

Rebellion, Republic, and Resistance:
Exploring the Politics of Disney's Star Wars Films

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Abstract

Star Wars is arguably one of the most significant cultural franchises in the United States of the past 40 years. George Lucas' original trilogy has spawned an abundance of media, the most prominent of which is the film saga. A wealth of research and literature has been conducted and written on the original and prequel trilogies, but a relative paucity of scholarly discourse exists since Disney acquired the property in 2012. This study seeks to fill a portion of that gap in literature. I begin by reviewing the literature on film's capacity to influence viewers' political attitudes, and why fictional films are able to do so via the theoretical Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model. Next, I discuss the various political commentary and scholarship on the original and prequel trilogies, and build a case inquiry into the sequel trilogy as a Disney property. Through focus groups, I explore the political messages received from the Disney Star Wars films as represented by *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) and contrast them with those of the early Star Wars films as represented by *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope* (1977). I find evidence that viewers of the original trilogy are exposed to libertarian ideological messages and viewers of the sequel trilogy are exposed to progressive ideological messages. While the qualitative results offer no generalizable conclusions, the implications and themes of this study certainly warrant further research.

Introduction

Depending on whom you ask, Star Wars is a cherished childhood favorite or an insufferable film franchise; an exciting adventure or a tired set of tropes; a way of life or just

one big advertisement. But no matter what people think of Star Wars, they can likely agree that it is simply omnipresent. Even if you haven't seen the movies, you probably know who Darth Vader, Luke Skywalker, and Yoda are. Whether it is a toy aisle devoted to the franchise, the consuming cultural event that accompanies a new movie, or a wisp of one of John William's musical compositions referenced here or lingering in your mind there, Star Wars is inescapable. As a student of political science, it is easy to wonder about the political consequences of this omnipresence.

This study is an exploration of the political values that viewers receive from Star Wars movies. While the Star Wars films are unlikely to affect an ideologue, they may be profoundly influential among apolitical citizens. Indeed, Star Wars has always been predominately marketed toward children and young people, a reliably apolitical bloc. A generation of kids lined up to view the original trilogy (sometimes referenced as OT) from 1977-1983; another generation crowded theaters as children to view the prequel trilogy (sometimes referenced as PT) from 1999-2005; though the sequel trilogy (sometimes referenced as ST) carries the weight of expectation from two generations of fans, doubtlessly it has the attention of young people from 2015-2019. Thus, Star Wars is generational and indelible to this specific time in which we live, deserving of study; it is worth exploring the films' political consequences, especially if this all-encompassing franchise has effects which can shape our values and attitudes. More specifically, how do Disney's Star Wars films affect political attitudes? To be clear, it is not the intention of this study to implicate Disney in a pursuit of some sort of political corporate agenda; rather, this study is merely curious about what political messages viewers will receive from the same film franchise helmed by two different creative progenitors working in two

different contextual circumstances. Below I will detail the wealth of literature on the original and prequel trilogies and the dearth of writing on the sequel trilogy, as well as that which justifies this study. Additionally, I explore the contexts in which George Lucas and Disney created Star Wars films to rationalize the comparisons in this study. After, I will aim to fill a portion of the gap of academic research on the sequel trilogy.

Literature

Media and Attitudes

In its rise in status from single film to cultural juggernaut, Star Wars was destined to be dissected and discussed. While there were certainly publications post-1983 discussing the original trilogy's cultural impacts, a more vigorous discourse emerged in the aftermath of the prequel trilogy. In essence, Star Wars became more than a short trilogy: it became a franchise with complexity, historical relevance, and intra-saga patterns to discuss. My goal is twofold: to explore the critical writing about the Star Wars saga and to find evidence of film's impact on political attitudes.

Luckily, there is a wealth of evidence that film can affect viewers' political attitudes. A key study by Adkins and Castle refutes the notion that entertainment has little effect on politics "because viewers are less likely to recognize the political nature of the messages they are receiving, thereby reducing their capacity for resistance" (1231). They conducted a study in the wake of the 2009 American healthcare debate which randomly assigned undergraduate students from introductory political science, sociology, and film classes to watch one of three movies: *That Thing you Do!*, *As Good as it Gets*, or *The Rainmaker*. *The Rainmaker* exposed

viewers to strong healthcare-reform messages; *As Good as it Gets* exposed viewers to subtle pro-reform messages; *That Thing You Do!* Acted as the control film with no healthcare messages (1235).

Despite the fact that 54% of the participants self-identified as Republican or leaning Republican, theoretically more resistant to liberal messages on healthcare, viewers of *The Rainmaker* and *As Good as it Gets* became more liberal toward healthcare policies for a full two weeks after watching them (1234, 1242). To gauge the attitudinal change, an initial survey buried healthcare questions within dozens of other questions; a second survey followed immediately after the movie viewing, and a third followed two weeks after the movie viewing (1234, 1236). Whether or not the films altered political attitudes beyond the two weeks post-film is not documented, and yet the authors suggest that popular film is a relatively untapped field of research in regard to changing political attitudes. They conclude that “In an age where...citizens are increasingly sorting their media consumption based on their political predispositions,” the movie theaters, TVs, or laptops where people consume media without their political armor in place, are some of the last refuges for “cross-cutting political exposure” (1242).

As entertainment media becomes more omnipresent in our culture, Adkins and Castle’s findings hold significant implications. Indeed, today’s consumers are spending more and more time with entertainment, because “entertainment media can expand our horizons and introduce us vicariously to new feelings and experiences—all without leaving our homes” (Mulligan and Habel 2). In their study, Mulligan and Habel ask if this media can even inspire more radical political attitudes; the answer is yes. In their experiment, participants watched the

political satire *Wag the Dog*, which poses an outlandish plot of the U.S. President staging a fake war in a Hollywood studio to distract from a sex scandal (7). They randomly assigned participants from an introduction to U.S. politics class to answer survey questions about the likelihood of government conspiracy (in conjunction with either watching *Wag the Dog* or taking part in an unrelated experiment). The authors conclude the participants who viewed *Wag the Dog* were more likely to engage in conspiratorial beliefs than their counterparts in the control groups (17).

Of course, it is “impossible to control all of the factors that might have influenced a viewer's perceptions of the government” (Pautz 122). There is an argument to be made that extraneous circumstances can easily affect people’s views, that perhaps a participant’s attitudes stay relatively the same but are simply muted or exacerbated in a study. And yet, studies still offer evidence that views can change. In a quasi-experiment, students from a variety of majors at a midwestern university watched *Argo* or *Zero Dark Thirty* and answered general survey questions about attitudes toward government before and after (122-123). The survey questions remained the same before and after the film, offering a clear depiction of any changes that may occur after watching. And indeed, after watching the actions of government agencies and actors like the White House, the CIA, and the military in either film, participants changed their initial survey responses. About a quarter of the audiences changed their opinions on government more favorably after watching either film; “of those viewers who changed their assessment of the direction of the nation, 22% improved their outlook; with regard to trust in the government, 25% of all respondents reported improvement after watching one of the films” (126). The political implications in Pautz’s study are relevant to this study, as is her

methodology. The method of gathering data before and after a film exhibits success in attitudinal change toward romance, climate change activism, controversial religions, capital punishment, and homophobia, among others (Hefner 2018, Skurka et al 2018, Igartua and Barrios 2012, Till and Vitouch 2012, Serpen et al 2018). It is clearly a method worth following, and a phenomenon worth researching. So if attitudes can so demonstrably change, how will an inherently political franchise like Star Wars change attitudes?

About Science, Fiction, and the Real World

The previously explained studies clearly establish a link between media exposure and attitudinal change. To focus the lens on Star Wars warrants a more expansive, thematic look. What widespread cultural effects, if any, does the behemoth franchise have? To start, there is evidence that science fiction, a once-denigrated genre, actually has the capacity to be culturally influential. As one of Star Wars' precursors, *Planet of the Apes* proved especially potent; it laid the foundation for cultural analyses of modern sci-fi franchises. Because the filmmakers and studio did not want to be associated with science fiction B movies of the time, they advertised the movie as "an allegory for our times"; even star Charlton Heston referenced evolution, science, and philosophy in an on-set interview; furthermore, it was written by a man investigated in the mania of McCarthyism and developed in the turbulent 1960s (Chambers 115-116, 119). Eventually, reviews enshrined *Planet of the Apes* in science-versus-religion discourse, and thus, the film evolved into political allegory.

Fictional movies can indeed be effective forms of persuasion, especially when they become so widely discussed like *Planet of the Apes*. According to the Extended Elaboration

Likelihood Model (E-ELM) as proposed by Slater & Rouner, involvement in a narrative and involvement with characters “are processes that limit counterarguing or make it incompatible, thus reducing individuals’ resistance and favoring their acceptance of the message contained in the narrative” (Igartua and Barrios 2012). The E-ELM provides theoretical justification for looking at the impact of media messaging in a plethora of films and franchises. Look no further than Ronald Reagan, who accepted “Star Wars” as moniker for his Strategic Defense Initiative: he welcomed the “association with... romanticism and... technological advancement” of the films (Meyer 99). But of course, we must look further.

Neither the Planet of the Apes franchise nor any modern franchise is wholly imaginable without the success and influence of Star Wars. From the OT’s development into saga and the saga’s development into franchise, scholars have certainly had much to discuss. While there has been plenty of political writing and argument about the Star Wars trilogies, some of which will have been inadvertently omitted by this study, I will nonetheless attempt a holistic review of Star Wars’ political themes.

The Original Trilogy

Silvio and Vinci’s book *Culture, Identities and Technology in the STAR WARS Films* is essential to this study, as it contains a number of influential critical essays on the original and prequel trilogies. While each discrete essay selects a specific lens through which to view the films, the authors usually concur that there is a distinct thematic difference between OT and PT. In attempts to compare and contrast these trilogies, it makes sense to begin with the OT. Most argue that the OT is dominated by individualist conservatism. The story is defined by the power

of autonomous persons' actions in opposition to a fascist Empire. For instance, Han Solo's actions in the Death Star battle in *A New Hope* and on the ice planet Hoth in *The Empire Strikes Back* are emblematic of the heroism of the individual. Not obliged by strict social orders, Han returns to help the Rebels fight at the Death Star; in spite of strict social orders, he ventures into the freezing cold of Hoth to find Luke. Because of his actions, Han Solo is viewed as a hero: "regardless of the situation, how his reputation will be affected, or even if he will live or die, Han Solo makes and follows his own rules" (Vinci 16). In contrast, his old friend and fellow smuggler Lando Calrissian, tries to play by the rules and work unethically with the administrative Empire, and fails: after all, he sacrificed his autonomy to seek success. Only after he becomes a rogue agent once more to help Leia, Chewbacca, and the droids escape, he becomes a hero, apart from an institution (Vinci 16).

This pro-individualist sentiment extends to Leia as a heroic and feminist icon as well. In her introduction, "she wears a long, flowing white dress and is referred to as a princess, reminiscent of Snow White and other fairy tale princesses," pleading the iconic line "help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi, you're my only hope"; soon though, she subverts audience expectations, "carries a blaster and can shoot with deadly accuracy" (Dominguez 116). She cuts Luke and Han with her sharp wit, often exuding an air of authority over them. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, she assumes the "single-minded behavior one would expect from a traditional action hero like Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger"; too-stalwart, she is forcibly removed from her post on Hoth, and stoically shoots her blaster in Cloud City (117). In the beginning of *The Return of the Jedi*, Jabba the Hutt enslaves Leia, forcing her to wear her famous metal bikini. Though she is effectively put on display, she overcomes her sexual trappings to kill Jabba, who

“understood too late that he dangerously underestimated his prey” (117). In short, Leia needn’t “play the cute, helpless sex kitten or become sexless and androgynous to get what she wants”—she just *is*: an icon of feminism and thus, non-conforming individuality (117).

All of this makes sense: after all, Star Wars creator George Lucas aimed to make a film in the wake of and as response to the post-Vietnam moment; to the “sociopolitical lethargy” after the Watergate scandal and Nixon’s resignation; to the stagflation and oil crisis of the 1970s (Deis 79). It seems that Reagan’s embrace of the “Star Wars” nickname for his defense program was misguided after all: “the films explicitly and implicitly criticize faith in technology at every possible turn” (Meyer 106). The Empire, clearly possessing “superior technological prowess,” is ever foiled by “the smaller forces, less sophisticated weapons, and innovation [and ingenuity] of the rebels” (106). In summation, Lucas’ commentary on governmental failure and administrative overreach takes the form of the OT’s valorization of the power and significance of the individual (Vinci 11).

The Prequel Trilogy

Conversely, the prequel trilogy is the product of rapidly globalizing world: the struggles of the 1970s were a thing of the past, the Soviet Union had fallen, and the “supposedly benevolent and progressive nature” of the global economy reigned (Silvio 67). The PT was conceived in a globalized world where individuals struggled to “understand their relationship to the... [new] organizational foundation for all aspects of... social existence” (55). Thus, the PT tells a different story than the OT.

The Force of the OT is created by and connected to all individuals: it is an ally, as Yoda says (Vinci 21). Yet in the PT, the Force “shifts from a free-flowing, transcendental energy... to a ‘will’ that needs to be codified so that its edicts may be followed” (21). Indeed, the Jedi are bound by the political rules of the Republic, a Jedi Code, prophecies, and councils: a distinct contrast to the mystic hermits living in huts in the original trilogy. Ultimately, the heroes of the Jedi Order are administrators and diplomats, preservers of the status quo (19-20). Nor do other protagonists share the traits of the Rebels in the OT: Leia’s mother, Padmé Amidala subordinates her needs or the needs of those she represents to the will of the Galactic Senate, insisting the need to “keep faith in the Republic” (18). Unlike her daughter, Padmé’s status devolves from beloved queen to distant senator to helpless pregnant wife who gives up the will to live; the erosion of her role in Republic affairs reflects the patriarchal structures against which Leia rebelled (Dominguez 126). Qui-Gon Jinn and Palpatine, the critics of dogma and existing power structures, are ultimately killed or evil. In succinct contrast, both Luke and Anakin Skywalker act with “autonomy and anarchy” in their trilogies; but where Luke is lauded, Anakin is corrupted (Vinci 26).

The distinct feeling of freedom in the OT is subdued in the PT. In the OT, coercion and dictates are the tools of the Dark Side: Darth Vader tries to convince Luke that he has no free will, and that joining the Dark Side is “his destiny” (Lyden 47). Eventually, the independent “choices of Luke and Vader are the reason why the Empire is defeated,” for Luke chooses to try to save his father, and Vader chooses to break free from the Emperor’s “foreseen” plans (47). The prequels, however, are the product of Palpatine’s machinations, who plots to become Chancellor of the Galactic Senate, stage a war to obfuscate his ascent to power, and eventually

declare himself leader of a new empire. The main character, Anakin, becomes a “pawn of events rather than a tragic hero who freely chooses the destiny that destroys him” (50). The prequels read as apocalyptic and deterministic not only because audiences know where the story is going in the original films, but because of the real-world context in which they were made: in the uncertainty of the post 9/11 world, Anakin’s line “if you’re not with me, then you’re my enemy” is a ready counterpart to Bush’s “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (Lyden 51, Tharoor 2017).

The Saga

And yet, Star Wars is more than just two separate trilogies: it is an interlinked saga, one which imparts messages when observing it in its entirety. When looking at Star Wars as a whole, it is a cautionary tale of the decline of democracy and the rise of tyranny (Deis 97). Indeed, the saga is an explicit tale of how democracies fall and are recovered through rebellion; the PT explores the rise of militarism in a national security state, and the OT rectifies the state’s regression (98, 102). In the OT, while the white, British-accented officers of the galactic fleet seek to subdue threats in the Outer Rim territories, the Rebels fight back against their imperialist oppressors with the strength of diverse aliens and humans (84). Indeed, the mixed races and species look not unlike the diverse, virtuous Galactic Senate and Jedi Council of the PT (81).

Of course, there is plenty of criticism regarding Star Wars’ racial homogeneity and marginalization. *A New Hope* can be read as an expression of “all-white, all-American military nationalism” (Nama 158). It relegates aliens of numerous colors to the bizarre and abnormal, to

poorly-lit bars (159); Jar Jar Binks, Nute Gunray, and Rune Haako of *The Phantom Menace* are the Coon and caricatures of the Japanese (160). However, the films' racial commentary can be viewed otherwise. Lando Calrissian, a black man, is one of the "coolest" and most influential members of the Rebellion: he lives to fight another day, gets promoted, and later becomes a general of the Rebel Alliance; Darth Vader, a man in black, is a symbol of strength and power (Nama 160, Deis 93-94). Indeed, Star Wars consistently sides the diverse and literally colorful characters with the *good guys*, populating the Republic and Rebellion with humans, Wookiees, Gungans, Twi'leks, Rodians, Ithorians, Ewoks, and many other alien species, while relatively stark monochrome is reserved for the *bad guys* (81).

Importantly, the emphasis on diverse, robust democracy has transcended the films. Star Wars inspired the idea of modern transmedia world-building: not only the building of a world via film and television, but via toys, videogames, comic books, novelizations, and role-playing games (Hassler-Forest 8). As Hassler-Forest says, the "multidirectional proliferation of transmedia world-building" has transformed the traditional focus of individual authorship dictating a linear, internally coherent text to one that is developed by audience contributions (8). This democratization of media is totally Star Wars: in this way, children cooperating and concocting adventures with Star Wars figurines is just as important as Luke, Han, and Leia valuing one another and restoring democracy to the galaxy, albeit at varying degrees of consequence. The Star Wars Expanded Universe, which "follows major and minor movie characters, develops complex family genealogies, and expands substantially on the events of the films," allowed creativity to blossom not just at the hands of George Lucas, but at the hands of a widespread fanbase (103).

Disney and the Sequel Trilogy

The world of Star Wars is pretty clearly democratic: assertive of the previous literature. And yet, since Disney's acquisition of Lucasfilm in 2012, Star Wars is an entirely new franchise. For example, Disney converted the once-canon Expanded Universe into now-dubbed Star Wars Legends, restricting the various sources of Star Wars' democratized authority. In its inheritance of Star Wars, plenty of fans mocked Disney's role as that of an irrepressible juggernaut, not unlike the Galactic Empire. One imagines that such a massive cultural media force would want to maximize its consumers by avoiding potentially polarizing political messaging, unlike a singular creator like George Lucas. Thus, it's worth searching for whatever latent political messages that viewers have received when watching Disney movies.

It is arguable that Disney only achieved its place as the modern era's preeminent entertainment source by its success in the 1990s during its illustriously coined Disney Renaissance (Seybold and Rondolino). The Disney Renaissance occurred from 1989-1999 and was a run of 9 films of extraordinary box office and popular, cross-generational appeal; after a period of corporate aimlessness after Walt Disney's death, the Renaissance fostered the company as we know it today. Just as the political takeaways of Star Wars matter more than what Lucas could have intended, what the Disney films effectively communicate does matter even if Disney didn't willfully include those messages (96). Generally, the Disney Renaissance films' "happily ever after" endings are all achieved when the "protagonists achieve happiness by abandoning their individuality, eventually conforming to the expectations of their patriarchal societies" (97).

The Disney Renaissance films each portray an adjusted hero's journey: they introduce their protagonists as *outliers* attempting to reconcile their identities with community expectations; the protagonists set off on quests to validate themselves, becoming *heroes*; their quests find them pitted against an *anti-hero*, over whom they triumph; overwhelmingly, they return to live *happily ever after*, their heroism allowing them ingratiation into society. Importantly, the protagonists set out to understand and ultimately redefine themselves in light of society's dictates (98). Ever at play in the journey are heterosexual romance, beauty and ugliness, American values, benevolent patriarchy, and racial homogeneity (99, 103, 104, 105). Conclusively, the Disney Renaissance films encourage individual self-realization, but reward it with happiness by social conformity (105).

In reviewing the films that made them wildly successful, Disney's messaging is at times antithetical to the world of Star Wars. Star Wars protagonists shirk from conformity while Disney protagonists ultimately embrace it; Star Wars characters make their own *happily-ever-afters*, while Disney characters eventually get included in existing *happily-ever-afters*. Coincidentally, Disney's live action reboots of its Renaissance films will largely coincide with its Star Wars films, which begs the question: with a return to the conservatism of its most resurgent decade, what kind of messaging will the company communicate, even unintentionally, to this new generation of viewers?

Naturally, the Star Wars films released by Disney haven't had the time to develop a body of critical work similar to that of their predecessors, the OT and PT. Pre-Disney Star Wars accumulated over 30 years of dialogue and discourse; Disney Star Wars has only had 7 years to do so. There has been some criticism regarding the politics of the newest generation of Star

Wars, like the problematic implementation of Disney's pseudo-feminism (Larabee 2016, Koushik and Reed 2018, de Bruin-Molé 2018). For instance, though Rey is the primary protagonist of *The Force Awakens*, she was conspicuously absent from most of the merchandise; apparently "merchandisers were explicitly instructed to minimize Rey and emphasize the male characters" (Brown 341). One essay connotes Kylo Ren's status as villain as a criticism of fragile masculinity in a time of patriarchal anxiety, which is reminiscent of Luke Skywalker's maturation, prompted by a phallic lightsaber and its power (Veneto 2017, Meyer 111). Despite this literature, there is still ample room for research into the films' political messaging, capacity to shift attitudes, and steer conversation. Such a gap in scholarship begs for research into what political messages the Disney Star Wars films are sending, and is the basis for this study.

Methodology

Originally, I planned to model this study after those of Adkins and Castle, Mulligan and Habel, Pautz, and others. Theirs were concise experiments which quantitatively observed the way a participant's preexisting political attitudes changed after being exposed to a film variable. However, to explore to what political messages, if any, viewers of the Disney Star Wars films were exposed, focus groups were the best methodology. Focus groups would complete the research by hearing from viewers in their own words, not the words I had chosen for them on a questionnaire. In an experiment reliant on questionnaires, specific inquiries about participants' attitudinal changes would likely pigeonhole their responses, while a focus group would allow a

more vigorous, free exchange and expression of ideas; ultimately, that is what mattered most to this study. Additionally, usage of the focus group method would build on the existing literature effectively.

Thus, I reserved two dates in a classroom on the Hood College campus to show two Star Wars films: *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope* (1977) and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015). I advertised the focus group sessions via word of mouth, social media posts on Instagram, and flyers on campus. To gain insight and hopefully enhance the study's findings, participants filled out a brief profile with basic demographic information, political ideology, and exposure to Star Wars (Appendix I). Next, they watched one of the films; to avoid self-selection, I did not advertise which film would be shown on which date. After, participants engaged in an approximately 30-45-minute-long focus group; the questions sought to verify the reliability of the general libertarian themes of *A New Hope*, and whether or not they changed in *The Force Awakens* (Appendix III). The focus groups were audio recorded with iPhone recording equipment. I chose those two films specifically because of their cultural relevance: the former was the first of its kind, the latter was a soft-reboot—both influential cultural events in their own right. Additionally, critics and fans have argued that *The Force Awakens* bears conspicuous similarities to *A New Hope*, to its benefit or detriment; thus, they presented an opportunity to observe how Lucas or Disney showed potentially-differing political messages with a markedly recurrent story.

It must be noted that only one participant took part in the second night, on which I showed *The Force Awakens*; naturally, the scheduled focus group turned into an interview. Therefore, I had to schedule another event session, which took place at an apartment off-

campus, and where I conducted the study with *The Force Awakens* once more. For the purposes of this paper, I will integrate the findings from both sessions in the results for *The Force Awakens*.

Results

Participant Profile

I include a brief detail of the profile results to paint a broad picture. Though they are not the essence of this study, they offer supplemental information and could aid in future research (Appendix II). Most importantly, the profile results offer insight into the constants of the sample. A total of 13 participants were involved in this study, seven of whom were male and 6 of whom were female. 10 participants identified as white, while the remaining three identified as Black or African American, Asian, and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. The most common participant partisanship was Democrat, followed by “unaffiliated”. Moreover, most participants split evenly among “very liberal” and “moderate” ideology—only two participants identified as conservative. Most participants “strongly agree” or “agree” that they pay attention to U.S. politics, though the plurality of participants answered “neither agree or disagree” that they are politically engaged. The majority of participants “strongly agree” or “agree” that they’d like to know more about U.S. politics; zero disagreed or strongly disagreed. While this demographic and political description is merely an overview, and not the primary purpose of this study, it does prompt some interesting thoughts. Is Star Wars more gender-inclusive than one might expect, which is why half the participants were male and half were female? Does the

fact that the overwhelming majority of participants identified as white speak to anything about racial assumptions in Star Wars? Was the generally-liberal ideological association indicative of anything specific? These questions and others are not answered in this study, but nevertheless I offer the data for potential future research.

Regarding the films themselves, the plurality of participants had seen all or almost all the existing Star Wars movies, but five participants had seen few to none. Ultimately, participants were nearly evenly split on being either strong Star Wars fans or not caring one way or the other. Though I felt compelled to ask about participants' exposure to films because of the nature of this study, I was more interested in question 10 (Appendix I, Appendix II). Question 10 is a list of various Star Wars media not only for participants to check when applicable, but for participants to get a sense of how prevalent the Star Wars franchise and brand is in our culture. Not only are there many films to view, but novels, art, décor, toys, and more to consume and utilize. As anticipated, participants were consumers of every media item on the list; naturally, not everyone engaged in every single media item themselves, but the variety of responses indicate how Star Wars has entered their lives in different, multifaceted ways. To my surprise, two participants answered that they have consumed "none of the above" media items. While it is certainly possible as some participants had watched zero films, I suspect that they were still aware of Star Wars as a cultural institution. While they may not have taken active part in the franchise over the years, I suspect that they surely must be aware of its impact and legacy, which speaks to the franchise's success. And yet, that suspicion is only speculative: it was not measured in this profile, and perhaps I did not provide enough options from which to choose on question 10. Regardless, the profile supports the notion that Star

Wars has a broad reach in peoples' lives; furthermore, that broad reach probably has implications, especially if consumers are unwittingly receiving political messages in their consumption of various Star Wars media. Again, these assertions are speculative, but offer supplemental data to this study that could be used in other future studies.

Focus Group— *A New Hope*

I used the focus group questions in Appendix III as guidelines: often I started with the questions as written, but pressed for exposition with follow up questions. As I've mentioned, I included *A New Hope* in this study to explore the reliability of its political messages as discerned in the vast field of scholarship. While I don't mean to suggest that *A New Hope* serves as a perfect substitute for its successors in the OT, its politics had an undeniable influence on them; thus, it serves as proxy for the OT in this study.

The discussion in the *A New Hope* focus group definitely supported the messages posed by the existing literature. The conservatism of individual contribution and heroism came up repeatedly in various forms, even despite the preponderance of moderate-to-liberal participants. One participant began the discussion by saying the film is a reminder that the greatest call across human history is the call to adventure, so they would probably be Luke Skywalker in the film—the main character who experiences the archetypal hero's journey. As the conversation continued, people agreed that, if not Luke, they would at least be "someone with a name," with Luke's attitude at least. The participants felt that the film reinforced the notion that if one isn't a "good guy," one is a bystander, or a "bad guy". Therefore, one replied,

“If the Empire were to come along... I’d resist... but if the Rebellion were to come along and offer me something to do to help, I would”.

The urgency of personal agency was continually expressed, especially as the participants described who they thought to be the best character of the film. Some preferred favorites like Luke Skywalker, who was “the reason... the Rebels defeated Vader”. Some liked C-3P0, because he “makes things happen”; if it weren’t for him, Luke, Han, and Leia would all be dead. Furthermore, C-3P0 defies boundaries: he is a character of morals and of assistance, and is great because he acts with individual agency in connection to the context of any given moment. Most of all, participants preferred Han Solo, and not just because “he’s charming,” “his own man,” and “so cool”. He is a character of dynamism, who experiences the most personal change in his story arc. He begins the film as a smuggler just trying to make money, and ends it as a hero of the Rebellion. Two participants put it simply: to Han, one said, “heroism did not come naturally”—“but he did the right thing in the end,” responded the other. When it came time to talk about the conflicting organizations of the movie, they defended the Rebellion as anti-fascist and worthy of support—end of discussion.

When asked to think in explicitly political terms, the participants all decided *A New Hope* contained strong anti-imperialist messages. To one participant, the Empire’s imperial pressure was the spark which naturally created the Rebellion; an imperial power exerting such pressure on smaller countries in our world would be wise to heed this film’s warning, because such tyranny can only lead to rebellion and uprising. Some participants drew comparisons between the Rebels and ISIS, among other terror groups. One participant stressed the film’s lessons in power and authority, and how it is a fine line that separates dangerous abuse and benevolent

good. Another participant wondered if the Rebels succeeded against the Empire because of the work of individuals like Luke Skywalker or of the collective work of the Rebel Alliance. When prompted to draw parallels between the film's characters and political figures in reality, most of the participants responded with public figures that they characterized with ill intent, likening Empire figures to wealthy political donors like George Soros and the Koch brothers, Rebels to Osama Bin Laden of Al Qaeda and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of ISIL, and Darth Vader to Donald Trump.

When asked to impart lessons from this film to kids, the participants largely rallied upon the self-reliant message of "do what you think is right". The answers were not diverse, but rather unified. One should trust one's own intuition, as Obi Wan reminds Luke to "trust [his] feelings" as he becomes acquainted with the Force. One participant responded "if you don't feel right about something, do something about it!"

Focus Group— *The Force Awakens*

Of course, the main purpose of this project is to not just confirm the political messages of past Star Wars films, but to explore those of the current Star Wars films—to compare the two. I posed the same questions to the focus group that watched *The Force Awakens*, to interesting results. As with *A New Hope*, *The Force Awakens* cannot be a perfect substitute for the rest of the films in the ST—especially because as of this writing, Episode IX hasn't been released. But as the initiator of a trilogy, as *A New Hope* was, it will serve as proxy for the ST in this study.

When prompted to identify where they would fit into the Star Wars universe, participants largely downplayed their proposed distinction. One participant said they'd probably be "one of the background characters... [they] definitely wouldn't be one of the main characters". Others echoed: "I probably wouldn't be front and center"; "[I'd be a] Jedi... but not the best Jedi"; "[I'd be a] secondary character, serving [my] own little special purpose...not hero or villain". These answers are a striking contrast to the desire to be "someone with a name" expressed by the *A New Hope* focus group.

In a fascinating difference, the *Force Awakens* participants were much more willing to delve into the discussion of organizational merits/demerits than their *A New Hope* counterparts. Some were skeptical with the pure dichotomy of good/evil that was so prominent in the discussion after *A New Hope*. After *The Force Awakens*, participants expressed interest in knowing more about the situation as it stands in the Star Wars galaxy, as both Resistance and First Order are only "doing what they think is right". Everyone agreed, however, that the Resistance was at least worth supporting. As one participant said: they are the group "that wants everybody to live and let live". The Resistance showed more respect for each of its members and welcomed newcomers like Finn; "nobody got yelled at," unlike members of the First Order. Moreover, the Resistance is an organization of diversity: "a bunch of random people... regular folks". The participants suggested that these organizational traits are worthy of support, in contrast to those of the First Order. While not inherently evil, the First Order's destructive militarism and desire to consume, achieve power, and "rule everything" is off-putting. Indeed, one participant said the First Order could be conceived of as good, because of its order and structure, but the group generally disliked the oligarchic power dynamic.

In further contrast to the *New Hope* focus group, the *Force Awakens* group identified a number of diverse favorite or best characters. One participant preferred the unnamed doctor who treats Chewbacca's wound at the Resistance base because she is helpful and has an important yet appreciably minute role to play; a few referenced Maz Kanata, a character who clearly has a huge backstory but doesn't discuss it because "she's just her own little spot in the universe"; another participant liked Han Solo who has become a secondary character, who has his own unique piece in the story and isn't just "fighting bad men" for the sake of it. The most direct reference to outright heroism was a general appreciation for Finn, the stormtrooper who deserts the First Order because "he realized he was doing something unethical [and] went to the other side," the Resistance. People agreed that Finn was the most heroic character because he went against norms, expectations, and destiny. But for the most part, the *Force Awakens* focus group recognized companions like BB-8 as their favorite characters; some preferred the idea of Rey to her execution, and one person said "I don't think I really liked any of them all that much," in reference to the protagonists.

Once again, when asked to think in explicitly political terms, the participants offered far more nuanced responses than their *New Hope* counterparts. They discussed the different types of leadership and organizations on display in *The Force Awakens*, and expressed the movie's potential to show different perspectives of governmental preference. One participant pointed out that Rey and Kylo Ren exemplify the way socioeconomic upbringing can influence a person's development and ultimately affect that person's social role. These themes were absent in the discussion of imperialism and power after *A New Hope*.

In another contrast, the *Force Awakens* focus group made few direct connections between movie characters and real-world actors. One participant likened Kylo Ren to Donald Trump, as both are unpredictable and “loose cannons”; another participant related Maz Kanata to just any “calm, knowledgeable adult”. Mostly, participant responses identified groups of people without many specifics, especially when it came to the First Order. A participant provided apt summation when they said “there’s some very blatant Nazi imagery” in the film; the clothing details, the militaristic ranks, and the scene where General Hux is speaking to an assembly of troops that salutes in response all reminded participants of fascism in Germany, North Korea, and elsewhere.

As participants discussed what lessons they’d like kids to learn from *The Force Awakens*, a couple themes emerged. They reflected on personal duty and the need to fight for what one believes in, especially when they see a group of people doing bad things to good people. The distinct difference from the *New Hope* group is that here, the fight for what is good and right is rarely an excuse to be a hero, actively seeking adventure or conflict. No—participants say that you should give others a second chance, “even if their background isn’t what you’d expect it to be, because people change”; one has every reason to fight back and be strong, but rarely to be the aggressor. Another major theme of the lessons is completely apolitical: they would want children to appreciate sci-fi, cinematography, aesthetics and design. Such appreciation could potentially lead to creativity and applied imagination, and offer new ways to simply “have fun”. The participants’ responses de-emphasize personal obligation to be steadfast defenders of what is right, and expressed the opportunity for people to determine their own paths. While one can argue that the OT characters determined their own paths in defending what is right,

the mere fact that participants lauded choosing paths without regard to the dichotomous right/wrong is telling: the dichotomy is subdued.

Discussion

And yet, there is something to be said for the tenor of each focus group. The discussion after *A New Hope* reinforced the messages spelled out in literature about the OT. Regardless of their political ideologies, the participants' discussion revolved around a limited set of definitive, concrete characters and ideas. The consistent references to main characters like Han Solo, C-3PO, and Luke suggest an association with heroism and personal influence. Thus, they seemed to conclude that what is best for the individual is what is best for society; they consistently lauded the achievements of singular characters as necessary and natural. Additionally, participants pointed out the harm that oppressive governments wreak. Lucas infused *A New Hope* with skepticism of government in the wake of Vietnam, Watergate, and the economic crises of the 1970s, and it appears to carry the same message 40 years later. The participants' final calls to "trust your intuition" and "do what's right" imply an innate dichotomy of right and wrong/good and ill in the world, and a personal duty of every individual to fight for the good, just as Han Solo did when he saved Luke during the battle of the Death Star. Though the focus group questions weren't tailored to address every idea outlined in the literature, the participants' answers suggest overwhelming support for the underlying libertarian ideals of the OT. Whether it's the personal heroism of feminism as expressed by Dominguez or the grand valor of toppling oppression by Vinci, the power of the individual's liberty is at the core of the

film's politics. The OT's political messaging and veneration of the individual is clearly reliable and still on display, in this study at least.

The discussion after *The Force Awakens*, however, was one of depth and breadth. If one identifies the films of the original trilogy as proponents of libertarian ideals, one could easily identify the films of the sequel trilogy as proponents of progressive ideals. Sure, participants still recognized ideas of right and wrong when they watched *The Force Awakens*, but frequently referenced the capacity for organizations and groups to do good/ill rather than individuals. The robust discussion about the Resistance and First Order was filled with nuance rather than ideological antitheses like tyranny and liberty. The repetitive calls to give others second chances and understand their viewpoints allowed for the group to explore the fluidity of ideas and ideological alignment, and the importance of structures and systems that perpetuate those ideals. Moreover, participants paid far more attention to a diversity of characters than the few discussed in the *New Hope* focus group—characters like BB-8, an unnamed doctor, Han Solo, Maz Kanata, Finn, Rey, General Hux, Kylo Ren, and others. The discussion of diversity and supporting characters was not a repudiation of individuality, but rather an appreciation of individuals fitting into and serving a community or organization, not defining it. This is an essential distinction between the two trilogies. While participants acknowledged the main characters of the story, they explored the significance and necessity of minor players in society in greater detail. The focus on organizational structures and legacies point to a far more progressive messaging in the ST than in the OT.

As previously mentioned, Star Wars has become generational, with Generation X growing up with the original trilogy, their children the Millennials with the prequel trilogy, and

Generation Z with the sequel trilogy. It is now easy to imagine that people of the OT generation grew up with the distinct libertarian values as expressed in those films: their appreciation for the clear delineation between right/wrong and personal agency could very well have affected their economic habits, career choices, and voting preferences. Furthermore, they would be likely to pass those values on to their children, the kids who grew up with the prequel trilogy. The generation growing up with the ST, however, is now exposed to a different set of political ideals; perhaps the messages point to a result of the inefficacy of the libertarianism espoused in the OT and PT in a globalized, interconnected world. The progressive ideals expressed by the ST and its viewership could potentially alter a whole segment of American demographics: they too may engage in economic habits, career choices, and voting preferences that clash and disrupt those established by previous generations. Maybe the ST generation will be more welcoming of those with differing viewpoints, more tolerant of opposition, more vehement in their efforts toward structural change; a disruption of the very structures built and solidified by those who made and consumed the OT.

In summation, the democracies of libertarianism and progressivism are still democracies, yet with significantly different goals and proposed means by which to achieve them. The shift from a saga of conservative values, dissected by scholarship and critic alike to one of liberal progressive values that has very little scholarship and criticism is important. The lack of significant literature devoted to the ST is only natural, as it is still in progress—its conclusion, Episode IX will be released at the end of this year. However, when a salient franchise of films, books, toys, games, and décor shifts its ideological tone, consumers can't help but receive those political messages. The films are certainly the most overt and

conspicuous representatives of the franchise; therefore, if the notion that younger, apolitical people grow up with them is accurate, their population could easily be susceptible to the films' political messaging.

Limitations and Opportunities

After discussing the implications of these results, it must be noted that there are some limitations to the research. For instance, there were a variety of ways participants self-selected their involvement. Some participated in the study because a teacher gave them extra credit to attend. Others were already fans of the franchise, and expressed their delight at just getting to watch a Star Wars film—some participants attended both sessions. The sessions were held at night and ended late, which may have deterred certain people and attracted others. Nor was this study conducted with a random sample: each participant was a member of the Hood College community—student or friend—which meant I knew all of them to varying degrees. Each of the aforementioned self-selective instances point to a possibility that participants attended the sessions and paid little attention or had already given the subjects ample amounts of thought—that they didn't simply come in with a set of attitudes, watch a specific media, and subsequently shift their attitudes. This qualitative study didn't provide the circumstances to document those changes, and so the findings could be mere chance.

This study may have also benefited from a larger pool of participants. Though six or seven participants was enough to ensure a robust discussion, several more viewers would have been preferable. Because of this limitation, it is possible that increasing the size of each focus

group could have completely changed the messages discussed. Additionally, whatever news was reported on the day of each focus group could have played a more influential role than film exposure in the way participants interpreted political messages. Participants also could have already been ideologically predisposed to interpret and discuss political messages of each movie in a certain way, though there is evidence that the participants were more ideologically varied than not (Question 5, Appendix II); nevertheless, the possibility that participants were already either more libertarian or progressive remains. Furthermore, Disney may have nothing to do with the political messages received in *The Force Awakens*. Though this study has taken care to establish its angle without accusing Disney of a political agenda, perhaps the company is irrelevant: perhaps political messages are more byproducts of directors and screenwriters than production companies. This study also assumes its two films to be proxies for their respective trilogies, and it is possible that the research may overstate the importance of each film.

Still, there are ample opportunities for further research. This study can provide a foundation for similar qualitative studies looking at other films in the franchise, or other science fiction/fantasy films outside of Star Wars. Future researchers could use the themes of this study to craft a more experimental methodology as to whether or not exposure to these films actually affect viewers' attitudes and behaviors as well as inspire discourse. The data from the participant profiles can be used to inform more specific inquiries into the relationship between Star Wars and various demographics and partisanships, and the focus group questions can easily be adapted to serve other studies.

As mentioned, there was significant self-selective bias in the study: indeed, two participants attended both focus groups. However, it is worth looking at the two participants

specifically. They answered their participant profiles consistently, and fully engaged in each post-film discussion; little about them changed except for their discourse. In other words, the same two participants with the same unwavering ideologies answered the same discussion questions in two distinctly different manners; though they remained ideological, they viewed and discussed the films' themes in a more libertarian or progressive light. This anecdote points to a quasi-experimental effect of this study, in which two different Star Wars films elicited different political thoughts; if viewers are still receptive to the political messages of a given film despite their predispositions, it could be an important point of inquiry for future research.

Conclusion

Of course, the aforementioned implications and limitations are all maybes. However, I submit that Star Wars isn't like just any other film media—no other franchise has so inspired such ubiquity in pop culture in our time. With the sheer vastness of its presence, Star Wars has entered many facets of our lives: it packs theaters, its novels fill bookstores, its innovations have guided popular cinema; it's on our food packaging, its toys dominate shelves, and its themes and references appear in meme and conversation alike. With such a dominant presence, especially now led by such a huge entertainment company, its political messaging is supremely important to study. This research merely seeks to illuminate what it is that Disney's Star Wars films are communicating, and how those messages could potentially affect individuals. The findings paint a picture of a subtle yet potent shift in the language of Star Wars, whether or not viewers or filmmakers realize it. Perhaps this study could provide the basis for

more quantitative research into the sequel trilogy or the franchise at large, or simply entice readers to think a little more deeply about that galaxy far, far away.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Rebellion, Republic, and Resistance Questionnaire

Please select the answer that best applies to each question or statement.

Please clearly select one answer unless otherwise specified.

You may choose not to answer any question.

1. What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary/third gender
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe: _____
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

2. With which racial and ethnic group(s) do you identify? (Mark all that apply)

- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin
- ☐ Middle Eastern or North African
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- ☐ White
- ☐ Another race or ethnicity not listed above: _____
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

3. I am a

- ☐ Freshman
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

4. If I had to pick, I'd probably be a(n)

- ☐ Republican
- ☐ Democrat
- ☐ Independent
- ☐ None of the above
- ☐ Other: _____

5. I mostly identify as

- ☐ Very liberal
- ☐ Liberal
- ☐ Moderate
- ☐ Conservative
- ☐ Very conservative
- ☐ None of the above
- ☐ Other: _____

6. I pay attention to U.S. Politics.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

7. I am politically engaged.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

8. I'd like to know more about U.S. Politics.

- ☐ Strongly agree

- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

9. How many *Star Wars* movies have you seen?

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1-3
- ☐ 4-6
- ☐ 7-9
- ☐ Not sure

10. I have been a consumer of the following *Star Wars* media: (*Mark all that apply*)

- ☐ Films
- ☐ Television programs
- ☐ Video games
- ☐ Toys
- ☐ Board games
- ☐ Comics or Graphic Novels
- ☐ Novels or Books
- ☐ Art
- ☐ Music or soundtracks
- ☐ Furnishings or Decorations
- ☐ None of the above

☐ Other: _____

11. I am a *Star Wars* fan.

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

12. I'm excited to watch this *Star Wars* movie.

- ☐ Extremely
- ☐ Sure, why not
- ☐ Meh
- ☐ Not in the least
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Appendix II

Answers to Questionnaire

Note: Answers to Question 3 were omitted because several participants were not students.

Answers to Question 12 were omitted because the question was meant to make participants more comfortable with the session, and was not meant to be taken seriously. If no one selected an option to answer a certain question, that option was omitted from the following charts.

1. What is your gender?

	<i>A New Hope</i>	<i>The Force Awakens</i>
Male	3	4
Female	3	3

2. With which racial and ethnic group(s) do you identify? (Mark all that apply)

	<i>A New Hope</i>	<i>The Force Awakens</i>
Asian	1	
Black or African American	2	
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander		1
White	4	6

4. If I had to pick, I'd probably be a(n)

	<i>A New Hope</i>	<i>The Force Awakens</i>
Republican	1	
Democrat	2	5
Independent	1	1
None of the Above	2	1

5. I mostly identify as

	<i>A New Hope</i>	<i>The Force Awakens</i>
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Very Liberal	2	2
Liberal		1
Moderate	1	3
Conservative	2	
None of the Above	1	1

6. I pay attention to U.S. Politics.

	<i>A New Hope</i>	<i>The Force Awakens</i>
Strongly Agree	3	1
Agree	1	2
Neither Agree nor Disagree	2	3
Disagree		1

7. I am politically engaged.

	<i>A New Hope</i>	<i>The Force Awakens</i>
Strongly Agree	1	
Agree	2	2
Neither Agree nor Disagree	2	3

Disagree	1	1
Strongly Disagree		1

8. I'd like to know more about U.S. Politics.

	<i>A New Hope</i>	<i>The Force Awakens</i>
Strongly Agree	5	2
Agree		3
Neither Agree nor Disagree	1	2

9. How many *Star Wars* movies have you seen?

	<i>A New Hope</i>	<i>The Force Awakens</i>
0 (films)	2	1
1-3 (films)		2
4-6 (films)		2
7-9 (films)	4	2

10. I have been a consumer of the following *Star Wars* media: (Mark all that apply)

11. I am a Strong

Strong
Neither Ag
D
Strong

Shares of Media Consumed by Participants—*A New Hope* and *The Force Awakens*



Appendix III

Focus Group Discussion Questions

- Role play a bit: where do you think you would fit in, or who would you be in the Star Wars universe? Why?
- Why are the Rebellion/Resistance the heroes? Could you make a case for the Empire/First Order being the heroes? Why or why not?
- Who is the best character in the film, why?
- Let's say you were a political science teacher and had to teach with this movie... what lesson would you want your students to learn?
- Do you see any similarities between any of the characters in this movie and national/global political leaders?
- What would you want your kids to get out of this?

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