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Translating the “Cult Classic”: from Book to Film
Summary

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Summary

Keywords: cult film; cult film adaptation; transmedia storytelling; book-to-film adaptations; cult classic; book adaptation; fandom culture; digital media and film; cult status in cinema; adaptation theory; pop culture; fanfiction.

Introduction

This thesis explores how cult status is created and sustained when books are adapted into films or other media, with a focus on transmedia storytelling and digital audience engagement. It is driven by the observation that, even in a media-saturated environment shaped by streaming platforms, audiences continue to engage deeply with cult narratives and adaptations. These texts remain culturally significant, often inviting emotional investment, creative reinterpretation, and long-term fan commitment.

The core hypothesis is that cultification is not determined by a work's inherent qualities, but by how audiences interact with it over time. Cult status emerges from a complex interplay between narrative elements, cultural context, and media adaptability. This thesis argues that cult texts flourish across platforms, where audiences actively reshape and extend the story beyond its original form.

Rather than approaching adaptation through the lens of fidelity, the study considers adaptation as transformation within a broader media ecosystem. Drawing on both adaptation theory and cult theory, the research examines how certain stories gain subcultural value through aesthetic reinterpretation, fan participation, and the accumulation of meaning across multiple formats. It positions transmedia storytelling as a crucial factor in the contemporary cult phenomenon.

Methodologically, the study combines theoretical research with comparative case studies. These include both traditional and recent examples of cult book-to-screen adaptations, ranging from literary classics to contemporary streaming-era narratives. The analysis is supported by a quantitative component based on an online questionnaire aimed at general audiences, offering insight into how cult status is perceived today.

Situated within adaptation studies, cult cinema, and media theory, the thesis adopts the MHRA referencing style. This footnote-based system allows for clear citation of diverse sources, including fan blogs, screenshots, and multimedia content. Ultimately, the thesis proposes a redefinition of cult status for the digital age, shaped by technology and participatory audiences.

The “Cult Classic” Phenomenon

Definitions and Theories of the Cult Classic

This chapter explores the complexities of defining what constitutes a cult classic, focusing on the evolving nature of cult status across different periods and media. A key theoretical foundation is provided by Umberto Eco, whose study of *Casablanca* (1942) identifies recurring traits that help explain how a film gains lasting cultural relevance (Eco, 1985). Eco argues that aesthetic quality alone does not define cult status; rather, it is the audience’s sustained engagement that transforms a work into a cult object. According to Eco, cult films create immersive worlds in which fans participate deeply, quoting lines, attending screenings, and forming communities (Eco, 1985). The *Harry Potter* franchise exemplifies this dynamic, offering an expansive universe that invites both identification and ongoing interaction.

However, Eco’s theory is not without limitations. His focus on structured, richly detailed worlds does not fully accommodate cult films celebrated for their fragmentation or incoherence. Works such as *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Withnail and I* (1987) achieve cult status through memorable standalone scenes rather than narrative cohesion. Eco suggests that cult films contain many disconnected peaks or moments, which create multiple interpretive openings rather than one unified reading. He also introduces the idea of intertextuality, asserting that cinema is born from cinema, with cult films often referencing earlier works to produce new meaning (Eco, 1985).

Eco’s concept of “unintentional cultification” is another significant point. He observes that cult status often emerges over time, through audience reinterpretation, rather than from the filmmaker’s original intent (Eco, 1985). This is seen in films like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), which initially failed but later gained recognition for its excessive use of clichés, irony, and participatory appeal.

I.Q. Hunter builds on Eco's ideas by offering a more contemporary understanding of cult cinema. He identifies core features such as marginality, censorship, strong fanbases, and quotation (Hunter, 2016). He argues that cult status evolves through reception, not simply through production, and that films like *Donnie Darko* (2001), *Blade Runner* (1982), and *Harold and Maude* (1971) were re-evaluated and later embraced due to shifting audience values (Hunter, 2016).

Hunter also introduces the notion of the "cinephiliac moment" (Hunter, 2016), when viewers fixate on isolated moments of visual or emotional intensity. This focus on mood, atmosphere, and aesthetic is evident in the contemporary resurgence of films like *Twilight* (2009), *Midsommar* (2019), and *The VVitch* (2015), which appeal more for their visual identity and nostalgic quality than for narrative strength.

Making the Difference Between "Cult" and "Cool"

This subchapter investigates the blurred boundaries between "cult" and "cool" in contemporary cinema, questioning how the cult label is applied in the digital age. It builds on I.Q. Hunter's question about what cult actually means (Hunter, 2016), suggesting that the term has evolved and at times lost its precision. Traditionally, cult films were subversive, low-budget, and marginalised, often rejected by the mainstream. Films like *A Clockwork Orange*, *Lolita* (1962), *Trainspotting*, *28 Days Later*, and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* gained cult status due to their controversial content, unconventional storytelling, and niche appeal.

In contrast, modern films such as *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003), *Star Wars*, *The Avengers*, and *Harry Potter*, despite fostering strong fan communities, lack these original traits. Critics like Stephen Dowling and Colin Kennedy argue that mainstream success and studio backing dilute the cult label, turning it into a trendy marketing term rather than a meaningful classification (Dowling, 2003).

The chapter also explores the shifting nature of cult status in global and historical contexts. In Iran, for example, director Babak Anvari recalls how even mainstream films like *Titanic* (1997) felt "cultish" due to their illegal distribution and limited access. Literary examples, including Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, show how once-scandalous texts gained cult status through cultural reevaluation.

Hunter's traits of cult media: marginality, quotability, iconography, and dedicated subcultures, are no longer consistently present in so-called cult works. The subchapter

highlights the inconsistency in classification and stresses that audience reception remains key. Ultimately, it calls for a contextual and systematic reevaluation of what constitutes cult cinema and literature today, as the lines between mainstream appeal and subcultural significance continue to blur in a digital and globalised media landscape.

Why Are Book Adaptations Still Made and Watched?

Book adaptations remain a dominant force in the entertainment industry despite the abundance of original content. Audiences continue to be drawn to adaptations because they want to see beloved narratives and characters brought to life, while creators rely on literature for its structured storytelling, rich character development, and existing audience appeal. The rise of streaming platforms has further cemented the demand for adaptations, as they offer a ready-made foundation for content that can generate strong viewer engagement. Rather than relying only on academic discourse, this chapter examines the cultural role of adaptations through real-world audience reactions, industry trends, and contemporary examples.

Why Make Film Adaptations?

Book adaptations remain a central practice in the film and television industry, even in a saturated media landscape filled with original stories. Creators continue to turn to books because they offer complex narratives, emotional depth, and pre-established worlds that support reinterpretation. Directors often choose to adapt previously adapted books to explore them through a new political, aesthetic, or technological lens. For instance, Denis Villeneuve's *Dune* represents a modern reimagining made possible by technological advancement and an increased interest in speculative fiction (Villeneuve, 2021).

In many cases, adaptations not only preserve but amplify the legacy of their source material. Works like *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999), *Jojo Rabbit* (Waititi, 2019), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller, 2017) have surpassed the popularity of the books they are based on, becoming cultural references in their own right. Creators are drawn to adaptations as a means of making personal statements or offering politically charged reinterpretations that resonate with contemporary viewers (Cardwell, 2002; Hutcheon, 2013).

Pros and Cons of Film Adaptation

Adaptations are strategically valuable to producers as well. Books come with built-in audiences, which reduces financial risk and guarantees a certain level of public interest. Popular literary works generate organic publicity on platforms like Goodreads, TikTok, or YouTube. This is particularly visible in the case of *Game of Thrones* (Benioff & Weiss, 2011 – 2019), where the adaptation not only brought visibility to the book series by George R. R. Martin but also generated vast digital discourse (Mittell, 2015).

Streaming platforms such as Netflix or HBO have further transformed adaptation trends by favouring serialised formats. Productions like *Bridgerton* (Van Dusen, 2020 –) and *The Queen's Gambit* (Frank & Scott, 2020) show how long-form storytelling allows for more expansive and faithful adaptations. This trend is supported by audience data collection that ensures content aligns with viewer preferences, reducing cancellation risks (Lotz, 2017).

From a business standpoint, adaptations are highly profitable. Reports show that book-based films and stage plays often perform better than original scripts in terms of box office returns and award recognition (Stam, 2005). The success of *The Lord of the Rings* series, especially *The Return of the King* (Jackson, 2003), illustrates the high commercial and critical value of well-executed literary adaptations.

Adaptations also benefit authors and publishers. The release of a screen version often leads to increased book sales, renewed interest in backlists, and the release of tie-in editions. Authors such as Stephen King have built enduring legacies through successful adaptations of their novels. Titles like *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980) and *It* (Muschietti, 2017) helped shape public perception of King's work, while his open approach to creative reinterpretation contributed to his popularity.

However, adaptation carries risks. Films can damage the original text's reputation if poorly executed or if they fail to capture the tone and emotional resonance of the source. Anna Todd's *After* series (Gage, 2019 – 2022) received strong criticism from both fans and critics, which negatively impacted the perception of the novels. Disappointing casting choices, altered plots, and budget constraints can provoke backlash and even harm the author's credibility (Leitch, 2007). Nonetheless, even unsuccessful adaptations may eventually gain cult status or reignite interest in the original story over time (Hills, 2002).

Why Watch Film Adaptations?

Audiences watch adaptations for many reasons: curiosity, nostalgia, comparison, or simply a desire to see favourite characters brought to life. The adaptation becomes a collective experience that often extends into fan communities, where casting, creative choices, and narrative changes are debated. This has been particularly visible in franchises such as *Harry Potter* (Columbus et al., 2001 – 2011), where audiences have developed strong emotional investments in both the books and the films (Jenkins, 2006).

For viewers unfamiliar with the original text, adaptations can act as accessible gateways to literature. They also offer opportunities to evaluate how a story changes across media. In the case of children's literature, adaptations play a formative role. Works such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* help younger audiences engage with complex storytelling through a visual medium, nurturing both imagination and early literary interest (Zipes, 2012).

Finally, some adaptations extend their influence beyond entertainment. *Outlander* (Moore, 2014 –) has revitalised Scottish tourism and historical interest, demonstrating how adaptations can have wider cultural and economic effects. These examples highlight that adaptations continue to be relevant not only as artistic expressions but also as socially and commercially impactful media.

Case Study. *Outlander*. Rewriting and Fictionalising the History of Scots

This chapter examines *Outlander* as a transmedia phenomenon and a representative example of how adaptation contributes to the formation of cult status and cultural reimagination. The series adapts Diana Gabaldon's novels into a long-form television format and expands into merchandise, tourism, and participatory fan culture. It does not merely retell a story but reconstructs a version of Scottish history through narrative, visual, and affective strategies. In doing so, it blurs the lines between historical fiction, national myth, and media spectacle, encouraging both emotional investment and historical reflection (Jenkins, 2006; Couldry, 2012).

Historical Accuracy and Inaccuracy in Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander*

This subchapter explores the extent to which *Outlander* remains faithful to historical events and where it departs for narrative purposes. While rooted in the Jacobite context of eighteenth-century Scotland, the series blends historical facts with fiction to create an accessible and emotionally charged experience. Locations, battles, and some historical figures are portrayed with a degree of accuracy, but many elements are adapted or altered to suit contemporary storytelling needs. Claire's modern perspective often reframes historical events through present-day values, creating a lens that can both enhance and distort historical understanding. This flexible treatment of history illustrates how adaptation serves not only as entertainment but also as a medium for reinterpretation, which may contribute to a fictionalised collective memory (Leith, 2020).

The *Outlander* Effect and the Importance of Historical Fiction for Rediscovering the Past

This subchapter analyses the wider cultural impact of *Outlander*, especially its influence on Scottish national identity, tourism, and heritage perception. The show has contributed to increased interest in Scotland's historical sites, with fans visiting filming locations and engaging with historical narratives that may have otherwise remained peripheral. Through its romanticised aesthetic and emotional storytelling, *Outlander* repositions Scottish history as both marketable and meaningful. The series invites a reconsideration of national trauma, particularly through its depiction of events like the Battle of Culloden, and encourages audiences to form emotional connections with the past. This effect underscores the potential of historical fiction to reframe cultural narratives and shape how history is remembered and imagined today (Historic Environment Scotland, 2021; Duffett, 2013).

From Page to Screen: Exploring the Success and Failure of Cult Book Adaptations

This chapter examines the complex process of adapting cult books into films or series, focusing on what determines their success or failure in capturing audience attention and maintaining or creating cult status. It explores the interplay between fidelity to source material, cultural context, audience reception, and symbolic representation, offering insight into why some adaptations become cult phenomena while others do not.

Faithfulness to the Source Material

This subchapter explores the recurring debate around how closely an adaptation should follow its original text. While fidelity is often considered a measure of success, especially by fans of the source material, strict adherence can also restrict creative interpretation and limit the work's relevance for broader audiences. Examples such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, which has never been officially adapted, reveal how authors' control or the text's structure can render adaptation difficult. Other cases show that maintaining the original tone and narrative arc can work in favour of cult status, but flexibility and creative transformation are equally important when adapting for new formats and audience expectations (Hutcheon, 2013; Leitch, 2008).

Cultural Relevance and Book Fidelity

This subchapter explores how cult adaptations must balance fidelity with cultural relevance, especially when adapting sensitive content across eras. Using *Lolita* as a case study, it compares Stanley Kubrick's 1962 version with Adrian Lyne's 1997 adaptation. Kubrick's film reflected the 1960s counterculture, feminism, and censorship debates, subtly addressing taboo subjects due to restrictions of the time. In contrast, Lyne's version aligned more closely with Nabokov's novel and responded to 1990s concerns over child abuse, legal censorship, and public outrage (Vickers 2008). Lyne aimed for emotional authenticity, casting a more childlike Lolita and emphasising Humbert's psychological depth. Both adaptations faced controversy, but Lyne's received stronger critical recognition for preserving the novel's thematic complexity. The chapter argues that staying true to a book's core message is more important

than strict replication of plot. In cult contexts, cultural resonance and a clear interpretation of the novel's themes often determine a film's enduring impact and success.

Iconography and Symbols

This subchapter analyses the visual symbols that contribute to a film adaptation's long-term cultural impact and cult status. Iconography, such as props, costumes, and standout scenes, plays a key role in making an adaptation memorable. Examples include the heart-shaped glasses from *Lolita* (Kubrick 1962), the yellow plaid suit from *Clueless* (1995), and the masked ball costumes in *Romeo + Juliet* (Luhrmann 1996). These symbols become recognisable even to those unfamiliar with the original works. Adrian Lyne's *Lolita* (1997) inspired the so-called "Lolita aesthetic" online, influencing fashion, Tumblr trends, and even Lana Del Rey's music and image (Warner 2018; Smith 2022). *Clueless* and *Romeo + Juliet* continue to influence modern media, from music videos to Halloween costumes (Horton 2021; Hess 2023). The hand flex scene in Joe Wright's *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) demonstrates how symbolic gestures can resonate deeply with audiences and fuel online fandoms. Across all examples, visual language proves essential to an adaptation's cult appeal.

Active Engagement and Fandom Communities

This subchapter explores the crucial role that fandom plays in transforming film adaptations into cult classics. It examines how active fan engagement, particularly in the digital age, contributes to a film's long-term relevance and cult status. The analysis includes *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), which gained popularity through costume culture and online discourse; *Sherlock* (BBC), noted for its global fanbase and Tumblr presence; and the works of Wes Anderson, whose aesthetic sparked a viral TikTok trend. These examples demonstrate that fan-driven participation, reinterpretation, and aesthetic appreciation are now central to the cultification of adaptations.

The Catcher in the Rye: Resisting the Mainstream

This chapter explores *The Catcher in the Rye* as a rare case of a cult novel that has never been adapted for screen, not due to difficulty, but because of J.D. Salinger's firm

resistance. It discusses the risks of adapting personal, stream-of-consciousness narratives and how failed adaptations may damage a book's reputation. The novel's intimate tone, cultural controversies, and the author's past disappointment with *My Foolish Heart* (1949) shaped his refusal. The chapter highlights how Salinger's stance and Holden Caulfield's anti-Hollywood attitude helped preserve the novel's legacy, mystique, and cult status (Dewey; Applegate; Bose; Podolski).

The Challenges of Adapting *The Catcher in the Rye*

This subchapter examines the difficulties of adapting *The Catcher in the Rye* due to its introspective, stream-of-consciousness style and fragmented narrative. Holden Caulfield's internal voice, emotional complexity, and lack of a traditional plot pose challenges for cinematic translation. Voiceovers risk feeling artificial, and visual storytelling may reduce Holden to a simplified version. The novel's power lies in its ambiguity and reader intimacy, which a film adaptation could undermine. However, new technologies like virtual reality or interactive media may offer future alternatives that respect the book's essence without compromising Salinger's original vision (Podolsky, 2011).

The Transmediality of Unadaptable Books: *The Catcher in the Rye* and Popular Culture

Although *The Catcher in the Rye* has never been officially adapted, its influence persists across popular culture through indirect, transmedial references. This subchapter introduces Julie Grossman's concept of "elastextity" to show how stories extend beyond their original form. Through intertextual engagement and reinterpretation across media, the novel remains culturally relevant and continues to shape modern cult phenomena.

J.D. Salinger in *BoJack Horseman*: A Commentary on Hollywood and Artistic Control

In *BoJack Horseman*, J.D. Salinger is reimagined as a satirical Hollywood figure, reflecting tensions between literary integrity and mass entertainment. This portrayal critiques Salinger's strict artistic control and aligns with *The Catcher in the Rye*'s themes. The show's

ironic use of Salinger engages in intertextual dialogue, illustrating how cult literature continues to shape pop culture in unconventional ways.

Who Wrote Holden Caulfield? – Green Day’s Musical Interpretation of *The Catcher in the Rye*

Green Day’s *Who Wrote Holden Caulfield?* illustrates how *The Catcher in the Rye* continues to inspire beyond literature. The 1992 punk song channels Holden’s disillusionment, frustration, and defiance against societal norms. Lead singer Billie Joe Armstrong identified with Holden’s alienation, transforming his experience into lyrics. This musical tribute underscores how cult novels like Salinger’s maintain cultural relevance through transmedial expression.

Life Is Strange: A Video Game Inspired by *The Catcher in the Rye*

Life Is Strange draws clear inspiration from *The Catcher in the Rye*, featuring outsider Max Caulfield, visual nods like a red hunting hat, and thematic parallels of alienation. However, unlike Holden, Max rewrites her story, using supernatural powers to confront injustice, transforming Salinger’s themes through interactive, empowered storytelling in a new medium.

***The Simpsons* and *The Catcher in the Rye*: A Satirical Take on a Literary Classic**

The Simpsons playfully engages with *The Catcher in the Rye* through direct references, satire, and loose parody. From Krusty receiving the book to the use of “phony,” the show highlights Salinger’s cultural impact. These humorous nods reveal how the novel’s themes continue to resonate and evolve through transmedia reinterpretation in contemporary popular culture.

Virtual Reality and Literature: A New Way to Experience Stories

Virtual reality offers new possibilities for literary engagement, allowing users to experience stories like *The Catcher in the Rye* in immersive, interactive ways. At the University of Michigan, students explored this potential through a VR adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, gaining emotional insight by embodying different perspectives. This approach deepens understanding without altering the source material.

Graphic Novels as a Medium for Nonlinear and Surreal Narratives

Graphic novels like *Slaughterhouse-Five* effectively translate nonlinear, surreal narratives through flexible layouts and visual storytelling. Unlike film, this medium embraces experimental structure, making it ideal for reimagining complex literature while engaging new audiences through vivid, fragmented scenes and imaginative page design.

Cult Books and Cult Films in Different Cultures and Historical Contexts

Cult book-to-film adaptations must be understood within their cultural and historical contexts, as reception varies across societies. This chapter explores how adaptations reflect and shape national identities, revealing the complex, culture-specific nature of cult status in literature and cinema.

Cinema as a Reflection and Shaper of Cultural Identity in Cult Film Adaptations

Cult film adaptations reflect and shape national identity by engaging with culturally specific themes. Unlike mainstream cinema, they often challenge dominant narratives. Their impact varies across regions, highlighting the need for culturally grounded approaches beyond Western-centric views of cult status.

Trainspotting and A Clockwork Orange

Trainspotting and *A Clockwork Orange* are two pivotal British cult film adaptations that examine youth rebellion, societal control, and class struggles. Though made in different eras, both reflect deep socio-political anxieties, shaping and critiquing British identity through bold, provocative storytelling that remains culturally resonant across generations.

Lady Snowblood

Lady Snowblood exemplifies Japanese cult cinema through its blend of samurai tradition, stylised violence, and a powerful female lead. Adapted from manga, it reflects cultural themes of honour and revenge, while influencing global cinema. Its atmospheric aesthetic and narrative mood mark a key distinction from Western cinematic approaches.

Emmanuelle

Emmanuelle gained cult status in France through its exploration of female sexual liberation, gender roles, and taboo-breaking themes. Despite commercial success, it challenged censorship and societal norms during de Gaulle's conservative era. Its unique position between mainstream and cult cinema highlights how cultural context shapes a film's reception and significance.

Fight Club

David Fincher's *Fight Club* critiques American consumerism, masculinity, and identity through a disillusioned protagonist rebelling against capitalist conformity. Its satirical message on male crisis and societal alienation sparked debate and misinterpretation, solidifying its cult status as a provocative reflection of late twentieth-century American anxieties and cultural discontent.

Devdas

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002), a lavish Bollywood adaptation of a classic novella, redefined Indian cinematic aesthetics while exploring themes of love, honour, and societal expectation. Though commercially successful, its deep cultural resonance, iconic status, and lasting impact within Indian society have earned it cult status beyond conventional Western definitions.

The Importance of Historical Context for Cult Film Adaptations

This section examines how historical, socio-political, and economic contexts influence a film's journey to cult status. Unlike broader analyses of national identity, it focuses on how specific temporal conditions shape a film's production and audience reception, especially for those who connect deeply with its themes at the time of release.

V for Vendetta

V for Vendetta gained cult status through its resonance with distinct socio-political contexts in Britain and the United States. Rooted in historical rebellion and adapted for post-9/11 anxieties, the film critiques authoritarianism, censorship, and surveillance. Its iconic Guy Fawkes mask became a global protest symbol, illustrating how transmedia adaptations shape cultural memory and inspire real-world political movements.

Battle Royale

Battle Royale gained cult status through its shocking portrayal of youth violence and deep socio-political resonance. Reflecting Japan's post-bubble anxieties: youth alienation, economic decline, and generational conflict, it became a cultural mirror and cautionary tale. Internationally acclaimed and widely controversial, it also inspired the "battle royale" gaming genre, cementing its legacy beyond cinema as a transformative, cross-media cultural artefact.

Solaris

Solaris (1972), Tarkovsky's adaptation of Stanisław Lem's novel, defied Soviet sci-fi norms by prioritising philosophical depth over propaganda. Produced under strict censorship, it critiqued state ideologies through introspective storytelling. Though appropriated for Cold War rivalry, the film's existential focus secured its cult status. Its legacy reveals how historical and political conditions shape adaptation reception and long-term cultural impact.

Cult Film in the Age of the Internet and Streaming Services

The digital age has transformed how audiences engage with cult films, shifting from passive viewership to active participation through social media and streaming platforms. Traditional cult traits like obscurity and niche appeal have evolved, though core elements such as visual uniqueness and loyal fandom remain relevant. This chapter explores how cult status now emerges across transmedia landscapes, reflecting broader cultural, technological, and aesthetic shifts in twenty-first-century media consumption.

A Brief History of Watching Films

The history of watching films, from early theatres and drive-ins to VHS tapes and today's streaming platforms, has shaped how cult films emerge. Scarcity once fuelled their mystique, but digital access and online fandom now sustain cult status. As Moodie (2020) and Dolby (2016) explain, shifting technologies transformed viewing habits and intensified fan engagement, proving that cult cinema evolves with its cultural and technological landscape.

Transmedia Storytelling as a New Cult Mechanism

Transmedia storytelling has redefined cult status by empowering audiences to actively engage with adaptations across digital platforms. *The Vampire Diaries*, adapted from L.J. Smith's novels, exemplifies how fan influence and deviation from source material can still lead to cult-like devotion. Modern cultification relies on reinterpretation through TikToks, memes, fan fiction, and platforms like Reddit, Tumblr, YouTube, and Letterboxd. Viral trends such as the Wes Anderson aesthetic further show how participation shapes reception. Unlike traditional cult films defined by rarity, today's cult adaptations thrive on continuous engagement, strong

characters, and emotional resonance across diverse media forms, including TV, animation, and video games.

Contemporary Cult Adaptations: Case Studies

Twilight

The *Twilight* film series, despite its mainstream box office success (IMDb, 2025), has developed a strong cult following through ironic fan engagement and online reinterpretation (Jackson, 2021). Initially criticised for poor dialogue and melodrama, fans embraced these flaws, turning them into memes and aesthetic tributes, especially on TikTok (Reddit, 2025). Iconic lines like “This is the skin of a killer, Bella” (Twilight, 2008) gained viral status. Offline, events like *Forever Twilight in Forks* continue to draw fans (Stylist, 2023). Streaming access has further sustained its relevance, showing that digital nostalgia and participatory culture can redefine modern cult status (Moore, 2022).

Arcane

Arcane, Netflix’s animated series based on *League of Legends*, became a global success and a contemporary cult phenomenon (D’Anastasio, 2024). Its emotional storytelling, award-winning animation, and transmedia roots engaged fans both inside and outside the gaming community (League of Legends Wiki, 2025). Online platforms fuelled intense DIY cosplay, fan art, and aesthetic reinterpretations, while official collaborations from Fenty Beauty to Funko and Insight Editions extended its influence offline (May, 2024; Insight Editions, 2025). Through sustained fan participation and expansive merchandise, *Arcane* illustrates how digital engagement and transmedia storytelling now shape cult status beyond traditional cinema models (Cosmetics Business, 2024; GKIDS Store, 2025).

Coraline

Coraline (2009), directed by Henry Selick and adapted from Neil Gaiman’s novella, has gained cult status among younger audiences through its gothic animation, eerie atmosphere,

and strong visual identity (Rose, 2024). Despite initial critical and commercial success, its legacy continues via fan theories, TikTok trends, cosplay, and enduring merchandise. The film's distinct aesthetic and handmade stop-motion appeal distinguish it as a cult animation within contemporary digital fan culture.

Spider-Verse Animated Films

Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018) and *Across the Spider-Verse* (2023) reimagine the Marvel character through Afro-Latino teen Miles Morales, blending comic-book roots with original storytelling and striking animation (Horne, 2023; Kain, 2023). Their visual style, cultural representation, and emotional resonance elevated them to potential cult status. The films sparked fan creativity through cosplay, TikToks, fan art, and viral phrases like “canon event” (Krishnan, 2023). Hobie Brown/Spider-Punk became a breakout character. Merchandise, fashion (e.g., Jordan 1s), and critical acclaim, including an Oscar win, further solidified their status as transmedia cult classics with deep fan engagement (Shorter, 2023; Klepek, 2017; IMDb, 2025).

Heartstopper

Heartstopper (Netflix, 2022), adapted from Alice Oseman's webcomic, achieved cult-like status through digital visibility, emotional resonance, and LGBTQ representation (Carter, 2023; Coutts, 2025). Its hopeful portrayal of queer life, faithfulness to its graphic roots, and strong social media engagement helped it transcend niche appeal, becoming a global phenomenon celebrated for its authenticity, aesthetics, and inclusive storytelling (Zornosa, 2023; Dawson, 2022).

Good Omens

Good Omens (Amazon Prime, 2019), adapted from Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett's novel, has become a contemporary cult classic. Its rich moral ambiguity, witty British tone, and emotionally resonant characters, especially Aziraphale and Crowley, captivated global online communities. Through fanfiction, queer-coded interpretations, memes, handmade merchandise,

and digital events, the fandom transformed the series into a sustained cultural phenomenon shaped by shared language and active reinterpretation.

The Shifting Criteria of Cult Status

Cult status today is no longer defined by obscurity or limited access but by emotional resonance, active fandom, and digital engagement. As streaming platforms and social media replace midnight screenings and VHS tapes, cult narratives now thrive on reinterpretation, visibility, and participation. The defining factor is not rarity, but how deeply a story connects with audiences and inspires enduring fan interaction.

Case Study: Audience Perception of Cult Film and Adaptation in the Streaming Era

Introduction

The purpose of the case study was to investigate how general audiences perceived cult film adaptations in the era of streaming. The central research question was whether cult films still exist today and how their status may have evolved. The study used a Google Docs questionnaire shared via social media to gather responses from a digital-native audience, collecting 111 answers.

Methodology and Target Group

The study focused on everyday viewers rather than academics, aiming to reflect organic, real-life engagement with cult films. The questionnaire was written in English and distributed primarily on Facebook and Instagram. It included 16 mostly multiple-choice questions to encourage high participation and generate easily quantifiable results.

Results

The participants were mostly aged between 18 and 34, with 104 respondents from Romania and others from the UK, Belgium, Hungary, and Japan. This demographic spread highlighted a digitally active audience that regularly consumes films and engages with media online.

Film Constumption Habits

Most respondents reported watching films multiple times per week (36%) or a few times per month (43.2%). Streaming services were by far the most popular viewing platform (91%), followed by cinema (41.4%) and online pirating (32.4%). A few still used DVDs or watched films in arthouse cinemas.

General Awareness of the Cult Film Concept

While 47.7% had heard of cult films but were unsure of the meaning, 36% knew what the term meant. Only 16.2% had never heard of it, showing that the concept still circulates widely, even if its meaning is vague to many.

Perception of Cult Status in Well-Known Adaptations

Respondents identified films like *Harry Potter*, *Fight Club*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Twilight*, and *American Psycho* as cult. This shows that passionate fanbases and online popularity have become key to public perception, even if these works lack traditional cult markers.

Characteristics that Define a Cult Film

Participants highlighted traits such as a strong fanbase (60.4%), unique aesthetics (56.8%), and quotability (55%) as most important. Subversiveness, memes, and late popularity were seen as less central.

The Role of Historical Context

62.2% of respondents believed historical context affects cult status, validating the idea that social and political environments contribute to a film's reception.

The Influence of Social Media on Discovering Films

Social media (79.3%) and word of mouth (73.9%) were the most common ways audiences discover films today, confirming the internet's central role in spreading cult appeal.

Streaming Services and Cult Film Endurance

While 42.3% felt streaming has a neutral impact, 38.7% believed it helps obscure films find audiences. Most agreed that cult films still exist, but their formation has changed.

Meme Culture and Internet-Driven Cultification

73.9% agreed that memes and viral content contribute to cult status, though some still believe long-term appreciation is essential.

Community Engagement and Online Fandoms

85.6% saw digital communities as vital to modern cult status, underscoring the shift from physical to online fandoms.

Why Book Adaptations Become Cult

Unique visual style (68.5%) and cultural context (53.2%) were viewed as more important than online community or book fidelity, suggesting a preference for originality.

The Cult Potential of TV Series and Animation

66.7% believed that both TV series and animations can achieve cult status, although many recognised that these forms may reach it through different mechanisms than live-action films.

Conclusions

The conclusions confirm a clear shift in how modern audiences perceive cult film. General viewers, shaped by streaming and online culture, showed strong awareness of cult traits. Their informal insights align with wider fan discourse, revealing that cult status now evolves through digital engagement, not academic frameworks, and is driven by emotional, participatory connections with media across platforms.

Conclusions

This thesis confirmed that cult narratives, particularly book-to-film adaptations, continue to exist and evolve in the digital era. By analysing cult status through the lenses of adaptation theory, transmedia storytelling, and cultural reception, the research demonstrated that cult texts are shaped by dynamic audience engagement rather than fixed traits. Cult status is not automatically transferred through adaptation; it is constructed through reinterpretation, emotional resonance, and community interaction across platforms.

One of the thesis's main contributions is its emphasis on cult adaptations, a category often overlooked in previous academic work. Through diverse case studies like *Outlander*, *The Witcher*, and *Game of Thrones*, the research showed how cult status can emerge not only through traditional cinematic adaptations but also through expansive transmedia ecosystems that include games, series, fanworks, and memes.

The included audience-based case study revealed that modern viewers associate cult status less with scarcity and more with fandom, aesthetic distinctiveness, and online discourse.

Respondents saw community-driven engagement, cross-platform storytelling, and even meme culture as key to cultification today.

Importantly, the research introduced a cross-cultural perspective, analysing examples from the United Kingdom, Russia, Japan, India, Iran, and France to move beyond a Western framework. It also proposed that unadaptable texts like *The Catcher in the Rye* can still become cult through indirect, transmedial references.

While the study focused on fiction, it encourages future exploration of non-fictional cult adaptations, VR and AI's role in narrative participation, and data-driven research on fandom platforms like TikTok and Reddit. Ultimately, this thesis establishes that cult adaptations thrive not despite digital media but because of it, offering valuable insight into how stories remain meaningful and culturally resonant across time, audiences, and media forms.

Appendix



Fig. 1, Melissa Coy, “The Shining Miniseries Is Notoriously Bad But Stephen King Prefers It For This Reason” [online] <<https://www.gamerant.com/the-shining-miniseries-bad-stephen-king-prefers-reason/>> [accessed 2 April 2025].



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Fig. 7, Michael Cuby, “Interview: Hunter Schafer.” [online] <www.them.us/story/interview-hunter-schafer>[accessed 2 April 2025].



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Fig. 12, Matthew Escosia, “This Dreamy Alice in Wonderland-Themed Resto-Bar is Perfect for Tim Burton Fans” [online] <www.freaked.com/this-dreamy-alice-in-wonderland-themed-resto-bar-is-perfect-for-tim-burton-fans/> [accessed 2 April 2025].



Fig. 13, Image created by the author, based on 12 screenshots from TikTok for the Wes Anderson trend, *TikTok*, 13 March 2025 [accessed 15 March 2025].



Fig. 14, Screenshot from TikTok, @tiktok, TikTok, “when you do the Wes Anderson trend with the cast of Wes Anderson’s new movie [#AsteroidCity](https://www.tiktok.com/@tiktok/video/7239039959968042282?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc) (shot and produced by @guywithamoviecamera)” [online]
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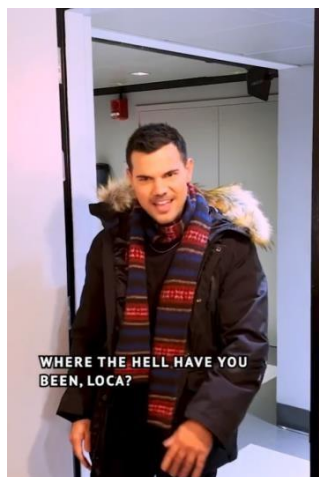


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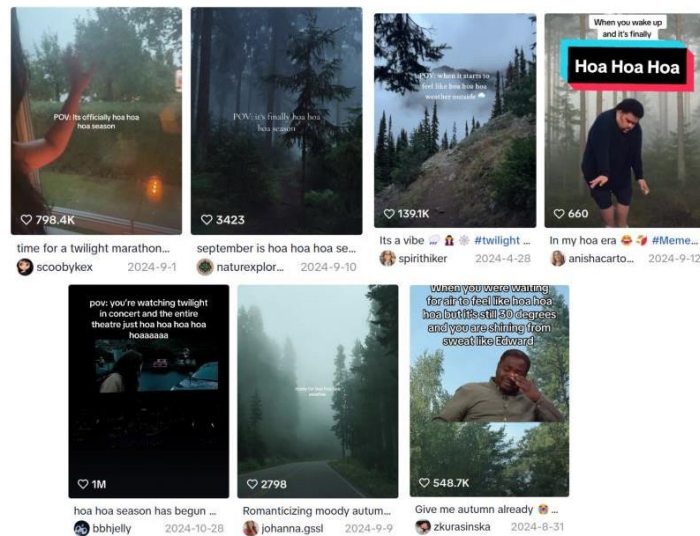


Fig. 24, Image created by the author, based on 7 screenshots from TikTok for the “hoa hoa hoa weather” *Twilight* trend, *TikTok*, 15 March 2025, [accessed 15 March 2025].

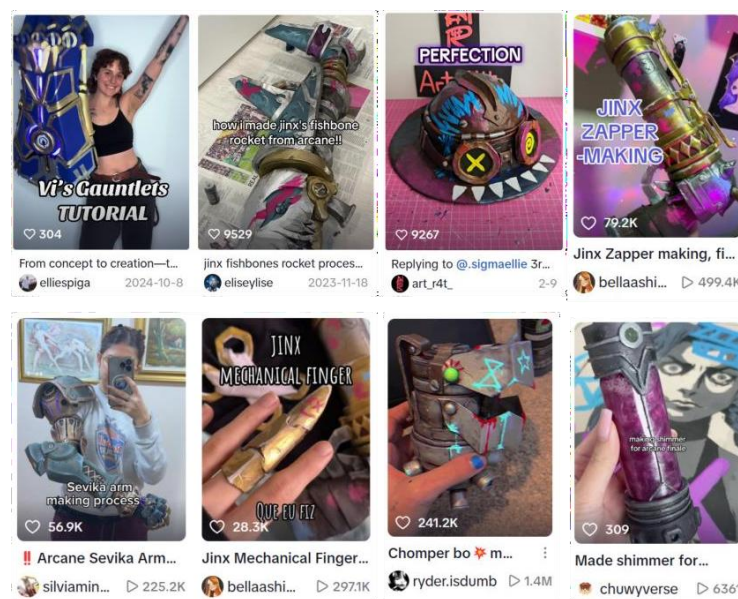


Fig. 25, Image created by the author, based on 8 screenshots from TikTok for the *Arcane* *dyi* tag, *TikTok*, 15 March 2025, [accessed 16 March 2025].



Fig. 26, Image created by the author, based on 6 screenshots from TikTok for *Arcane* cosplays, *TikTok*, 15 March 2025, [accessed 16 March 2025].

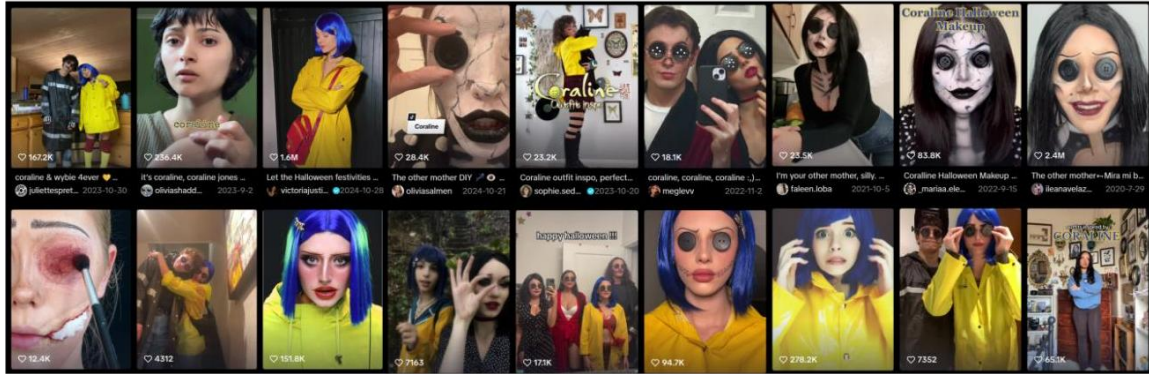


Fig. 27, Image created by the author, based on 18 screenshots from TikTok for *Coraline* cosplay, *TikTok*, 15 March 2025, [accessed 16 March 2025].



Fig. 28, “Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse” [online]
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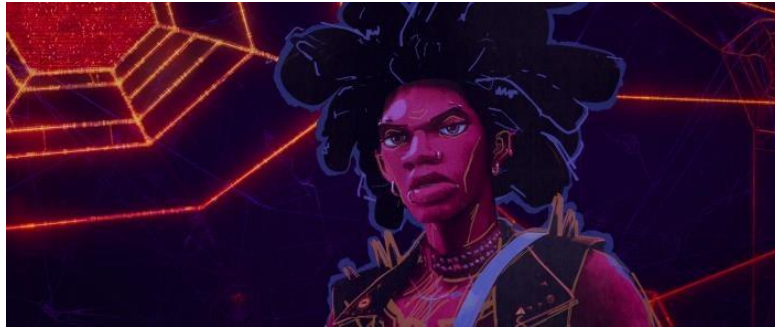


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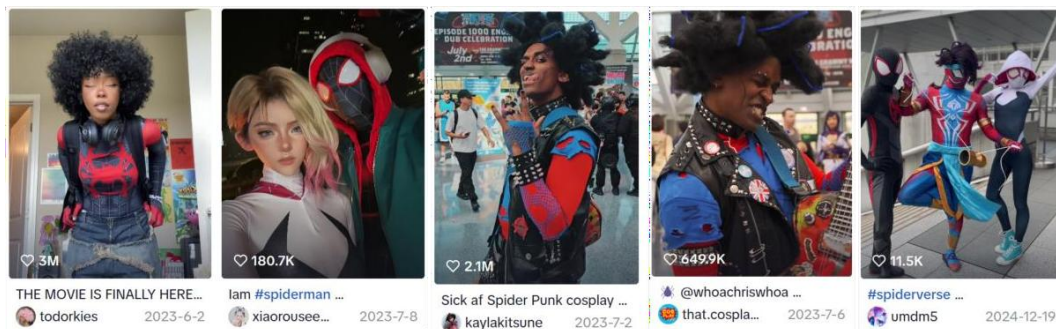


Fig. 31, Image created by the author, based on 5 screenshots from TikTok for *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* and *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* cosplays, TikTok, 17 March 2025, [accessed 17 March 2025].

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Casablanca, dir. by Michael Curtiz (Warner Bros. Pictures, 1942)

Clueless, dir. by Amy Heckerling (Paramount Pictures, 1995)

Do Revenge, dir. by Jennifer Kaytin Robinson (Netflix, 2022)

Donnie Darko, dir. by Richard Kelly (Newmarket Films, 2001)

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Fight Club, dir. by David Fincher (20th Century Fox, 1999)

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The Rocky Horror Picture Show, dir. by Jim Sharman (20th Century Fox, 1975)

The VVitch, dir. by Robert Eggers (A24, 2015)

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Downton Abbey. 2010 - 2015 (ITV)

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