You're a Wizard, Harry! Consumer Response to the Harry Potter Phenomenon

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Short Abstract

Harry Potter is one of the most astonishing consumption occurrences of recent years. Less than a decade ago, the boy wizard’s creator was an anonymous single mom on welfare. Today, J.K. Rowling presides over a $4 billion marketing empire and is one of the most famous faces on the planet. This paper examines consumer responses to the fashion for all things Potter. It argues that far from being trivial, as some suppose, fads are typical of today’s Entertainment Economy. If transformative consumer research is our aim, Harry Potteresque phenomena need to be better understood.

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“You’re A Wizard, Harry!”
Consumer Response to the Harry Potter Phenomenon
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ABSTRACT
Harry Potter is one of the most overwhelming consumer tsunami of recent years. Less than a decade ago, the boy wizard’s creator was an anonymous single mom on welfare. Today, J.K. Rowling presides over a $4 billion marketing empire and is one of the most famous faces on the planet. This paper examines consumer responses to the fashion for all things Potter. It argues that far from being trivial, as some suppose, fads are typical of today’s Entertainment Economy. If transformative consumer research is our aim, Harry Potteresque phenomena need to be better understood.

FAN OF TEEN FABLES
An indigent author writes a compelling story about an eleven-year-old orphan with wayward hair and distinctive features, who is transported to another place, finds it difficult to fit in and, after getting into all sorts of intriguing scrapes, eventually learns to do the right thing. The indigent author’s manuscript, however, is rejected by numerous publishing houses, which see no market for the quirky tale. She is on the point of giving up and returning to her hardscrabble job as a schoolteacher, but on a whim, decides to try one last publisher. The manuscript is accepted, published in a limited edition and, miraculously, becomes an enormous hit. The ex-indigent author follows up with sequel after sequel after sequel and a storybook franchise is born.

Familiar as it is, this rags-to-riches tale of literary good fortune is not the heart-warming story of J.K. Rowling and the Harry Potter phenomenon. It is the tale of L.M. Montgomery, an impecunious inhabitant of Price Edward Island whose classic children’s story, *Anne of Green Gables*, was published in 1908 to huge popularity, instant acclaim and not a little criticism (Barrett 1997). It is a story that spawned six successful sequels, all of which have been filmed, televised, merchandised and variously recycled in the century since *Anne of Green Gables* was written (Gammel 2002).

Montgomery’s story, nevertheless, is almost identical to that of Joanne Rowling’s (even down to the six sequels), who published her first Harry Potter novel in 1997 and saw her creation grow, like Topsy, as the episodes rolled off the Rowling production line (Smith 2001). More pertinent perhaps, Montgomery’s story reminds us that Anne/Harry-style fads are—and long have been—an important aspect of consumer culture (Berger 2000). From the bicycle craze of the late-nineteenth century, through the crossword puzzle mania of the 1920s, to the Pet Rock phenomenon of the 1970s, consumer fads are always with us (Thorne 1992). Individually, they may be here today and gone tomorrow, but collectively fads are as dependable as Old Faithful. They are the geysers of fads like *Star Trek*, Beanie Babies, Blackberries, iPods et al (Hills 2002). Brand communities, most studies agree, are knowledgeable, proprietorial, opinionated, disputatious, committed and, actively encouraged by far-sighted corporate executives, increasingly involved in the co-creation of brand meaning (e.g. Fournier 1998; Holt 2002; Kozinets 2001; McAlexander et al 2002; Munniz and O’Guinn 2001). Set against this, of course, they are somewhat atypical. By their very nature, brand fans are unusually dedicated to the object of their veneration, be it Elvis or ET. They are the keepers of the fad flame. They continue to tend it long after the craze has died down and the next big thing’s all the rage. It follows that the picture presented by the burgeoning brandfan literature is incomplete. It also follows that, if we are to better understand the nature of fads, the feelings of less committed fans and, moreover, non-fans must be investigated.

The present paper attempts to increase our understanding of “fadology.” It does so by means of a qualitative study of the Harry Potter phenomenon, a staggering successful consumer craze that erupted at the turn of the millennium and is still going strong. The paper begins with a brief outline of Harry Potter mania, continues with an overview of our research program, turns to a summary of the findings, and concludes with some thoughts on the nature of fads.

BRANDACADABRA
Harry Potter is one of the most astonishing marketing tsunami of recent years (Blake 2002). So much so, that surely there can’t be a single person anywhere who hasn’t heard of Harry Potter and the best selling books that bear his name. A scrawled and orphaned schoolboy, who is maltreated by his stepparents, bullied by his stepbrother and discovers on his eleventh birthday that he possesses magical powers, Harry Potter is whisked off to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where he studies the magical curriculum, learns that an enchanted world co-exists alongside the everyday world of non-magical Muggles, makes friends with fellow pupils Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley, spends many a happy hour playing Quidditch, a kind of airborne basketball, and, not least, battles against the evil Lord Voldemort, who killed his parents, tried and failed to kill Harry too, and is determined to take over the wizarding world by hook, crook, curse, hex and analogous nefarious means (Rowling 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2003).

To date, six books in the seven-book series have been published and approximately 300 million copies have been sold worldwide (Brown 2002). This places Potter third in the all-time bestsellers list, after *The Bible* (2.5 billion copies sold) and *The Thoughts of Chairman Mao* (800 million). In addition to the books themselves, the first three HP adventures have been made into live-action movies by Warner Bros, earning some $1.6 billion at the global box office and a further $750 million in DVD, video and television
licensing sales. More than 400 items of tie-in merchandise are also available, everything from candy and key rings to computer games and glow-in-the-dark glasses (Beahm 2004). It is estimated that the brand is worth $1 billion per annum and that J.K Rowling is a (dollar) billionaire. She is 6th on Forbes’ roll-call of female business leaders, 5th on Entertainment Weekly’s inventory of movers and shakers, and was runner-up to George W. Bush as Time’s “Person of the Year, 2000.” Not bad for someone who was a poverty-stricken single mom, living on welfare in an unheated Edinburgh apartment, less than a decade ago (Gupta 2003).

Staggering as the sales figures are, the Harry Potter phenomenon goes way, way beyond the bottom line. The entire children’s book sector has been invigorated by the teenage mage, as countless identikit novels attest. Innumerable parsings, parodies and pastiches of Harry Potter have also been published, including two pseudonymous books by J.K. Rowling herself. Boarding schools report significant increases in applications, both in Britain and France; EFL teachers claim that the HP texts are ideal workbooks for those wishing to improve their grasp of the mother tongue, as do parents of children with learning difficulties; owls are proving increasingly popular as household pets, much to the dismay of Animal Rights activists who have triggered a to-whit to-do about consumers’ inability to care for the often-irascible creatures; the locations used in the movies are proving popular with tourists, though some sites have been chastised by Warner Brothers’ legal department for advertising the connection; and signed first editions are fetching $50,000 plus on the rare books market. As celebrity book scout Rick Gekoski (2004, p. 223) notes with dismay, “For that price, for God’s sake, you could buy a pretty good collection of W.B. Yeats, or Conrad, or D.H. Lawrence.”

Pottermania, in short, is escaping the economic base and colonizing the cultural superstructure. Consumer culture especially. Cyberspace, for instance, is chock-a-block with tribute websites such as mugglenet.com, hpmana.com and hp-lexicon.org. Dedicated chatrooms, newsgroups and weblogs dissect every tidbit of Pottertrivia, including the latest scuttlebutt from the movie sets and interminable speculation about narrative twists and turns to come. No less than 64,000 fan fictions—that is, entire HP “novels” written by aficionados using Rowling’s characters, settings, etc.—are currently posted on the foremost clearing house for this so-called “fanon.” At least three fan fayres have been organized thus far (in Orlando, Salem and Reading), academic interest is increasing exponentially (the principal HP database lists more than 500 scholarly publications) and the Potter lexicon of “muggles,” “quidditch,” “slytherin,” et al has not only been inducted into dictionaries but is part and parcel of popular parlance.

HOCUS POCUS GROUPS

Needless to say, the latter-day Potterquake has attracted the attention of numerous marketing and consumer researchers. The book tracking consultants, NDP Group, regularly publish opinion polls on the phenomenon. A 2001 questionnaire survey of 1,511 respondents, for example, revealed that 60% of American teenagers are favorably disposed toward Harry Potter, with 25% of adults feeling the same way (see Gupta 2003). In Britain, there is a much-cited statistic to the effect that 50% of UK households own at least one Harry Potter novel (Blake 2002). The rest of the world is equally besotted, according to the Guardian newspaper, which compiled a “Potter Potty Index” of the boy wizard’s global impact. Apparently, Australia, Germany, Japan and China are most entranced by Harry’s adventures, with Mexico, India and Indonesia not far behind (Guardian 2002).

In addition to the quantitative facts and figures, the qualitative side of the Harry Potter fad has also been explored. Rebecca Borah (2002) has surfed the highways and byways of the world wide web, conversing with Potterphiles, Weaselymanes and Graingerphagites. From her analysis of message board postings, she calculates that two-thirds of Potter posters are under the age of 18, with most falling between 12 and 16. Of the 12-16 subgroup, approximately two-thirds are female, though male participation is much greater in movie-related message boards. Borah followed up with email interviews of twenty teenage consumers and found that most had been introduced to Harry by a friend or relative, many had participated in school activities pertaining to Potter, around half had made objects inspired by the books, such as wands, artwork or costumes, and the majority are keen to acquire official Warner Brothers merchandise. However, her interviewees are by no means Pottermonogamous, since Pokemon cards, favorite TV characters, and pop band fandom also figured prominently in the discussions. Far from being brand loyal, teenage consumers are quite profligate with their preferences. Harry Potter may be the crack cocaine of kiddy culture—to put it crudely—but the boy wizard is only one among many brand-name intoxicants.

Above and beyond her analyses of adolescents, Borah (2002) interviewed ten adult Potterites. Although most are unashamed of their enthusiasm for products targeted primarily at teenagers, their fanaticism is more subdued. They only attend fan activities–theme parties, Potter bees, collector fayres, book launch events, etc.—when accompanied by a child or several. They wouldn’t dream of wearing a Harry Potter T-shirt, which is too uncool for words, and worry about Warner’s meretricious merchandising of Rowling’s well-told tales. That said, they love chatting to fellow adult initiates of the Harry Potter “club.”

Fascinating though her findings are, Borah’s research predates the deluge of movie tie-in merchandise, as well as the three-year hiatus between books four and five. It fails to give a complete picture, furthermore. The problem with studies of Harry Potter fan communities, or any self-selected enthusiasts, is that they are somewhat atypical. As only the most obsessive Potterites are prepared to write entire novels about his ongoing adventures, let alone build and maintain dedicated websites, their views hardly reflect those of the average consumer.

In order, therefore, to deepen our understanding of the HP phenomenon–and consumer fads in general–a three-stage program of qualitative research is being undertaken by the authors. These stages comprise analyses of adults’, schoolchildren’s and college students’ feelings about brand Harry Potter, the first phase of which is considered herein. Twenty-one adults–seven male, fourteen female, some fans, some phobes, ranging in age from 20 to 45–were asked to write individual “introspective essays” on the Harry Potter phenomenon. No restrictions were placed on essay length or what was considered an acceptable or unacceptable response. They were simply required to reflect on and write about their feelings (positive, negative or otherwise) concerning the Harry Potter brand in all its manifold manifestations (books, movies, merchandise, websites, whatever). Although introspective approaches, broadly defined, have been debated at length in the consumer research literature (e.g. Mick 2005), the evidence suggests that, once their initial apprehensions are overcome, informants find the introspective essay writing experience quite enjoyable. Revelatory even. The results, certainly, seem to bear this out, inasmuch as the individual introspective essays ranged from 2,500 to 6,000 words, which compares well with analogous consumer research techniques. While no one would claim that introspection is better than established qualitative procedures, such as focus groups, depth interviews, ethnography and so forth, it is a methodology that is well suited to story-based brands like Harry Potter (Haig 2004).
RIDDLE ME RESULTS

As might be expected, just about every one of our essayists has heard of Harry Potter and has some familiarity with the Harry Potter phenomenon. Let’s be honest, the boy wizard’s impossible to avoid, though that hasn’t stopped people from trying. The idolization of Harry Potter, interestingly enough, is very off-putting for many consumers. His popularity with some makes him unpopular with others. They are determined to resist his bewitching blandishments at all costs. They pride themselves on not being taken in:

The crazy over-the-top media frenzy surrounding the whole phenomenon acts as a barrier preventing me from taking the bold step of reading a Harry Potter book or watching any of the films. Even if I was to sit down and watch one of the movies any enjoyment would be tarnished by the continual feeling that this is a box-office hit, adored by millions and a regular feature in The Sun newspaper… I think I have this attitude simply because I’m generally a person who doesn’t like to conform with popular opinion. It’s more fun to be different.

(David B.)

They also hate Harry Potter devotees, with their knowing smiles, secret language and embarrassing enthusiasm:

It’s just gone Halloween and the number of fake Harry Potters and Hermiones I saw on a night out was crazy. Big fat women trying to fool themselves that they look good dressed as Hermione when all they look like is a man in drag, bad drag at that! I don’t know who they are trying to kid but the only guys that seemed to be attracted to them were Harry Potter wannabes. Where did all these people come from? All these people who think dressing up as school kids is a turn-on! Surely this is verging on perversion.

(Kim P.)

These perceived barriers to entry, furthermore, are reinforced by incessant peer pressure. Everyone knows someone who suffers from Pottermania—a parent, a cousin, a friend— and the evangelist is determined to spread the good word, which further alienates the agnostics. While one hesitates to call this bullying, it’s a lot closer to Dudley Dursley than J.K. Rowling and Co might imagine:

I like to think that I have managed to remain neutral about Harry Potter, but because I am not a devout fan this can be very testing. It’s a bit like Christianity. Harry Potter lovers feel that they must spread the message of the ‘good book’. They automatically make a dash for non-believers with the aim of saving them from their non-Harry Potter ways.

(Gemma A.)

That said, peer pressure works both ways. Individuals who are intrigued by the Harry Potter phenomenon and would quite like to check it out, if only to satisfy their curiosity, sometimes find themselves stymied by anti-Potter types, such as knuckle-dragging boyfriends or mega-macho companions, who refuse to embarrass themselves by association:

I had reckoned without my beloved partner. Even though we have gone to see shows like Monsters Inc and Toy Story, and even though he actually owns copies of both Lion King movies, he point blank refused to go and see Harry Potter. I personally considered this very unfair, since I had sacrificed many a Friday night watching horror films (which I hate) and war films (which I pretend to hate, but usually quite enjoy).

But no, there was no budging him, and sad as I was, I had no intentions of going to see it on my own. So, it was a long wait for the film to come out on video.

(Eleanor Mc)

Embarrassment, in truth, is an emotion that figures prominently in the stories told by adult consumers. As often as not, it’s the embarrassment of buying, or borrowing, or being seen reading a children’s book. Or, alternatively, being caught attending a kid’s movie that has none of the multi-level appeal of, say, Shrek or Toy Story or Shark Tale, with their jokes-just-for-adults dimension. However, it’s also the adolescent antics of adult Harry Potter fans that many non-devotees find bizarre at best and bananas at worst:

One of the most fascinating aspects of Harry Potter mania is that many of the fans appear to be adults. From someone who hasn’t read any of the books, watched an entire film or bought any merchandise, maybe I’m not the best person to pass judgment. However, Harry Potter strikes me as something that’s written for kids—as evidenced by the various merchandise available aimed at young people. Despite this, I’ve found that a number of people my own age are big fans of the movies and to a slightly lesser extent the books. Only the other day, I saw a young woman, in her early twenties, wearing a Harry Potter T-shirt. What is wrong with these people?

(David B.)

At the same time, people are occasionally embarrassed into Potter participation, as in the following anecdote:

Let me set the scene: it was the summer of 2003, a long hot summer where I was bored out of my head. [My boyfriend’s] sister had just bought the fifth book and we were all talking about it over dinner one Sunday. I tried to keep out of the conversation as much as possible as I didn’t know a thing about the books and these people were obviously avid fans, to the point of arguing about it over Christmas. No matter how much I tried to keep quiet I was uncovered as a Harry Potter virgin when I was asked who my favorite character was. The only character I knew was Harry Potter and I think they were looking for some more in-depth answer than that. So I had to confess that I had not read even one page out of the Harry Potter books, never mind have a favorite character!! Oh the look of shame!

(Kim P.)

Mortification notwithstanding, and regardless of how individuals get press-ganged into Potterphilia, the fact remains that when people do fall for Harry Potter they fall big. They have the zeal of the newly converted. They refuse to let minor inconveniences, like being on honeymoon, get in the way of their obsession:

In April this year, my girlfriend had just become my wife and we were about to set off on honeymoon. We had an hour or two to kill in Gatwick and I did some last minute panic buying for some holiday reading… I decided to buy the first two Harry Potter books, the Philosopher’s Stone and the Chamber of Secrets. I have got to say I was something of a Harry Potter virgin, that is to say I had never read anything by J.K. Rowling, hadn’t seen the films or knowingly bought any affiliated wands or broomsticks. I was however only too aware of the publicity surrounding the books and who the author was, as well as some of the characters… When I got down to reading, I felt the books were brilliant. I could really see how the books...
appealed to adults and children alike. Needless to say that my new page turning obsession did not go down too well with my new life partner. When on our first night in the Maldives and expecting some form of conjugal rites found herself in second place to a fictional 11 year-old trainee wizard and something called the Sorting Hat.

(Keith T.)

Even those who hate Harry Potter with a vengeance find that their temper is tempered when they are required to read the books or watch the movies. They may not like the boy wizard—and like his admirers even less—but at least they understand why the fans feel the way they do:

Watching the film provided me with a glimpse of why so many older people worship Harry Potter. On one hand it may be the idea that takes them back to their childhood days. I can relate to this theory. On the other hand it may be that it takes them away from the mundane reality of their own lives. As you get older it gets increasingly harder to have fun. Worries about the mortgage, worries about the kids, worries about the kids having kids, and so on. So for those few brief moments I realized that perhaps it wasn’t just a stupid childish fad, it had a real offering for the older generation too.

(Richard H.)

Now, this doesn’t mean that once consumers take a hit of Hogwarts they are hopelessly addicted and thereafter hang on Rowling’s every word. On the contrary, most consumers are self-conscious about their fixation—especially those who have been Pottermanes from day one—and are actually quite relieved to discover that there are people much more obsessed than them. I’m sad, as it were, but not that sad!

Although I would be loath to admit it in polite company, I am a Harry Potter fan, and probably always will be. I’m not sure what it is about the books, but I have a feeling that I will eventually get round to collecting all the hardbacks, like I had originally planned. By the time the last book came out, maybe I had gotten wise to the marketing ploys of the publishers. Even though the hype was at fever pitch, it didn’t really get through to me at all. I did buy it, and I have read and enjoyed it as much as the others, but I certainly didn’t queue outside Eason’s from 12 midnight.

(Eleanor Mc)

Other enthusiasts adopt a kind of wry detachment from the whole thing. Yes, they love the books. Yes, they rush out and see the movies. Yes, they buy the DVDs and some other bits and pieces. But let’s not get carried away. It’s only a bit of fun, after all:

I’ve become a Harry Potter junkie. I need my fixes to keep me spellbound. AAarrrrgghhhh!!! There are a few things that annoy me though—the names of the characters, a lot of them end in ‘ius’ or similar, such as Cornelius, Albus, Lucius, Sirius (seriously now, come on), Serverus (cut me some slack), Bartimus (Simpsonus) and so on...There’s another thing that annoys me, the not naming of people and things, it’s like The Village, the ‘you-know-what’ and ‘those-we-don’t-speak-of’ and ‘the-place-we-don’t-go’. Crap, crap, crap. Name them—Voldemort—it is a bit hard to say and I admit it took ME several times to get it right. But now I’m a wizard at it.

(Daria C.)

Some customers, similarly, appropriate the product and take it to places that Warner Brothers didn’t anticipate:

All the Harry Potter novels have provided many a laugh for me but some have spilled over into my social life. After a crowd of mine mates and I went to watch the first movie it is not uncommon for the following phrase to be shouted out randomly on a night out. ‘You’re a wizard, Harry!’ may seem a bit strange to onlookers but believe me it is bound to have us in stitches. And of course it is a lot funnier when you are drunk!

(Kim P.)

Many consumers, in short, are quite proprietorial about Harry Potter. They feel a very strong sense of ownership. Personal friendship, near enough. As such, they are contemptuously dismissive about certain parts of the movie adaptations:

The saying goes that the books are much better than the films and in my view this is certainly true. I can’t believe [Chamber of Secrets] left out the hilarious picture of the Weasleys degnorning their garden. The film does not match the vivid and detailed descriptions that I have conjured up when reading the book. I imagine Gilderoy Lockheart (sic) with long blonde flowing locks that he is constantly flicking back. As orange as Dale Winton and just as camp. The book leads me to think he is much more pompous and exaggerated than in the film. The film was a great let down of the character I had built up.

(Gemma A.)

The books aren’t immune, either. Quite a few feel that the fifth volume wasn’t up to scratch (a view, incidentally, shared by lots in the fanfiction community, who aren’t reluctant to excise Phoenix from “the canon”) and worry whether Rowling will continue to do justice to her creation now that the series is reaching its climax and the whole world is wild about Harry:

The build up to the fifth book was immense, it was the longest book but in my opinion very disappointing...How could this woman who has written four such wonderful books ruin it all with her latest release? I was looking forward to continuing the Harry Potter ‘experience’ but for me the fifth book ruined it...I just hope that the sixth book proves me wrong. Could Rowling really start to go downhill? Did she reach her peak? I hope not.

(Susan Mc.)

Ex-enthusiasts, furthermore, feel that the phenomenon is rapidly running out of steam, that it has become too popular for its own good, that it is being milked dry and merchandised to death. Thus, when Rowling announces that another character’s about to die—yawn—the news is interpreted not as an intriguing HP come-on but as a sign that the series is on the skids. Sensationalist sales tactics are a cry for help, don’t you know:

When I was driving into town the other week the news came on and hey guess what? Yes, that’s right, one of the articles of news was about how J.K. Rowling had stated that she was going to kill off a character in her new book. This got me thinking. My initial reaction was not one of excitement or who will it be, but a very negative ‘this is just a publicity stunt’. I thought ‘Is Harry slowly dying and was this just a clever PR stunt to help revive Harry Potter?’ I think so. I suppose if I was a true Harry Potter fan (which I can assure you I never will be) I would be ecstatic. But I think this is because I have watched
Harry isn’t history yet. But he’s heading that way...

I CAN’T BELIEVE IT’S NOT POTTER

Obviously, too much shouldn’t be inferred from a single case study, even a case study as impactful as Harry Potter. However, if the Harry Potter phenomenon is emblematic of the ever-burgeoning Entertainment Economy (Wolf 1999), then extracting a few concluding lessons may be helpful, if only as an indicator of future research possibilities. The first of these concerns the dialectical character of consumer crazes. That is to say, crazes call forth consumer resistance, they repel as well as attract. For every curious consumer who wonders what all the fuss is about, many more seem determined to stand aloof by refusing to get dragged in. The bigger the fad, we suspect, the more virulent the resistance and the more virulent the resistance the more convinced true believers become.

Certainly, the copious attacks on Harry Potter from concerned parents, Christian fundamentalists and condescending literary critics have helped further the phenomenon (Weiner 2003). Fads, as Gladwell (2000) notes, need fans, enthusiasts who are willing to spread the word, but our HP evidence suggests fads need phobes as well.

Another intriguing issue pertains to the fan acquisition process. The idea that consumers follow a preordained HP progression—what economists term path dependency—which starts with the books, continues with the movies and culminates with the merchandise is completely at odds with reality. Some are drawn in by the movies, others by watching the videos, others by catching a trailer, others by encounters with the tie-ins (being asked to buy a present for someone), others by a family connection (reading bedtime stories to a nephew), others by gifts or prizes or sales promotions (free tickets to a premiere courtesy of Coca-Cola), others by the stories to a nephew), others by gifts or prizes or sales promotions for someone), others by a family connection (reading bedtime

books, continues with the movies and culminates with the merchandise. As the media and companies drown Harry Potter out and have made me sick to the back teeth of Harry Potter. I simply do not give a gryffindor about Harry Potter in my everyday life. My life it too busy to care about Harry Potter and what J.K. Rowling wants to do next. I simply have no interest. (Laura O’K.)

The fourth lesson relates to the final phase of the fad life cycle. Conventional wisdom maintains that popularity kills a fad (Gladwell 2000). Once everyone is into it—sporting the hairstyle, singing the song, using the catchphrase, reading the book—the early adopters move on to something newer, cooler, obscurer, whatever. The 64,000 Galleon question, however, is how do we know when the point of departure is reached? Our Harry Potter study suggests that marketing itself is the signal. When brand enthusiasts start complaining about too much marketing, excessive exploitation, undue commercialization and so on, the writing is on the wall for the fad concerned. Crazes come wrapped in an authentic, grass-roots, word-of-mouth accrued aura and once this aura is damaged through marketer reproduction—Walter Benjamin (1973) style—commodification can’t be far away, collapse is imminent, the end is nigh.

THE END

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Advertisements for Harry Potter have helped further the phenomenon (Weiner 2003). Fads, as Gladwell (2000) notes, need fans, enthusiasts who are willing to spread the word, but our HP evidence suggests fads need phobes as well.