this experience of identifying intensely with the characters in the *Harry Potter* series, participants described how closely following their experiences taught them valuable life lessons. Part of this involved seeing characters struggling, making participants’ own struggles acceptable, as Elizabeth explained:

They just normalise it and they... it makes me feel better and like knowing, because even if you don’t necessarily see it in the people around you, you know that like, okay, this is normal even though it’s in a fictional setting and it’s not real.

Catherine further described how young readers go through *Harry*’s challenges alongside him, learning as he does:

But I feel like just being able to like see *Harry* like, deal with like all these like difficult situations [...] um it was like a little blueprint and like just something that I ... Yeah could expose like my really like young like developing mind to before I even had to, it’s like a practice run of like the situations that you have to do with in real life.

Complexity. Every participant spoke about the dialectical complexity of

the characters in the *Harry Potter* series, with no character solely good or evil. The humanity of each main character resonated deeply with participants, as Hester explained: “because they’re whole characters, and it’s not just physical traits, you know.” This complexity increased the realism of the story for Hester:

Yeah good people don’t necessarily make good decisions and you know what, you know dumb teenage boys make dumb teenage boy decisions and it’s really very well written in that regard.

Nancy similarly described Harry:

But he’s um. . he’s just very real I think. He’s kind of like ...He’s not just this like, hero character that’s constantly going through being heroic, most of the time he’s bumbling along and getting lucky along the way, and um you know, sometimes he’s really angry and sometimes he’s really sad.

Participants spoke thoughtfully and empathically about their favourite characters in the series and expressed a deep appreciation for the diversity and personality of each. Jo, who connected strongly with Hermione, stated:

I like that she’s a bit of a moral compass but she’s also not perfect. Like she does things that are way out of line and she takes chances and things like that, and she - she yeah, she takes lots of risks like she sets a teacher on fire and all that kind of things like oh, that’s not perfect behaviour, but it shows she’s human.

Storylines and themes

While participants connected with and learned from the characters, several also described important connections with various storylines and themes in the narrative. Hester explained that the most meaningful aspects of the story were not the overarching messages as one might expect:

[...] there are themes in there of love and love trumps all and you know ...All of those things that you know, they’re the bigger themes, but the smaller underlying stories are what will get people through, to my mind [...] and that’s real. That that could happen to any of us in such - much less dramatic circumstances, but it can happen to any of us.

Catherine described a similar connection with those smaller, more grounded aspects of the story:

Like it’s not just, it’s not just like his fight against Voldemort, or like these forces or whatever. It’s also like, um, dealing with family issues or dealing with, just like personal angst or you know, love interests and that sort of thing. Like his ... It’s like he has, like a fully-realised actual life. And when you are just kind of like sitting back and looking to escape or whatever, like you can just like pick any one of those things to, to imagine or to tune in to, as opposed to kind of being like, alright, I’ve played this storyline out like a whole bunch of times.

Fans

Beyond participants’ connections within the series, each participant also spoke about connections made through the series, and through the powerful process of being a fan itself. This took various forms. Matilda described connecting with a mental health nurse while undergoing inpatient treatment:

I used to wait for her to come on shift because it was - it was like, we just talked about *Harry Potter* the whole shift. And [...] that kind of like, really helped as well, with like, at meal times when she was there [...] She’d have to like supervise meal times and then like, post meal times so we’d spend a lot of time together. And would just talk about *Harry Potter*, and that kind of - having that connection as well.

While Hester described explicitly seeking out other *Harry Potter* fans: I’m like, I need to find some local *Harry Potter* people [laughs] [...] And you know, you’re in your 30 s, you’re trying to make new friends, you’re single and it’s like, I need to go find my *Harry Potter* community, because that’s where it will all start. Those are people I can be comfortable around.

Discussion

This research explored from the perspective of six fans how they used *Harry Potter* narratives in their mental health recovery, and what was useful about the stories for this purpose. The recovery process using *Harry Potter* as recounted by participants included three superordinate themes. Early Engagement emerged through participants’ descriptions of engaging with the *Harry Potter* series in childhood, permitting them to grow alongside the protagonist, an experience that created strong, positive memories they can return to for hope. Immersive World developed as participants described the immersive nature, depth of content and breadth of media of the *Harry Potter* series, and how that choice and immersion fostered deeper engagement with the series and its protagonist. Connection represented the deep connection each participant described with the series, the characters, the storylines and other fans, and how these different forms of connection strengthened each other and permitted greater identification with the content and themes.

Using the *Harry Potter* world for recovery

In their discussions of how they engaged with the *Harry Potter* world, participants referenced three of the five central categories of the CHIME recovery of the model described by Leamy et al. (2011) – connectedness, hope, and identity, whereas meaning and empowerment were less represented. Participants emphasised the role that *connection* played in the series’ influence on them, with each participant describing a deep, emotional connection with the world, paralleling the real emotional response to a text that is central to creative bibliotherapy (Eğeci & Gençöz, 2017). Connectedness, finding someone or something to relate to on one’s journey, is a deeply personal and intrinsic part of mental health recovery. Social connectedness and social inclusion takes prominence in many conceptualisations of mental health recovery, for example Glover (2012), and has been found to be a crucial part of creative bibliotherapy (Bhattacharyya, 1997; Morawski, 1997; Rus-Makovec et al., 2015). Connectedness with others can take many different forms. Participants reported important connections with other *Harry Potter* fans and feeling connected with a wider community, as well as parasocial connections with the characters themselves and how these met their real life social needs, as is consistent with research on story comprehension (Mar, 2011; Oatley, 2016). This connection appeared to be bolstered by the immersive opportunities available for this series, such as merchandise, quidditch tournaments and Wizarding Worlds, with participants emphasising the range of ways that they are able to enter this world.

Participants also referenced the ways in which engagement with the series provided them with a sense of hope. For these participants, closely following the fictional protagonist and his friends face and overcome challenges appeared to prompt hope and optimism about the future, and in the possibility of recovery. Participants’ descriptions of hope reflected findings of previous research around the importance of finding and maintaining one’s hope in recovery; that is, that the message that people can, and do, recover from mental illness is powerful and essential to the recovery journey (Australian Health Ministers’ Advisory Council, 2013; Cohen, 1994).

Finally, participants reported experiences of identification with the characters, of seeing themselves in them, in their mistakes and flaws and quirks. Identification has been labelled another crucial component

underlying creative bibliotherapy's effect (e.g., Cohen, 1994; Levitt et al., 2009; Swaton & O'Callaghan, 1999). Identification was also a central part of the psychodynamic model of the therapeutic use of stories, where this process permitted a release of emotional tension as the character the reader has connected with works through familiar challenges, reducing feelings of isolation (Morawski, 1997). When the unique neurological processes involved in ToM and affective empathy are activated through reading fiction, we are able to be emotionally transported by stories and empathetic responses and relational inferences are prompted, so that we can connect deeply with characters (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Hsu et al., 2015; Oatley, 2016; Zunshine, 2006). These intertwined processes have likely bolstered this process of identification, as well as connection, with the characters in the *Harry Potter* series. As found in other creative bibliotherapy research, participants drew upon fictional characters for a range of purposes, depending on their needs (Ellis et al., 2019). These imaginative processes and real emotional responses are different for each individual reader, and different in each reading for each individual reader (Oatley, 1995). The complexity of Rowling's characterisations, where no character is solely good or evil, but made up of a realistic mix of traits, seems to be well-suited to precipitate this identification. This characterisation, combined with the way that fiction engages our brain, emotions, and empathy, may provide insight into why *Harry Potter* fans have spontaneously used the series to support their mental health recovery.

Interestingly, participants did not appear to be using the *Harry Potter* series to find meaning or empowerment as part of their recovery journey, nor did they reflect on the series being lacking in this regard. It may be that these are aspects of recovery that are more subtle and difficult to identify or articulate. It may also be that these elements are overall less essential to the process of recovery when it is undertaken in such an informal and spontaneous manner. Future research may want to consider the role that meaning and empowerment play in recovery processes undertaken outside of formal therapy.

Strengths and limitations

The current research has explored in depth how six *Harry Potter* fans have informally used the series to support their mental health recovery, and has identified a number of elements of the series that have been central to this process for each participant. The themes that have emerged through this research have been connected with the existing literature on the therapeutic use of stories and models of mental health recovery, and highlighted clear directions for future research. Furthermore, the CHIME model may not be socioculturally specific to the Australian context, suggesting that members of other cultural groups may be able to transfer the results of the present research to their own experiences; an issue that could be explored in future research.

One limitation of the current research was that the participants were all of similar ages, which may have influenced the themes that emerged, particularly around growing up alongside the protagonist and his friends, and how that may have encouraged increasing connection with the series and identification with the characters with each successive release. Interest in and passion about *Harry Potter* is certainly not limited to this generation, but future research may investigate how much the therapeutic impact of *Harry Potter* is tied to the generation that grew alongside its protagonist.

Another key limitation of the research was that only women volunteered to participate. As a result, the sample lacks a male voice, as well as the voices of more diverse people. The *Harry Potter* series revolves around a male protagonist with predominantly male role models and antagonists, which might suggest that the process of identification and connection that emerged through this research should be facilitated for boys and men. Unequal gender participation in qualitative research has been acknowledged in the literature as a shortcoming, although the drivers behind this phenomenon remain speculative (Butera, 2006). Participation in this research study might have been seen as an

inherently feminised undertaking for male fans who came across the recruitment material, or perhaps it was viewed as an arduous undertaking with no clear benefit to them (Hutchinson et al. 1994). Additionally, it may be that male fans of the series have overall not used it to support their mental health recovery to the same extent and in the same ways as female fans. Future research may want to consider how to recruit male fans of *Harry Potter*, and then explore their use of the series.

A further limitation, due to the choice in methodology and aims of the research, was that participants were responsible for defining mental health recovery and their place on that pathway. We cannot be certain how "recovered" these individuals are, or that we shared a mutual conceptualisation of the phenomenon of recovery. Additionally, due to the way the interview protocol was worded, it may have prompted participants to selectively discuss only the positive elements of their use of *Harry Potter* during periods of difficulty. However, one participant did allude to this (Nancy), stating that while reading *Harry Potter* fanfiction was a comfort, she found there to be a fine line between reading for a few hours, and spending her whole day absorbed in reading, and neglecting her real life. This notion of how an immersive narrative can have negative effects could be further explored in a follow-up study. All research methods are imperfect, and consistent with one of the aims of qualitative research of giving participants "voice" (Braun & Clarke, 2013), allowing participants to speak for themselves was prioritised in this study.

Finally, this research did not address the recent controversies facing J. K. Rowling (her expressed views on transgender issues), the majority of which occurred after data collection was completed. Given the deep connection and trust for the series reported by these participants, such that memories of reading the books in childhood have formed safe places to return to when in distress, the impact of the controversy facing the author will need to be explored in future research. Whether fans are able to separate the content from its creator in order to continue to take advantage of the recovery benefits inherent in connecting so deeply with this unique series will be an important question to investigate.

Clinical implications

The present research has significant clinical implications for the role of the arts in supporting the mental health recovery journey, particularly for younger people. These clinical implications are clear from the ways in which participants reported that they were spontaneously drawn to the series in their mental health recovery journey. While some participants integrated their use of *Harry Potter* to support their recovery in clinical spaces, such as inpatient treatments, none explicitly turned to the series in a formal, therapeutic manner. However, each participant was able to achieve self-reported therapeutic effects by engaging with the series in the manner that best suited their needs at the time. The findings emphasise the important, intuitive role that the arts play in mental health for young people. *Harry Potter* appears to offer a unique confluence of prevalence, magical themes, accessibility, complexity of characters, and depth of content, to provide a platform for creative bibliotherapy. However, the effect the series has may be bolstered by participants' early and ongoing engagement with *Harry Potter* in childhood, where it becomes a positive and safe memory from childhood that they can return to. This developmental aspect may be a crucial mechanism underlying the successful use of the series to support mental health recovery.

Conclusions

This research aimed to explore the role that engagement with the *Harry Potter* universe played in recovery from mental health difficulties outside of therapeutic settings. The research addressed two questions: first, how do six fans in recovery from mental health challenges use *Harry Potter* narratives in their mental health recovery journey; and second, what elements do these fans identify as useful about the *Harry*

Potter narratives for their recovery journey? The findings demonstrated that participants employed *Harry Potter* in creative and individual ways, best suited to their lived experience of mental health recovery, yet still paralleling existing research around models of mental health recovery and mechanisms of change underpinning creative bibliotherapy and fiction reading more generally. Participants' descriptions of their use of the series to support their recovery illuminated what is useful about the stories for this purpose. The *Harry Potter* universe is unique in its accessibility and the range of choice of engagement; participants were able to find a format or formats that best suited their needs at each stage of recovery. The narratives themselves provided a number of elements that fostered this recruitment for recovery processes, including the depth of characterisation and magical subject matter. The successive releases allowed readers to grow alongside the protagonist, and the series' enormous popularity permitted fan engagement and interaction on a deep level, making it evident that the series "just gives people hope." Future research can build on the findings presented above by investigating whether more diverse fans of *Harry Potter* use the series in similar ways.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Kelsey V. Tribe: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing, Project administration. **Fiona Ann Papps:** Supervision, Methodology, Writing - review & editing. **Fiona Calvert:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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