Harry Potter and the Service-Dominant Logic of Marketing: a cautionary tale

Stephen Brown, University of Ulster, UK*
Anthony Patterson, University of Liverpool, UK

Abstract Much has been written about Service-Dominant Logic, Vargo and Lusch’s vaunted contention that service isn’t an add-on to goods but goods are tangible reminders of service. Most of these writings are conceptual rather than empirical, however. This paper adds an empirical dimension to SDL by means of a qualitative study of the Harry Potter phenomenon. It shows that although Harry Potter can be successfully viewed through V&L’s lens, the picture is not crystal clear. So vague is the resultant image, in fact, that SDL should be handled with considerable care and more than a modicum of caution.

Keywords Harry Potter, Service-Dominant Logic, Customer co-creation, Goods versus Services

When the history of 21st century marketing is written, a prominent place will undoubtedly be reserved for the Service-Dominant Logic of Marketing (SDL). Since its star-spangled debut in JM, Vargo and Lusch’s (2004) Maynard Award-winning article has generated considerable academic enthusiasm and not a little critical commentary. As their edited anthology attests, V&L’s contention that marketing’s traditional goods-oriented mindset has been superseded by a service-aligned ethos, has been lauded and lambasted in equal measure (see Lusch and Vargo 2006). At one extreme, Rust (2004, p. 23) and Hunt (2004, p. 22) deem it “brilliantly insightful” and “an important and potentially seminal article” respectively. At the other extreme, Schembri (2006, p. 390) and Achrol and Kotler (2006, p. 323) variously consider

*Correspondence details and biographies for the authors are located at the end of the article.
it “inadequate and incomplete” and “a backward step from the current exchange paradigm”.

Regardless of where researchers stand on SDL, one thing is clear from the papers published thus far. Empirical evidence is in short supply. Although V&L’s suggestion that service is no longer an add-on to goods but goods are a keepsake of service, is being debated and dissected to death (e.g. Abela and Murphy 2008; Gummesson 2008; Layton 2008; Vargo and Lusch 2008), these discussions are taking place on a conspicuously conceptual plane. Empirical support is somewhat lacking and, as such, marketing practitioners may well be wondering what, if anything, is in it for them (though see Blazevic and Lievens 2008; Brodie, Pels and Saren 2006). Granted, not every marketing scholar subscribes to the view that managers’ pragmatic needs must determine the academic research agenda (Tadajewski and Brownlie 2008). But, as the very title of this journal attests, JMM is unashamedly managerial in ethos and it has been for 25 years.

With JMM’s heritage in mind, the present paper aims to add an empirical component to SDL. It does so by means of a qualitative study of the Harry Potter phenomenon. Although the boy wizard may strike some readers as a decidedly quirky “test” of V&L’s framework, he is in fact a potentially ideal illustration, if only because the Potter “product” encapsulates almost everything enshrined in Service-Dominant Logic (Vargo and Lusch 2006). Harry Potter is the epitome of an operant resource, a distillation of author J. K. Rowling’s skill, knowledge and fabulously fecund imagination. Harry Potter consists of incontestably physical goods – the decidedly bulky books – which provide a multi-platform service experience involving magic, mystery, shock, horror, spills, thrills, good humour and adolescent angst. Harry Potter is cogently co-created by consumers – the phenomenon was originally built by word-of-mouth and -mouse – though “co-creation” hardly does justice to the intensity of world-wide Pottermania. Harry Potter is a relational entity, furthermore, insofar as most fans have an on-going emotional attachment to Harry – they’ve grown up with him and vicariously share his teenage torments – one that they value, treasure and actively pour their own operant resources into (via tribute websites, chatroom contributions, fan fiction and so forth).

If not exactly the poster child of Service-Dominant Logic, Harry Potter appears to embody several of its central premises. The present paper, however, will show that although significant parallels can indeed be drawn between Potter and SDL, the drawing process raises doubts about the veracity of Vargo and Lusch’s vaunted construct. In saying that, it must be stressed that the purpose of the present exercise is not to add to the already noisy chorus of disapproval (e.g. Holbrook 2006; Levy 2006). Our aim, quite simply, is to examine SDL empirically. We do so through the lens of an authentic marketing phenomenon, a multi-billion dollar brand that embodies several issues appertaining to V&L’s postulate: namely, goods versus services; customer co-creation; and relational arrangements. The paper commences with an overview of Harry Potter mania, continues with a summary of the authors’ qualitative research programme, culminates in an analysis of our three salient themes, and concludes with some comments on the implications for SDL in general and marketing scholarship in particular.
INANIMATUS CONJURUS

In a prescient 1970s publication, Ted Levitt anticipated a key premise of SDL when he stated that “There are no such things as service industries. There are only industries whose service components are greater or less than those of other industries. Everybody is in service” (Levitt 1972, pp. 41-42). In the same paper, he further contended that marketers should adopt a production-line approach to service. Instead of seeing service as a post-production add-on, it can and should be as efficiently and effectively managed as the manufacturing process itself.¹ “The problem in so many cases,” Levitt (1972, p. 47) fulminated:

is that customer service is not viewed by manufacturers as an integral part of what the customer buys, but as something peripheral to landing the sale. However, when it is explicitly accepted as integral to the product itself and, as a consequence, gets the same kind of dedicated attention as the manufacturer of the hardware gets, the results can be spectacular.

If ever a service industry were managed in a machine-line manner that service industry is Harry Potter. With the exception of a brief hiatus between books four and five, the Harry Potter series has been cranked out with monotonous regularity (Gunelius 2008). The first book in the mega-selling series was published in 1997 and the seventh volume appeared ten years later. The first blockbuster movie was released in December 2001, number six is due to open in July 2009 and the final episode is scheduled for November 2010. Each book and movie release, what’s more, has been accompanied by tidal waves of T-shirts, sweat pants, cuddly toys and all sorts of magical memorabilia – bath-salts, bedspreads, broomsticks and beyond (Brown 2005). A dedicated theme park, The Wizarding World of Harry Potter, is set to open in 2009 and if the author continues to produce spin-off publications, which seems likely, then it is fair to assume that rolling waves of Rowling thunder will be echoing round the canyons of popular culture for some time to come.

Needless to say, this state of play is a long way from Nicholson’s Café in Edinburgh, where a penniless single parent set down her enchanting story of an eleven-year-old boy with bad hair, broken glasses, bullying step-parents and a bolt-of-lightning-shaped scar on his forehead, who turns out to be a world-famous wizard, is enrolled in an exclusive boarding school for budding sorcerers and, after diverse extra-curricular adventures with new-found friends Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, encounters his necromantic nemesis, the mind-bogglingly evil Lord Voldemort...

Although, considered in retrospect, Harry Potter was little more than a creative reworking of the classic Cinderella narrative, albeit with lashings of The Wicked Witch and Tom Brown’s Schooldays, Rowling’s manuscript was spurned by twelve leading publishers before being issued in a limited print run of 2,500 copies (Nel 2001). Thanks to enthusiastic word-of-mouth and favourable press coverage, sales took off rapidly, especially in America where word-of-mouse proved crucial in spreading the news about the boy who lived. Full-blown, world-wide Pottermania erupted in July 2000, with the midnight publication of the fourth novel and the announcement

¹ Note, Levitt’s paper isn’t a precise premonition of SDL. He treats goods and services as essentially separate entities (entities that shouldn’t be treated separately, in his view). V&L, on the other hand, invert the goods/services relationship, arguing that services aren’t add-ons to goods but goods, rather, are tangible reminders of service.
of the first live-action, big-budget, Warner Brothers movie (Brown 2005). Each episode thereafter further added to the marketplace mayhem, which climaxed in the summer of 2007 when the final book and the fifth movie were released near-enough simultaneously. Despite widespread concern that the teenage mage would be killed off at the end of *Deathly Hallows*, Rowling not only refused to slay her golden goose but promptly produced a quasi-prequel, *Tales of Beedle the Bard*.

It remains to be seen whether Potter pandemonium can survive the hero’s survival, since the narrative tension has dissipated and many fans who’ve grown up with the boy wizard will, presumably, renounce their former infatuation. But even if consumer commitment wanes to some degree – if brand Potter is downgraded from a record-breaking monster to a run-of-the-mill blockbuster – it’s still an incredible achievement (Gunelius 2008). Some 450 million copies of the books have been sold thus far, making Harry Potter the third biggest seller of all time after the Bible and Mao’s Little Red Book. The movies have garnered $4.5 billion at the worldwide box office, a take that makes Harry Potter the most successful cinematic franchise ever, bigger even than Star Wars and James Bond. Approximately $1 billion worth of tie-in merchandise has been sold to date, with a gusher of theme park keepsakes still to come. All told, the brand is worth around $4 billion, which is inconsequential in the great corporate scheme of things but enormously impressive for a cultural product that sprang from the fertile imagination of a single parent on unemployment benefit.

**PETRIFICUS TOTALUS**

Although the Harry Potter phenomenon is less than a decade old – assuming that the insanity began in earnest in 2000 – researchers have not been slow to study its impact. More than 100 full-length books have been published on the much-loved boy wizard. The principal Potter database lists in excess of 800 scholarly articles, the bulk of which pertain to literary concerns. Several academic conferences-cum-fan fayres have been held in appropriately hyperreal locales like Orlando, Las Vegas, Salem and, er, Reading. The Potter phenomenon also figures prominently in bestselling works of popular science, such as Malcolm Gladwell’s (2000) *Tipping Point*, Leonard Mlodinow’s (2008) *Drunkard’s Walk*, Chris Surowiecki’s (2004) *Wisdom of Crowds* and Nicholas Taleb’s (2008) *Black Swan*, where it is (predictably) held up as an exemplar of unpredictability.

The results reported below are drawn from a wide-ranging, in-depth, seven-year study of the Harry Potter brand in its manifold manifestations. This research program ranged from content analysis of the marketing-replete novels, via participation in the promotional circus during new book release frenzy, to tracking studies of media representations of the ever-burgeoning Potterverse (on tribute websites, in fan fiction, though analysis of extras on DVDs, etc.). Empirical data were also gathered (from Harry Potter lovers, Harry Potter haters and the Harry Potter indifferent) by means of focus groups, depth interviews, netnography and introspective storytelling techniques. This information was acquired at various points in the Potter product release cycle (it commenced prior to the publication of the fifth book and concluded in the immediate aftermath of the final episode) and involved consumers of diverse ages, genders and nationalities (the youngest informant was 7 years old, the oldest 62). In total, the data set consists of approximately 1,000 single-spaced pages of empirical interviews, introspections and suchlike, as well as photographs, podcasts,
video mash-ups, a sizable mound of press clippings and a collection of 34 books on
the Harry Potter phenomenon.

This “Potter” data set yields a rich array of reactions to Rowling’s redoubtable
creation. At one extreme are consumers’ (often bitterly cynical) views on the author’s
marketing savvy and, at the other, is the bemused response of a Black Sabbath
fan who can’t quite comprehend why Rowling magic is socially acceptable whereas Ozzy
magic is ostracised:

The Beatles may not have been bigger than Jesus but it seems as if Harry Potter is. It
appears that this interest in the occult has been brushed aside by the British media. This
is made worse by the fact that when I walk down the street wearing a Black Sabbath
T-shirt, I get all sorts of strange looks from people wearing Harry Potter T-shirts. It’s
as if I am Satan himself.

(Irish male, 23, introspection)

**EXPECTO PATRONUM**

Such is the richness of our Potter data set that it can be explored from any number of
academic perspectives, be they narratological (the stories consumers tell), chronological
(age-related differences in consumer response), managerial (the likely longevity of
Warner Brothers’ brand), theological (Potter as religion, religions against Rowling) or
whatever. For the purposes of the present study, however, three SDL-relevant themes
are discernible – Goods versus Services (a.k.a. Avada Kedavra), Consumer Co-creation
(a.k.a. Cruciatus) and Relational Arrangements (a.k.a. Imperius).

**Avada Kedavra**

Tangible, touchable and never less than terrifically tactile, books are goods in every
sense of the word (Baxter 2002; Epstein 2002; Zaid 2003). Approximately 1 million
new books are published worldwide each year and, notwithstanding the recent
Kindle- and Sony Reader-led rise of e-books, that still equates to a prodigious pile of
paper. When the sales of backlist volumes, second hand volumes and self-published
volumes are added to the new title total, it is clear that there are more books about
butterflies on Amazon.com than there are butterflies in the Amazon basin.

Most would agree that Harry Potter is one of the biggest literary butterflies ever
recorded. In addition to the 450 million new books mentioned earlier, let alone the
plague of counterfeits in China, India and elsewhere, the sheer amount of fungible
“stuff” associated with Rowling’s creation almost defies belief (Beahm 2004). If
all the DVDs and video tapes and computer games and soft toys and sweat shirts
and bedspreads and beach towels and backpacks and baseball caps and lunchboxes
and address books and writing sets and wall calendars and trading cards and jigsaw
puzzles and potions kits and key rings and coffee mugs and candy bars and Lego this,
that and the other, were laid end to end, the crazy conga of collectibles would stretch
from here to Hogwarts and back again. Several times over.

The physicality of the Potter phenomenon is integral to its marketing, furthermore.
Every post-Azkaban book launch has been accompanied by a plethora of gee-whiz,
look-ma, hold-the-front-page “statistics” that attest to the superhuman scale and
breathtaking scope of the Potter operation (Brown 2005). The staggering size of the
record-breaking, forest-felling print runs; the giant armada of trucks and container
ships needed to move the monstrous product tonnage from printers to punters; the enormous strain placed on creaking postal services, whose employees heroically struggle from house to house delivering backbreaking doorstoppers; the onerous impact on enfeebled teenage readers who come down with heinous ailments like Harry Headache and Potter Elbow, are all grist to the Pottermarketers’ mill. In keeping with the retro tenor of the books themselves, the marketing of Harry Potter is P. T. Barnum reborn. If not quite the greatest show on earth, it remains proof positive that a reader’s born every minute.

All the physical evidence in the world, nevertheless, can’t disguise the fact that Harry Potter is an experience. The books are containers of adventure, amazement, amusement and, on occasion, anguish. They are the epitome of Service-Dominant Logic, whereby physical products are inconsequential compared to the spectacular service they deliver. The story itself is what captivates consumers and the story owes almost nothing to operand resources, other than Rowling’s initial notebook and pen and periodic caffeine infusions in Nicholson’s Café. Harry Potter is operant in excelsis. Again and again our informants wax lyrical about the intoxicating power of the Harry Potter narratives, how they were swept up and carried away by the stories and, having taken a sip of Rowling’s literary ambrosia, they imbibed book after book after book in an orgy of over-indulgence:

**Moderator:** What age were you when you started getting into Harry Potter?

**Participant No. 1:** I kinda knew about them for ages, and I wanted to start to read them. But I didn’t actually start to read them until I went on holiday last year, and then I literally couldn’t put them down. It was like one after the other...

(English female, 20, focus group)

When asked, moreover, what people get out of Harry Potter, most informants agree that it is escapism, pure and simple. Rowling’s writing transports readers to a magical world, an invisible world alongside the everyday world, a world of heroes and villains, monsters and mayhem, humour and high jinks, loyal friends and lethal enemies. There’s more to Harry Potter than escapism, mind. The use value that the boy wizard delivers is manifold and various. There’s the agonising excitement when a new book’s about to be released (who’ll live, who’ll die, what happens next). There’s the interpersonal frisson when hypotheses about the latest Potter plots are swapped at the water cooler. There’s the one-upmanship that goes hand-in-hand with fandom, since knowledge equates to power and prestige. There’s the collective communitas that occurs when “Potter nutters” gather together, either on-line or in-person.2 There’s the feelings of warmth and empathy when others are seen enjoying the escapist experience, youngsters especially:

_I went shopping the day after the book came out, and there was this little boy, he had made like a little nest in one of the shops, because the sale was on, and his mum and_

---

2 Even those who hate Potter with a vengeance get something intangible out of it, since they’re given a wonderful opportunity to look down on those “suckers” who’ve fallen for the hype, who should really know better (especially the adults!) and who’ll be profoundly embarrassed by their Pottermania when they finally grow up and get a life. Harry Potter thus services lovers and loathers alike.
whoever was there, and he was just sitting in the corner reading, and I thought ‘ah, that’s really amazing’.

(English female, 31, interview)

That said, it’s mistaken to imagine that Harry Potter products are mere service vehicles. As the popularity of Potter first editions, box sets, associational copies, slipcase-covered commemorative volumes and special gift editions in Latin, Gaelic and Ancient Greek patently proves, the physical goods themselves are very important to many people. To suggest otherwise runs counter to the vast body of research on material culture (Miller 2001, 2005, 2008). Possessions, things, stuff, keepsakes, collectibles etc., are important in and of themselves and while it is occasionally necessary to stress the service end of the goods/service spectrum, the goods end is neither paltry nor passé.

Cruciatus

If ever a product were co-created, that product is surely Harry Potter. Countless millions of mad-keen consumers have contributed to the happy Harry experience. The service Potter provides owes as much (if not more) to consumer co-creators as it does to Warner Brothers, Scholastic, Bloomsbury and the remainder of the official wizard stakeholders. The tribute websites, the podcasts, the bloggers, the chatrooms, the well-attended fan conventions, the admittedly ludicrous LARPs (live action role playing games) and many, many more attest to Potterphiles’ co-creative prowess. An entire musical genre, no less, has sprung fully formed from the fertile ground of customer co-creation. Known as “wizard rock”, it features Potter-themed bands like The Moaning Myrtles, The Whomping Willows and Draco and the Malfoys. By far the most famous is Harry and the Potters, who have released three Rowling-related albums, including the garage band classic, *Voldemort Can’t Stop the Rock*.³

Incredible as co-created wizard rock is, more astonishing still is the fan fiction phenomenon (Lanier and Schau 2007). These are entire novels written by Potter lovers and posted on the web. Employing the canonical characters and settings, albeit with occasional cross-franchise appearances from, say, Captains Kirk or Sparrow, these works of consumer art take the Potter storyline to places where Warner Brothers and J. K. Rowling fear to tread. So raunchy are some of the 100,000 plus stories posted thus far that a voluntary classification system, similar to that for movies and computer games, has been introduced in an attempt to ensure that younger readers aren’t corrupted by the eye-popping antics in the “slash fiction” sub genre (Terego and Denim 2006).

Be that as it may, perhaps the most striking marketing contribution to come from customer co-creators is the queue. The long line of excited consumers outside bookstores at midnight, many of them in flowing robes while brandishing broomsticks and waving wands, is not only a wonderful service experience for the participants themselves but it also generates an enormous amount of media attention (and media attention about the media attention), especially when the doors finally open and the charge for the checkouts begins...

³ Wizard rock, for some, is proof positive that America’s got talent and, for others, clearly demonstrates that America’s got to get a grip.
I remember when I got the 6th book at 18 minutes past midnight I wore my Harry Potter dressing gown. Some people had brought capes, hats, the HP glasses. So there was quite a lot of people fanatic about it.

_It sounds like a really good atmosphere_

Yeah, it was. It was the WH Smith's in Speke. There was a big queue of people and what they did was they had all the books and they said: 'Right, you can be in the Hufflepuff house or the Slytherin house' and you went into a house and that is where you got your book.

_Sounds like it was a lot of fun that night_

Yeah it was. It really was.

(English male, 12, interview)

Queuing is not only exciting in and of itself but it is downright intriguing for many others, who are thus tempted to read Potter in order to discover what all the fuss is about. Indeed, there’s only one thing that contributes more than the line to the bottom line and that’s word of mouth. The persuasive power of Potterites’ prodigious proselytising prowess is impossible to overstate. Just about everyone knows someone who is a Harry fanatic and is determined to convert the entire world to the boy wizard’s cause:

_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._

(Irish female, 23, introspection)

The co-creation of the phenomenon has not been without problems, however. The issue of intellectual property has loomed large throughout the present Potter decade. When tribute websites first appeared at the start of the millennium, Warner Brothers attempted to clamp down on unruly fans, issuing cease-and-desist orders to all and sundry. The community rose in revolt, threatened a boycott of tie-in merchandise and the IP holders duly backed down. Thereafter, Warner Brothers endeavoured to work with the Harry Potter fan community, largely by means of its official website which supplied games, downloads, news snippets etc. and, until recently, they turned a blind eye to consumers’ on-line copyright infringements.

Interestingly, the most fractious co-creation “incident” broke out at the very boundary of goods and services. When a Harry Potter enthusiast called Steve Vander Ark attempted to publish a book based on his on-line lexicon, HPL, Rowling and Warners were quick to slap an injunction on the physical product. The intangible website was acceptable but when Vander Ark tried to transform it into something tangible, all legal hell broke loose. It went to court in March 2008, where Vander Ark was accused of plagiarism, theft and worse, accusations that left the middle-aged devotee sobbing in the dock. Regardless of the official judgment, which favoured the plaintiffs but couldn’t prevent the publication of a revised volume, the court of public opinion was not kind. Most agree that the episode did not reflect well on Rowling. Even the pro-IP Financial Times lambasted her legal stand (Caldwell 2008). This thus serves as a reminder that customer co-creation is more problematic in practice than it is
in fulsome articles by spokespersons for “crowdsourcing”, “we-think”, “wikinomics” et cetera (Howe 2008; Leadbeater 2008; Tapscott and Williams 2007).

**Imperius**

Hailed, by some, as a radical reorientation of marketing’s worldview, an overturning of the goods dominant mindset that has held sway since the discipline emerged from the womb of economics, SDL remains true to the customer centric and relational philosophies that are central to contemporary marketing thinking. True, customer orientation and relationship marketing are comparatively recent ideas – relative, that is, to the centuries old mercantile traditions SDL claims descent from – but Vargo and Lusch (2004, p. 11) are adamant that “a service-centred view is customer oriented and relational”.

The Potter marketing paradigm is also customer orientated and relational, albeit with a twist. The conventional notion of customer absolutism, where the customer is not only king but always right, does not form part of the brand Potter proposition. Teasing, tantalising and tormenting the customer is the order of the day. Denial not devotion, abjuration not adoration, tongue-in-cheek scorn not out-and-out servility is Pottermarketing’s *raison d’être*. The on-going aim has been to make life deliciously difficult for customers by, variously, implying that there aren’t enough books to meet the demand, by keeping the author’s personal appearances to an invitation-only minimum and by generally frustrating the readership through cryptic hints, contrived “countdowns”, casting security blankets over production, forcing retailers to sign confidentiality agreements, opening bookstores at midnight and suchlike. The tactic continues, furthermore, in the Potter aftermath, since Rowling’s subsequent writings have been published in very limited editions, at least initially.

Denial, of course, is a classic marketing means of increasing consumer desire, of turning customers into lustomers (Brown 2007). It is the antithesis of the obsequious posture that is propounded in mainstream textbooks, though if anything denial forges stronger customer relationships than the reverential attitude that is widely considered best practice. Indeed, it is hard to imagine stronger or more long-lasting relationships than those that obtain between Harry Potter and his numberless devotees, many of whom surprise themselves with the depth and intensity of their “inexplicable” attachment to the boy wizard’s incredible escapades:

> *I just was, you know, in a way, like, desperate to get the next book. You know, I’ve never read anything where I’ve been desperate to get the next. Well I have actually, in some early sci-fi stuff. But nowhere near as much as Potter.*

(English male, 45, interview)

These relationships, however, are not stable. They wax and wane through time. It is less of an unbreakable pact than an on-going process. As a rule, consumers’ enthusiasm for the series either wears off as the stories become longer and darker and more repetitive, or their instinctive antipathy ebbs when they actually read the books, in this regard, Potter gives pause to the customer co-creation lobby. Predicated on the alleged “wisdom of crowds”, the prevailing assumption is that today’s consumers are deeply knowledgeable, highly sophisticated and are a kind of postmodern “brains trust” that savvy marketers can tap into. This may be so, but all the wisdom of all the crowds of Harry Potter lovers signal failed to predict the ending of the final novel, despite prodigious amounts of speculation (which strongly suggests that co-creation is not all it’s cracked up to be).
or watch the movies, and (grudgingly) recognise their merits:

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 realised that perhaps it wasn’t just a stupid childish fad, it had a real offering for the older generation too.

(Irish male, 21, introspection)

This inconstancy is perhaps not surprising since the cyclical character of the Potter product release cycle – seven books and five movies in a ten year period – also means that the target audience’s connection with the franchise is subject to peaks and troughs and fluctuation. The children who were eleven years old when the first book about an eleven-year-old boy wizard was published are now leaving college. With childhood, puberty and higher education behind them, it would be strange indeed if their Potterphilia hadn’t subsided or their Potterphobia hadn’t tempered to some degree.

All things considered, nevertheless, Rowling’s ability to cast a spell over flighty, fad- and infatuation-prone teenage consumers is nothing less than miraculous. At the same time, the admirable relationship that she has established with her readers must be balanced against the damage her novels have done to book trade relationships. For all the talk of superhuman sales figures, the profit margins on Potter are disappointingly thin (Brown 2005). As the brand burgeoned, big chain bookstores started slashing prices in order to maintain their share of the market and slashed them further when supermarkets and discounters got in on the act. The inevitable upshot was that traditional, independent, mom and pop-style booksellers couldn’t compete on price. Many, in fact, refused to stock the final Potter volume or sourced it from supermarkets rather than their normal wholesaler, thereby further embittering established channel relations.5 The trade was thus squeezed between Asda and a hard place, much to the dismay of some consumers who profess to prefer the personal touch of local bookshops, even as they make their purchases from loss-leading discounters:

Um...I think that what was maybe a little bit of a shame about Harry Potter – and I’ve discussed this with Sarah [colleague from work] – is what it has meant for local bookshops. It was such as success but it, it became a bit of a price war. I think that was a shame because it, it didn’t benefit the little bookshops.

(English female, 28, interview)

PRIORI INCANTATEM

If, as this article has argued, Harry Potter is an exemplar of Service-Dominant Logic, then the foregoing analysis suggests – contra Vargo and Lusch – that the split between goods- and service-dominant logic is not clear cut. The transition from the former

5 Ironically, Rowling has urged readers to support their local bookshops. This is a bit rich coming from someone whose voluminous volumes have severely weakened the competitive position of independent booksellers.
to the latter is unlikely to be smooth or untroubled. As the on-going conflict over IP
attests, any Harry Potter admirers who wish to turn their web-based operant resources
into operand resources shaped like hardback books that you can touch and feel and
flick through, are in for a very torrid time. It can, admittedly, be counter-argued
that Potter’s intellectual property owners are way behind the co-creation curve and
remain in thrall to old-fashioned goods-dominant logic. Such an argument is hard
to sustain against an organisation like Warner Brothers, which is not only a bastion
of the creative economy but at the cutting edge of popular culture. The brute reality,
rather, is that the putative shift from goods-dominant to service-dominant logic is
much less straightforward in empirical practice than in academic theory.

SDL, moreover, is beset by intractable conceptual difficulties, linguistic difficulties
especially. Perhaps the most striking thing about SDL in the five years since its much-
lauded arrival, is the lack of consensus on terminological matters. The word “service”
in particular has precipitated much debate about its adequacy, its appropriateness, its
lack of precision (see the contributions to Lusch and Vargo 2006). This has lead, on
the one hand, to V&L's attempts to defend their preferred term, usually by arguing
that their critics misunderstand the meaning of “service” as they define it, and, on
the other hand, to an unseemly scramble for potential replacements. Resources-
solutions-, promises- and dialog-dominant logic have all been posited. As Ballantyne
and Varey (2006, p. 235) rightly observe about the switch to SDL, “much of the
problem will be adjusting to new language and meanings”.

This terminological debate isn’t confined to the purportedly profound differences
between “service” and “services”. Several of the key words contained in SDL have been
criticised or challenged – operand versus operant, use value versus exchange value,
etc. – and this has given rise to the lexical equivalent of running repairs. Some of the
core propositions have been rebooted, others have been added to the initial list and,
while no doubt justified conceptually, such rhetorical changes convey an unavoidable
impression of “moving the goalposts”. Be that as it may, the oft-reiterated hope of
SDL's proponents is that, as the concept matures, this linguistic issue will gradually
settle down and a stable construct will eventually emerge. Linguistic stability is a
chimera, however. If there is one thing that post-structuralist philosophy teaches us,
it is that language is inherently, ineradicably, unavoidably unstable (Brown 1995).

The salient point, then, is that although SDL can be “successfully” applied to a
marketing phenomenon like Harry Potter, the application process necessitates all
sorts of linguistic acrobatics – a book becomes an operand resource, reading translates
into use value, fans are co-creators and so forth – in order to make SDL “work”. It
likewise follows that with sufficient linguistic manipulation every marketing
phenomenon can be forced through the SDL sausage machine. In truth, though,
the attendant terms are so vague, so recondite, so open to tweaks, adjustments and
judicious reinterpretations, that the basic idea can be adapted to, or wrapped around,
just about anything and everything.

This wrap/adapt process comes at a price. With the best will in the world, we can’t
help but wonder what marketing managers make of a concept that sees profound

6 The still-unresolved definitional debates around long-established marketing constructs
like “involvement”, “loyalty”, “satisfaction”, “branding” and even “marketing” itself
are reminders that definitions are not set in stone. This issue is even more problematic
in Service-Dominant Logic, which relies on a core term that is already encrusted with
interpretive barnacles. When the lack of linguistic consensus over ancillary terms is also
taken into account, then it is clear that the meaning of SDL will always be unavoidably
slippery.
differences between “service” and “services”, or draws deeply meaningful distinctions between difficult-to-distinguish notions like “operand” and “operant”. Given practitioners’ already low opinion of academia’s output (Tapp 2005), we suspect that our latest “great white hope” isn’t going to improve our standing any, let alone change managers’ minds. If anything, SDL will reinforce the belief that academic research is no use to anyone and, while marketing scholarship’s need for usefulness can and indeed should be debated (Hackley 2009), alienating an important stakeholder at a time when hard questions are being asked about management education generally (Khurana 2007) is not only unwise but potentially suicidal. We need all the friends we can get these days. SDL will not make us any. On the contrary, SDL is turning us into the Seriously Deluded Lovers of scholarship. V&L are making a frog out of a prince. It’ll take more than a kiss to change things.

**FINITE INCANTATEM**

Poetic licence is rarely sanctioned by the academic marketing community. Yet it requires very little poetic licence to infer that the Harry Potter phenomenon is SDL writ large. That is to say, the incredible rise of Service-Dominant Logic is not dissimilar to Harry Potter fervour. The speed of its uptake, the enthusiasm of its admirers, the controversy it has provoked, the contention that it contains “nothing new”, the claim that it is all hype no heft, the paradigm-shifting character of its arrival (just as Rowling reinvented kid-lit, so too V&L reimagined marketing scholarship), the intricate language games it has initiated (for “quidditch” and “muggles” read “operand” and “use value”), together indicate that SDL is the scholarly equivalent of Harry Potter, loved and loathed in equal measure.

Despite all the talk about Service-Dominant Logic, empirical interrogations of SDL’s premises remain few and far between (see Blazevic and Lievens 2008; Brodie, Pels and Saren 2006). This paper has attempted to assess SDL’s empirical utility. As we have seen, the Harry Potter craze is not only broadly compatible with SDL – relational, co-created, service delivering – but that it also highlights some of the difficulties associated with V&L’s concept. Our longitudinal study of the boy wizard brand reveals that the transition from goods-dominant to service-dominant logic is much more ambiguous, more nebulous, more fractious than spokespersons for SDL imply. This does not mean that the idea is managerially worthless, it means that the magical transformation SDL promises is closer to smoke and mirrors than many of its proponents proclaim.

**OBLIVIATE**


ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND CORRESPONDENCE

**Stephen Brown** is Professor of Marketing Research at the University of Ulster. Best known for *Postmodern Marketing*, he has written numerous books including *Fail Better, Free Gift Inside*, *The Marketing Code* and *Wizard: Harry Potter’s Brand Magic*. 
**Corresponding author:** Professor Stephen Brown, Department of Marketing, Entrepreneurship and Strategy, Ulster Business School, University of Ulster, Jordanstown, Co. Antrim, BT37 0QB, Northern Ireland, UK.

T +44 28 9036 6130  
E sfx.brown@ulster.ac.uk

*Anthony Patterson* is a senior lecturer in marketing at the University of Liverpool. His teaching includes marketing theory, qualitative marketing research and critical perspectives in marketing. Patterson’s research projects have investigated book marketing, theme pubs, text messaging and speed dating. His articles have been published in *Journal of Marketing Management*, *Marketing Theory* and *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, among many others.

Anthony Patterson, Senior Lecturer, Management School, University of Liverpool, Chatham Street, Liverpool, L69 7ZH, UK.

T +44 151 795 3817  
E a.patterson@liverpool.ac.uk