

Alive but #Cancelled? The Public's Response to the Controversial Author

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Abstract

Academici als James English, John Frow en Wenche Ommundsen hebben in hun onderzoek gesuggereerd dat naast Hollywood-sterren ook auteurs tegenwoordig gezien kunnen worden als volwaardige *celebrities*. Zeker nu sociale media een steeds grotere rol spelen in onze perceptie van bekende artiesten, worden ook uitingen van auteurs via verschillende mediaplatforms regelmatig onder de loep genomen. De sociaalmaatschappelijke verantwoordelijkheid die wordt toegedicht aan beroemdheden met een noemenswaardig platform is groot en concepten als “wokeness” en “cancel culture” worden langzaam diepewortelde onderdelen van het Westerse sociale klimaat.

In deze scriptie wordt onderzocht hoe het publiek zich uit wanneer een auteur zich schuldig maakt aan het doen van uitspraken die in deze tijd door velen als sociaal onwenselijk worden gezien. Er is een overvloed aan voorbeelden van auteurs die op artistiek vlak hooggewaardeerd werden maar er discriminerende of mogelijk kwetsende opvattingen op nahielden, maar in deze scriptie wordt gekeken naar eigentijdse casussen. De reacties op controverses veroorzaakt door auteurs J.K. Rowling en Lionel Shriver zullen onderzocht worden, en hierbij zal gezocht worden naar opvattingen van het publiek over hun auteurschap en de morele implicaties van de consumptie van hun werk. Hierbij zullen concepten zoals fan-cultuur, het al dan niet loskoppelen van auteur en werk, en bottom-up censuur aan bod komen en zal worden aangetoond dat de *celebrity* van een auteur van grote invloed is op de reacties op diens controversiële gedrag en dat de beroemde auteur een reactie opwekt die niet alleen kwantitatief heviger is, maar ook qua reprobation, emotie, en duur.

Keywords: Lionel Shriver; J.K. Rowling; literary celebrity; wokeness; cancel culture; Death of the Author; transphobia; cultural appropriation

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Introduction

“[C]ensoriousness is spreading more widely in our culture: an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty.” – *A Letter on Justice and Open Debate*¹

In this excerpt from the open letter “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate” published in *Harper’s Magazine* in July 2020, a crucial aspect of the contemporary debate around free speech is addressed. The letter was signed by 150 public figures, among them authors such as Margaret Atwood, Malcolm Gladwell and, J.K. Rowling, who publicly denounced the “restriction of debate” that they feel can be observed in contemporary society. Several of the signatories have been the subject of public controversy after comments they made had caused offence and were severely criticised. Controversies like these are far from uncommon in today’s online social climate. Numerous celebrities and renowned authors have become the subject of the (social) media’s criticism due to what was perceived as undesirable behaviour or objectionable opinions.

Author Margaret Atwood, for example, was fiercely criticised on social media in 2018, after expressing her concerns about the emerging #MeToo movement. She voiced her apprehensions about the movement in an article for *The Globe and Mail*. While she acknowledged that the legal system had proved insufficient for victims of sexual abuse, she stated: “If the legal system is bypassed because it is seen as ineffectual, what will take its place?”. She likened instances of sexual harassment allegations to the Salem Witch Trials, “in which a person was guilty because accused, since the rules of evidence were such that you could not be found innocent.”² The response on social media was substantial and many called to “cancel” the author.³ The condemnation of authors who have offended the public does not,

¹ 150 signatories, “A Letter on Justice and Open Debate”, *Harper’s Magazine*, Harper’s Magazine Foundation, July 7 2020. <https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/>

² Margaret Atwood, “Am I a Bad Feminist?”, *The Globe and Mail*, January 13, 2018. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/am-i-a-bad-feminist/article37591823/>

³ Ashifa Kassam, “Margaret Atwood faces feminist backlash on social media over #MeToo”, *The Guardian*, 15 Jan 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/15/margaret-atwood-feminist-backlash-metoo>

however, only revolve around “new” comments or opinions. In December 2020, family of late children’s author Roald Dahl came out with an apologetic statement regarding the author’s antisemitic comments. The author was still being criticised severely over his offensive statements and even companies were still deciding against commemorating him because of the pain he caused.⁴ Despite the author having passed away in 1990, the popularity of his work endures and his estate remains a lucrative source of income for his beneficiaries, which might be one of the reasons that the family felt it necessary to condemn Dahl’s statements. The examples of these types of controversy are countless and raise the question of whether the public is actually trying to censor those with unfavourable opinions. Are people calling for boycotts and trying to “restrict free speech”, or is the public merely trying to hold authors accountable and challenging them in a way they might not be used to? Questions such as these form a relevant starting point for a discussion of the main topic of this thesis: the public’s response to the controversial author.

In this thesis I will analyse the public’s response to commotion caused by authors and aim to establish what views on authorship and the consumption of the work of a controversial author are put forward by the online public. The cases I will study are the controversies sparked by statements made by authors J.K. Rowling and Lionel Shriver.

In the case of J.K Rowling, the commotion started in December 2019, when the author took to Twitter to defend Maya Forstater, who lost her employment at The Centre of Global Development over comments about transgender people that were deemed offensive.⁵ Rowling was heavily criticised for her defence of Forstater at the time, but the backlash against her seemingly transphobic statements reached its peak in June of 2020. On the sixth of that month, Rowling used Twitter to criticise the phrase “people who menstruate” saying that it portrays a denial of biological sex, which erases “the lived reality of women globally”⁶. In response to the immense amount of criticism Rowling received over her comments, she published a 3,600 word essay on her website further explaining her statements and views on the transgender community. The essay includes explanations emphasising Rowling’s wish for

⁴ See for example: Simon Murphy, “Royal Mint rejected Dahl coin over antisemitic views”, *The Guardian*, 6 Nov, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/06/royal-mint-roald-dahl-coin-antisemitic-views>

⁵ Sophie Lewis, "J.K. Rowling facing backlash after supporting researcher who lost her job over transphobic tweets". *CBS News*. 19 December 2019. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jk-rowling-maya-forstater-backlash-support-researcher-fired-over-transphobic-tweets-2019-12-19/>

⁶ J.K. Rowling on *Twitter*, 7 June, 2020, https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1269389298664701952?s=20

transgender women to be safe but also touches upon subjects such as bathrooms that are, according to Rowling, now open to “any and all men who wish to come inside” since transgender people can use them, and how phrases like “menstruators” or “people with vulvas” which are used to refer to people who were assigned female at birth in an inclusive way, can be seen as dehumanising.⁷ The essay was met with mixed responses. While a great deal of people felt Rowling only amplified her offensive ideas about the transgender community, others praised her defence, even resulting in a nomination for the BBC Russell Prize for Best Writing.⁸

Since the case of J.K. Rowling is remarkable in many ways and the response incomparable in size it is impossible to find another case study that provides a comparable corpus. This makes Lionel Shriver a worthy subject for a second case. Shriver is an author who is well-known for expressing her unapologetic opinions on many controversial topics. It is public knowledge that she does not mince her words and on several occasions has the author been subject of public dissatisfaction. This provides the opportunity to look at several of her controversies and still establish a sizable corpus. The best-known case of Shriver causing a public kerfuffle happened in September of 2016. In July 2016, after the publication of her novel *The Mandibles*, Shriver was accused of cultural appropriation. The Latino and African-American characters in her book were depicted in a way that was seen as racist and inappropriate by some critics.⁹ In September, Shriver was a keynote speaker at the Brisbane Writer’s Festival and made several controversial statements in her speech.¹⁰ Shriver’s main point was that authors should be free to write about whomever they want; the perspective of a story is up to writers to decide and can include any background, gender or race that they

⁷ J.K. Rowling, “J.K. Rowling Writes about Her Reasons for Speaking out on Sex and Gender Issues”, *J.K. Rowling Official Website*, 10 June 2020. <https://www.jkrowling.com/opinions/j-k-rowling-writes-about-her-reasons-for-speaking-out-on-sex-and-gender-issues/>

⁸ N.a. "The winners:2020 Russell prize for best writing". *BBC*. 21 December 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-55350905>

⁹ See for example: Ken Kalfus. ““The Mandibles,” by Lionel Shriver: A vision of America in a downward spiral”, *Washington Post*, July 12, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/the-mandibles-by-lionel-shriver-a-vision-of-america-in-a-downward-spiral/2016/07/12/24d1025e-4851-11e6-bdb9-701687974517_story.html

¹⁰ Transcript: "Lionel Shriver's full speech: 'I hope the concept of cultural appropriation is a passing fad'". *The Guardian*. September 13, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/13/lionel-shrivers-full-speech-i-hope-the-concept-of-cultural-appropriation-is-a-passing-fad>

choose. Many people disagreed with this statement. Shriver also faced a significant amount of backlash in 2018, when she spoke out against publisher Penguin Random House's aims to represent a more diverse collective of authors, claiming that they were prioritising diversity over the quality of writing. Shriver blatantly suggested that:

If an agent submits a manuscript written by a gay transgender Caribbean who dropped out of school at seven and powers around town on a mobility scooter, it will be published, whether or not said manuscript is an incoherent, tedious, meandering and insensible pile of mixed-paper recycling.¹¹

The statement was perceived as graceless and discriminatory, but this did not stop Shriver from continuing to use her column as a place for unapologetic bluntness. In 2019, Shriver wrote about “the n-word”, stating it was difficult to avoid the word as well as ridiculous and “embarrassing” to go out of one’s way to avoid its usage: “Right-on whites are thus anxious about visiting Niger, ordering a negroni, niggling over a bill or sniggering at a joke, assuming anyone in the surround of the vauntingly virtuous ever makes one.”¹² This shameless candour can also be observed in interviews with Shriver. In 2018, she was interviewed by journalist Bhavya Dore for *Open* magazine. In this interview Shriver bluntly stated that it was time to end the #MeToo movement. The social movement, which has existed since 2006 but saw a surge in fame in 2017, is concerned with sexual abuse and harassment against women. Shriver argued that the discussion about it became too indiscriminate and made women sound “whiny, oversensitive, weak and unable to handle themselves.”¹³ She was echoing comments she made a month prior at the Cheltenham Literature Festival, where she also argued that the “divisive” movement had “run its course”.¹⁴

¹¹ ¹¹ Lionel Shriver, “Penguin wants its authors to represent all UK minorities. What about just publishing good books?”, *The Spectator*, 9 June 2018. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/penguin-wants-its-authors-to-represent-all-uk-minorities-what-about-just-publishing-good-books->

¹² Lionel Shriver, “Why I hate the n-word”, *The Spectator*, 2 March, 2019. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-i-hate-the-n-word->

¹³ Bhavya Dore, “‘MeToo has made women weak and whiny,’ says Lionel Shriver”, *Open: The Magazine*, 21 November 2018. <https://openthemagazine.com/columns/open-conversation/metoo-has-made-women-weak-and-whiny-says-lionel-shriver/>

¹⁴ David Sanderson, “Cheltenham Literature Festival: Lionel Shriver says we need to talk about ending ‘divisive’ #MeToo”, *The Times*, 15 October 2018. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/cheltenham-literature-festival-we-need-to-talk-about-ending-divisive-metoo-says-shriver-522lhxcgj?region=global>

Research Question

The objective to further explore these cases in combination with the relatively new concepts like “cancel culture” and “wokeness” has led to the following research question:

How do online responses to controversial (political) statements made by the authors J.K Rowling and Lionel Shrive reflect and relate to ideas about authorship and the consumption of the work of the controversial author?

The significant, new developments in Western society and the way the public deals with objectionable views have made this question relevant. The concept of “cancel-culture” and terms like “wokeness”, which *Merriam Webster* defines as “aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)”¹⁵, emerged only in the last few years and are clearly changing the conceptions and expectations that exist about artists as well as other public figures. In addition to this I think this topic contributes to longstanding research that has been conducted over time about the position of the author and the expectations and views of the public on authorship and the author as a person, artist or celebrity. The aforementioned development in our social climate that has been observable in the past few years has likely changed the expectations of the author and the position of the author in the literary field as well.

Hypothesis

In a world in which it becomes increasingly important to have a certain level of social awareness and celebrities with vast platforms are generally expected to be politically correct, it is hard to have a controversial¹⁶ opinion without at least sparking some debate. It is expected that authors are treated like celebrities in this case and will have caused a great deal of displeasure and even outrage by making claims that are not seen as socially just. It is also likely that a connection between the work of the author and their controversial statements will be made. There are many instances where people call to no longer consume the work of an artist because they have made statements that were not seen as acceptable or “woke”.

¹⁵ Merriam Webster, s.v. “Woke”, accessed 8 February, 2021. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/woke>

¹⁶ Whether or not a political statement is controversial is, of course, subjective. Controversial in this case refers to the fact that a statement was perceived as controversial by the public and sparked a significant amount of response from the public.

Examples of this are abundant and range from heavy consequences for widely disapproved behaviour, such as the recent boycott of actor Armie Hammer, who was accused of sending disturbing messages to women, including sexually intimidating statements and statements confessing to cannibalistic desires, to smaller and less supported boycotts such as that of singer and film director Sia, who did not cast an autistic actress to portray an autistic girl in her film “Music”. This leads to the hypothesis that the public expects a certain level of social awareness from authors and that the statements made by the authors in the case studies in this thesis were met with great amounts of critical response, which will likely include statements about concepts such as boycotting the author’s work and/or cancelling the author.

Prior Research

The amount of research that has been done on this particular subject is complicated to establish since this research topic contains a few different areas of research. The first topic I will be dealing with in this thesis is the notion of “cancel culture”, because the concept often connects the undesirable¹⁷ opinions that an artist expresses, with the work they produce and whether the consumption of it is still acceptable. While some research has been conducted on the concept of cancel culture, it is very limited. Most studies on this topic were carried out in the field of communication studies and establish on which websites the concept occurs, whether these platforms suffice as a means of communication about such sensitive topics, and what facets of the digital podiums either facilitate or restrict the ability to discuss controversial social and political topics.

An article that does define the concept and its implications is “DRAG THEM: A brief etymology of so-called “cancel culture” by M. Clark. Clark explores the term cancel culture and defines it as a form of digital accountability¹⁸. An article by Pippa Norris, published in August 2020, also discusses the concept in an interesting way. In “Closed Minds? Is a “cancel culture” stifling Academic Freedom and Intellectual Debate in Political Science”, Norris raises the question whether we are being limited in our freedom because of cancel culture. At first sight this might not seem very relevant to this research, but it does reveal something interesting. The conclusion that can be drawn from Norris’ research states that politically left-wing people mainly answer her question negatively, while right-wing people did feel like

¹⁷ Undesirable to the blogger/social media user.

¹⁸ Meredith D. Clark, “DRAG THEM: A brief etymology of so-called “cancel culture”, *Communication and the Public* 5 (3-4), p. 88.

their freedom was being limited.¹⁹ Especially since several authors have spoken out about cancel culture, including one of the authors that will be studied in this thesis, this fact is quite interesting. Cancel culture is often related to “leftist” belief and left-wing communities, since it is largely concerned with concepts of social justice and equality, which are often seen as “leftist” concerns.

Articles about separating the art from the artist are superfluous but they are often written in an unacademic setting. Essays, opinion pieces, and an abundance of polemic exists about the topic, but often including subjective, personal opinions on the matter. There are few examples of people incorporating the question in contemporary academic writing. This does not mean it does not exist. In her article “Must Be Love On The Brain? Feminist responses to the “can we separate artwork from artist” question in the era of #MeToo popular feminisms” researcher Robin James, for example, discusses the topic.²⁰ She emphasises how the debate on whether it is possible to separate beloved art from the controversial artist goes further back than just the last few decades, but remains relevant to this day.

No academic material has been published about controversial authors in the digital age, so it will be valuable to see how the public deals with controversies that mainly take place online. The combination of the contemporary case studies, the incorporation of modern media and the currently growing importance of social awareness and concepts like “cancel culture” makes this a research that investigates relatively unfamiliar and unexplored territory.

¹⁹ Pippa Norris. “Closed Minds? Is a “cancel culture” stifling Academic Freedom and Intellectual Debate in Political Science”, August 2020, *HSK WORKING PAPER NO. RWP: 20-025*.

²⁰ Robin James, “Must Be Love On The Brain? Feminist responses to the “can we separate artwork from artist” question in the era of #MeToo popular feminisms”. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, Volume 32, Number 4 (2020): pp. 75-76.

Theoretical Frame

Since there is no existing theoretical frame that is directly applicable to a research that deals with so many new and modern concepts this thesis will borrow from several existing theoretical concepts to establish a framework in which the case studies can be analysed.

First and foremost the theory concerning literary celebrity will be used. It is worth acknowledging that the conversation around the author and authorship has changed over the last few years, in line with the growing importance of modern media. It has become significantly easier for readers to access information about the author, and authors have significantly bigger platforms since the rise of social media. With literature related content appearing on all the big social websites, authors cannot ignore the influence of concepts like BookTube and Bookstagram²¹ on the amount of attention a book receives and many renowned authors are now active on social media.²² In addition to this the public has become much more inclined to view authors, not just as authors, but as proper celebrities. In “Literary Authorship and Celebrity Culture” James English and John Frow address this phenomenon. Popular authors are not “simply” novelists anymore,

they are *celebrity novelists*, novelists whose public personae, whose “personalities,” whose “real-life” stories have become objects of special fascination and intense scrutiny, effectively dominating the reception of their work. And their celebrity, predicated as it is on images and narratives in the media, has increasingly become an object of fervent media attention in its own right, serving as a major nodal point for discussion and debate about the condition of British literature.²³

In a world in which celebrities are more visible than ever, it is not hard to establish why some authors have gained a celebrity status, and why this changes the perception of them. But as English and Frow state: it is not just the authors, but also the reception of their work that is influenced by this celebrity status. This then raises the question whether in this day and age, in which responsibility and accountability seem to become increasingly highly valued concepts by the general public, ideas of scholars like Barthes and Foucault are still applicable.

That is why these concepts concerning the position of the author will form the second

²¹ Social media users often create their own platforms for e.g. their literature related content. Hashtags like #Bookstagram or pages called “BookTube” are popular amongst young readers.

²² See for example: Kate Gwynne, “10 Authors Who Excel On The Internet”, *The Guardian*, 11 May 2015: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/may/11/10-authors-who-excel-on-the-internet>, accessed 28 feb 2021.

²³ James English, John Frow. “Literary Authorship and Celebrity Culture”. *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), p. 40.

most important part of the theoretical framework of this thesis. It comes as no surprise that a lot has been written on this topic throughout the course of history. The position of the author and how authorship is perceived by the public have been everchanging concepts. One of the most prominent and crucial advancements in this field was the essay written by Roland Barthes called “The Death of the Author”. In this essay the French philosopher and literary theorist argues for viewing the author’s intentions or biographical context and the work of that author as unrelated. Earlier it was common practice to consider the creator’s background and (perceived) intentions as a crucial part of the interpretation of a text. Barthes argued that author and reader should be separated and that the reader’s own interpretation of a text should be dominant. A selection of Barthes’ ideas on authorship were echoed in the 1969 essay written by Michel Foucault “What is an Author?”, and for a long time the ideas put forward by Barthes were only challenged unsuccessfully.²⁴ Sean Burke, however, wholeheartedly disagrees with Barthes and wrote about this in his 2008 publication *The Death and Return of the Author*. In this work he explains the ideas on authorship of scholars such as Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault. He describes their key ideas and what they denoted about authors and their relations to texts and readers. Burke himself does not agree with the concept of “the death of the author” and demonstrates that the concept of the author has always remained “active”, even when scholars like Barthes tried to argue that the author was dead. He asserts authorial intent and responsibility, and argues that one could even consider authors to be responsible for unintended readings of their works. In a publication that followed, “The Responsibilities of the Writer”, he further investigates this subject and talks about the ethics of writing and the responsibilities that an author should or should not take on. Burke argues that authors should be aware of possible interpretations or implications that their work brings about, rather than just considering whether what is inside a text is ethical. This is a view on authorship that the public might have today, since the public seems to want to hold authors accountable for statements that they deem to be unethical. Burke is not the only 21st century scholar who continued to challenge an incorporate Barthes’ idea about the position of the author. In 2001, for example, J.C. Carlier argued that “The Death of the Author” was not to be taken literally but was meant to be ironic. According to Carlier “The Death of the Author” should be viewed as work of “fine satiric fiction”²⁵. Carlier implies that those who welcomed a literal interpretation of Barthes’ theory moved in theoretical circles where anti-democratic

²⁴ Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 20.

²⁵ J. C. Carlier and C. T. Watts, “Roland Barthes's Resurrection of the Author and Redemption of Biography”, *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 4, (2000), pp. 392

and anti-rational notions were rather widespread. He used misogynists as an example for this claim: “[C]overt misogynists may have felt inclined to welcome a theory which, by denying the role of the author, erases the gender of the literary work’s producer, and thus subverts feminist endeavours.”²⁶ Some people also refer to Barthes’ concept when discussing the separation of art and artist. Whereas Barthes mainly discussed the author’s authority about the interpretation of the text, many people also choose to apply his words to justify consuming or appreciating the art of an artist that is controversial.

Thirdly, there is the aforementioned concept of “cancel culture”. As can be concluded from the literary review this is a concept that has yet to be fully explored in academic settings. The concept of denouncing an authors or their work because of their (political) views, however, is far from revolutionary. It is as old as literature itself; “cancel culture” may be seen as a form of censorship that originated in a particular historical context. The most common form of censorship is censoring a work because of its contents. This often means that the author of the work expresses criticism towards a specific institution of power, such as the government or the church. Examples of this include the banning of all government-critical works during the apartheid-regime in South-Africa²⁷, and the suppression of all anti-Catholic literature that has been a recurring factor in many Catholic countries, and had existed as long as Catholicism itself.²⁸ People were censored for their undesirable opinions but a crucial difference with “cancel culture” is that the works were banned because of their contents, not merely because of the person who wrote them. This does not mean, however, that the latter has never occurred. Examples of literature being banned solely because of the background or views of its author include the burning of all books by emigrant, Marxist or Soviet authors during the Nazi-regime in Germany²⁹, and one of the most famous examples; the boycott of the works of Oscar Wilde because of his homosexuality that took place in many European countries.³⁰ Although there are obvious moral differences between the censorship of the past

²⁶ Ibid, 393.

²⁷ Margreet de Lange, *The Muzzled Muse: Literature and Censorship in South Africa* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co, 1997), 155.

²⁸ Margaret Bald, *Literature Suppressed on Religious Grounds* (New York: Facts On File, 2006), xi.

²⁹ Guenter Lewy, *Harmful and Undesirable: Book Censorship in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 85.

³⁰ Stefano Evangelista, *The Reception of Oscar Wilde in Europe*, (London: Continuum, 2010), 16-17, 48, 172.

and the censorship that can be observed in contemporary online debates, they share the aim to prevent the spread of ideas that they deem harmful or incorrect. A crucial distinction that can be made between these cases and the concept of “cancel culture” that we can observe in modern day society, however, is the bottom-up structure of the censorship. The censorship that was implemented under the control of authoritarian regimes is characterised by a “top-down” structure in which the relatively small group of people in a position of power tried to boycott or even ban a certain body of work for ideas that were in contrast with the views and ideals of that institution. The institution was often much more powerful than the author being censored. In the case of “cancel culture” an opposite structure can be observed, where the general public rejects the work of a certain author because of opinions that are in contrast with the views and ideals of the public. The authors that the public is trying to boycott often have a significantly bigger platform to express their views than the ones affected by the author’s views. This is why celebrities and authors who are cancelled will not always face significant consequences and the boycotts or aims to “deplatform” the author only show effectiveness when vast numbers of people agree with the idea that the views of said author are wrong or offensive.

Lastly, this thesis will incorporate elements of fan studies; another notion that plays a large, but often overlooked, role when discussing the perception of an author. When an author has a sizable fandom the response towards this author’s controversy could be heavily influenced by fans. This could have a positive outcome for the author, i.e. the fans defend their idol, but it could also have a negative effect, i.e. the fans feel betrayed because the author fell off a pedestal for them. Fan studies have often been considered a neglected topic but a fair amount of academic research has been conducted on the subject, and notable recurring concept is the idea of “fan activism”. Lucy Bennet, for example, identifies civic power as one of the four key areas of fandom.³¹ Just because the conversation about a topic takes place within a fandom does not mean the fans automatically agree with their idol(s), and there have been many instances of fans protesting against decisions made by idols, producers, networks, etc., when they disagree with a choice or action.³² Henry Jenkins has also discussed the topic of fan activism and has even written about the *Harry Potter* fandom in this context.³³

³¹ Lucy Bennett, “Tracing Textual Poachers: Reflections on the development of fan studies and digital fandom”, *The Journal of Fandom Studies*. 2.10., (2014): p. 10.

³² Ibid, 10.

³³ Henry Jenkins, ““Cultural Acupuncture”: Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance”, *Popular Media Cultures* (2015): n.p.

Especially since the emergence of new media, it has become easier for fans to connect³⁴, and people have even argued this gives them the opportunity to exact a great deal of influence.³⁵

Method

The corpus that will be analysed consists of professional articles, blogs and tweets about the controversies caused by the authors and a close reading of those entries should determine how the general public has reacted to them. The aim of this research is to find out if the public's opinions are in line with what the theorists have written and why or why not. The opinions will be compared to each other as well as to opinions across different platforms to see if there are any significant differences between opinions expressed in formal or informal pieces of writing.

Due to the enormous quantity of tweets it is impossible to analyse all those that have been posted about a certain controversy. It is therefore crucial to look at tweets in more ways than just by close reading a part of the possible corpus. To gain insight in what was tweeted and when, Twitter's API for Academic Research will be used. Being authorised to use this application provides a researcher with access to Twitter's full archive and the ability to retrieve data based on real-time tweets as well as all historical tweets. In this thesis Twitter's API will mainly be used for quantitative research. The Twitter data that will be accessed and analysed are:

- Time-based series:
The volume of tweets over time for specific keywords (or keyword bundles over time)
→ Primarily: the name of the author in question
- Content metrics:
The most prominent keywords or *hashtags* used within a certain time frame (trending topics) and how often they are used
- Follower counts
Did an author lose (or possibly gain) a significant amount followers after certain incidents?

On the basis of counting and tracking, there are several observations that can be made:

³⁴ Ruth A. Deller, "A Decade in the Life of Online Fan Communities" in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Fan Cultures*, ed. Andreas Widholm, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2014): 259.

³⁵ Matt Hills, "Not just another powerless elite?: When media fans become subcultural celebrities", in *Framing Celebrity: New directions in celebrity cultures*, ed. Su Holmes, Sean Redmond (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 116.

- overall distribution of keywords:
 - what are frequent keyword patterns for specific time periods?
- occurrence over time:
 - the rise and fall of keywords or keyword bundles over time
- co-occurrence:
 - interrelationships between keywords or phrases

The quantitative approaches made possible by the Twitter API serve mainly as a valuable starting point. A further qualitative analysis and (unautomated) interpretation of tweets according to their themes and attitudes which cannot clearly be identified by automated means alone, will be required. Content analysis of tweets will be carried out by paying attention to key ideas, views and opinions that are put forward in a random selection of tweets. Additionally, it might be relevant to use the quantitative data to track the extent to which certain terms or phrases occur together (for example: J.K Rowling and *Harry Potter*) and then analyse why and how the public chooses to combine them in their responses to the controversy.

Scope

This thesis consists of two main chapters. Chapter 1 will concern J.K. Rowling and the controversy surrounding her tweets about trans women. Online articles, blogposts and tweets about the subject will be analysed. Chapter 2 will concern Lionel Shriver and the controversy surrounding her speech at the Brisbane Writer's Festival, her columns about Penguin Random House and the N-word, and her controversial statements about the Me Too-movement.

Posts and articles that are critical of these authors, their opinions, or their authorship which were posted before the controversies in question arose will not be included in this thesis. Both authors have been subject to criticism in other instances. An example of this are the allegations of cultural appropriation against Rowling, for including sacred native American traditions in her description of her fictional world of magic on her website *Pottermore*³⁶. It evoked resentment but the reaction did not match the extent of the response towards her comments about the trans community.

³⁶ Alison Flood, "JK Rowling under fire for writing about 'Native American wizards'", *The Guardian*, 9 Mar 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/mar/09/jk-rowling-under-fire-for-appropriating-navajo-tradition-history-of-magic-in-north-america-pottermore>

Chapter 1: J.K. Rowling

This chapter is the first of two case studies in which online responses towards an author who has sparked controversy will be closely analysed. In this chapter the commotion surrounding J.K Rowling and her comments about transgender women will be the topic of discussion. The first section will briefly summarise Rowling's reputation and earlier controversies as well as generally explain the controversy that will be dealt with in this chapter. Subchapter 1.2 will examine news articles that have been written about the Rowling controversy in the week following her tweet. In section 1.3 professional opinion pieces and blogs written by amateur writers about the controversy will be analysed. Section 1.4 will deal with the reactions towards Rowling's controversial statements on social media platform Twitter. The key findings of these three subchapters will be discussed in section 1.5. Due to the vastness of the response that Rowling received this chapter will provide relevant insight into which topics are addressed when an author makes a controversial statements and how the general public relates the controversial statements to the author's work. Because of recent events that were worth mentioning in this thesis, chapter 1 has an appendix which reports on current developments regarding this controversy and its aftermath.

1.1 The Rowling Controversy

Joanne (J.K.) Rowling is a renowned author, primarily known for writing the immensely popular *Harry Potter* series. The children's book series has been met with a great deal of praise, critical acclaim and its positive impacts have even been the subject of academic research.³⁷ Rowling, however, is not solely known for her successful oeuvre, the author has often used her platform to express her political views, concerning British or international politics and often also concerning women's rights and the female experience. The vast majority of her political statements has never been met with a significant amount of criticism, and Rowling has even been praised for several of her contributions to contemporary debates.³⁸

This does not mean, however, that Rowling's reputation has been free of blemish. The author did, for example, receive a significant amount of criticism over her choice to use her

³⁷ For example: Valerie Frankel (ed.), *Teaching With Harry Potter: Essays on Classroom Wizardry from Elementary School to College*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company Inc. Publishers, 2013).

³⁸ See for example: n.a. "J.K. Rowling presented with Ripple of Hope Award". *JK Rowling Official Website*, Harry Potter and Fantastic Beasts Publishing. 13 December, 2019. <https://www.jkrowling.com/j-k-rowling-presented-with-robert-f-kennedy-human-rights-ripple-of-hope-award/>

Twitter account to announce that one of the crucial characters in her best-known work identified as a gay man, without this ever being mentioned or hinted towards in the work itself. Members and allies of the LGBTQ+ community spoke out against what they deemed a failed attempt at queer representation, accusing Rowling of trying to be credited for inclusivity while simultaneously not losing any of the commercial profit that incorporating a queer character in the series might have hindered. This “phenomenon of creators extratextually ‘outing’ their characters as a kind of substitute for leaving overtly queer characters out of their text”³⁹ is seen as a form of queerbaiting; a term used to describe the largely condemned act of hinting towards or otherwise suggesting the existence of a queer character or relationship without it being confirmed or explicit enough to pose the danger of offending more conservative networks, viewers or readers.⁴⁰

Additionally, Rowling was accused of cultural appropriation in 2014, when she incorporated sacred elements of Native American culture as part of her fictional world building on her website *Pottermore*. The website was designed as an online platform where fans of the book series and/or its film adaptations could enjoy an interactive literary, audio-visual, gaming, and social experience⁴¹ while Rowling kept expanding her fictional world in order to keep the so-called “digital generation” interested in the series. Her fictional “History of Magic in North America” was serialised on the platform and appeared in weekly instalments, combining Rowling’s imaginativeness with existing, cultural elements of Native American culture. The usage of an ancient and sacred culture as a basis for a work of fiction about wizards, and cherry-picking the elements of this culture that were a convenient contribution to Rowling’s own fantasy-narrative was met with condemnation from within the Native-American community and scholars studying Native-American Culture(s).⁴²

Rowling also became the topic of frantic discussion for allowing actor Johnny Depp to play one of the lead characters in the *Fantastic Beast* films, a film series written by Rowling

³⁹ Elizabeth Bridges, ‘A genealogy of queerbaiting: Legal codes, production codes, “bury your gays” and “The 100 mess”’, *Journal of Fandom Studies*, 6:2, (2018): p. 119.

⁴⁰ Joseph Brennan, “Queerbaiting: The ‘Playful’ Possibilities of Homoeroticism.” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (March 2018): p. 190-91.

⁴¹ Vera Cuntz-Leng, “Potterless: Pottermore and the Pitfalls of Transmedia Storytelling?” *Wyrd Con Companion Book 2013*. Ed. Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek. (Orange, CA: Wyrd Con, 2013), 68.

⁴² Aleksandra Szczodrowski, “Native Americans in J.K. Rowling’s “History of Magic in North America” on Pottermore.” In Gymnich et. al. (eds.) *“Harry - yer a wizard”. Exploring J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter Universe*. (Baden-Baden: Tectum, 2017): 205-214.

and set in the *Harry Potter* universe.⁴³ Many called for a boycott of Depp, since the actor was facing domestic abuse allegations made by his ex-wife Amber Heard. Rowling's compliance with the contracting of the actor was seen as a form of betrayal towards the people who have always admired her for speaking out for women's rights.

The first mention of Rowling's possibly disapproving stance on transgender rights surfaced in 2018. She was questioned and critiqued for liking a tweet in which the author referred to transgender women as "men in dresses," which one of her representatives later dismissed as a "middle-aged moment",⁴⁴ implying that Rowling liked the tweet by accident. Criticism grew when, in 2019, Rowling took to Twitter to openly support and defend Maya Forstater. Forstater was topic of public debate when she lost her job at the Central London Employment Tribunal after publicly questioning government plans to make it easier for people with gender dysphoria to legally change their gender. Forstater included offensive comments describing transgender women as men in her statements, and was terminated from her function because of these gender-exclusive views. Rowling publicly sided with Forstater and used the hashtag #IStandWithMaya to express her support. This event marks the start of the public's criticism of Rowling's stance on gender politics and gender inclusion.

This criticism reached its peak in June 2020 after Rowling's most infamous tweet. In the tweet Rowling reacts to an article by media platform Devex titled "Creating a more equal post-COVID-19 world for people who menstruate". She criticised the website's usage of the phrase "people who menstruate" by saying "'People who menstruate.' I'm sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?"⁴⁵. The problem people found with this tweet is that it seems to be condemning the company's attempt to use gender inclusive language. Individuals who were assigned the female sex at birth but identify as men can also menstruate, but that does not make them women. Rowling's response either deliberately or unconsciously excluded this group of people altogether. This, combined with Rowling's earlier defence of Forstater, led to public outrage. The tweet, which, as of May 2021, has received over 29,4K replies, sparked the most criticism that the author has ever been on the receiving end of. Rowling tried to defend herself after the

⁴³ Biba Kang, "JK Rowling endorsed Johnny Depp and betrayed millions of women". *The Independent*. 8 December, 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/jk-rowling-johnny-depp-endorsement-betray-millions-women-crimes-grindelwald-harry-potter-domestic-violence-a8099051.html>

⁴⁴ Martin Coulter, "Twitter outrage as Harry Potter author JK Rowling likes tweet calling transgender women 'men in dresses'", *Evening Standard*. 22 March 2018. <https://www.standard.co.uk/showbiz/celebrity-news/twitter-outrage-as-harry-potter-author-jk-rowling-likes-tweet-calling-transgender-women-men-in-dresses-a3797026.html>

⁴⁵ J.K. Rowling on *Twitter*, 6 June 2020, https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1269382518362509313

backlash, starting with three tweets the following day. The tweets do not include a mention of the outrage or any form of acknowledgement towards the people who were upset, but rather function as a means for Rowling to further expand on her views:

If sex isn't real, there's no same-sex attraction. If sex isn't real, the lived reality of women globally is erased. I know and love trans people, but erasing the concept of sex removes the ability of many to meaningfully discuss their lives. It isn't hate to speak the truth.⁴⁶

The idea that women like me, who've been empathetic to trans people for decades, feeling kinship because they're vulnerable in the same way as women - ie, to male violence - 'hate' trans people because they think sex is real and has lived consequences - is a nonsense.⁴⁷

I respect every trans person's right to live any way that feels authentic and comfortable to them. I'd march with you if you were discriminated against on the basis of being trans. At the same time, my life has been shaped by being female. I do not believe it's hateful to say so.⁴⁸

On June 10th, 2020, Rowling posted a lengthy letter on her own website titled "J.K. Rowling Writes about Her Reasons for Speaking out on Sex and Gender Issues". The letter contained Rowling's main points of concern regarding the gender inclusivity discussion. She included, for example, a paragraph about women being uncomfortable by inclusive language such as "people who menstruate" since it reduces their identity as women to just the fact that they menstruate. Another paragraph deals with Rowling's opinion on 'women's only' spaces, like public bathrooms, that are supposed to serve as safe spaces that men cannot enter. Rowling claims that allowing "anyone" to enter these bathrooms, denies women their right to a safe 'women's only' space. The follow-up tweets and the letter did not help Rowling to gain more sympathy and the condemnation of her and her opinions grew.

In her latest novel, published in September 2020 under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith, Rowling included the character of Dennis, a serial-killer who disguises as a woman to dupe his victims. The inclusion of a story line like this was interpreted as another attack on

⁴⁶ J.K. Rowling on *Twitter*, 7 June, 2020, https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1269389298664701952

⁴⁷ J.K. Rowling on *Twitter*, 7 June, 2020, https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1269406094595588096

⁴⁸ J.K. Rowling on *Twitter*, 7 June, 2020, https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1269407862234775552

transgender or non-binary people and a reaffirmation of Rowling's adverse views on it.⁴⁹ This added to the controversy around Rowling and her stance on transgender rights, and is one of the reasons it continues to this day.

1.2 Online articles

In the week following June 6th, 2020 a great deal of articles on J.K. Rowling appeared on online news platforms. The majority of these articles focussed on merely explaining the controversy and informing the reader about the incident, without passing any form of judgement or expressing personal opinions on the matter. A selection from these articles form the primary sources for the first section of this research.

The corpus that will be used for this section of the research will consist of 120 articles. The articles are made up of all English Google results for search term J. K. Rowling that date from 6 June, 2020 up until 13 June, 2020. This search brought up 151 results, excluding the links that the search engine automatically filters out, such as websites that do not comply with the European data protection law, and articles that are reposted and are recognised as

duplicate results. These results included twelve webpages that were not related to the ongoing controversy, two articles that cannot be accessed outside of their own region and one article that only consisted of Tweets (and no original content). With these results omitted there are 136 articles left that appeared within a week of Rowling's first tweet on the subject and all report on the controversy it caused. Sixteen of these 136 final results are not deemed useful for this part of the research since they can be defined as "long-read", opinion pieces. These pieces, though posted on news- and entertainment websites are not concerned with informing the reader on the events that transpired but rather with putting forward a single author's opinion on



⁴⁹ Canela López, "JK Rowling's new book reportedly features a male killer who wears wig and a woman's coat to dupe some of his victims", *Insider*. 24 September, 2020. <https://www.insider.com/jk-rowlings-book-features-a-cross-dressing-male-serial-killer-2020-9>

the matter. Since this part of the research focusses on articles with the former aim, the opinion pieces have been omitted from these results as well.

The articles all report on the tweet written by Rowling on June 6th, 2020 (see image 1)⁵⁰. The articles published at the beginning of this week mostly only include this tweet, people's issue with it and mention of the reaction it sparked up until that point. Articles published later that week often include a report on more reactions to the author's statement and mention of the essay that Rowling published on her website on June 10th. While it speaks for itself that articles that were published later are able to provide a more complete and multifaceted view on the matter, this does not mean that the early articles provide insufficient content to be part of this section of research. Many of the trends and similarities that were observed across all articles, were included in articles from early in the week in a comparable amount as from later that week.

All 120 articles wrote about the tweet in question and aimed to present objective reasoning as to why it sparked controversy and what the controversy entailed, though some articles were more successful in their objectivity than others.

1.2.1 The Potter Universe

One of the most common recurring elements that could be observed was the mention of the cast of the *Harry Potter* film series. The journalists reporting on the news of Rowling's controversy deemed it important to mention how other artists related to the Harry Potter franchise responded to the statements made by Rowling. A total of 50 of the 120 articles mentioned one of the actors who appeared in the film adaptations in their article about Rowling. Actors Daniel Radcliffe (title character), Emma Watson (Hermione Granger in *Harry Potter* film series), Eddie Redmayne (lead actor in the *Fantastic Beasts* films) and Katie Leung (Cho Chang in *Harry Potter* film series) appeared most frequently. Radcliffe, the most mentioned, issued his statement about Rowling's tweets on the website of *The Trevor Project*, a non-profit organisation focussed on the mental health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ youth. His statement, which he opened by saying: "I realize that certain press outlets will probably want to paint this as in-fighting between J.K. Rowling and myself, but that is really

⁵⁰ J.K. Rowling on *Twitter*, 6 June, 2020, https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1269382518362509313

not what this is about, nor is it what's important right now,"⁵¹ included comments of disapproval of Rowling's views, claiming they contradict the fact that trans women are in fact women. While it is only logical that websites that bring news want to highlight several perspectives on a matter, it is remarkable that they chose to include the statements made by actors that are directly related to the franchise of Rowling's own brain child. The assumption that readers who care about what J.K. Rowling has said will inevitably also care about what Daniel Radcliffe has to say about the same subject, implies that people will likely associate Rowling's comments directly with the *Harry Potter* universe, and would want to know what the rest of the people associated with this universe thinks about the matter.

Another indication of this direct connection is the mention of *Harry Potter* fans and fan groups. In 23 of the articles there was mention of either *Harry Potter* fan groups or individual fans and their reaction to Rowling. Roughly half of these statements mentioned the same *Harry Potter* Fan Group and how they were among the first to publicly denounce Rowling's offensive statements and shared a link to an organisation that helps black trans women to survive. Several articles also mentioned how *Potter* fans started donation trends, such as calculating the costs of the entire book series and donating that amount to charities committed to supporting transgender people.

The connections made between Rowling and *Harry Potter* are so strong that it sometimes seems like the journalists aim to defend the *Harry Potter* universe, even when Rowling is under fire. The mention of the actors and fan groups seem to serve as a means to reassure fans that it is still okay to like Rowling's creation. This idea is strengthened by the mention of Radcliffe's statement on the *Harry Potter* books. In his aforementioned publication Radcliffe addressed *Potter* fans and told them: "To all the people who now feel that their experience of the books has been tarnished or diminished, I am deeply sorry for the pain these comments have caused you. I really hope that you don't entirely lose what was valuable in these stories to you."⁵² Radcliffe proceeds by listing examples of possible themes that readers could have observed in Rowling's works as well as interpretations that he considers valid and untouchable. He concludes his essay by stating:

⁵¹ Daniel Radcliffe, "Daniel Radcliffe Responds to J.K. Rowling's Tweets on Gender Identity", *The Trevor Project*, 8 June 2020, <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/2020/06/08/daniel-radcliffe-responds-to-j-k-rowlings-tweets-on-gender-identity/>

⁵² Ibid.

[I]f you found anything in these stories that resonated with you and helped you at any time in your life — then that is between you and the book that you read, and it is sacred. And in my opinion nobody can touch that. It means to you what it means to you and I hope that these comments will not taint that too much.⁵³

Eleven of the articles mention this part of his statement and journalists were unafraid to quote Radcliffe and incorporate his words of reassurance. Four articles also mentioned how renowned LGBT-advocacy organisation GLAAD directly addressed *Potter* fans in their statement saying they stand by the trans people who were hurt by Rowling's words "especially those Harry Potter fans hurt by her inaccurate and cruel tweets."⁵⁴

The connection does not stop there, however. Some articles go even further and delve into the content of the *Harry Potter* book series to make sense of Rowling's statements. Eighteen of the articles mentioned plot related or thematic elements from the famous book series and related them to Rowling's statements. The articles that adopted this approach can be categorised into two subsections; the articles that took positive elements from the series and related them to the controversy (6 equalling 5% of all articles) and the articles that used problematic elements in Rowling's work for the same purpose (12 equalling 10% of all articles). It is remarkable that more platforms chose to write about the flaws they observe in the texts Rowling has written than to write about past problems that Rowling, as a person, has caused. The *Harry Potter* series and its content are used as a form of ammunition to prove Rowling wrong by both its lovers and its opponents. While one author claims that "One look at Rowling's Harry Potter franchise can tell you how embarrassingly undiverse it is"⁵⁵ to prove that inclusivity has never been Rowling's strong suit, another reports a general feeling bordering on betrayal about the author "whose books gave kids hope that they could work

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Hannah Yasharoff. "J.K. Rowling reveals she's a sexual assault survivor; Emma Watson reacts to trans comments", USA TODAY, 7 June, 2020. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/celebrities/2020/06/07/j-k-rowling-harry-potter-author-slammed-transphobic-comments/3169833001/>

⁵⁵ Shubhangi Misra, "JK Rowling has always been tone-deaf. Just look at the Harry Potter Universe", *The Print*, 10 June 2020, <https://theprint.in/opinion/pov/jk-rowling-has-always-been-tone-deaf-just-look-at-the-harry-potter-universe/439064/>

together to create a better world”⁵⁶ presenting views that are offensive to so many. One article includes a quote stating that Rowling is "undermin[ing] the core values of the Harry Potter series”⁵⁷, which is regarded as an additional source of disappointment. The articles highlighting the negative side of Rowling’s stories often mentioned the character of Cho Chang. Chang is one of the few non-white characters in the book series and serves mainly as the title character’s first love interest. The girl is not given much of a personality and many see her name as stereotypical and offensive. This led to the character name Cho Chang to trend on Twitter shortly after Rowling’s first statement on the 6th of June, another indication of how prevalent the instant connection between Rowling and the book series is.

Frow and English have stated that the treatment of authors as literary celebrities is “effectively dominating the reception of their work”⁵⁸, an idea that is also echoed in the articles written about Rowling. Many journalists reporting on the Rowling controversy took on the task of defending the *Harry Potter* universe, reassuring its fans that the franchise is still loveable, which can be said to imply that they are refuting an assumed general understanding that Rowling’s comments made the series unlovable. This, in combination with the comments about the negative elements of the *Harry Potter* story and the character name Cho Chang being a heavily debated topic at the moment of the controversy’s peak, clearly point to a strong relation between the opinions on the author and opinions on the author’s work. Wenche Ommundsen emphasises this connection as well in her article “Sex, soap and sainthood: Beginning to theorise literary celebrity”. She explains how the “celebrification” of an author by the public includes methods that “typically include features such as: a preference for personality over writing”⁵⁹, meaning that the “defence” of the Potter universe that returned in several of the articles was justified and needed. The public has “a tendency to confuse art and life”⁶⁰, which can be observed in the parallels that journalists aimed to find between Rowling’s offensive statements and the negative elements they have found in her works. Ommundsen continues by saying that the “celebrification” causes the public to tend to:

⁵⁶ Jordan Moreau, “Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling gets backlash over anti-trans tweets” *Chicago Tribune*, Tribune Publishing, 7 June 2020, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-ent--20200607-flk46pk5zbatbcrqoxgfnjmm4u-story.html>

⁵⁷ Jennifer Bisset, “JK Rowling responds to criticism of transgender comments”, *CNet*, 10 June 2020, <https://www.cnet.com/news/jk-rowling-responds-to-criticism-of-transgender-comments/>

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Wenche Ommundsen, ‘Sex, soap and sainthood: Beginning to theorise literary celebrity’, *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, vol. 3, (2004): p. 52.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 52.

“see writers as seamless extensions of their texts; an intense investment in the body of the writer, in their sexual exploits and preferences and in the details of their daily lives; a desire to recreate the writer as national icon or as representative or spokesperson for particular cultural groups; an emphasis on performance, whether that of writers themselves or others on their behalf; a willingness to elevate the writer to the position of spiritual guru, but also to see her or him as the most intimate companion: kindred spirit, best friend, confidant.”⁶¹

Several of these elements can be observed in the treatment of Rowling and her controversial views. A great deal of value is attributed to Rowling’s standpoints and opinions and when they do not conform to the norms and standards of what the public views as socially just, this incites a significant amount of indignation. The journalists who focussed on the positive themes and morals that were part of the *Harry Potter* stories even indicated that Rowling’s comments bordered on being a form of betrayal to fans of the series.

Whether this indicates that the author is indeed, not dead, remains to be seen. In one of her other works, Ommundsen touches upon the discrepancies between the notion of “The Death of the Author” and the idea of the literary celebrity, noting that the two concepts actually were initiated around the same time: “It is a frequently noted irony that the celebrity author gained prominence at the same time as the 'death of the author' was proclaimed with great authority from within academic literary criticism (Barthes 1977).”⁶² She does, however, disagree with the implication that the concepts are in any way contradictory or even mutually exclusive: “It is important to remember that Roland Barthes' author' was only ever an ideological construct, a metaphor for the perceived 'centre' of textual authority, a critical tool for limiting the play of the signifier and the text's capacity for meaning.”⁶³ This does not mean that the author is completely disregarded or his or her actions are deemed as unimportant, it simply implies that the author does not have the ultimate authority on the meaning of a text. This is an argument that was made in the 70s by Michel Foucault. When Foucault examined the role and the position of the author he Barthes' theory simply shifts the centre of authority rather than dismissing the author as a whole.⁶⁴ This ties in with what could be observed in the

⁶¹ Ibid, 52.

⁶² Wenche Ommundsen. "From the Altar to the Market-Place and Back Again: Understanding Literary Celebrity." In *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2007), 247.

⁶³ Ibid, 247.

⁶⁴ Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 1977): p. 128-129.

articles about Rowling as well, because even though Rowling was alive and well, this did not mean that her views were necessary for people to attribute meaning to her works. People either thought she was offensive to begin with, which Rowling supposedly does not agree with, or people thought the work was worth defending because of the meaning they attributed to it themselves, regardless of what Rowling thinks or has to say.

1.2.2 (Literary) Celebrity

Another noteworthy, recurring phenomenon was the mention of other celebrities. Many websites included statements made by other public figures without much, if any, authority on the matter to inform readers about *their* views on the controversy. This has become a common practice in modern media. Eighteen of the articles included celebrity reactions, most commonly those of TV host Jonathan van Ness, actress Jameela Jamil, and actress Mara Wilson, all of whom are known for being outspoken activists. The authors of the articles chose to give voice to Rowling's critics in the form of other celebrities, indicating that they believe that readers who are interested in J.K. Rowling's view on trans rights, will likely be interested in celebrity opinions on this subject in general. One of these articles actually compared Rowling's statements to those of other celebrities who have made offensive comments towards transgender people or the LGBTQ+ community.⁶⁵ The fact that journalists writing these news articles treat Rowling as a celebrity and focus on her public personae already tells us something about the position of the author today. It is clear that Rowling is treated as a proper celebrity. Her personality, views and opinions are deemed as very important to the public, who have long stopped caring solely about Rowling's work. Here we see an example of what Frow and English have argued about authors being seen as "*celebrity novelists*, novelists whose public personae, whose "personalities," whose "real-life" stories have become objects of special fascination and intense scrutiny."⁶⁶ This is confirmed by the way the journalists chose to write about Rowling as a person with a vast platform and many fans, even comparing and contrasting her views with those of other, fairly randomly chosen, non-literary celebrities. Six of the articles also mentioned Rowling's vast platform and the

⁶⁵ Frank Olito, "J.K. Rowling is being criticized for her tweets about transgender people. Here are 10 other celebrities who've been called out for anti-LGBTQ comments." *Business Insider*, 9 June, 2020. <https://www.businessinsider.nl/celebrities-called-out-for-anti-lgbtq-comments-2020-6/>

⁶⁶ James English, John Frow. "Literary Authorship and Celebrity Culture". *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), p. 40.

responsibility that comes with it, many of them quoting people who have spoken out against Rowling for not taking this responsibility. Making statements like: “many trans-activists have further criticised Rowling for using her platform to make the lives of trans men and women more difficult.”⁶⁷ and including quotes such as “You have power and influence. Why would you do this? What does it achieve?”⁶⁸.

1.2.3 Alive and Cancelled

The fact that Rowling has an enormous platform and is expected to make use of this in a responsible way did not just result in comments pointing out that her behaviour proved she did not take this responsibility. While most of the articles were purely informative rather than argumentative, many of them still hinted towards their own disapproval of Rowling’s behaviour and some even included statements on the idea of “deplatforming” her. The concept of “cancelling” was not explicitly addressed in a significant number of articles but the idea of Rowling and her work no longer deserving the attention and respect that they are given was mentioned. Three of the articles used another quote from organisation GLAAD, which made a statement implying that readers should stay away from Rowling and her work: ““Looking for some summer reading?” the group wrote on Twitter. “‘Percy Jackson’ author Rick Riordan isn’t transphobic.””⁶⁹.

Three other articles included statements made by Warner Bros, the company that, with the *Harry Potter* film rights, *Harry Potter* theme parks and studio tours, and the production of the *Fantastic Beasts* films is responsible for a significant amount of Rowling’s work opportunity and income. Wanting their reaction to Rowling’s statements can be linked to the instances of people being boycotted or excluded from work projects for their offensive and undesirable behaviour. Even though Warner Bros chose to continue their work relationship with Rowling, journalists found it relevant to include them stating their disapproval in the news reports on the controversy.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Mehera Bonner, “J. K. Rowling Faces Backlash for Transphobic Tweets About Menstruation”, *Cosmopolitan*, Inc. 7 June, 2020. <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/celebs/a32791417/jk-rowling-transphobic-tweets/>

⁶⁹ Jenny Gross, “Harry Potter author faces backlash after taking aim at reference to ‘people who menstruate’”, *Irish Times*. 8 June, 2020. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/jk-rowling-under-fire-by-lgbtq-groups-over-anti-transgender-tweets-1.4273497>

A few articles took it a step further. Two of the journalists incorporated the opinion that Rowling was “destroying her legacy” with her comments and two others quoted *Washington Post* journalist Molly Roberts who deemed this latest controversy as proof that it was time for Rowling to “put down the pen”⁷⁰.

1.3 Opinion Pieces

The number of opinion pieces written about Rowling’s controversy was significantly smaller than the total of news articles written about the subject, with the amateur “blogs” written about the incident being surprisingly low in quantity. After searching on the more popular blogging websites such as *Wordpress*, *Blogger*, *Tumblr* and *Weebly*, only a few pieces of writing worth analysing surfaced. Those results, in combination with the two blogs on the websites medium.com and junkee.com provided a total of ten blogs of 750 words or more, written on J.K. Rowling and the controversy in question, by amateur writers, in the months after her tweet on June 6th. This result, in combination with the small amount of opinion pieces that appeared when looking at articles on professional websites, led me to establish a corpus for this part of the research consisting of ten professional opinion pieces and ten amateur opinion pieces. The amateur articles are published on personal blog spaces and websites, while the professional articles are published on professional news and entertainment websites. Opinion pieces on Rowling which were published on professional websites exist in greater numbers and were far easier to find than blogs on personal websites. To match the quantities, however, only ten professional opinion pieces were selected. Most of those already came up in the initial search for articles on professional websites and the remaining ones also surfaced prominently when using Google to search for articles about Rowling published in June 2020.

The twenty results all include mentions of the controversy and also touch upon the subject of authorship or Rowling’s reputation as an author. Several pieces of writing that came up in this search referred to the controversy caused by Rowling but only dealt with it in an introductory manner, to then continue to talk about the dangers that members of the trans

⁷⁰ N.a. “JK Rowling responds to trans tweets criticism”, *BBC*. 10 June, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-53002557>

community face or why comments such as Rowling's are deemed offensive or dangerous by experts. While these articles are both important and interesting, they do not provide any information relevant for this particular research, since no opinion on Rowling or her position as an author was expressed in them, other than her being incorrect in her statements about transgender individuals.

1.3.1 Blogs

The most striking observation that can be made when reading the blogs about the Rowling controversy is that they nearly all deal with the same subject matter: loving the *Harry Potter* books. All but one of the bloggers shared their personal experience with and love for the book series and many attempted to give their readers advice on how to deal with being a fan of the book series and the author making statements that hurt so many. This leads to another noteworthy similarity: all the bloggers disagreed with the statements made by Rowling and deemed them offensive and transphobic.

The bloggers touched upon some of the same subjects that the journalists reporting on the controversy incorporated in their articles, though the blogs provided the opportunity to be more subjective and the space to elaborate on personal opinions on the matter. The bloggers seem divided on the topic of *Harry Potter* and whether it is still morally just to love and support the series. The question of whether it is still okay to enjoy the book series or franchise is explicitly answered in 70% of the blogs, with four of them answering the question positively (40% in total). One of the authors stated that it was absolutely necessary to say goodbye to the beloved novels⁷¹, while two others leaned towards letting the series go, but left room for some grey area, with one of them stating that an official apology on behalf of Rowling, Warner Brothers and others was necessary⁷² and another saying that it is ultimately a personal choice for everyone and both decisions are understandable⁷³. The treatment of

⁷¹ Missprint, "We Need To Talk about J.K. Rowling and Harry Potter and Why it's Time to Say Goodbye to Both", *Wordpress*, 18 September, 2020. <https://missprint.wordpress.com/2020/09/18/we-need-to-talk-about-j-k-rowling-harry-potter-and-why-its-time-to-say-goodbye-to-both/>

⁷² Rori Porter. "How to Continue Being a Harry Potter Fan and a Trans Ally", *Medium*, Medium Corporation, 8 January, 2021, <https://roriporter.medium.com/how-to-continue-being-a-harry-potter-fan-and-a-trans-ally-c78746f18a9>.

⁷³ EveryFlavouredBean, "JK ROWLING HAS POSTED TRANSPHOBIC COMMENTS, Potter fans ask now what?", *Wordpress*, 13 June, 2020. <https://everyflavouredbean.wordpress.com/2020/06/13/jk-rowling-transphobia/>

Rowling and her work as a “seamless extension” (Ommundsen) of one another is present in the blogs and opinion articles even more than it seemed to be in the news articles. The writers sometimes even seemed to treat the author and her work as one and the same, implying that you have to either like or dislike both.

Half of the bloggers wrote about separating the art from the artists and to which extent they considered this to be fair or even possible. Two of them even mentioned “The Death of the Author”, with one stating that the concept is too easy⁷⁴, and another that the concept is too complicated to be completely disregarded or blindly used in this case.⁷⁵ The general consensus reached by the bloggers who will continue to love the *Harry Potter* series, is that they love the positive aspects they have found in the story too much to let this experience be blemished by the hurtful comments of the author. Two of the bloggers even quoted the aforementioned statement issued by Daniel Radcliffe on how readers should not lose that what they found valuable or enjoyable within the series.⁷⁶

The majority of the blog authors also found the *Harry Potter* fandom one of the reasons to remain a fan. The positive aspects of acceptance and inclusivity that the bloggers took away from the book series are, according to most (70%) of them reflected in the fandom and the support they experience there. A few of the authors even mentioned fan art, such as fanfiction, or recommended buying Potter merchandise from fans who sell theirs on Etsy (a website focussed on handmade items).⁷⁷

This recommendation followed statements of people declaring to no longer support Rowling financially in any way. Except for one of the bloggers stating that they will continue

⁷⁴ Society of Badgers, “J.K. Rowling and Transphobia”, *Tumblr*, 14 June 2020.

<https://societyofbadgers.tumblr.com/post/620935130401341440/jk-rowling-and-transphobia>

⁷⁵ EveryFlavouredBean, “JK ROWLING HAS POSTED TRANSPHOBIC COMMENTS, Potter fans ask now what?”, *Wordpress*, 13 June 2020. <https://everyflavouredbean.wordpress.com/2020/06/13/jk-rowling-transphobia/>

⁷⁶ Ibid.

&

HammockOfBooks, “On Reclaiming Harry Potter from Rowling and Separating the Artist from the Art”, *Wordpress*, 11 June 2020. <https://hammockofbooks.wordpress.com/2020/06/11/on-reclaiming-harry-potter-from-jk-rowling-and-separating-the-artist-from-the-art/>

⁷⁷ HammockOfBooks, “On Reclaiming Harry Potter from Rowling and Separating the Artist from the Art”, *Wordpress*, 11 June 2020. <https://hammockofbooks.wordpress.com/2020/06/11/on-reclaiming-harry-potter-from-jk-rowling-and-separating-the-artist-from-the-art/>

to purchase Rowling's work⁷⁸, the rest of them all seem to agree that they will refrain from endorsing the author monetarily. While most of them already own the book series and mention they are not planning on disposing of it, they do recommend others to either acquire the books second hand, lending them from a library, or purchasing them from stores who support trans-charities.

Three of the writers mentioned that they will continue to love the series in spite of negative elements that can be observed in the text. The bloggers touched upon various of the negative elements that were already mentioned in the articles (the character of Cho Chang, the lack of textual representation of minority groups) but a few were added. One of the bloggers mentioned how several ex-fans accused Rowling of using werewolves as a parallel for gay men with AIDS as well as including goblins as an offensive caricature of Jewish people.⁷⁹ Two of the blog authors mentioned how new problematic readings seemed to surface after Rowling published her statements about transgender people⁸⁰. So while it remains clear that Rowling's celebrity status and thus the connection the public makes between her and her work play a crucial part in the reaction that her comments evoked, the concept of "The Death of the Author" becomes less straightforward. Most people who wrote on the concept seem to be in favour of taking from Rowling's beloved works what is valuable to them, there is also a group of readers who insist on applying on Rowling's exclusionary views onto her works. Fans and journalist touch upon ethically irresponsible aspects of *Troubled Blood* as well as their beloved *Harry Potter* stories. The cross-dressing killer, the enslaved house-elves, the aids-analogy, the anti-Semitic caricatures: readers seem to recognise them more unambiguously than ever before. This concept, of attributing more responsibility to the writer of a certain work and holding them fully accountable for offensive readings of their work, rejects "The Death of the Author" but amplifies the theory put forward by Sean Burke in "The Responsibilities of the Writer". As stated in the introduction, Burke is known for exploring concepts of authorship, the ethics of writing and the responsibilities that an author should or

⁷⁸ The Issue With Red, "On Harry Potter, JK Rowling and being Trans", *Tumblr*, n.d. <https://the-issue-with-red.tumblr.com/post/621853622701080576/on-harry-potter-jk-rowling-and-being-trans>

⁷⁹ EveryFlavouredBean, "JK ROWLING HAS POSTED TRANSPHOBIC COMMENTS, Potter fans ask now what?", *Wordpress*, 13 June 2020. <https://everyflavouredbean.wordpress.com/2020/06/13/jk-rowling-transphobia/>

⁸⁰ Yanitta Lew, "Harry Potter is not Authorless: Support Queers while keeping Harry Potter in our lives", *Weebly*, 17 June 2020. <https://genzwrites.weebly.com/hot-topics/harry-potter-is-not-authorless-support-queers-while-keeping-harry-potter-in-our-lives>

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EveryFlavouredBean, "JK ROWLING HAS POSTED TRANSPHOBIC COMMENTS, Potter fans ask now what?", *Wordpress*, 13 June 2020. <https://everyflavouredbean.wordpress.com/2020/06/13/jk-rowling-transphobia/>

should not take on. Burke explores the ways in which authors should be aware of possibly negative interpretations or offensive implications that their work could cause. Burke mentions how it is an “ethically responsible” decision for an author to “hold[s] himself accountable for whatever (mis)readings are made of his work.”⁸¹

The blog authors all agreed that *Harry Potter* is not authorless. Three of the ten blogs included statements about people trying to forget the author, ignore the author, or attribute the work to someone else (e.g. Daniel Radcliffe), but they also mentioned how they disagreed with this manner of thinking. Rowling did write *Harry Potter* and her comments influence the way the fans (because they all are) will interact with the author and the series. Two of the bloggers declared they would no longer recommend the series to anyone, while two others used their blog to recommend books (comparable to *Harry Potter*) by other authors or work by transgender authors.

The opinions on whether J.K. Rowling deserved to be “cancelled” or de-platformed were dissimilar. Four of the bloggers mentioned the vastness of her platform and claimed she misused or even “abused”⁸² it, but none of them indicated that they wanted it to be taken from her completely. Two of them did mention the concept of “cancelling”, and while one said it was merely an initial reaction⁸³, the other mentioned he would not care either way, since the *Potter*-stories are what matter to him⁸⁴. A noteworthy observation, in fact, is that none of the bloggers mentioned any of Rowling’s other works and they all seemed to regard the works that Rowling wrote after *Harry Potter* or might still write in the future with a certain indifference.

1.3.2 Professional Opinion Pieces

The professional essays written on the Rowling controversy provided an expected combination of the informative qualities of the online articles and the personal standpoints that could be observed in the blogs. The writers, with the exception of one, all chose to write

⁸¹ Séan Burke, “The responsibilities of the writer.” *Literary Theory and Criticism. An Oxford Guide*. Ed. Patricia Waugh. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006.): p. 490.

⁸² Rori Porter. “How to Continue Being a Harry Potter Fan and a Trans Ally”, *Medium*, 8 January 2021, <https://roriporter.medium.com/how-to-continue-being-a-harry-potter-fan-and-a-trans-ally-c78746f18a9>.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ EveryFlavouredBean, “JK ROWLING HAS POSTED TRANSPHOBIC COMMENTS, Potter fans ask now what?”, *Wordpress*, 13 June 2020. <https://everyflavouredbean.wordpress.com/2020/06/13/jk-rowling-transphobia/>

about the *Harry Potter* series as well, with some of them even expressing an undying love for the franchise. An abundance of *Potter* jargon, references and metaphors cause the articles to feel almost as *Potter*-orientated as the blogs were. These journalists were almost equally intent on persuading or advising the readers on how to deal with their love for *Harry Potter* now that Rowling turned out to be a person who does not value inclusivity and acceptance as much as her books might have lead its readers to believe.

The positive aspects of the *Harry Potter* series are mentioned in 70% of the articles, mentioning how the books' emphasis on love and acceptance have led the readers to feel betrayed. This seems to be a recurring aspect throughout the entire corpus of responses. The fact that Rowling's opinions seem to contradict with the values that were put forward in her books appears to contribute to the validity of feelings of indignance towards her. One of the authors phrased this as: "Rowling's stance doesn't align with the core themes of the series that made her famous. That perceived inconsistency makes the instinct to "cancel" her entirely seem logical."⁸⁵ What remains unclear here, however, is whether "cancelling" also includes no longer consuming Rowling's work.

The concepts of "cancelling" and boycotting came up explicitly in half of the articles but there seem to be divergent views on it. While one of the authors reveals to have "boxed up" her *Potter* collection and calls to minimize the influence of controversial artists, another argues there has "never been a better time to read Rowling", since "the reflex to dismiss instead of to explore is one of the more unfortunate aspects of many current cultural debates"⁸⁶. The article titled "J.K. Rowling's Transphobia shows it's time to put down the pen" mentions Rowling's "fall from literary darlinghood" and describes how she is "upending her legacy"⁸⁷, but does not clearly state if and why Rowling should stop writing indefinitely.

⁸⁵ Margaret Lockyer, "Potter Fans Shouldn't 'Cancel' JK Rowling - They Should Confront Her Legacy", *CBR*, Cbr.com. 10 June, 2020. <https://www.cbr.com/potter-fans-shouldnt-cancel-jk-rowling-confront-her-legacy/>

⁸⁶ Alyssa Rosenberg, "Opinion: There has never been a better time to read J.K. Rowling's books" *The Washington Post*, The Washington Post. 24 September, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/09/24/jk-rowling-controversy-transgender-harry-potter-author-statements-women/>

⁸⁷ Molly Roberts, "Opinion: J.K. Rowling's transphobia shows it's time to put down the pen", *The Washington Post*, The Washington Post. 9 June, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/09/jk-rowlings-transphobia-shows-its-time-put-down-pen/>

The main points of concern for the journalists seem to be the same as those of the bloggers; first and foremost they feel the need to express that Rowling is wrong and transphobic, but they also want to present their views on the debate of whether liking *Harry Potter* is still justifiable. The separating the art from the artist discussion is a crucial part of the majority of these articles. Several of the authors mention other controversial artists such as H.P. Lovecraft and analyse how these situations were handled. Three of them mention the fandom trend of claiming the series was written by someone else or deeming it authorless, but, similar to the bloggers, they reject this idea. There is talk of how inclusive and accepting the *Harry Potter* fandom is, how the film actors in the Potter adaptations have thankfully, wholeheartedly disagreed with Rowling's statements, but also of how readers should take matters into their own hands and cling to the positive morals they saw reflected in the book series. One essayist calls fans of the series to acknowledge Rowling's flaws and to strive to do better than her, but proclaims that they can still enjoy the books series in spite of her: "The author is behaving as if she is completely separate from her work, so it makes sense that fans would follow her lead."⁸⁸ The question of the moral permissibility of enjoying the work of an artist who is, or seems to be, oppressive towards minorities occurred far more in the opinion pieces more so than it was in the news articles. This question, of to which extent it is possible to separate art and artist, is far from new. In her article "Must Be Love On The Brain? Feminist responses to the "can we separate artwork from artist" question in the era of #MeToo popular feminisms" popular culture researcher Robin James quotes feminist Norma Coates who wrote in 1997: "The Rolling Stones trouble me. As much as I love their music, it periodically grates against my sensibilities and produces spasms of feminist guilt."⁸⁹ The debate on how social awareness and the enjoyment the art of artists who seem to be socially unaware can coexist (if at all) dates back even further⁹⁰, but the question remains relevant and might even become increasingly relevant in today's social climate where inclusivity and equality seem to receive an ever-increasing amount of attention. It is also a question to which possible answers are highly subjective and therefore does not have a definitive solution, which can be observed in the discourse about Rowling as well. Merely one of the authors completely ignores the debate, while another turns the question around by stating that

⁸⁸ Margaret Lockyer, "Potter Fans Shouldn't 'Cancel' JK Rowling - They Should Confront Her Legacy", *CBR*, Cbr.com. 10 June, 2020. <https://www.cbr.com/potter-fans-shouldnt-cancel-jk-rowling-confront-her-legacy/>

⁸⁹ Robin James, "Must Be Love On The Brain? Feminist responses to the "can we separate artwork from artist" question in the era of #MeToo popular feminisms". *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, Volume 32, Number 4 (2020): pp. 75-76.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 75.

“[her] love for the franchise should not excuse the fact that the creator is a transphobic ‘feminist’”⁹¹.

It is also mentioned how the *Harry Potter* universe is flawed. The same examples that have been addressed before resurface in these articles. The extratextual outing of Dumbledore, the perceived racism and the anti-Semitism, the controversial aids-analogy⁹², and the incorporation of a form of slavery were all mentioned as examples of why the book series is imperfect and might show signs of a prejudiced and exclusionary author. Two of the articles also mentioned the character of Dennis in Rowling’s mystery novel *Troubled Blood*, and one of them called the interpretation of it as a way for Rowling to warn people about any man in women’s clothing incorrect. Fact remains that the writers of these articles, just like the bloggers and the journalist reporting on the controversy, regard the problematic interpretations of Rowling’s works as a relevant element of this discussion.

⁹¹ Cache Merriweather, “Opinion: J.K. Rowling refuses to listen to the transgender community in light of her transphobic comments and opinions”, *Metetea Media*, Metetea Media. January 12, 2021. <https://meteteamedia.org/19477/opinions/j-k-rowling-refuses-to-listen-to-the-transgender-community-in-light-of-her-transphobic-comments-and-opinions/>

⁹² This reading can be traced back to a misinterpretation of a statement by Rowling on how she used the character of Remus Lupin, who is a werewolf, to represent his condition as one that carries stigma, which was a metaphor for illnesses like HIV and AIDS and the wrongful treatment of those conditions that Rowling observed. The controversy has been addressed by Rowling and in several news outlets.

See for example: Jacob Stolworthy “K Rowling debunks 'new Harry Potter revelation' that Remus Lupin's condition is AIDs metaphor”, *The Independent*. Independent Digital News & Media Limited. 10 September 2016. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/jk-rowling-harry-potter-theory-debunked-remus-lupin-aids-david-thewlis-a7235751.html>

1.4 Twitter

How truly remarkable the case of the J.K. Rowling controversy is becomes especially clear when analysing the reactions to it on Twitter. Her full name was already tweeted 96,399 times at the peak of the controversy, but there are alternate spellings and ways of mentioning her that brought about even more results. In figure 1.1. you can see that the word Rowling was tweeted almost 900K times on 7 June, 2020. This is including the people who have used the “@” to tweet directly to Rowling’s Twitter account and also includes the hashtag #jkrowling, which also saw its all-time peak in usage in June of 2020 (figure 1.2.).

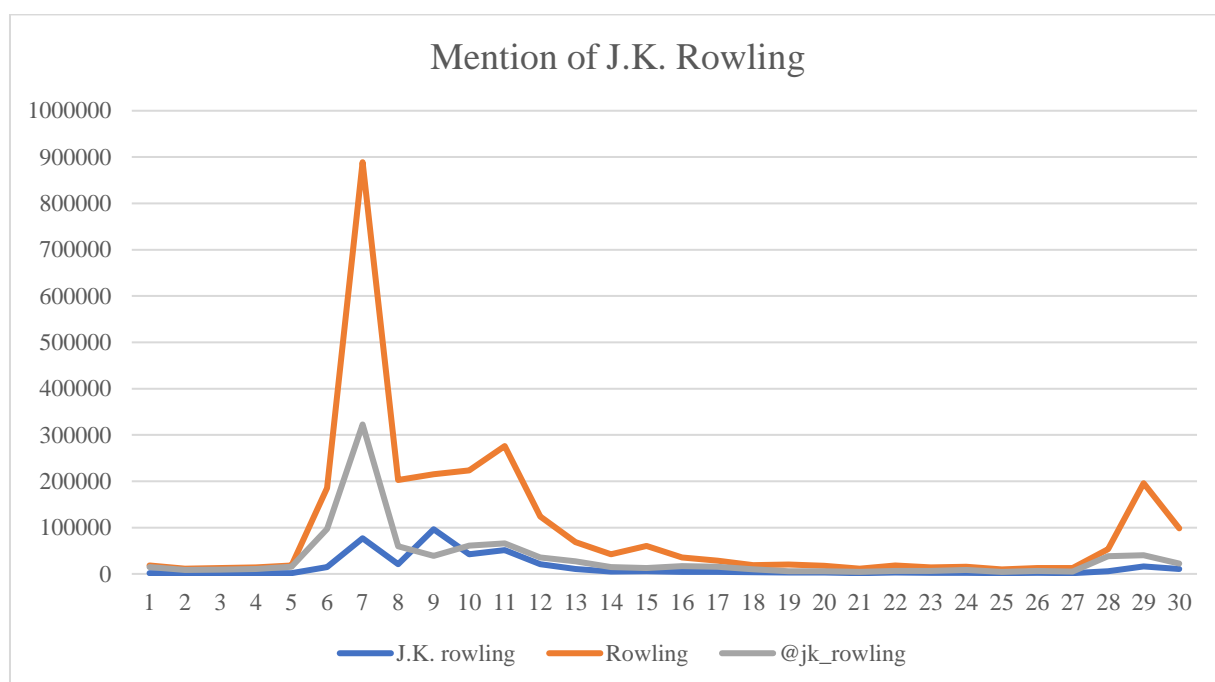


Figure 1.1 Different ways of mentioning J.K. Rowling and how often they occurred on Twitter in June 2020.

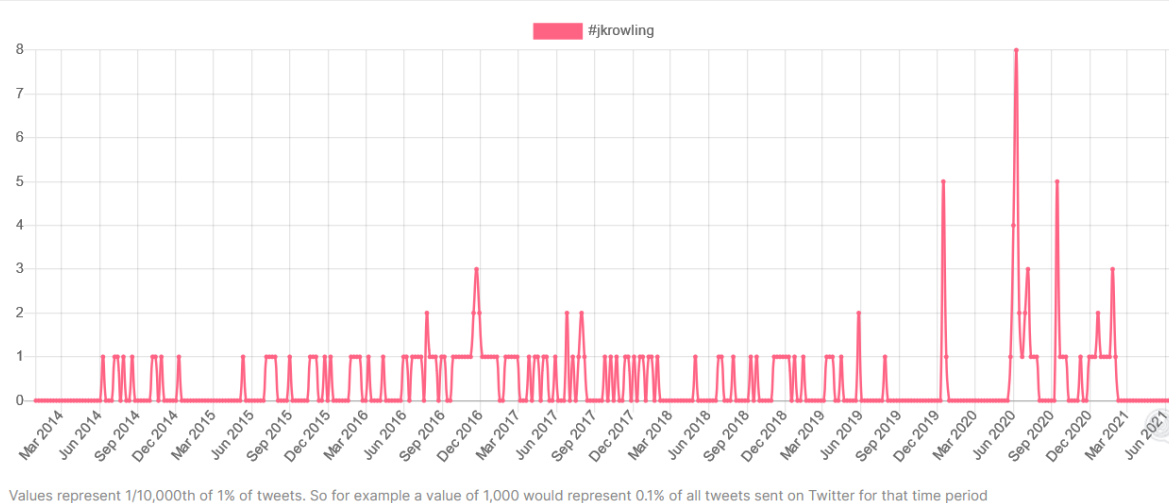


Figure 1.2 Usage of the hashtag #JKRowling and how often it was used over the years.

1.4.1 The Fandom

The magnitude of the response towards Rowling becomes especially clear on Twitter. And interestingly enough the majority of the criticism does not seem to come from people who disliked the author to begin with, but rather from her own fans. The success of the *Harry Potter* series is remarkable in many ways. It is known for being vast and vocal but scholars have also written about the fandom's so-called "fan activism", which also concerns itself with LGBTQ+ rights. In a 2014 research published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* Loris Vezzali et. al. even demonstrated that due to its content, fans of the book series were generally more accepting and tended to have more positive attitudes towards stigmatised and marginalised groups.⁹³ It is also known that among some fans these attitudes have even evolved into activism. In "'Cultural Acupuncture': Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance", Henry Jenkins writes about the Harry Potter Alliance, a non-profit organisation that is currently known under the name "Fandom Forward" and was initially run by fans of the Harry Potter series. Fan activism, as Jenkins defines it:

refers to forms of civic engagement and political participation that emerge from within fan culture itself, often in response to the shared interests of fans, often conducted through the infrastructure of existing fan practices and relationships, and often framed through metaphors that are drawn from popular and participatory culture.⁹⁴

Jenkins mentions how the contents of the *Harry Potter* books contributed to a general feeling of empowerment within the fandom that mobilised the founders of the organisation to work for a better world. This idea is echoed by Kevin R. Carriere in "'We Are Book Eight': Dialoging the collective imagination through literary fan activism", an article in which he mentions how the Harry Potter Alliance employs symbolic resources "to guide others to imagine the world as they see it."⁹⁵ Carriere also mentions LGTBQ+ rights as one of the most important causes that the alliance supports.⁹⁶ From the interviews with members of the foundation that Carriere incorporates in his research it becomes apparent that they have also

⁹³ Loris Vezzali et.al., "The greatest magic of Harry Potter: Reducing prejudice", *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 45.2, (2014): p. 116.

⁹⁴ Henry Jenkins, "'Cultural Acupuncture': Fan Activism and the Harry Potter Alliance", *Popular Media Cultures* (2015): p. 218-19.

⁹⁵ Kevin R Carriere, "'We Are Book Eight': Dialoging the collective imagination through literary fan activism", *Culture & Psychology* Vol. 24.4.(2018): p. 540.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 534.

fought for trans rights and one of them even used a *Harry Potter* storyline to frame the problem of trans discrimination: “scarier things than a trans person in the bathroom, there’s a giant snake.”⁹⁷ It might, therefore, not come as a surprise that feelings of disappointment and betrayal dominated the debate on Twitter.

1.4.2 Followers

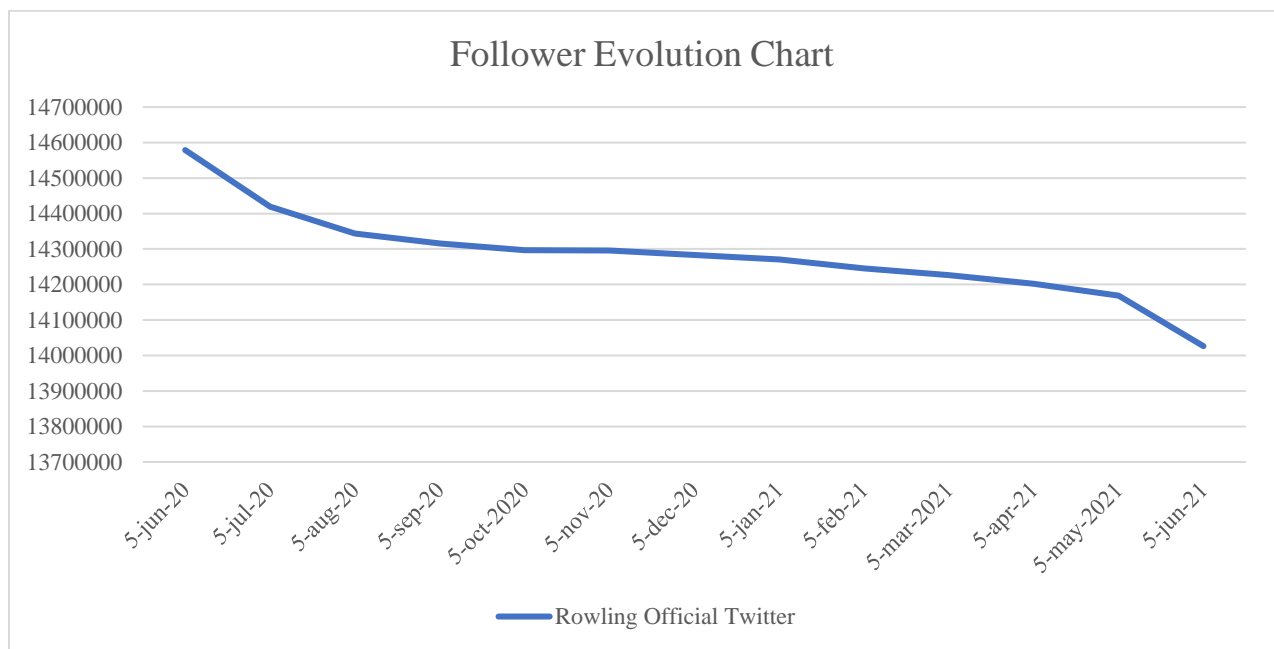


Figure 1.3 Follower count for J.K. Rowling’s official Twitter account from June 2020 until June 2021.

With over 14 million followers, J.K. Rowling is still the most followed author on Twitter. To put that in perspective: other Twitter users with a following of approximately 14 million include Hollywood actor Hugh Jackman and Grammy winning singer John Legend. This does not mean, however, that the controversy did not tarnish Rowling’s reputation. On 5 June 2020 the author neared 14,580,000 followers but after her controversial statements about trans women, her follower count rapidly declined. Rowling has currently lost over half a million followers since June 6 2020. Whereas her Twitter account had only grown before that date, J.K. Rowling’s Twitter account currently is estimated to grow by -437 followers per day. Since theory about literary celebrity has yet to respond to current developments in our social climate such as the usage of social media and the influence of an author’s online presence on commercial success or symbolic capital, it is unclear whether a loss of Twitter followers will exert a great deal of influence on Rowling’s book sales or her status.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 537.

1.4.3 Trending Topics

Because it is impossible to analyse a corpus of millions of tweets it is interesting to look at the topics that also made Twitter's "Trending" list on the days of the Rowling controversy.

Trending Topics are subjects, in the form of a word, cluster of words, or a hashtag (#), that experience a surge in popularity on Twitter for a limited duration of time. While the unparalleled numbers in the earlier statistics might already indicate that J.K. Rowling became a Trending Topic on Twitter on 7 June, 2020, the author's name was not the only phrase related to this controversy that made the list.

1.4.3.1 TERF

Trans-exclusionary radical feminist, or TERF for short, is a term used to call out those who claim to be feminists but merely practice a discriminatory form of feminism that is not intersectional and does not concern itself with the rights of transgender or otherwise gender-diverse women. Oxford Languages defines TERF as: "a feminist who excludes the rights of transgender women from their advocacy of women's rights"⁹⁸ and states it emerged in the 21st century. On 7 June 2020, the term TERF was a trending topic worldwide from 1AM until 7.30AM GMT. The term was almost exclusively used in tweets mentioning either J.K. Rowling's twitter account or her name. The fact that the term became a trending topic all over the world shows both the vastness of the response and the level of discontent that people felt towards Rowling.

⁹⁸ *Oxford Languages*, s.v. "TERF," accessed 30 April 2021. <https://www.lexico.com/definition/terf>



Image 2.2 (...) wrote Harry Potter trend.

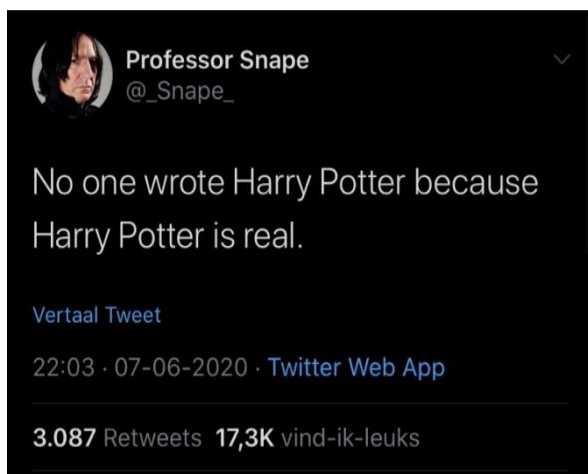


Image 1.3 A parody account for a Harry Potter character does not acknowledge Rowling as the author of the series

1.4.3.2 Who Wrote *Harry Potter*?

The term “Harry Potter” also became a trending topic on the 7th of June, in the United Kingdom as well as the United States. The franchise was, of course, mentioned to refer to *Harry Potter* author Rowling, but also because many fans of the book series chose to give voice to their mixed feelings about the beloved works now that the author outed herself as “transphobic”. Aside from the occasional happy Twitter user who proudly announced to have never read the books, the tweets including the phrase “Harry Potter” posted on 7 June show emotional responses from people who seem to be morally conflicted. To make light of this conflict fans soon started a trend where they implied another celebrity, their favourite book character or even no one wrote the *Harry Potter* book series (see image 1.2 and 1.3).

Not long after this trend emerged the character name Hermione became a trending topic in the United Kingdom and the United States because many fans stated that they henceforth chose to believe that the beloved character was responsible for writing the book series. It speaks for itself that none of the Twitter users actually believed this to be true, but they were publicly stating they would continue to love the work while protecting it from the negative connotations attached to Rowling.

1.4.3.3 Cho Chang

The strength of the connection between the author and her work becomes especially evident when considering that “Cho Chang” was one of the Trending Topics on Twitter in the United Kingdom and the United States on June 7th, 2020. As previously mentioned, the character of Cho Chang has been topic of debate for a long time. On the day of June 7th many Twitter users argued that the portrayal of the character of Cho Chang was an indication of the author’s lack of inclusivity. “If someone names a character "Cho Chang" it's a red flag let's remember this for next time”⁹⁹, wrote one of the angry Twitter users. The character’s name, which many people argue sounds like “ching chong”, is seen as a racist name. The name Cho is mostly used as a surname and can mainly be found in Korea. The surname Chang, on the other hand, is Chinese. Fans also argue that the character was not presented in a flattering manner and only serves as a potential love interest for the books male title character. The fact that the name was used so often that it became a trending topic in two countries in which Twitter is used very actively is especially striking. When witnessing unwanted behaviour from an author a great deal of people will connect this to this author’s work and the negative elements they found in the text(s).

⁹⁹ @BitterCheri on *Twitter*, 7 June, 2020. <https://twitter.com/BitterCheri/status/1269699970598424576?s=20>

1.4.4 Close Reading

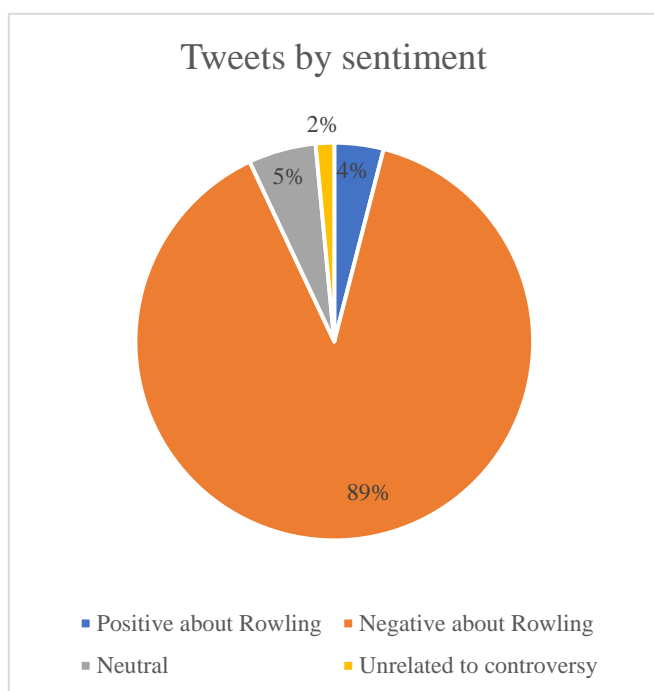


Figure 1.5 Tweets about the J.K Rowling controversy, posted on 7 June, 2020 by sentiment.

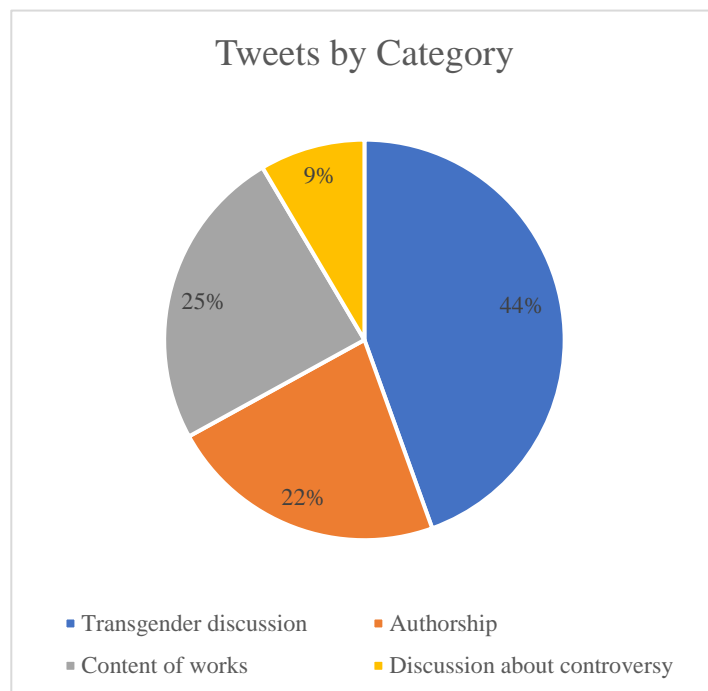


Figure 1.6 Tweets about the J.K Rowling controversy, posted on 7 June, 2020 by category.

When analysing a corpus of 200 randomly selected tweets mentioning the J.K. Rowling controversy, posted on 7 June 2020, it becomes clear that the discourse about Rowling was already taking place on several different levels. A rather large part of the corpus consists of tweets from people aiming to explain why Rowling was wrong, using scientific facts or personal experiences to call out the problem with Rowling’s statements or to discredit her. “Equating womanhood to their ability to reproduce? How charmingly medieval”¹⁰⁰, reads one of the tweets directed at Rowling’s Twitter account. A sizable portion of the tweets suggest something along the same lines and is either written in response to the author’s tweets or to someone who agreed with her statements. As can be seen from figure 1.5, nearly half of the tweets in this corpus are about transgenderism and the Twitter users almost exclusively disagree with what Rowling had to say about the matter, leading many of them to make statements about no longer supporting the author. It is, however, not always clear what “support” means in this case. The interpretation of the word “support” seems to be different among the Twitter users. While some talk about no longer purchasing anything written by the author, others mention wanting to dispose of her books, no longer following the author on social platforms, or no longer speaking positively about her. The definition of support in

¹⁰⁰ @nicoleamaines on Twitter, 7 June 2020.
<https://twitter.com/NicoleAMaines/status/1269418279166246915?s=20>

situations as these seems to be a topic that causes some dispute. When some Twitter users stated that no longer supporting Rowling financially would be their preferred solution others argued that ownership of previously purchased works is also a form of support that they frown upon.

These discrepancies in the interpretation of the term caused the debate to go beyond the topic of transgenderism and also focus on topics such as the sustainability of concepts like “The Death of the Author”, or separating the art from the artist. Another sizable group of Twitter users is concerned with discussions such as these and with Rowling’s authorship rather than just the content of her controversial statements, and engages in discourse such as the previously mentioned “who wrote *Harry Potter*”-trend. They almost all disapprove of Rowling’s statements but are not willing or able to let go of their love for the book series she created. This group is explicitly stating they will be separating the art from the artist and continue to love one but not the other. In line with the aforementioned statement by Potter-actor Daniel Radcliffe they choose to focus on what the books mean to them and are protecting the work from its author.

A third category that can be defined is the text-specific discussion of Rowling’s work. Especially on Twitter, a significant portion of the discussion seems to revolve around Rowling’s texts. This group can be divided into two sub-categories. On the one hand there is a group of people who emphasise the positive elements they have found in Rowling’s works, the *Harry Potter* series in particular. This group of people is displeased with Rowling since they feel like the core values that they observed in the *Harry Potter* books, i.e. love and inclusivity, are not reflected in Rowling’s behaviour. It is clear that they perceive Rowling as an extension of her text, or vice versa. “JKR’s comments are in complete contradiction to story and ideals of Harry Potter. Harry Potter and the community around it has always been about acceptance, friendship and fighting against bigots. JKR’s comments have broken our hearts 2/”¹⁰¹, a fan account posted as part of a bigger thread about Rowling’s comments. On the other hand there is a group that also analyses Rowling’s work on a textual level as part of this discussion, but focusses on the negative elements and interpretations of the *Harry Potter* series instead. This is the group responsible for making “Cho Chang” a trending topic. They refer to elements of Rowling’s work that they perceived as problematic and mention how

¹⁰¹ @expectopodcastm on *Twitter*, 7 June 2020.

<https://twitter.com/expectopodcastm/status/1269599234271182855?s=20>

Rowling has never taken responsibility for them. The accusations against Rowling do not stop with character names or a lack of representation but also with inexplicit text elements that the readers have interpreted as problematic. They also introduce these interpretations as reasons why other people should no longer support Rowling or purchase, own or appreciate her works. “Can't expect much from the lady who gave us hook nosed goblin bankers and the "actually, they like being slaves" elves. Oh, and the AIDS Wolves,”¹⁰² stated one of the Twitter users, while others told others to dispose of the books they own:

rip it off like a bandaid. throw out your harry potter books. dont try to disassociate author from work, its impossible. feed your slinthydor and honklestink funko pops to the ocean.¹⁰³

To everyone separating the art from the artist... There are two brown, one Asian characters in all of Harry Potter. I don't remember who was black in the books but I think it was no one, the movies had some but still very few. There are zero gays. Throw that art out the window.¹⁰⁴

It is especially striking that the Twitter users do not seem to differentiate between interpretations (e.g. the AIDS metaphor) and explicit textual elements (e.g. the character named Cho Chang), and deem both an equally valid reason to disprove of Rowling's work. Whereas Sean Burke argues that an author should take responsibility for possible “misreadings’ of a text¹⁰⁵, these people take it a step further and insist that not just the author is responsible for readers’ interpretations of a text but that other readers are as well.

The final and smallest group consists of people who are commenting on the controversy itself and the way it is handled. Whereas some comment that they are not ready to do away with their Rowling books, others mention how some people are wrong in the statements they make about Rowling or her works:

About this JK Rowling thing. It kinda crushed me. I love Harry Potter and just ordered more of the lego sets. I still think the works have value and aren't necessarily any

¹⁰² @KeilaNKTC on *Twitter*, 7 June 2020. <https://twitter.com/KeilaNKTC/status/1269404074602045440?s=20>

¹⁰³ @BAKKOOONN on *Twitter*, 7 June 2020. <https://twitter.com/BAKKOOONN/status/1269519982255173632?s=20>

¹⁰⁴ @shoishipao on *Twitter*, 7 June 2020. <https://twitter.com/shoishipao/status/1269599285009625088?s=20>

¹⁰⁵ Séan Burke, “The responsibilities of the writer.” *Literary Theory and Criticism. An Oxford Guide*. Ed. Patricia Waugh. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006.): p. 494 – 45.

worse because of this. They can stand apart from the author. Don't throw the baby out with the bath water.¹⁰⁶

If I see one more person's tweet saying that Cho Chang is the only Asian character in Harry Potter to bash JK Rowling, I swear I will reach out through your mobile phone screens and slap you hard across the face.¹⁰⁷

The last tweet was accompanied by two photos of actresses Shefali Chowdhury and Afshan Azad, who played twin sisters Parvati and Padma Patil in the *Harry Potter* film adaptation and are of Bangladeshi descent. Tweets such as these show not only how much attention the debate received but also how attached many people feel to the author's works and the struggle that some faced when trying to decide whether or not to keep loving her books. The division that exists within the reactions about this topic is especially striking and speaks volumes about the disagreement that exists about "cancel culture" and the appreciation of the work of a controversial author.

1.5 Discussion

In this chapter it has become clear that the discussion around the J.K. Rowling controversy is exceptional in many ways. All of the components that form the theoretical frame of this thesis play a crucial role in the reception of Rowling's comments. First and foremost it is Rowling's celebrity status and the expectations that exist because of her enormous platform that have caused the incident to become extremely famous. Over 14,5 million Twitter followers could read what Rowling had written, so a substantial response to a controversial statement was inevitable. The popularity of Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is unique and the content of the book series played a significant part in the reception of Rowling's statements, partly due to the fact that people observed positive elements in the book (acceptance, inclusivity, the power of love) that they expected to also recognise in Rowling's behaviour, but also because some observed negative elements in the book (stereotyping, possible metaphors that are perceived as offensive, performative activism in retrospective worldbuilding) that they feel could or

¹⁰⁶ @keystone_devil on Twitter, 7 June 2020.
https://twitter.com/Keystone_Devil/status/1269492809578446848?s=20

¹⁰⁷ @captainbollywood on Twitter, 7 June 2020.
<https://twitter.com/captainbollywood/status/1269418354424586240?s=20>

should have been perceived as indications of Rowling's lack of inclusivity. Discussions around topics like "The Death of the Author" and "separating art from artist" became a part of the online discourse about Rowling, and, especially on Twitter, emotions were running high because of the book series' loyal fandom. Discrepancies in definitions of concepts like supporting or "cancelling" the author could be observed as well as discrepancies in ideas about which consequences would be fitting in this scenario. While little unanimity could be observed in the online reactions, it does become clear that the general public believed that Rowling should face consequences in some form for her statements about transgender women.

Appendix A

On 19 July, 2021 J.K. Rowling used her personal Twitter account to address some of the responses she has received over her controversial statements from 2020. Rowling included a screenshot of a tweet from a since deleted Twitter account that reads: “I wish you a very nice pipebomb in (sic) mailbox”. Rowling posted the screenshot, which was dated one day prior to

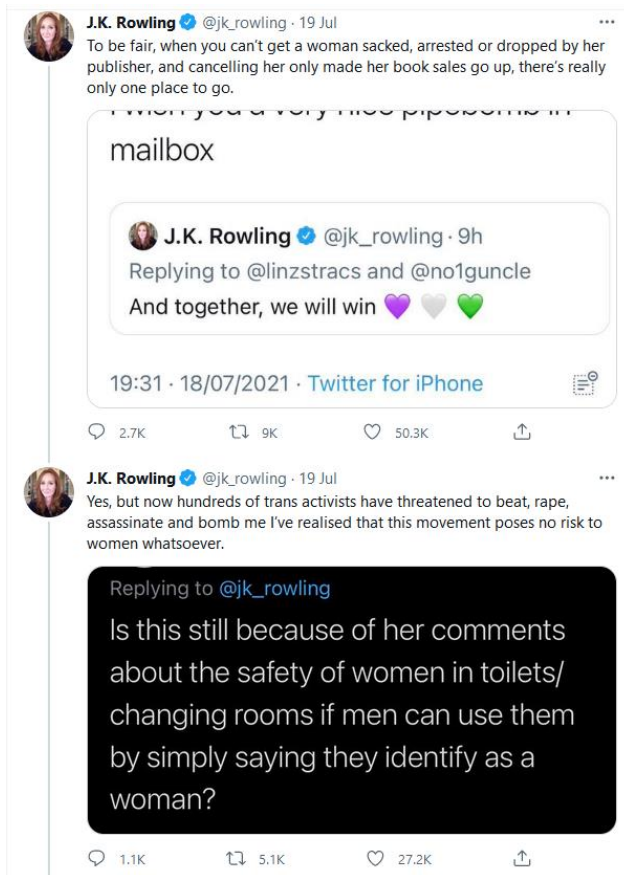


Image A. Tweet by J.K. Rowling

her own tweet, and captioned it: “To be fair, when you can’t get a woman sacked, arrested or dropped by her publisher, and cancelling her only made her book sales go up, there’s really only one place to go.”¹⁰⁸ When another

Twitter user (whose name Rowling *did* omit from the screenshot) asked: “Is this still because of her comments about the safety of women in toilets/changing rooms if men can use them by simply saying they identify as women?”, Rowling responded by saying:

“Yes, but now hundreds of trans activists have threatened to beat, rape, assassinate and bomb me I’ve realised that this movement poses no risk to women whatsoever.”¹⁰⁹ The controversy starting receiving attention again when Rowling published a screenshot of a tweet aimed at author Milli Hill that read:

“Milli, you obviously haven’t learned from the response that @JK_Rowling got from her post. You aren’t incorrect that obstetric violence is sex-based. But how difficult is it to acknowledge that not everyone who is capable of giving birth, identifies with the female or woman label?”. Rowling responded to this tweet by saying:

“Judging by the tsunami of supportive emails and letters I’ve received, if women learned anything from the response to my post it wasn’t that they should sit down and

¹⁰⁸ J.K. Rowling on *Twitter*, 19 July 2021. https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1417031300498829315?s=20

¹⁰⁹ J.K. Rowling on *Twitter*, 19 July 2021. https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1417067152956399619?s=20

shut up. Solidarity to the brave and fabulous @millihill (and I love your books, by the way!)”¹¹⁰

After these tweets the discussion about Rowling and her offensive comments slightly recommenced. The number of responses is incomparable to the amount that Rowling received in June of the previous year but the fact that the matter has not been put to bed yet speaks volumes about its extent and impact. On 20 July the name Rowling became a worldwide trending topic on Twitter once again, and many messages of disappointment over Rowling and her statements were reiterated by thousands of Twitter users (see figure A).

It is remarkable how Rowling addresses a perceived demand for severe consequences in her tweet, while a more considerable number of responses were concerned with the emotional, moral conflict that fans of her work experienced. Rowling also relates the controversy to her book sales and hereby addresses a possible connection between the controversy and the consumption of her work. Rowling claims here book sales have only risen but there have also been reports stating that, even though the numbers did rise, they have not done so steadily. There have been reports of the *Harry Potter* book sales underperforming in the months following the incident¹¹¹, and several articles have been published in which journalists suggest a direct relationship between the controversy and the lagging sales figures.

The fact that Rowling’s comments are still a topic of discussion today shows that their impact might be even greater than expected. The incomparable numbers of tweets, opinion pieces and news articles that have been written on the subject are still increasing, and

Rowling’s reputation seems to have suffered some permanent damage, which is affecting not only her public persona but also her status as an author and public opinions about her work.

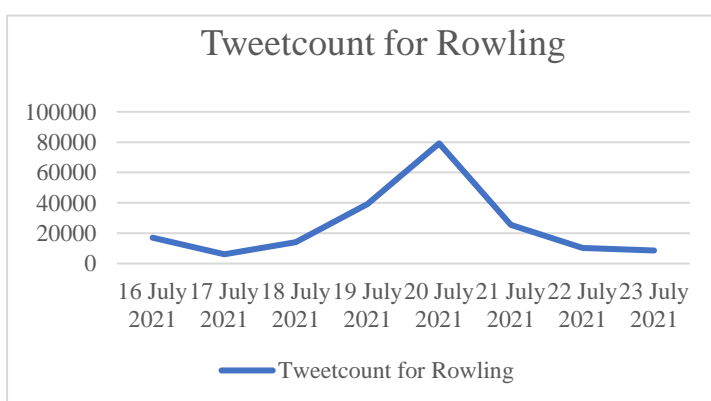


Figure A: Tweetcount “Rowling” 16 – 23 July 2021.

¹¹⁰ J.K. Rowling on Twitter, 15 July 2021. https://twitter.com/jk_rowling/status/1415631382068535296?s=20

¹¹¹ Adam B. Vary “J.K. Rowling’s Book Sales Lagging Despite Industry Boom in June”, *Variety*, 16 July, 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/film/news/jk-rowling-book-sales-harry-potter-1234708777/>

Chapter 2: Lionel Shriver

Another author that has become the subject of public outrage is Lionel Shriver. Her case is different than Rowling's in that her comments are often asked for (by a magazine, interviewer, etc.), but evoke a similar negative response in the sense that people feel minority groups are targeted by the author. This chapter will discuss the reactions towards Shriver and her statements that were put forward by journalists and the general public. Section 2.1 will provide a brief overview of Lionel Shriver's reputation and introduce some of the incidents that lead to controversy. Section 2.2 explores how journalists in news articles dealt with these controversies and what ideas about Shriver and authorship they put forward. Section 2.3 will determine how the topics were dealt with in opinion pieces, such as editorials in professional newspapers as well as blogs by amateur authors. Section 2.4 examines the way the public reacted to Shriver's controversial statements on social media platform Twitter. In section 2.5 the key findings of this chapter will be summarised and discussed.

2.1. The Shriver Controversies

UK-based Lionel Shriver is an American-born author best known for her novel *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, which won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2005 and was adapted to film in 2011. Shriver is also broadly published as a journalist and writes articles, columns, op-eds, and literature reviews for well-respected publications such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. Shriver is known for being very outspoken, which makes her a popular interviewee for TV and radio shows. Her views, often described as contrarian, on politics and the contemporary social climate have frequently been met with resistance by the general public. A recent interview in *The Telegraph* mentions her unapologetic indifference towards political correctness and Shriver advises those who aim to “cancel” her to “think again.”¹¹²

Shriver has spoken out about many social and political issues. She has criticised the

¹¹² Victoria Lambert, “Lionel Shriver: ‘I’m horrified at how people have adapted to being locked down’”, *The Telegraph*, 4 June 2021. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/lionel-shriver-horrified-people-have-adapted-locked/>

American healthcare system¹¹³, has spoken out about a need for gun control¹¹⁴, and is an outspoken member of a UK-based population growth concern group “Population matters”.¹¹⁵ Last year, Shriver spoke out about the Covid-19 pandemic stating she disagrees with the way the pandemic was handled and proclaiming that the people who died from the Covid-19 virus would have died within the year.¹¹⁶

Political correctness and activists’ preoccupation with social justice seem to be Shriver’s main vexations. In her recent *Telegraph* interview Shriver affirms she is “not big on rules. Especially I’m not keen on issuing rules in relation to fiction. As a novelist, I like flawed people.”¹¹⁷ She has negatively spoken out about topics such as the concept of “wokeness”.¹¹⁸ She is opinionated and outspoken on the topic of fiction in combination with societal expectations. In June 2018, for example, Shriver publicly criticised a statement made by publisher Penguin Random House about their attempt to diversify the authors they represent. In her opinion piece in *The Spectator* she claimed the publishers were “drunk on virtue” and were choosing seemingly politically correct authors over the quality of the works they published. She argued that a work “written by a gay transgender Caribbean who dropped out of school at seven” would be published by the publishing house, “whether or not said manuscript is an incoherent, tedious, meandering and insensible pile of mixed-paper recycling”.¹¹⁹ These comments were not well received and even caused her to be dropped from the judging panel formed by literary magazine *Msllexia* for one of their writing

¹¹³ n.a. “Lionel Shriver: US citizens feel need to ‘counterbalance state’”, *BBC News*, 17 December 2012. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-20762510>

¹¹⁴ Eleanor Hall, “US author scathing on Obama health reform”, *ABC*, 19 May, 2010. <https://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2010/s2903664.htm>

¹¹⁵ *Population Matters*, “Population Matters welcomes Lionel Shriver”. *Population Matters Org.* 7 august, 2014. <http://populationmatters.org/2011/population-matters-news/population-matters-welcomes-lionel-shriver-patron/>

¹¹⁶ Charlotte Cripps, “Lionel Shriver: ‘Two-thirds of coronavirus fatalities would have probably died within the year anyway’”, *The Independent*, 5 May 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/lionel-shriver-interview-the-motion-of-the-body-through-space-we-need-to-talk-about-kevin-a9490986.html>

¹¹⁷ Victoria Lambert, “Lionel Shriver: ‘I’m horrified at how people have adapted to being locked down’”, *The Telegraph*, 4 June 2021. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/lionel-shriver-horrified-people-have-adapted-locked/>

¹¹⁸ Lionel Shriver, “I’m sick of fighting moronic culture wars”, *UnHerd*, 25 September 2019, <https://unherd.com/2019/09/im-sick-of-fighting-moronic-culture-wars/>

¹¹⁹ Lionel Shriver, “Penguin wants its authors to represent all UK minorities. What about just publishing good books?”, *The Spectator*, 9 June 2018. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/penguin-wants-its-authors-to-represent-all-uk-minorities-what-about-just-publishing-good-books->

competitions.¹²⁰

In 2019, the author spoke out on her animosity towards identity politics and went as far as to call them a form of “fascism”. During a visit to Australia, the author called other authors to speak out against the expectations that come with this new social climate and clamoured for their rejection of the attempted “restrictions of creativity”¹²¹. Shriver made these statements while defending comments she had made three years prior while visiting the country.

In September of 2016, Shriver was a keynote speaker at the Brisbane Writer’s Festival. She chose to give a speech about the theme of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is a term used to describe the act of members of a dominant culture taking elements from a minority culture for their own gain.¹²² While not all critics seem to agree on the exact definition and the moral implications of cultural appropriation, the vast majority of them agrees that there is a problematic and potentially harmful side to it. Shriver, on the other hand, disagrees. To reinforce her image as a provocative contrarian, Shriver wore a traditional Mexican sombrero to her speech, which can also be interpreted as a form of cultural appropriation. The sombrero is an important national symbol for the people of Mexico and according to scholar Rosane Gertner “many Mexicans feel affronted when foreigners wear it”¹²³. Shriver was obviously aware of the implications of her headdress and concluded her speech by stating that: “fiction writers have to preserve the right to wear many hats – including sombreros”¹²⁴. Many more indications that Shriver was aware of the reactions that her speech could evoke can be found throughout it. In the second sentence of the speech, she referred to herself as an “iconoclast”¹²⁵.

¹²⁰ David Barnett, Lionel Shriver dropped from prize judges over diversity comments”, *The Guardian*, 12 June 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/12/lionel-shriver-dropped-from-prize-judges-over-diversity-comments>

¹²¹ Debbie Zhou, “Lionel Shriver returns to Australia and doubles down on 'fascistic' identity politics”, *The Guardian*, 2 September, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/02/lionel-shriver-returns-to-australia-and-doubles-down-on-fascistic-identity-politics>

¹²² John Young. *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell: 2008, p. 13-14.

¹²³ Rosane K. Gertner, “The impact of cultural appropriation on destination image, tourism, and hospitality,” *Thunderbird Int. Bus. Rev.* No. 61. (2019) :873–877. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tie.22068>

¹²⁴ Lionel Shriver, “Lionel Shriver's full speech: 'I hope the concept of cultural appropriation is a passing fad'”, *The Guardian*, 13 September, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/13/lionel-shrivers-full-speech-i-hope-the-concept-of-cultural-appropriation-is-a-passing-fad>

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Her choice of topic did not come as a surprise to everyone since Shriver had not long before been criticised for the way in which she depicted racial minorities in her novel *The Mandibles*.¹²⁶ Literary critic Ken Kalfus described one of the Mexican characters in the novel as “one of the novel’s several racist characterizations”.¹²⁷ These comments were challenged by Shriver in her speech. She emphasised that it is crucial for authors to be able to write about people from backgrounds different than their own. “The ultimate endpoint of keeping our mitts off experience that doesn’t belong to us is that there is no fiction”¹²⁸, Shriver stated. She also expressed condemnation towards the contemporary fixation on political correctness, and contested the plethora of restrictions people are trying to impose on others in the name of political correctness: “Seriously, we have people questioning whether it’s appropriate for white people to eat pad Thai.”¹²⁹

While it is obvious that Shriver touches upon an interesting discussion in relation to authorship and the ethics of writing, the provocative nature of her speech caused a significant amount of acrimony. Shriver did not solely aim to make a point about the ethics and customs of writing, but also aimed to provoke. Her statements about themes such as cultural appropriation lacked nuance and sensitivity and included quotes such as: “I am hopeful that the concept of “cultural appropriation” is a passing fad.”¹³⁰ The generality of statements like these indicate that Shriver was not just discussing the morality of writing certain forms of fiction but rather wanted to critique the entire contemporary social climate where social justice and political correctness take on an increasingly crucial position.

In March of 2019, Shriver once again reinforced her reputation as a contrarian by publishing a column about the use of “the n-word”, and explaining her issues with the expression. She compares it to other insulting words that *can* be said out loud and asks why the world pretends that one degrading term is seen as worse than another. She also argues that oftentimes white people feel “a little taunted”¹³¹ because they are not allowed to use the word.

¹²⁶ See for example:

Constance Grady, “Lionel Shriver’s *The Mandibles* is the smuggest dystopian novel this side of Ayn Rand”. *Vox*, 2 August, 2016. <https://www.vox.com/2016/8/2/12163144/lionel-shriver-mandibles-dystopia-review>

¹²⁷ Ken Kalfus, “The bankruptcy of liberal America: ‘The Mandibles,’ by Lionel Shriver”. *The Washington Post*, 20 June, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/the-mandibles-by-lionel-shriver-a-vision-of-america-in-a-downward-spiral/2016/07/12/24d1025e-4851-11e6-bdb9-701687974517_story.html

¹²⁸ Lionel Shriver, “Lionel Shriver’s full speech: ‘I hope the concept of cultural appropriation is a passing fad’”, *The Guardian*, 13 September, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/13/lionel-shrivers-full-speech-i-hope-the-concept-of-cultural-appropriation-is-a-passing-fad>

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Lionel Shriver, “Why I hate the n-word”, *The Spectator*, 2 March, 2019. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-i-hate-the-n-word->

In this chapter the responses to several of the controversies caused by Shriver will be discussed. While it is a fact that Shriver often sparks significant backlash, the reaction towards her does not match the vastness of the response brought about by Rowling. As mentioned in the thesis intro, to ensure the two cases are comparable in size, responses to more than one of Shriver's controversies will be examined. Whereas the responses towards Rowling were heavily shaped by emotional fans and feelings of nostalgia, Shriver's works do not seem to have such feelings of sentimental value attributed to them. While Shriver is an award winning author who wrote an international bestseller, and is frequently given a platform on TV, on the radio, or in print, her literary celebrity is incomparable to Rowling's and which causes large discrepancies between the two cases.

2.2 Online Articles

The first noteworthy observation that can be made when searching for news articles written about the Shriver controversies is that the amount of them does not begin to match the amount of articles written about the Rowling controversy. Whereas the search for articles about Rowling's controversial comments had to be limited to days after the incident itself, it was impossible to match the number of articles, even with widened parameters, when analysing one of Shriver's controversies. When using Google to search for English content about Lionel Shriver between the 6th of September, 2016 and the 31st of December (after her Brisbane speech), 2016, for example, only a little under ten usable, objective news articles can be found. This, in combination with a general "Lionel Shriver + Brisbane" search without any limitations, provided a corpus of twelve objective news articles to examine in this section of the research. The vast majority of search results when using these search terms are opinion articles or blogs written by people eager to debate with Shriver and challenging her views on authorship and the ethics of writing minorities. While the Rowling controversy evoked comparable amounts of resentment, her subject seemed less debatable than Shriver's and the fact that she sparked controversy in the first place seemed to be more newsworthy.

Since a corpus of twelve articles is relatively small and incomparable to the corpus used in the previous chapter, more than one of Shriver's controversies will be addressed in this chapter. A total of twenty-six news articles could be found about the Brisbane speech, the Random House Publishers controversy and the MeToo controversy. This corpus is still comparatively small, so the first part of the chapter will be dedicated to the probable reasons behind the size of the corpus.

2.2.1 Newsworthiness

The fact that controversies about an author like J.K. Rowling are more likely to make the headlines than controversies surrounding someone like Shriver can, quite predictably, be

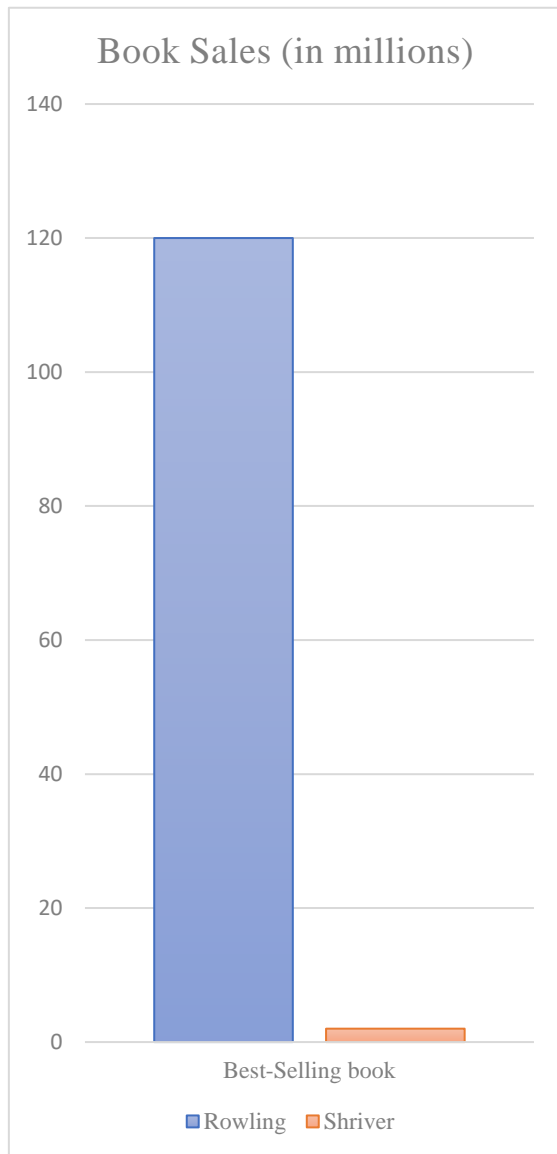


Figure 2. 1 Best-selling book sales for Rowling and Shriver as of 2020.

attributed to the fact that the authors are not equally famous. With the ineffable success of the *Harry Potter* book series and film franchise, Rowling has become a woman of great wealth and influence. Frow and English even use Rowling as one of the most prominent examples of a celebrity novelist.¹³² With over 500 million *Harry Potter* books sold, she has become one of the best-selling authors of all time. To compare, Shriver's most popular book *We Need To Talk About Kevin* has sold a respectable two million copies. When comparing the data about their book sales in a graph (see figure 2.1¹³³), it can be observed that their popularity is almost incomparable, especially when considering the fact that *We Need to Talk about Kevin* has greatly outsold all of Shriver's other works.

According to research conducted by international research data and analytics group YouGov Rowling is one of most popular and best-known contemporary authors, with 97% of the questioned people having heard of the author. Shriver, on the other hand, is not even

mentioned on their website.¹³⁴ Also, Shriver is also not active on any social media platforms,

¹³² James English, John Frow. "Literary Authorship and Celebrity Culture". *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), p. 39.

¹³³ Jessie Atkin, "The Most Popular Harry Potter Books (According to Sales)", *Screen Rant*, 07 January 2020. <https://screenrant.com/harry-potter-book-popular-best-sales/>

& Ariel Levy, "Lionel Shriver Is Looking for Trouble", *The New Yorker*, 25 May 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/01/lionel-shriver-is-looking-for-trouble>

¹³⁴ N.A. "JK Rowling", *You Gov*, 2021 https://yougov.co.uk/topics/arts/explore/writer/J_K_Rowling

while Rowling has over 14 million followers on Twitter. It is clear that there is a significant difference between their levels of fame, in terms of readership, following, and general name recognition and authorial brand awareness. This even led to some of the headlines of articles on the Shriver incidents including phrases such as “an American author” or simply “a speech” without any mention of who gave it. An example of this can be found on entertainment website BuzzFeed. The website, which is known for being leftist and has a target audience of young adults, reported on the Brisbane incident with an article titled “This Woman’s [Abdel-Magied] Response To A Speech Attacking Political Correctness [Shriver’s] Went Viral”¹³⁵. Besides the fact that they are aiming to appeal to their audience by writing about one of Shriver’s critics rather than about Shriver herself, they clearly do not deem Shriver famous enough to mention her by name in the headline to generate views.

2.2.2 Fanbase

A related crucial difference between Shriver and Rowling that could be observed in the news articles was that there was little mention of Shriver’s work or her readers. So, not only did Shriver not make nearly as many headlines, there was also no mention of devoted fans which were a significant and omnipresent facet of the Rowling articles. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series was addressed in almost every article, as well as every opinion piece and blog post. Even in the rare cases where there was no mention of the angered and disappointed fan base, there would be *Harry Potter* jargon, or a mention of the values that people observed in the Potter book series being contradicted. In the case of Shriver, this component was completely absent. A few of the articles reporting on her Brisbane speech did mention *The Mandibles*, but this mention merely served as a means to address the criticism that Shriver received after the novel was published that prompted her to focus on this subject for her key-note speech. While the author, undoubtedly, has some fans, there was no mention of fans being upset or her readers feeling hurt after any of her comments. The absence of any mention of her readers or her works, again points to the fact that the author’s celebrity status dictates how these controversies develop. The author and the oeuvre are seen as a type of entity. Ohlsson et. al.

¹³⁵ Gina Rushton “This Woman’s Response To A Speech Attacking Political Correctness Went Viral”, *Buzzfeed*, 11 September 2016. <https://www.buzzfeed.com/ginarushton/this-womans-response-to-a-speech-attacking-political-correct>

have reported on this phenomenon in their article “Literary celebrity reconsidered”, stating that:

The authors [...] have become celebrities by way of their literary performances; in other words, their works of literature have paved the way for the media representation. Their celebrity is ‘achieved’ (Rojek 2001, p. 18), and always stands in direct relation to their literary works.¹³⁶

This means that Rowling, the author of a renowned and beloved book series that taught its readers about the importance of acceptance, will be faced with more criticism than Shriver, the author of books that do not even begin to match the popularity of Rowling’s. The influence of a fanbase on an author’s reputation or literary celebrity remains a somewhat neglected topic. In her chapter “Literature fandom and literary fans” Alexandra Edwards points out the lack of attention scholars give to literary fans. Even within theory on literary celebrity the fans are often overlooked. They become, as Edwards states it, “a faceless crowd, easy to ignore”¹³⁷. While Edwards mainly provides an overview of early twentieth century literature, it is the case that even in works about literary celebrity in the 21st century, such as the chapter by English and Frow, a mention of the importance fan culture is notably absent. The influence that fans have on controversies such as these clearly display the need for research into literary fandom. Rowling has a rather large group of readers she is expected to feel responsible towards, which affects the reception of her statements and actions. This is clearly not the case for Shriver.

2.2.3 Eligibility

It does not seem to be the case, however, that the public is generally uninterested in what Shriver has to say. As mentioned before, Shriver is an often-invited guest in several radio and TV shows and writes op-eds for multiple well-respected magazines and newspapers. Her opinions on the diversity policies at Random House Publishing, her Brisbane speech, her statements about wokeness or on the MeToo-movement have all made headlines and, though not as many as in the case of Rowling, numerous journalists have written a great deal about

¹³⁶ Anders Ohlsson, Torbjörn Forslid & Ann Steiner, “Literary celebrity reconsidered”, *Celebrity Studies*, 5:1-2 (2014): 32-44, DOI: [10.1080/19392397.2014.887533](https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2014.887533)

¹³⁷ Alexandra Edwards, “Literature Fandom and Literary fans”, in *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2018), p. 48.

Shriver's controversies. It is noteworthy, however, that a great majority of the media coverage about these incidents consists of opinion pieces and responses towards Shriver written by other authors, journalists and columnists. This raises the question of whether the authors might also be viewed differently in terms of authority. Does the public deem Shriver more eligible to comment on these types of topics? The vast majority of the articles give Shriver "a chance to explain" by including her arguments or clarifications in the articles as well. This might be due to the fact that Shriver is more than an author and is also a journalist and columnist who is expected to give her opinions on several topics.

A related fact that is worth noting is that when searching for the Shriver controversies, a significant number of interviews with the author can be found. In these interviews Shriver is, again, given the opportunity to explain her statements and double down on some of the contrarian points she has made. It is difficult to establish whether this points towards the attribution of a certain eligibility to Shriver, or if this is a case of newspapers and magazines hoping to generating clicks and views by letting a known contrarian speak her mind.

2.2.4 Reputation

In several of the articles Shriver is described as a contrarian, in her Brisbane speech she described herself as an "iconoclast", and many of the news articles refer back to earlier controversies sparked by Shriver. It is clear that the author has a certain reputation as someone who does not hold back her views, even if those views are unfavourable to the general public. Shriver even seems to provoke the audience and deliberately attempts to reinforce her existing reputations with comments or actions she knows will be met with criticism. Her wearing a sombrero while she is aware that this type of headdress is seen as a significant part of a culture that she has no connection to is a clear example of this. The fact that Shriver has a reputation like this and still is given such a significant platform to broadcast her opinions does prove that she is in fact well-known to a certain audience but that this audience does not object to Shriver's recalcitrance.

The fact that Shriver does not seem to face as much outrage as Rowling did, can likely be attributed to more than just the fact that the authors are not equally famous. The distinction can also be linked to expectations that exist about the author and whether these expectations are met or not. It has been proven that when a discrepancy exists between the perceived character of a celebrity author and the acts of this author, that discrepancy contributes to a

significantly more negative response. In her chapter “Authentic activism: Challenges of an environmental celebrity” that appeared in *The Political Economy of Celebrity Activism*, Jackie Raphael explains this phenomenon. She argues that a celebrity’s success in their activism as well as their profession heavily depends on their “audience’s perception of a consistency between these two aspects of the celebrity’s public persona”¹³⁸. This means that a discrepancy between what celebrities preach and what celebrities do can damage their reputation, and even their professional success. This might be one of the explanatory factors of why, besides their level of fame, the reactions towards repeat offender Shriver and the self-proclaimed feminist who wrote a book series about love and acceptance Rowling are so dissimilar. The public is aware of Shriver’s persona and reputation and her statements only reinforce their preconceived notions about her.

2.2.5 MsLexia

The fact that the public is relatively more objective about Shriver’s behaviour does not mean, however, that her actions are completely free of consequences. Several articles were written about Shriver being dropped from the judges panel of a literary contest organised by British Literary Magazine *MsLexia*.¹³⁹ This incident indicates that the controversial statements made by Shriver do, in fact, have consequences bigger than just journalists writing columns in which they disagree with her. While there are no explicit calls to “cancel” the author or rid her of her platform, the media does report on her losing work because of her statements and this does point to the fact that her political opinions and her literary work are linked.

¹³⁸ Jackie Raphael, “Authentic Activism: Challenges of an Environmental Celebrity”. In Nathan Farrell (Ed.), *The Political Economy of Celebrity Activism* (1 ed.). (Abingdon: Routledge), 2019. n.p.

¹³⁹ See for example: David Barnett, Lionel Shriver dropped from prize judges over diversity comments”, *The Guardian*, 12 June 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/12/lionel-shriver-dropped-from-prize-judges-over-diversity-comments>

2.3 Opinion pieces

After the surprisingly low number of news articles about Shriver, one might expect that fewer opinion pieces and blogs would have been written about the lesser-known author as well. This assumption, however, is incorrect. The lack of thoroughly disappointed fans feeling the need to vent their disillusionment was compensated for by a large group of both professional and amateur authors who were ready to address the controversies and debate the topics Shriver introduced. The op-eds about Shriver's Brisbane speech even outnumbered the news articles in the Google results. For this part of the research a total of twenty opinion pieces were selected. Ten of them are published by professional websites and written by professional journalists or columnists, and the ten others are weblogs written by amateur writers.

Many of the opinion pieces express disagreement with Lionel Shriver and her controversial opinions but not all of them do. A number of writers decided to pick up the pen not because they wanted to refute the statements made by Shriver, but rather to address the controversy the statements caused and to explain why this controversy is uncalled for. Most of the authors, however, use their platform to explain why they disagree with Shriver or why her statements might be factually incorrect. Most of the negative opinion pieces about Shriver were about her infamous key-note speech at the Brisbane writer's festival. Many of the authors mentioned the racism and offensiveness of her ideas, judged the provocativeness of Shriver's choice to wear a sombrero, and criticised her attitude and tone, which to some people was the most offensive element of the speech.¹⁴⁰

2.3.1 Shriver's Reputation

Similarly to the news articles, a great deal of the blogs and opinion pieces mentioned Shriver's reputation as an author who is always prepared to express her contrarian beliefs. Half of the articles mentions, in one way or another, that Shriver is known for being a contrarian and has a reputation of expressing opinions that are unfavourable to a great portion of the public. The blogs describe her as a "professional contrarian", "iconoclast", an "agente provocatrice", but also as "problematic", "racist" and "brutal". One of the bloggers even implies that the controversies that Shriver repeatedly sparks are a form of PR and a gimmick employed in an attempt to generate book sales. "Why can't Lionel Shriver let her books speak

¹⁴⁰ Suki Kim, "What Happened in Brisbane", *The New Republic*, 15 September 2016.
<https://newrepublic.com/article/136815/happened-brisbane>

for themselves without the relentless anti ‘identity politics’ rhetoric”¹⁴¹, she asks. It becomes very clear that in the case of Shriver, the emphasis is always more on her reputation as a heckler than on her authorship or her novels. The theory about literary celebrity does not fully apply to Shriver in this sense. The public does not view Shriver as a “seamless extension” of her work, as they often do with literary celebrities¹⁴², but rather seems to look at her as a contrarian public figure who has also written books.

2.3.2 Shriver’s Platform

Several of the opinion pieces mention the fact that Shriver is given a big platform to express opinions like hers, that are likely to be discriminatory or offensive to a large group of people. Author and journalist Abdel-Magied, for example, mentioned how giving Shriver the position of key-note speaker at a literary festival shows us a great deal about contemporary society:

“The fact Shriver was given such a prominent platform from which to spew such vitriol shows that we as a society still value this type of rhetoric enough to deem it worthy of a keynote address. The opening of a city’s writers festival could have been graced by any of the brilliant writers and thinkers who challenge us to be more.”¹⁴³

She does not call to “cancel” the author or deprive her of her platform but does mention how there are people who might be more suited for such important positions. All the opinion pieces about the Penguin Random House controversy positively mention *MsLexia* dropping Shriver from the judges panel, making it clear that while Shriver is allowed to have an opinion, others are allowed to disagree and there can be consequences. One of the bloggers even mentions Rowling and her history with cultural appropriation:

Does this mean Rowling’s not allowed to publish her book? Don’t be absurd. (...)

She’s allowed to write and publish it. And others are allowed to criticize, to point out

¹⁴¹ Laura Waddell, “Why Lionel Shriver's attacks on greater diversity in publishing are wrong”, *The Scotsman*, 27 May 2020, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/why-lionel-shrivers-attacks-greater-diversity-publishing-are-wrong-laura-waddell-2866352>

¹⁴² Wenche Ommundsen, ‘Sex, soap and sainthood: Beginning to theorise literary celebrity’, *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, vol. 3, (2004): p. 52.

¹⁴³ Yassmin Abdel-Magied “As Lionel Shriver made light of identity, I had no choice but to walk out on her”, *The Guardian*, 10 September, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/10/as-lionel-shriver-made-light-of-identity-i-had-no-choice-but-to-walk-out-on-her>

the harm she's doing, and to believe she was wrong to write and publish the story the way she did.¹⁴⁴

It seems that the authors of the opinion pieces do not aim to “cancel” Shriver. They do, however, seem to think that other opinions also deserve a platform and that there can be consequences when people disagree with Shriver's statements. This is in line with what Meredith Clark wrote about cancel culture when she defined it as a form of “accountability”¹⁴⁵. The public does not seem to be calling for a complete ban or a form of censorship, but rather encourage mutual rejoinders, consequences and open debate.

2.3.3 The Art and the Artist

The discussion to separate art from artist takes on a quite different form in this case than in the case of Rowling or even other cases like those of J.R.R. Tolkien or Roald Dahl. This is due to the fact that during her Brisbane speech, Shriver was explicitly addressing the topic and calling on readers to separate the art from the artist. People are not calling to separate Shriver's controversial opinions from her beloved work, they are writing in response to Shriver's call to let a piece of literature stand on its own without considering the author. The topic remains relevant but the debate around it takes place on a different level. This does not mean that the opinion pieces do not include any mention of Shriver's work. Especially the bloggers were eager to point out the offensive elements of *The Mandibles* that led to the criticism that eventually inspired the infamous Brisbane speech. “Shriver advocates appropriation of gender, race and disability; she doesn't care what it costs her victims; (...) she's inserted a sole African American into a white family who literally put the black character on a leash.”¹⁴⁶ wrote one of the bloggers. While the author of an op-ed also emphasised the harmfulness of the representation of the black characters in the novel:

The most problematic of Shriver's minority characters is an African American woman who has married into the white family at the heart of the novel. She suffers from early-onset dementia and is a danger to herself and to others. As the economy collapses, the

¹⁴⁴ Jim Hines, “Lionel Shriver's Speech on Cultural Appropriation”, *Jim C. Hines*, 13 September 2016. <https://www.jimchines.com/2016/09/shrivers-on-cultural-appropriation/>

¹⁴⁵ Meredith D. Clark, “DRAG THEM: A brief etymology of so-called “cancel culture”, *Communication and the Public* 5 (3-4), p. 88.

¹⁴⁶ Nalini, “Lionel Shriver, Representation and Misappropriation Part 1”, *Dark Matter Zine*, 16 September 2020. <https://www.darkmatterzine.com/lionel-shriver-representation-and-misappropriation-part-1/>

family loses its home and treks across Brooklyn with the woman at the end of a leash.¹⁴⁷

The authors are incapable of meeting Shriver's request to ignore the fact that this character was written by a white author, since they feel a great deal of racial prejudice can be observed in the depiction of this African-American character.

2.3.4 Buying Shriver

A few of the authors also mention the consumption of Shriver's work and whether the choice to read or buy Shriver's books is affected by her controversies. One of the bloggers implies that he will not be reading any of Shriver's works, since she has outed herself as a racist: "I like that she's thrown herself and all of her work on that particular pile. (...) I like my racism where I can see it, letting itself hang out, stretching its arms, wondering what all the fuss is about."¹⁴⁸ Another mentions the works of Abdel-Magied, the journalist and author who wrote about walking out on Shriver's Brisbane speech. After emphasising the need for diversity and different points of view Susan Wyndham says she "look[s] forward in the most respectful way to reading a novel by Abdel-Magied, the talented author of a memoir, *Yassmin's Story*."¹⁴⁹ and hereby implies she prefers this point of view over Shriver's.

¹⁴⁷ Ken Kalfus, "No, Lionel Shriver, the problem is not cultural appropriation", *The Washington Post*, 20 September, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/no-lionel-shriver-the-problem-is-not-cultural-appropriation/2016/09/20/1c3a5620-7e9f-11e6-8d13-d7c704ef9fd9_story.html

¹⁴⁸ Scott Woods Makes Lists, "Lionel Shriver and the Magical Vial of White Writers' Tears", *Wordpress*, 13 September, 2016. <https://scottwoodsmakeslists.wordpress.com/2016/09/13/lionel-shriver-and-the-magical-vial-of-white-writers-tears/>

¹⁴⁹ Susan Whyndham, "Lionel Shriver on identity politics at Brisbane Writers Festival and the aftermath", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 September 2016. <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/lionel-shriver-on-identity-politics-at-brisbane-writers-festival-and-the-aftermath-20160914-grg09b.html>

2.4 Twitter

The controversies sparked by Shriver did not go unnoticed on Twitter. The number of responses on this platform does not begin to match the responses to Rowling either, so again, this chapter will deal with a wider time frame and several of the controversies. Figure 2.2. shows the number of tweets per day during a month in which one of Shriver's controversies occurred. The highest number of tweets written about Shriver per day occurred five days after her Brisbane speech. The total amount of tweets written about Shriver that day was 2457. While this might seem like a significant number, the numbers are relatively low for a well-known author. In October 2018, the month when Shriver published a contrarian column about the MeToo-movement, the highest number of tweets in a day about her was 210 tweets, which is surprisingly low.

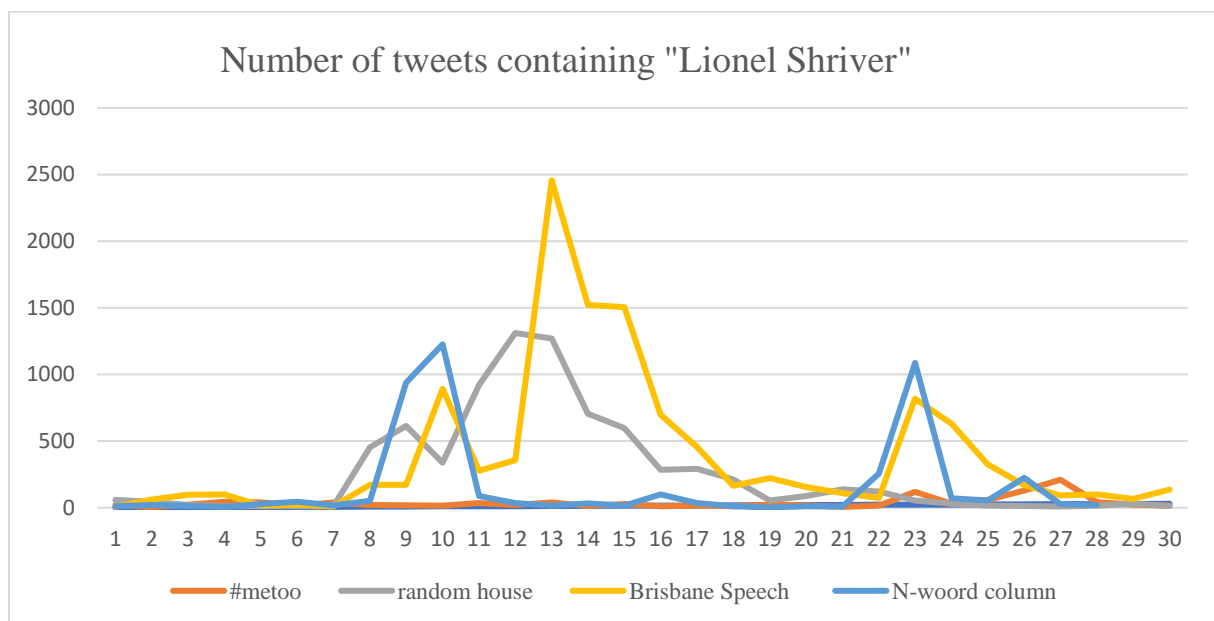


Figure 2.2: Tweets including the words "Lionel Shriver" during a period of 30 in which a controversy occurred

This might be attributable to the fact that Shriver is just not well-known amongst Twitter users, but given the fact that she frequently appears in radio- and TV shows in combination with her often making the news headlines, it is unlikely that people do not know her at all. The relatively small response might also be due to the frequency of her controversies. It could be the case that people no longer feel the need to comment on every single one of her controversial statements, since they are simply used to these types of declarations from Shriver. When, again, comparing Shriver's cases to Rowling's, it is noteworthy how people often complained that the latter's statements were out of character for a left-wing feminist who wrote about acceptance and the power of love, which again proves the earlier addresses

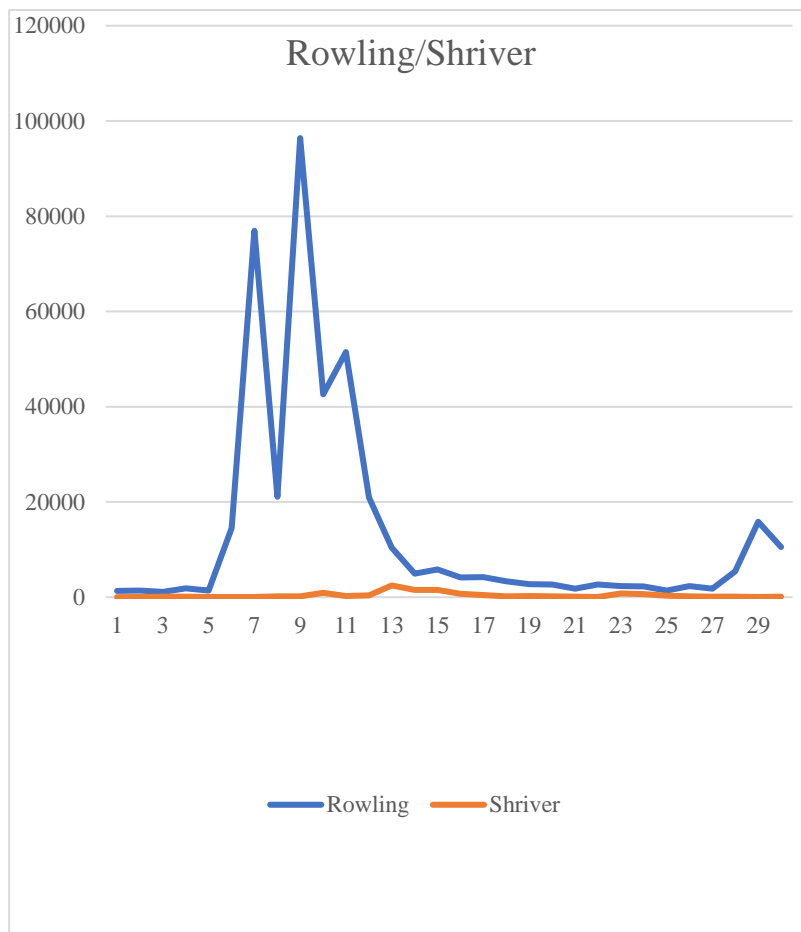


Figure 2. 3 Comparison tweets including J.K. Rowling/ Lionel Shriver at peak moments.

phenomenon of discrepancies between the author as an activist and the author as a professional causing distrust or disappointment. Figure 2.3. clearly shows the immense difference in the amounts of tweets about either of the authors. Whereas the Rowling controversy reached 96,399 tweets in a single day at the peak of the discussion, Shriver’s peak came down to 2457 tweets in a single day.

2.4.1 Brisbane Speech

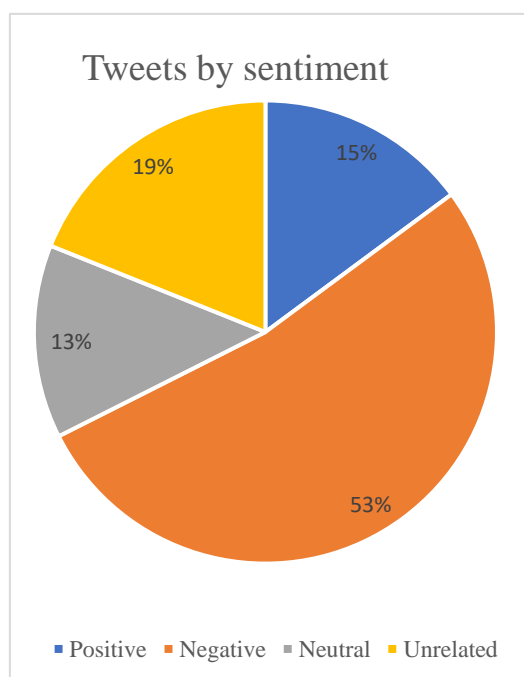


Figure 2.4. Top tweets about Shriver’s Brisbane speech by sentiment

When searching for English tweets about Lionel Shriver on the day of her Brisbane speech and the week after that, Twitter provides 74 “Top Tweets” (excluding double posts). These are tweets that Twitter’s algorithms have deemed “relevant” or “important”, because they have been interacted with most or have a significant number of likes or retweets. These tweets can be divided into four categories: “positive about the speech”, “negative about the speech”, “neutral/unsure”, and “unrelated to the speech”. Tweets that include links to essays or articles with positive or negative statements about the speech will be regarded as a form of agreement with those opinions. The majority of the tweets was negative (see figure 2.4.) and only a small percentage of the public seems to agree with Shriver.

The majority of the negative opinions about Shriver's statements come with a link to the opinion piece written by Yassmin Abdel-Magied, often highlighting one of the quotes the Twitter-user in question agrees with. Several of the users also posted their own blogs or attached longer pieces of texts in forms of screenshots to their tweets.

A few of the Twitter-users also mention Shriver's platform and criticise the way she uses it: "Why is it always public figures like Lionel Shriver and Andrew Bolt - people with platforms - bemoaning their lack of freedom of speech?"¹⁵⁰ one user wrote. Followed by the comment: "why is criticism of them considered "censorship" but their criticism of others considered "their right"?" Statements like these imply that Shriver is (mis)using her position as a celebrity to spread messages that are potentially harmful.

2.4.2 Shriver's Sombrero

A remarkable find when searching for tweets about the Brisbane incident was the account called "Lionel Shriver's Sombrero". Even though the account was only created in October of



Image 2.1. Twitter account @LionelSombrero

2020 (four years after Shriver's Brisbane speech), the creator of the account uses the account to express her disdain towards the author. Tweets include statements such as "Going as Lionel Shriver for Halloween", and is clearly meant to mock the author and her controversial statements, but also criticise her decisions to, for example, put on a sombrero during her Brisbane speech. Accounts like

these indicate that conversations about controversies like these on social media platforms like Twitter lack the nuance and well-founded argumentation that can be found in articles, opinion pieces or blogs. A fact that shows Twitter to be an unsuitable environment for nuanced debate but a reliable source for authentic, emotional reactions.

¹⁵⁰ @mslcheng on Twitter, 9 September 2016. <https://twitter.com/mslcheng/status/775096088923471872?s=20>

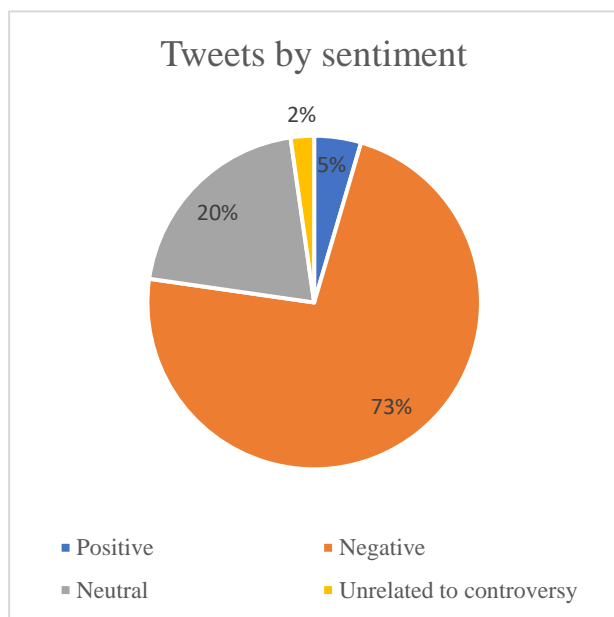


Figure 2. 5. Top tweets about Shriver during the Penguin Random House controversy by sentiment

2.4.3 Penguin Random House Publishers

Searching for tweets about “Lionel Shriver” posted between 6 and 14 June 2018, during the peak of the Penguin Random House controversy, will provide 88 top tweets. These tweets are mostly negative towards Shriver, with many calling her racist and others pointing out the frequency of her expressing offensive opinions.

This time people called out the fact that Shriver is still given a platform to express these exclusionary views as well. One user wrote “I’m so very weary of people

giving a platform to the same old jaded, antagonistic, cynical claptrap from people like Lionel Shriver. We won’t make progress as a human race until we stop thinking it’s somehow smart to sneer. It’s really not”¹⁵¹ while others celebrated the news about Shriver being dropped from the judges panel at the *MsLexia* Women’s Fiction Awards.

Another recurring theme that can be observed among these top tweets is the theme of good writing. While the connection between the work and the author was made on several occasions in the case of Rowling, it does not seem like the public generally really cares for the work of Shriver. The dismissal of her work is reinforced here with tweets including statements such as: “Having read Lionel Shriver’s latest book I’m not sure she is best placed to adjudicate on ‘literary excellence’. She seems to me to be the perfect embodiment of the mediocrity she purports to oppose.”¹⁵² This can, of course, be directly linked to Shriver’s statements about Penguin Random House and how she feels they are prioritising diversity over quality.

¹⁵¹ @sarah_hilary on *Twitter*, 8 June 2018. https://twitter.com/sarah_hilary/status/1005161260919422976?s=20

¹⁵² @houmanbarekat on *Twitter*, 9 June 2018.

<https://twitter.com/HoumanBarekat/status/1005398792785494016?s=20>

2.4.4 The N-word

The day Shriver's column about the use of the N-word was published was the day before she appeared on BBC Question Time, and it is therefore difficult to provide a clear overview of the response to this column around this time. When combining the search results of several search terms and date-ranges, however, 45 tweets about Shriver's column could be found. Out of these 45 tweets, only 2 were neutral or unclear, just 1 person seemed to stick up for Shriver, and the rest of them were outspokenly negative.

While many tweets expressed disdain towards the frequency of Shriver's controversial statements, others pointed out the ignorance that could be observed in her column about the use of the n-word. "Did none of @spectator's point out to Lionel Shriver, Award Winning Author, that the word that rappers use and the word that racists use are two different words?"¹⁵³, one user wrote. A

tweet she followed with another stating "Find it extremely fucken difficult to believe that Lionel Shriver only wants to use the N-word so she can sing the m.A.A.d city chorus properly."¹⁵⁴ The last tweet has been retweeted 46 times and has received 592 likes, making it the most popular tweet that can be found about the column.

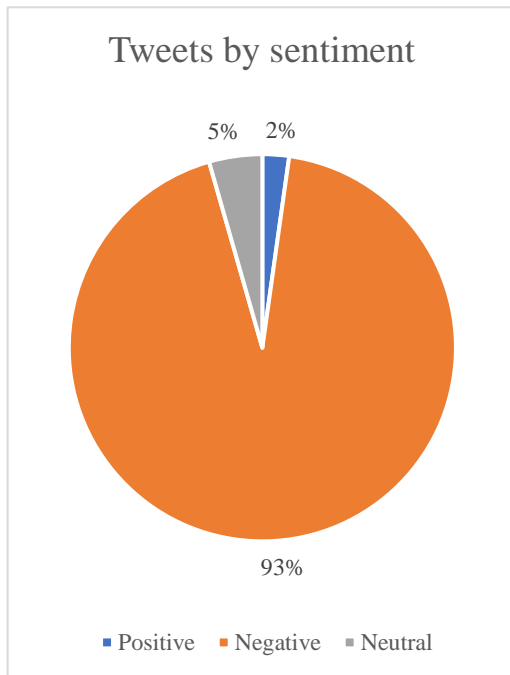


Figure 2. 6 Tweets about Shriver during the N-word column controversy - by sentiment

¹⁵³ @ayoceasar on Twitter, 28 February 2019.
<https://twitter.com/AyoCaesar/status/110104966222581760?s=20>

¹⁵⁴ @ayoceasar on Twitter, 28 February 2019.
<https://twitter.com/AyoCaesar/status/1101050067534954496?s=20>

2.4.5 Book sales

A thread of tweets that reappeared several times when researching responses towards Shriver on Twitter was an informative set of tweets written by author Chris McCrudden.¹⁵⁵ After yet another Shriver controversy in 2019 (likely a response to her column about the n-word or her TV performance on the BBC the following day), McCrudden took to Twitter to criticise the author and provide statistics and information about Shriver's success as an author. By providing data collected from the Nielsen Book Scan¹⁵⁶ (a platform that provides authors and publishers with information about book sales in the United Kingdom), he implied that Shriver is not very successful as an author. He classifies her as a "one hit wonder", and describes the author's contrarian reputation: "If you wanted someone to argue black was white on Radio 4, you called Lionel"¹⁵⁷, which he then links to her declining book sales. He points out that since 2016, when Shriver received her most considerable amount of backlash because of her infamous Brisbane speech, her book sales have declined immensely. He finishes the thread by

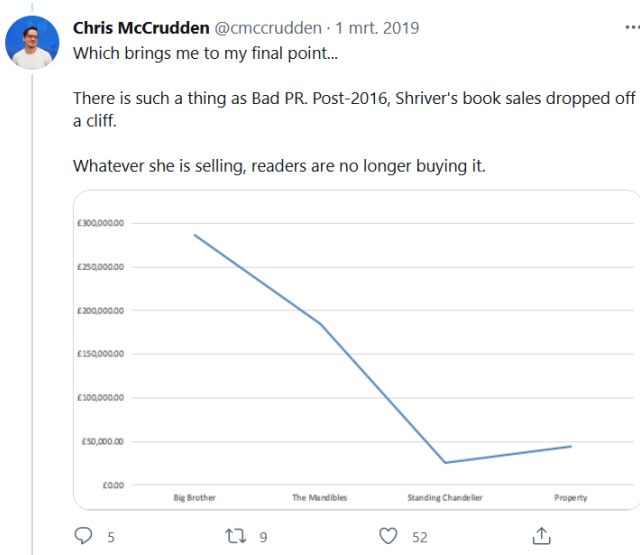


Image 2.2 Example Tweet out of series of tweets by @cmccrudden

... saying her radical behaviour has resulted in him actively discouraging people from purchasing or reading Shriver's works.

When combining all the "retweets" of the individual tweets in this thread it shows that McCrudden's criticism of Shriver has been shared 203 times. A significant amount, since it almost matches the number of tweets about her during the peak of her MeToo-commotion. The fact that tweets like these are shared this often and are referred back to after every new

controversy points to the fact that people do see a relationship between the controversies and the consumption of Shriver's work.

¹⁵⁵ @cmccrudden on *Twitter*, 1 March 2019. <https://twitter.com/cmccrudden/status/1101473217317867520?s=20>

¹⁵⁶ Chris McCrudden, personal conversation with the author via *Twitter*, 23 June, 2020.

¹⁵⁷ @cmccrudden on *Twitter*, 1 March 2019. <https://twitter.com/cmccrudden/status/1101481006467637249?s=20>

2.4.6 New York Times

It does seem like the public is growing increasingly tired of Shriver and her controversies. A clear example of this can be found when looking at the replies to a publication by *The New York Times*, which the newspaper linked to on their official Twitter account. The tweet, published on May 26th of 2020, received 244 replies, of which 241 were negative. People are negative about Shriver but also express their criticism towards *The New York Times* for giving her attention.

“Contrarian” is how the rest of us spell “click bait”. Are you @NewYorker really so hard up for money that you must platform a derivative “talent” whose work reduces to cheerleading the atavistic UK manipulators who made Johnson PM and marginalizing those who do not wield power?¹⁵⁸

wrote one user. While another kept it short and simple by asking “Who cares and why amplify her?”¹⁵⁹. Several more comments express disappointment in *The New York Times* for giving Shriver a platform and a great amount of the tweets either imply or simply state that the person is uninterested in Shriver’s views or opinions. The vast majority of the tweets is dedicated to calling out Shriver’s ideas. While the original tweet describes her as “famously contrarian”, many seem to disagree with this term. “Weird way to spell sexist and racist”¹⁶⁰, reads the most-liked response.

2.5 Discussion

The reaction towards controversies caused by Shriver is very different than the Rowling controversy from chapter 1. The general public seemed to be more outraged about the Rowling controversy than about Shriver’s repeated tumultuous incidents. It might be logical to assume that this is simply the case since Rowling’s incident was better-known but the discrepancy seems to have several causes.

First and foremost, of course, the authors are not equally famous. Rowling is one of the most famous authors in the world, while not everyone knows who Lionel Shriver is. Their book sales are virtually incomparable. The theory about the literary celebrity seems to apply to Rowling to a greater extent than it applies to Shriver, likely because Rowling is simply

¹⁵⁸ @kirkmurphy on *Twitter*, 26 May 2020. <https://twitter.com/kirkmurphy/status/1265268368120016897?s=20>

¹⁵⁹ @alphsc13 on *Twitter*, 26 May 2020. <https://twitter.com/alphsc13/status/1265286494073221121?s=20>

¹⁶⁰ @bigdogoutlet on *Twitter*, 26 May 2020. <https://twitter.com/bigdogoutlet/status/1265265156487098369?s=20>

more of a celebrity than Shriver is. People are also less likely to call to “cancel” the author since she was not as influential to begin with.

Secondly, it can be argued that people do not feel the same attachment to Shriver’s work as they do to Rowling’s. Whereas Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series has a vast and loyal fanbase to this day, none of Shriver’s works was mentioned as a piece of literature that carried a great deal of sentimental value for people. People are likely more disappointed in Rowling because they are still enjoying (the memory of) one or more of her works and do not want that enjoyment to be tarnished by thoughts about the author supporting offensive or narrow-minded ideologies. When there is no art-reader relationship that can be damaged, people will likely be less affected by statements they deem offensive. There is also little discussion about whether buying Shriver’s books is still acceptable, since the people expressing their discontent towards Shriver likely were not purchasing her work in the first place.

It also seems to be the case that people take Shriver more seriously. As a columnist she is given the platform to express her opinions about everything and the views she expresses are views she was (indirectly) asked for. Several of her controversies also concerned topics that are related to literature and authorship, which might also contribute to the fact that people are not as outraged by them.

Lastly, there is Shriver’s reputation. She is known to be a contrarian and when she expresses her views people do not notice a discrepancy between the “author” and the “activist”. When Rowling expressed her exclusionary views people did notice an inconsistency between the author of a beloved children’s book series about acceptance and the trans-exclusionary feminist who defended her views even when told they were offensive and discriminatory. This likely contributes to feelings of anger and disappointment towards Rowling.

It is also interesting to note that the responses towards Shriver become more negative as the platform that is dealt with becomes more informal. Whereas the news articles were almost fully objective and the opinion pieces were fairly mixed, the bloggers expressed almost no sympathy towards Shriver’s views and Twitter users were almost all simply outraged. It speaks for itself that journalists have to be more objective and cannot use explicit or offensive language in their articles, but it is noteworthy that Twitter is that much more critical than the writers of the opinion pieces. When a piece of writing does not require professionalism or to be polished, there seems to be room for freedom and raw honesty, which might even mean that social media posts provide the most accurate data.

Conclusion

The answer to the question of how online responses to controversial statements made by J.K. Rowling and Lionel Shriver reflect ideas about authorship is not unequivocal. The responses towards statements made by Rowling and those made by Shriver show great discrepancies both in quantity and content, and demonstrate that the public's reaction towards authors and their controversies heavily depends on the celebrity status of said author.

In Rowling's case it can be said that the response reveals attitudes towards authorship that strongly echo the concepts put forward in existing theory (Frow and English, Ommundsen) about literary celebrity, in which the public is said to perceive a strong relationship between the author and the work. When this connection exists the public attributes ideas about the author onto the work and vice versa, which can lead to controversial statements by an author blemishing the work for the reader, and also leads to the values that could be observed in the literature (like inclusivity or acceptance, in Rowling's case) shaping the readers' expectations about the author. Both of these consequences can be ground for a strong emotional reaction towards controversial statements, which result in a desire for repercussions for the author after having made statements that the readers deemed offensive. This might include no longer positively discussing, recommending or purchasing the author's works.

Due to a noteworthy difference in the level of fame, fandom size and the extent to which a connection to the author's works is felt by readers the theoretical framework of literary celebrity is only partially applicable to Shriver. Her reputation and the preconceived notions that already existed about her amongst the public have also shaped the response towards her controversial statements. People were less likely to relate her statements to her status as an author or to the novels she has written and there was no indication of an emotional connection to her work that could possibly be tarnished by her statements.

While both the cases in this research provided interesting results, it can be said that the results are difficult to compare. Early on in the research process it became evident that focussing on merely one of Shriver's moments of controversy would not make for a case study comparable to Rowling's. The case of J.K. Rowling is exceptional in every sense. There is no author who is as famous, or has a more vocal fandom. A remarkable number of young adults grew up reading the *Harry Potter* series and all evidence shows that the emotional connection they feel towards it is strong and unique. There is no other author who has succeeded in keeping an audience engaged with a series through trans-medial storytelling for

such a long period of time either. These facts make Rowling's case unique and the vastness of the response she received is unmatched by any other author. There was also a clear difference in what the public expected from both authors and it is only logical that the its response is noticeably more severe when expectations are not met than when the public never expected anything else. These external factors made it hard to compare the two cases, since it was difficult to make hard claims on views about authorship or expectations of authors when the public's response might be heavily dependent on the circumstances of the particular case. On the other hand, it was also enlightening that the cases showed great discrepancies since it only amplified the relation between the public's response and the author's level of fame. Rowling's literary celebrity was the main reason her controversial statement evoked a response that was severe in size, the level of emotion, the call for reprobation and duration. The case of Shriver whose celebrity is less prevalent, also received significantly less severe reactions.

The scope of this research was limited and therefore it was only possible to look at two cases while it might have been fruitful to compare more incidents and more authors - not only because Rowling's case is so exceptional, but primarily because there are other factors that might shape the responses towards controversies. When aiming to accurately observe patterns and consistencies in the public's response it is necessary to analyse a larger group of authors. That group should be more diverse as well. The authors that were studied in this thesis are both white, straight, Western, cis-gender women. Whether the public would respond different to men, for example, or people of colour is a question that remains unanswered in this thesis.

Academic research using Twitter data is a relatively unknown phenomenon. Especially within literary studies using Twitter's IPA for Academic Research is a very new possibility that has not been used before. While it is an innovative feature that provided valuable information which was a welcome addition to this research, the system itself is also still subject to development which did not always make it easy to work with. Additionally, if the timeframe in which this thesis had to be completed was significantly bigger it would have been worth exploring the full range of options that Twitter data could provide. Access to the complete Twitter archive offers the possibility to search for recurring key words, analyse the positive/negative ratio of a corpus of tweets, categorise tweets by country or age groups, etc. The options are numerous but all require time and programming skills to implement.

Over the course of writing this thesis it has become clear that there is a great deal left to be explored within this field of research. First and foremost it has become evident that a

sufficient theoretical framework based on contemporary authorship in times of social media has yet to be established. Even research into concepts such as celebrity culture and fandom culture have dealt relatively little with the contemporary social climate in which social media have become one of our main forms of communication. In addition to this, concepts like “cancel culture” and so-called “wokeness” have not been subject to much significant academic research either, while they are very prevalent in contemporary (online) discourse and shape today’s socio-political activism in a significant way. Separating the art from the artist and the moral implications of buying art from a controversial artists is a topic of discussion as old as art itself but not many scholars have dealt with this theme either. All these matters would make interesting and valuable research topics and could teach us a lot about our contemporary socio-cultural climate. While this thesis has already established how the public deals with some of the aforementioned concepts, such as “cancel culture” being a call for accountability, and the topic of supporting a controversial author still being a subject of debate within online (fan) communities, there is still a lot left to explore.

As suggested before, it will provide further insight to study a larger number and a more varied group of authors with this thesis’ research question in mind. The scope of this thesis did not allow for a greater number of case studies but more questions could be answered when looking at authors with different backgrounds (e.g. racial), or even authors who are no longer with us such as Roald Dahl or J.R.R Tolkien. Researching a larger number of cases would make it easier to identify patterns and to validate claims about consistencies in the public’s response.

It is, however, clear that the public no longer accepts just any behaviour from authors and that socially undesirable statements from an author can greatly influence the way the public perceives said author and the work this author produces. While the public’s response might not necessarily lead to damage to the author’s book sales or work opportunities, controversial statements can severely damage the author-reader relationship and therefore the relationship between readers and the works they once loved.

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