

**Anti/Fan Activism:
Ideological Negotiations in *Star Wars* Fan Conflicts on Social Media
from 2015 to 2024**

D i s s e r t a t i o n

Zur

Erlangung des akademischen Grades

Doktor der Philosophie

in der Philosophischen Fakultät

der Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen

Vorgelegt von

Christina Wurst

aus

Filderstadt

2025

**Gedruckt mit Genehmigung der Philosophischen Fakultät
der Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen**

Dekanin: Prof. Dr. Angelika Zirker

Hauptberichterstatter: Prof. Dr. Michael Butter

Mitberichterstatterin: Associate Prof. Dr. Ashley Hinck

Tag der mündlichen Prüfung: 14.05.2025

Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen, TOBIAS-lib

Table of Contents

List of Figures	4
1.1: “Welcome to Online Fan Culture”: Motivation and Thesis	5
1.2: “A Woman’s Place Is in The Resistance”: Literature Review	12
1.3 “(Fan) Wars in (Online) Space”: Research Questions and <i>Star Wars</i> Case Study Selection.....	36
1.4 “Millions of Voices Suddenly Cried Out”: Methodology, Limitations, and Critical Discourse Analysis	46
1.5 “Million Different Ways to Engage”: Chapter Overview	52
Chapter 2: #MarySueGate: Mapping Socio-Political Disruptions onto Anti/Feminist Fan Conflicts	57
2.1 “Marysuegate”: Channeling Anti-Feminist Sentiments into a Catalyst Term.....	62
2.2 “Women Are Coming for Your Franchises”: The Crisis of (Geek) Masculinity in the late 2010s	69
2.3 “Feminist Propaganda”: <i>TFA</i> and <i>TLJ</i> as Reflections of Popular Feminism in the 2010s.....	78
2.4 “Battle in the Economy of Visibility”: How Media and Celebrities Spread the MSD	85
2.5 “A Fandom Divided”: The Rise of Fanization post- <i>TLJ</i>	94
2.6 “Carano made Star Wars fun again and Disney canceled her”: Fan Conflicts as a Far-Right Rabbit Hole.....	108
Chapter 3: <i>Star Wars</i> Is (Not) Political – The Fan-Populist Style of (Reactionary) Media Analysis Essays on <i>YouTube</i>	116
3.1: When Fan Backlashes Go Mainstream: From <i>YouTube</i> to <i>South Park</i> : Joining the Panderverse	120
3.2: The Activist and Fan-Populist Styles of Video Essays as a Form of Engaging in (Reactionary and Left-Leaning) Politicized Fan Conflicts	126

3.3: “Art Must Inspire Us” VS. “Objectively, This Is Bad Storytelling”: LVT- and RVT-Self-Presentation as (A)political Channels.....	133
3.4: “True (Male) Fans” vs. Kathleen Kennedy, the “Disney Elite”: Authenticity, “Bad Manners” and Scapegoating in the Fan-Populist Style	149
3.5: “ <i>Star Wars</i> is DEAD and Wokeness KILLED it”: Constructing A State of Crisis and Nostalgia for the Heartland.....	166
3.6: “Just Some Haters on <i>YouTube</i> ?”: The Radicalization Potential of RVT.....	190
Chapter 4: “Reylos Deserve to Die”: The Performance of Progressive Values in Negotiations of (Female) Sexuality in Anti/Shipping on <i>Tumblr</i>	196
4.1. “Tale As Old As Time”: Reylo Within the Romance Tradition.....	200
4.2. “This Ship Fucking Sux”: Framing Anti-Shippers as the Conservative Intruder.....	207
4.3 “Girlbossed Too Close to The Hays Code”: The Reactionary Rhetoric in “Puriteen” Anti-Shipping Culture.....	214
4.4: “Abuse Apologists Who Support Rape”: Anti-Shippers Draw From Rising Socio-Cultural Tensions In The #MeToo-Era.....	234
4.5. “Pros of Reylo: None”: Anti-Shipping Draws from the Values and Language of Social Justice Activism on <i>Tumblr</i>	242
4.6: “Worse than Twilight”: The Evolution of “Anti-Reylo” in the History of Fan Activism	253
4.7: “You’d Rather Tell Reylos to Unalive Themselves”: From Informal Activist Education to Transverse Coalitions?	260
Chapter 5: Conclusion: The Fandom Is (Still) Political: <i>The Acolyte</i> and the Loss of Certainty	267
5.1: “ <i>TA</i> Is Not For (White) Men”: The Impact of Paratextual Framing.....	270
5.2: “Won’t Somebody Think of The Lore”: Textual Dissatisfaction and the Overflowing Signifier of “Lore”.....	275

5.3: “Lesbian Space Witches”: Queerness as a Threat to Geek Masculinity 282

5.4: “It's really not about good or bad, it's about... Ambiguity and Anxiety”: Final Thoughts on Fan
Conflicts and Aversion Spaces..... 290

Works Cited..... 300

List of Figures

Fig. 1. Ted Cruz (@tedcruz, “Um”) comments on an X post by Matt Walsh, both discussing the upcoming Star Wars movie	8
Fig. 2. Poster of Leia with the headline “A Woman's Place is in the Resistance” (Gilmore)	16
Fig. 3. The titles of the original Star Wars trilogy imposed on the American presidents from 2008 to 2020, posted by the actor of Luke Skywalker, the hero of the original trilogy (@MarkHamill).	26
Fig. 4. Model of factors contributing to the rise and polarization of anti/fan conflicts. Graphic by author.	71
Fig. 5. A non-comprehensive timeline of (anti-)feminism-related events in pop culture. Graphic by author.....	72
Fig. 6. Tweet by @benshapiro about TLJ and the 2020 elections	101
Fig. 7. An example of articles on Star Wars on Breitbart.com using the site’s search function, showcasing the seemingly neutral earlier reporting	102
Fig. 8. Example of typical later, more polarized, anti-feminist, anti-woke and MSD-borrowing articles on Breitbart	104
Fig. 9. Illustration of different political YouTube communities (Wurst, “Bread”).....	131
Fig. 10. Self-presentation of Jessie Gender (Earl) with trans flag colors in her channel’s banner and her profile picture.....	133
Fig. 11. Channel info of The Critical Drinker (Jordan)	142
Fig. 12. Channel info of TheQuartering (Hambly).....	142
Fig. 13. Channel info of Nerdrotic (Buechler).....	143
Fig. 14. EndymionTv’s simplistic channel info (EndymionTv).....	144
Fig. 15. Buechler (Nerdrotic) in front of his large collection of figurines	153
Fig. 16. Example of YouTube thumbnails by Buechler with funny faces	167
Fig. 17. Example of YouTube thumbnails by EndymionTv	169
Fig. 18. Example of YouTube thumbnails by Hambly	169
Fig. 19. Early YouTube thumbnails by Buechler around 2019.....	175
Fig. 20. Later YouTube thumbnails by Buechler around 2020	175
Fig. 21. More recent YouTube thumbnails by Buechler around 2023	176
Fig. 22. A widely shared post criticizing a perceived rise of conservative “puritanism” in fan spaces with an added commentary of hashtags added by user erikalynae (Undeadhousewife). Due to the high popularity of the post, uncontroversial nature of its content and difficulty of re-wording it without losing relevant meaning, I have chosen to keep the original post for this publication.	220
Fig. 23. Google Trends results for “toxic masculinity” (blue) and “rape culture” (red) with the peaks between late 2018 and early 2019	237
Fig. 24. A Tumblr post by Lesbianmichelmishina contrasting the ships of “Finnrey”, “Stormpilot” and “Reylo”. Due to the popularity, uncontroversial nature, and specific wording of this post, it has not been anonymized.....	245
Fig. 25. Users joking that people celebrate the death of Queen Elizabeth due to her being a Reylo shipper (Grungegoths)	266

Chapter 1:

Introduction: Fan Wars – A Galaxy Far Within the Internet?

1.1: “Welcome to Online Fan Culture”: Motivation and Thesis

“Welcome to the internet

What would you prefer?

Would you like to fight for civil rights or tweet a racial slur?

Be happy

Be horny

Be bursting with rage

We got a million different ways to engage”

- Bo Burnham in “Welcome to the Internet”

As Bo Burnham describes in his poignant song quoted above, the Internet offers many ways users can express themselves and even shape the world and its politics in ways previously unthinkable just decades prior. Unsurprisingly, these different ways of engaging often lead people online to clash with one another — frequently in the form of fan conflicts, debating issues such as: Do the new *Star Wars* movies suck? Does feminism still have a long way to go? Has it gone too far already and ruined *Star Wars*? Is *Star Wars* brainwashing children with “woke” ideology? Is it even part of a larger leftist plot to undermine Western civilization? Should Rey and Kylo Ren from the new *Star Wars* movie kiss or would that set a bad example for audiences? Do fans who think they should deserve to be bullied by the fan community and told to kill themselves?

These questions come from *Star Wars* fan discourse, i.e. exchanges between social media users who either identify as fans or at least engage with issues related to the franchise,

thus investing time and emotional energy like fans (Jensen). Such users seem to exist in a microcosm of their own: within their fandom, i.e. as part of a group of fans (“Fandom”), their fan community. As these questions already hint at, such fan discourse can reach far beyond discussions of the source text.

Yet what may seem like a galaxy far, far away within niches of the Internet is both a reflection of and contribution to wider social discourses. As these examples already suggest, popular media texts — from games and books to shows and movies — have in recent years become central to mediated conflicts (Proctor and Kies). In such fan conflicts, fans may negotiate differing ideologies, such as differing stances on feminism, expressions of sexuality, or social justice, while directly or indirectly relating them to pop-cultural texts.

The discourse in which these are enacted is carried out not just by fans who have become more visible to mainstream audiences (i.e. those who consume media texts or use social media without deeper investment into the media text and its fan community) than ever (Bennet and Booth). Even public figures such as journalists, actors, producers and politicians increasingly participate in fan discourse. This is often enabled through the shared virtual space of social media platforms where the opinion of an anonymous user (or many anonymous users) may become just as or even more visible to “creators/producers and the general public” (Mueller 9) than that of a public figure. Some studies even suggest that “grass roots” trends on social media last longer than “conversations driven” top-down “by celebrities, large-scale institutions, mass media” and the like (Van Horn et al.). Consequently, social media has been re-writing the rules as to who can shape dominant discourses or how political polarization arises (Pérez-Escolar and Noguera-Vivo) for over a decade, highlighting the importance of paying attention to all discursive contributors.

Fandom and Politics

Fandom is generally perceived to be of little political importance to those not involved in it, reflected in common calls to “keep politics out of fandom” (Penney, *Pop* 48) — with the word “keep” suggesting that apolitical is the natural state of fandom despite the fact that fandom was a place of political debates long before the Internet (Mueller 5). Yet how this is enacted has differed over the years. I first became aware of the changing political dimension of online fandom when I was working on my Master’s thesis in 2018: I noticed the bullying of shippers, i.e. those supporting (i.e. “shipping”, cf. “Shipping”) a specific fictional relationship (also called a “ship”, cf. “Shipper”). They would be mocked or insulted in comments under fanfictions, i.e. stories written by fans set in the world of a specific source text such as *Star Wars*, or receive threatening private messages on their social media accounts which they described on their *Tumblr* blogs or in tweets.

Those harassing these fans would often portray their own behavior as a form of political activism, protecting the fandom from content setting a bad example by means of antagonistic behavior against other fans. I was familiar with fan examples of fan activism, i.e. fans engaging for something they wanted, for example the renewal of their favorite show. Such intense anti-fan activism driven not by a wish to “sav[e] what [they] love” but rather “fight[] what [they] hate” (to quote Rose from *The Last Jedi*) was new to me, however. I began to wonder what drove such fan conflicts.

I also increasingly noticed *YouTube* pushing video recommendations on me in which TV shows I liked would be reviewed on the premise of how “woke” they were, i.e. how much creators assumed they were pushing an overly progressive political message (“Woke”). These content creators frequently painted a picture of feminists threatening to ruin franchises by “making it political” and putting gay women of Color (see chapter 3) in everything. This reminded me of something alt-right activists would say, those who are mostly united in their

“resistance to identity politics and so-called ‘wokeness’” (Moffitt, “What Was the ‘Alt’” 14), making me wonder about the extent of these parallels.

At the same time, there were more and more politicians and political commentators who shared their views on *Star Wars*, even reacting to terms and arguments originating in and prevalent in fan discourse on platforms not geared specifically towards fans, such as *X* (formerly *Twitter*). A trend that has only increased recently, for example when far-right political commentator Matt Walsh (fig. 1) argues the next *Star Wars* films will flop because of their “feminist” director. US senator and former presidential candidate Ted Cruz (fig. 1) adds to this the slogan #GoWokeGoBroke – a common “rallying cry [...] any time a company announces a progressive product” (Stanfill et al.) and widespread in reactionary fandoms.



Fig. 1. Ted Cruz (@tedcruz, “Um”) comments on an *X* post by Matt Walsh, both discussing the up-coming *Star Wars* movie

Using this to argue that feminist / progressive politics will lead to the financial ruin of *Star Wars*, they both lean into arguments originating in fan discourse (Stanfill et al.). The way they discuss *Star Wars* is thus eerily similar to many *YouTube* videos I saw. This demonstrates how such discourses often require a profound understanding of both domains to fully understand what is being discussed between the lines in online conversations and made me wonder how and when fan and political discourse intersect.

Fandom as a Place of Learning

Furthermore, fan discourses are not only a topic worth investigating out of intellectual curiosity: Fan communities are also a powerful place of learning (Booth) – including increasingly about political matters. I experienced this myself when I joined a seminar on liberation movements in my 4th year of university: By then, I was already familiar with many of the events and issues to be discussed. I had informally learned about these before - on *Tumblr*, a social media platform particularly popular among fans where posts about my favorite TV shows had been interspersed with posts about political topics. This is a typical experience of “fannish passions and social justice concerns” (McCracken et al. 10) being intertwined on the platform. Sometimes political posts were thematically related to specific shows and sometimes they were unrelated but posted by the same users whose blogs I was following due to shared fannish interests. Social media increasingly encourages such “collapsed contexts” where due to platform affordances, it is “difficult to maintain distinct social contexts” (boyd 48).

Generally, fan communities have been praised for offering all kinds of learning opportunities, such as media literacy skills, including receptive as well as productive skills (Jenkins, “Confronting”). Fan communities are after all what Gee calls “affinity spaces” which “are key sites today where people teach and learn 21st Century skills” (Gee 27): Affinity spaces can be physical or virtual spaces characterized by a shared affinity (29), like a shared fandom – I for example learned how to use Photoshop and what *mise-en-scène* meant from Anime and *Supernatural* fans.

Additionally, the intrinsically motivated and communally embedded learning as it takes place in fandom holds powerful potential to shape how fans see the world. For example, reading fanfiction, is generally assumed to change readers’ “attitudes about sexuality” (Meggers 60) and make them grow more open, tolerant and accepting due to exposure to queer characters and content in what they read. Consequently, media fandom has often been considered a

positive influence, particularly on (but not limited to) young people. As young people nowadays spend more and more time online, often over 8 hours a day (“The Common Sense”) on social media platforms such as *YouTube*, *Instagram* and *TikTok* (Vogels and Gelles-Watnick), it becomes essential to understand what they might be learning online. Fan Studies scholar Booth suggested in 2015 that “once formal schooling is complete, one's fandom may be one of the only places where one is encouraged to think critically, to write, to discuss deeply, and to make thoughtful and critical judgments about hegemonic culture” (1.1) — a very utopian view of the learning potential in fandom, focusing largely on the positive aspects of fan culture. Yet fandom is not limited to creative writing and media analysis — it is also about “fight[ing] for civil rights or tweet[ing] a racial slur” (Burnham). Activist engagement is usually seen as positive, yet even when “fight[ing] for civil rights”, it may involve harmful behaviors such as online harassment towards those disagreeing which may be legitimized in fan discourse – such as bullying users perceived as homophobic (Larsen). In response to Gee, we might call parts of fandom in which people come together not due to a shared affinity, but a shared aversion, “aversion spaces”. These may be equally powerful at reinforcing or even changing fans’ worldview. Moreover, some “fandoms have long been a breeding ground for hate speech and neo-fascist ideology” (Euteneuer and Meints 358). Thus, fans may in certain environments be in danger of political radicalization, particularly — but not limited to — to the extreme right. The combination of fandom as a powerful place of learning and its less utopian dimensions calls for scholarship to pay close attention to what norms and behaviors are perpetuated in fan cultures, particularly in areas of political positions being negotiated.

Thesis

Star Wars fan conflicts illustrate various ways that ideologies can be negotiated in fan discourse. Recent anti/fan activism in the *Star Wars* fandom manifests differently based on political alignment and is shaped by the logics of a visibility economy of social media

platforms: Reactionary fans engage in (mostly) bottom-up attempts to reshape the media industry, aligning with broader “anti-woke” efforts to amplify certain voices and ideas in online discourse, making them more visible (chapter 2). At the same time, they often aim to make their own positionality invisible through using a fan-populist style (chapter 3). Progressive fans primarily focus on lateral policing within their own fan communities, drawing from social justice rhetoric to suppress specific forms of fan engagement they deem harmful, thus trying to render invisible media content and fan behaviors they disagree with (chapter 4). Despite these differences, all anti/fan activist behaviors in my case studies intend to change the media text and its fan community to a different ideological position, driven by negative affect (not just for textual problems but frequently also for an enemy figure or concept), often through strategies to render certain positions (in)visible on social media.

Such fan conflicts arise particularly when dissatisfaction with textual, fan-cultural and socio-cultural disruptions align, turning discussions of the text into a (frequently implicit) conflict about ideological disagreements. Such fan conflicts can be a vehicle for reactionary worldviews, particularly to spread anti-feminist sentiments – this often blurs the lines between fan and political discourse (chapter 2). Particularly reactionary fans frequently make use of a fan populist style in their anti/fan activism, drawing on enemy figures, crisis narratives and nostalgia to make their ideology appear the “common sense” one (chapter 3). On the other hand, some fans may be perceived as reactionary by others in their fan community but engage in behaviors harmful to the fan community which are nevertheless deeply rooted in progressive ideals and argumentation (chapter 4).

Chapter Structure

Consequently, it is essential to understand what is known about fan discourse and conflicts so far: In 1.2, I will briefly define relevant concepts and frameworks for my analysis. This will be followed by a literature review which identifies relevant gaps and points out the

contributions of my thesis, including discussions of fan activism, “ugly” fandom, political polarization in general, and intersections of these fields. Building on my review of the state of the art of Fan Studies and fan conflicts, I will further discuss my research questions and my selection of *Star Wars* as my case study as well as how I selected my platforms and specific materials within the case study (1.3). Based on this, I explain my methodology, particularly my choice of Critical Discourse Analysis (1.4). Finally, I provide an overview of the three chapters and conclusion to follow which will all focus on fan conflicts regarding gender and sexuality, specifically debates on feminism and heroines (chapter 2), diverse representation and perceived “woke agendas” (chapter 3), and relationship norms and fan policing thereof (chapter 4) in contemporary *Star Wars* fandom (1.5).

1.2: “A Woman’s Place Is in The Resistance”: Literature Review

Definitions: Pop Culture, Resistance, and Ideology

As I outlined in the motivation, the study of fans, i.e. those passionately engaging with a text, a sport, or a celebrity, is fundamental to understanding our contemporary participatory media and cultural landscape (Jenkins, *Confronting*; Jenkins, *Convergence*; Jenkins et al., *Spreadable*) and new forms of political engagement in online spaces (Jenkins et al., *Popular*; Hinck). Such research is increasingly relevant as social media’s impact on culture and political discourse grows.

For my purposes I consider part of fan discourse those who take the time to publicly share their opinions on *Star Wars* on social media. This is in line with Fiske observing that “[a]ll popular audiences engage in varying degrees of semiotic productivity, producing meanings and pleasure [...] [b]ut fans often turn this [...] into some form of textual production that can circulate among [...] the fan community” (“The Cultural Economy” 30). While issues of identity (Grossberg; Jensen), being part of a community (Jensen) and affective investment

(Grossberg) also play into who we consider a fan, these dimensions of fandom are not easily observed in discourse analysis. It also does not matter for the impact of an idea whether the person it originated from identified as a fan or discussed *Star Wars* for other reasons.

Fandom and popular culture frequently go hand in hand (Fiske, “The Cultural Economy” 30), with many fandoms being centered around films, TV shows or video games. Popular culture is on one hand widespread, it’s “mass-produced and mass-distributed entertainment” (30), but it is also generally “associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people” (30). This is contrasted to “high culture” which is “socially and institutionally legitimated” (31) and liking it is generally associated with a “higher socio-economic position” (31). That is to say: *Star Wars* is not Shakespeare.

While this may mean that fans are right to say something like “*Star Wars* is only mindless entertainment for the masses” and thus fan conflicts are trivial and do not matter, contemporary views on audiences challenge such a one-directional understanding of popular culture: Although earlier theories on mass culture assumed consumers to be “the mindless pawns of capitalism” (Jenkins et al., “Hop on Pop” 39), modern Cultural Studies recognizes the influence of consumers “through their choices, schemes, and re-creations.” (39). A movie audience may for example not buy enough tickets or leave bad reviews for a movie, leading to no further similar movies being produced, such as the end of the “A Star Wars Story” set of installments after the financial failure of *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (Dietsch). They may also, through word-of-mouth advertisement or hashtag campaigns, help save failing or canceled shows (Navar-Gill and Stanfill). Such examples highlight the power of consumers to shape the media landscape.

The increasing influence of audiences is closely tied to the rise of participatory culture, i.e. “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement” (Jenkins, *Confronting* 3). This is due to the Internet and social media among other reasons which have

allowed audiences to be not merely consumers, but have “a more active stake in the culture that is produced” (Jenkins, “Confronting”): Fans are frequently actively “speaking back” to it, often “through the production of transformative works (fanfiction, fan video, fan art)” (Scott, “The Moral Economy” 167), expressing their opinions on social media and occasionally trying to actively influence the production of their favorite media through coordinated campaigns. With the increasing visibility of fan voices (Bennett and Booth) and access to media producers due to social media, this act of “speaking back” has only grown more powerful and widespread.

Fans participating in fan activism and fan conflicts demonstrate that fans are often highly aware of Stuart Hall’s understanding of popular culture as “the arena of consent and resistance” which is “partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured” (239). By this he means that by producing popular culture, “cultural industries do have the power constantly to rework and reshape what they represent; and, by repetition and selection, to impose and implant such definitions of ourselves as fit more easily the descriptions of the dominant or preferred culture” (233).

Popular culture thus contributes to securing hegemony. Hegemony as conceptualized by Gramsci describes “consent which is secured by the [...] popularization of the world view of the ruling class” (Bates 352). For *Star Wars*, this may for example mean that in line with the patriarchal structures of modern US society, it used to primarily depict men in leading roles and as Jedi, thus contributing to normalizing the patriarchal worldview that only men belong in positions of power (Clarke and Hine 2).

Yet not all fans will agree with — or even on — the ideology that shaped a given *Star Wars* movie. While I have described fan conflicts as a phenomenon I particularly noticed in the last decade, they have a long history (cf. Mueller). Particularly differing interpretations of pop cultural texts rooted in audiences’ worldview are far from a new phenomenon and thus it is not a surprise that fan conflicts constantly arise. In 1989 Fiske already argued that popular

culture “contain[s] resources out of which the people can make their own meanings of their social relations and identities” and thus “[p]opular culture is always a culture of conflict” (*Understanding 2*).

The kind of fan conflicts I am interested in are first and foremost ideological negotiations. For the purpose of this study, I understand ideology to describe a “set of ideas, beliefs and attitudes, consciously or unconsciously held, which reflects or shapes understandings or misconceptions of the social and political world” (Freedon). Ideology is a term often used but rarely defined in Fan Studies. The way it is frequently used best aligns with this definition.

Coming from a Cultural Studies background and being interested in the interplay of ideology and media, my understanding of ideology in this work is strongly shaped by the works of John Fiske and Stuart Hall. When analyzing cultural products, such as *Star Wars* and its fan discourses, it is necessary to think of ideology more in line with Althusser’s theory of interpellation which Fiske applies to TV¹: “[I]deology is not a static set of ideas imposed upon the subordinate by the dominant classes but rather a dynamic process constantly reproduced and reconstituted in practice - that is, in the ways that people think, act, and understand themselves and their relationship to society” (“Culture” 1269). Institutions, among them the media, are part of the “ideological state apparatuses” and “produce in people the tendency to behave and think in socially acceptable ways” (1269).

However, despite owing much to Fiske’s work on fans, I rely on a broader definition of the term, given above. Fiske closely relates ideology with how the dominant class thinks the world should be and proposes “a constant contradiction between ideology and the social experience of the subordinate”, leading to constant “ideological struggle” (1273). This

¹ To be precise, he discusses news media, not entertainment. However, an in-depth discussion of all the developments from Adorno and Horkheimer’s passive consumers to contemporary theories on active audiences is beyond the scope of this introduction.

understanding of ideology as something imposed from above but resisted from below is not in line with how the term is commonly used in Fan and Media Studies, where we can find for example discussions of the “far-right racial ideology” (Varda and Hahner 137), “[a]lt-right ideology” (139) or “post-colorblind white supremacist ideology” (Kreiter 116) expressed in fan conflicts – which are all notably fringe ideologies (as of now)².

“Beautiful” Fandom: Fan Activism

Part of fans’ active “speaking back” to popular culture is expressed in fan activism. This term describes fans “organiz[ing] around real-world issues through extended engagement with and appropriation of popular culture content” (Brough and Shresthova 2.3). The study of which is heavily skewed towards marginalized (Scott, “The Moral Economy”) (i.e. predominantly female and queer) fans’ engagement for progressive causes.

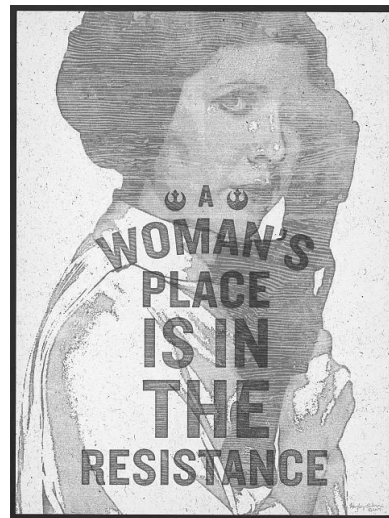


Fig. 2. Poster of Leia with the headline “A Woman's Place is in the Resistance” (Gilmore)

Fan activism has had a profound impact on political discourse and civic activism in recent years (Jenkins, *By Any Media*; Hinck). At a protest march, such as the women’s march in 2017, we may for example find someone holding up a sign that says that “[a] woman’s place

² Additionally, some fans in my case studies use ideology as a pejorative, frequently in combination with “feminist” or “woke ideology”, the connotations of which are more in line with the “vulgar Marxist sense of ‘false consciousness’” (Fiske, “Culture” 1269).

is in the resistance” (fig. 2), displaying a print of Leia Organa, leader of the fictional *Star Wars* rebels – a piece of artwork that “was spotted everywhere from Mississippi to New Zealand, and hundreds of thousands shared it on social media sites” (Gilmore, “Women’s March”). Leia “shaped at least one generation of women”, Barclay argues, and those who had admired her strength and resilience “took up the resistance for her after 2016” (3), inspired to real world action by the strength of a fictional character. For this reason, organizations may also tap into fandom, such as the Star Wars: Force for Change campaign in support of UNICEF (Hinck), to rally fans behind a good cause. Such examples illustrate how fandom can inspire civic action.

Historically the field of Fan Studies has overwhelmingly focused on subversive fan practices by “marginalized voices” (Scott, “The Moral Economy” 167), mostly meaning female and queer audiences³, as a positive and progressive force. The creation of fanworks as a form of grassroots resistance to hegemonic, particularly patriarchal and heteronormative, norms (e.g. Bacon-Smith; Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*) has been at the heart of the field and the center of much research. Additionally, judging from the breadth of works on fanfiction and fanart, the state of the art suggests that such “transformational works” (Scott, “The Moral Economy” 168) seem to be the central means through which resistance is expressed — despite fanfiction being a niche interest (Egido Lorente) many fans do not take part in.

The field’s substantial positive takes on fan culture arose from a desire to “construct an alternative image of fan cultures [...] as active, critically engaged, and creative” (Jenkins, *Fans* 1), to counter the common negative perceptions of fans held by society and scholars: Fans, particularly men, were pathologized as the “obsessed loner” (Jensen 11) who need to “get a life” (Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* 9); women were often shamed as inferior fans who have

³ Race unfortunately plays a minor role, both in fan activism and academic scholarship. For a work on “decentering white fans”, see for example Pande: *Fandom, Now in Color: A Collection of Voices*.

particularly “bad taste” (Mueller 86) in genres such as romance and who act hysterical and stupid (87).

However, the celebratory focus of the field, often described as its “fandom is beautiful” phase (Coppa, “Fuck Yeah”), has largely ignored the discursive contributions of the majority of fans who do not produce fanart (particularly fanfiction) or who do not participate in activist events but simply post online. Additionally, it has intentionally overstated fandom’s democratic and progressive potential (cf. Stanfill, “Introduction”, 123) while under-exploring the activist engagement of reactionary and antagonistic fans. Consequently, in line with a recent shift in Fan Studies towards exploring the ways in which “Fandom is Ugly” (Proctor and Kies; more recently: *Fandom Is Ugly: Networked Harassment in Participatory Culture* by Mel Stanfill), I focus on fan conflicts that can encourage radicalization and harassment. Thus, this thesis adds to a growing body of works that allow for a more nuanced and complex understanding of fandom, including its “dark” or “ugly” side.

“Ugly” Fandom: Toxic Fandom and Anti-Fan Activism

Unlike the examples of progressive fan activism discussed previously, some fans also engage in behaviors that aim at changing existing power structures – either within the original text or within the fan community – in order to achieve reactionary changes or by antagonistic (“toxic”) ways of engagement. So far, few works on the “dark” or “ugly” side of fan culture exist compared to the body of work on fan activism that depicts fandom as an almost utopian space of progressive values, democracy and unity – an image purposefully painted by many scholars “with the goal to counteract the widespread bias against consumers of popular culture [...]” (Mueller 1). However, this image is not a realistic reflection of the dynamics of fan communities. Works on “ugly” fandom mainly fall into two categories which often overlap: Toxic and anti-fans:

Toxic fans are those who engage in “harmful practices driven by fans’ feelings of entitlement, possessiveness or superiority” (Driessen 26). Such fans may, for example, claim their behavior is rooted in a defense of “their” franchise against poor writing due to “forced diversity”. This is a typical case in which such toxic fans portray themselves as the “true” fans defending the integrity of the franchise they love. They thus don’t fall clearly into either the category of being driven by love or dislike.

Generally, the term “toxic fans” is taken to mean fans who participate in the harassment of others (Driessen) for a variety of reasons. Fans who dislike the idea of a romantic relationship between Rey and Kylo Ren may, for example, bully those who do. The term “toxic” in “toxic fan” is closely connected to the concept of “toxic online disinhibition” which encompasses a wide range of antagonistic behaviors that are not limited to but also found in fandoms: Behaviors which are generally “rude, critical, angry, hateful, and threatening” (Suler 184), such as mass harassment and community exclusion and even death threats (Click). They can range from blackmail and “doxxing”, i.e. publication of private information (Proctor and Kies), boycotts, angry petitions and data manipulation to sexist and racist abuse of actors or authors (B. Jones; Driessen).

Additionally, fans who are for example asking for Lucasfilm to feature less, not more, actors of Color in *Star Wars* are engaging in reactionary fan activism. This has often led to direct targeted harassment: Many actors of color – such as Kelly Mary Tran or John Boyega in the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy – received significant backlash against their characters that involved mass harassment against them on social media platforms with Tran even leaving the platform (Driessen). However, independent of harassment, Stanfill argues that such “reactionary fandoms, as sites of domination, are inherently toxic (“Introduction” 125)” yet “nonreactionary fandoms can also be toxic.” (125).

As the comment by Stanfill about reactionary fans suggests, the term is not always applied solely on the basis of observable behavior but also due to the underlying ideology: Those opposed to social changes reflected in contemporary media, reactionary fans, are also often perceived as toxic by the nature of their views alone – within fandom as well as by scholars. Dannar for example describes “most of the communities discussed in [his] dissertation [as] certainly toxic in that they legitimize white supremacy” (22). Dosser similarly discusses that the label “‘toxic’ [is] seldom being defined and more used to describe homophobic, misogynistic, racist, and/or violent practices or individuals” (Dosser 135).

This aligns with fandom’s natural state being assumed to be progressive (Stanfill, “Introduction” 124): While homophobic fans might be perceived to be disruptive to the fan community by the controversial nature of their views alone, this might similarly apply to queer-activist fans, particularly before the more widespread contemporary cultural acceptance of queer characters on-screen. For example, “slash shippers”, i.e. those supporting fictional same-sex relationships, were seen as curiosities who were writing against the intended reading of the text when they imagined straight characters in same-sex relationships until well into the 2000s (Green et al.). This was often done despite the explicit disapproval of copyright holders such as Lucasfilm (Brooker 164-6) – yet slash shippers of old are never discussed as “toxic” fans despite their disruptive nature. Both the fact that the term is only vaguely defined and that it holds a normative quality is why I refrain from describing the fans engaged in my case studies as “toxic” – although their perception as such by other fans and scholars has certainly influenced my decision to focus on these specific disagreements between fans and anti-fans that I am writing about.

There is a lot of overlap between toxic and “anti-fans”, i.e. those who are motivated not by love but hate (or more broadly: negative affect) for a given object. Anti-fans “strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic

drivel” (J. Gray, “New Audiences” 70). This can motivate “toxic” behaviors, but it does not have to involve antagonistic interactions and can take harmless forms such as “hate-watching” in which anti-fans “derive pleasure from mocking entertainment content that they find worthy of ridicule” (Cohen et al. 136) by for example “laughing or complaining about the show with others” (138). However, to complicate this concept, people engaging against diverse representations in *Star Wars* may see themselves as deeply motivated by their love for the franchise, thus naturally wanting to uphold the status quo of what the franchise used to be. Such fans are only described as “anti-fans” by others yet would not self-identify as such. Consequently, I may in my case studies describe the same person as a “*Star Wars* fan” but in a specific instance as an “anti-fan” of a specific character or movie(s) from the franchise.

Additionally, in fan discourse “anti(-fan)” may be much more about a set of toxic behaviors, than necessarily an individual’s affect towards a given text, as the term is understood in academia. A specific kind of anti(-fan) is the “anti-shipper”, “someone who opposes shipping or a certain pairing” (“Anti-shipper”), i.e. someone who is opposed to a specific fictional relationship, sometimes to the point of “harass[ing] [those who enjoy the relationship or “ship”] for shipping ‘morally wrong’ ships” (“Anti-shipper”). The use of “anti” as an insult towards fans perceived to be disrupting the fan community and its shipping practices is common, even when the fans in question are not strongly opposed to a specific relationship: This is frequently weaponized when “fans who are critical of fandom’s negotiation of race/ism” (Pande, “Get out” 107) are dismissed as being “antis” who are “supporting censorship in the name of social justice” (107).

On the other hand, “anti-fan activism” can be positively connotated and associated with progressive values depending on its driving cause: Some fans see being considered an “anti” of a specific content which they consider problematic as a form of activist engagement that justifies any (or many) means – fans may for example proudly declare themselves “anti-

Twilight” as a form of “feminist critique of romance stories”, assuming that “romance portrayed in Twilight is [...] sending a ‘bad’ message to teenage girls” (Strong 7). The social impact of representation in media and dominant cultural practices is often given as justification for such activist engagement (as I will also discuss in chapter 4).

All these examples demonstrate the complexities of what I consider “anti-fan activism”, yet little research exists so far on anti-fan activism. I understand “anti-fan activism” as a drive to engage with “real-world issues” through “engagement with and appropriation of popular culture content” (Brough and Shresthova 2.3), just as fan activism does. However, in contrast to fan activism, it is primarily motivated by negative affect towards specific texts, characters, or fan behaviors — be it the sequel trilogy or fictional relationships considered problematic. In this thesis, I am particularly interested in reactionary “anti-fan activism”, in contrast to fan activism (which may ask for additive changes towards a new status quo, such as including a more diverse set of characters), that advocates for a return to the prior status quo or for a discontinuation of the text or of specific fan behaviors, thus expressing a dislike for the text in its current form or for recent fan culture.

While anti-fan activism may sometimes noticeably differ from fan activism (see chapter 3), I chose to use this closely related term to emphasize that the difference between fan activism and anti-fan activism lies in participants’ behaviors, not their ideological beliefs. Although the literature often describes fan activism as progressive and reactionary fan engagement as “backlashes”, as Stanfill notably points out, “it is political when anyone uses popular culture to transform the world—traditionally excluded or not. There is slippage across this research between changing society and being progressive, but reactionaries, too, want to change society, and they generally also see themselves and/or their views as marginalized” (“Introduction” 128). As “anti-fan activism” differs in its ways of engagement from fan activism, a more in-depth understanding of it is necessary.

This thesis explores three types of anti-fan activism:

- 1) Those who are anti-fans of Rey and other female characters and thus (presumably) are opposed to the source text (i.e. the sequel trilogy, especially *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi*) itself.
- 2) Those who are anti-fans of new *Star Wars* releases generally, producer Kathleen Kennedy, and the overly progressive ideology she presumably enforces. These anti-fans are thus more opposed to the people and social circumstances creating the text. Both case studies have in common that the anti-fan activism in question is bottom-up, i.e. directed hierarchically upwards and outwards (i.e. directed against those outside the fan community).
- 3) Finally, those who are anti-fans of a potential relationship between Rey and Kylo Ren and who are thus against “shipping” fan behaviors they disapprove of. In this case study, there is theoretically no power imbalance between the parties involved, as it is an intra-fan community conflict, thus a form of lateral anti-fan activism.

All three case studies have in common that those engaging in it do not only experience negative affect but are driven by it to (often rather frequently) engage in productive behaviors such as writing social media comments on *Twitter/X*, creating *YouTube* videos, or writing lengthy *Tumblr* blog posts about their object of dislike in an attempt to “fix” the perceived problem.

Fandom and Political Polarization in the 2010s

Despite having discussed several examples of fan and political discourse being intertwined, popular culture and fan spaces are still widely perceived as naturally apolitical – this is also implied by the widespread accusation by fans and politicians alike of bringing “politics into” an inherently escapist text and space they were not previously part of (Condis

and Stanfill). There are two primary ways in which fandom is falsely assumed to be apolitical or irrelevant to politics: By fannish definition and by scholarship outside of Fan Studies.

In fan discourse, “political” is often understood (particularly by reactionary fans) to mean that something has been included in order to influence or even manipulate the political stance of its audience. This argument is most frequently made by fans who are part of a dominant social group as “the line between what is considered “political” and “apolitical” has historically been determined by dominant groups and shaped by hegemonic ideas” (Mueller 8). This means it’s often conservatives and white men who think the media they are consuming is apolitical (8) and that “any divergence from the fannish norm” is “an attempt to drag politics into fandom” (82).

Fan, Cultural and Media Studies are likely to disagree with such stances and consider that no cultural product can be devoid of political or ideological messages, as I discussed more extensively in the first part of 1.2. For example, science fiction that is most concerned with space fights and explosions is not – as it is usually portrayed – “just entertainment”. Rather, as Mueller points out, such “military science fiction” is “saturated with ideological beliefs around imperialism, militarism, colonialism, and masculinity” (83). This also applies to the original *Star Wars* trilogy. Even if it wasn’t explicitly created by George Lucas to comment on the Vietnam war (S. Campbell), it is a common misconception that a highly successful movie franchise such as *Star Wars* merely exists to entertain and bring in movie-goers’ money and is thus inherently devoid of any ideological messages that may impact its audience.

Political Science on the other hand has paid little attention to fan cultures which implies them to be of little political relevance. One exception are the works of Jonathan Dean, who suggests “a hitherto apolitical fan community can become politicized if and when that fan community seeks to challenge and intervene into wider social relations” (415). In Dean’s understanding, politicization of fandom means (formalized and informal) fan activist

engagement, for example for greater LGBTQ acceptance outside of the fan community (415). At the same time, this implies other fan activities that only focus on the source text or changes within the fan community to be apolitical.

For the purpose of this work, I have a broader understanding of this than Dean: A fandom is also politicized if discussions of the media text explicitly support or reject social changes reflected in the media text – for example if the inclusion of a female heroine or a queer relationship is celebrated as a social milestone or rejected as a perceived example of a progressive “agenda”, even if the intervention is limited to the fan community.

Generally, the intersection between fan practices and political discourse seems to be increasing. Besides fan activism which would be more in line with Dean’s understanding of politicized fandom, there are also more low-impact ways of connecting fandom and politics which are often better described as the “fanization” of politics: We may for example illustrate politicians with lightsabers in hand to show our support or we insert them into memes that align them with the evil empire to critically comment on political events, such as the 2020 US elections (see fig. 3) — such posts sometimes even spread by “Luke Skywalker” himself to millions of followers (Wurst, “Dildoshops”). Many political figures nowadays speak back to us in the same language, using pop cultural terminology familiar to fans, such as President Obama discussing “Jedi mind-meld”ing the congress (Sneed; Petri). In such cases, fandom serves as a shared language to comment on political events.



Fig. 3. The titles of the original Star Wars trilogy imposed on the American presidents from 2008 to 2020, posted by the actor of Luke Skywalker, the hero of the original trilogy (@MarkHamill).

Fan culture has also firmly secured its place in politics in various other ways: Political subjects often act as fans (Dean) — with even extreme political behaviors such as belief in the QAnon conspiracy theory sharing traits with fan behaviors and dynamics (Reinhard et al.). This includes for example the “intense affective engagement; collective meaning-making and appropriation; social interaction and identity performance; and pleasure from consumption and engagement” (Barnes 51) commonly found in fandom. Thus, fan culture is both important to understanding contemporary politics and impossible to understand without contemporary politics.

Although “[t]hose who study politics often reject mixing it with popular culture as unserious”, it can be useful to understand how popular culture can function as “complementary resources for political communication” (Stanfill, “Introduction” 127). Consequently, particularly since the late 2010s, more and more works in Fan Studies have addressed fandom-like behaviors in political discourse and suggested a potential increasing political “fanization”, often related to populist politics. This includes works on how supporters of politicians such as Trump (Petersen et al.) or Bernie Sanders (Penney, “Social Media”) or parties such as the Tea Party (Sandvoss 125) act as fans. Dean even suggested that “fandom is now an established feature of contemporary politics” (409) regarding UK politics.

Additionally, recent works have analyzed how reactionary and white supremacist ideology may function as a fandom (Stanfill, “Introduction”; Dannar), or how QAnon conspiracy theory believers act like transformational fans when they engage in collective sleuthing and storytelling (Petersen; Reinhard et al.). Driessen et al. offer a broad overview from “fan citizenship to ‘fanspiracies’” on the role of “participatory culture in times of crisis” in their 2024 edited Special Issue on “Participatory Culture Wars”. Their issue explores how “fan studies can be used to make sense of the seeming growth of conspiracy theory communities and right-wing movements” (304). Works in this direction have also often analyzed which role fan art, such as pop cultural memes (Lamerichs et al.) or even fan videos (Butter, “This Beast”), may hold in the support of right-wing politics.

While most works on fan culture and political polarization have predominantly focused on case studies of right-wing extremism, Barnes offers a comprehensive monograph that questions “how [...] polarization manifests in online political debate?” (2). She suggests a “fan-based framework” illustrates how “identity performance, entertainment, and affective investment” shape participation in online political discourse. She particularly suggests that “[g]iven the role of othering in polarization, anti-fandom provides a significant intervention in how individuals experience and exhibit polarization” (6). However, her case studies like most works in this direction explore the role of fan-like behavior in regular political discourse, not the political elements in fan discourse.

Generally, outside of Fan Studies, research into online communication and political discourse on social media has a strong interest in the detrimental consequences of social media use, such as “dark participation” (Quandt) and toxic online practices (Suler), including trolling (Phillips), digital hate (Lumsden and Harmer), “fake news” (Flew and Iosifidis), political polarization (Barberá), as well as the contribution of social media to the rise of right-wing

extremism (Nagle; Schwarz), populism (Moffitt *The Global*; Bobba), and conspiracy theories (Caballero; Stano).

While it is contested whether the Internet or social media caused the rise of right-wing populism and conspiracy theories, it is generally agreed that it contributed to new phenomena particularly observed since the 2010s and gave rise to new expressions of political discourse. As Flew and Iosifidis for example write, social media offers “alternative communication sites to mainstream media” (7). Online political engagement seems to have “exposed the fissures in modern democracies, and there is the risk of a feedback loop operating between political polarisation, misinformation, the accumulation of user attention and engagement on politically preferred online sites” (22). Consequently, online discourse has become particularly relevant to recent research into polarization.

To understand such new developments in polarized online political discourse, “[a]nti-fandom, reactionary fandom and toxic fan practices provide a useful interpretative lens for examining the intense dislike that manifests in online political discussion” (Barnes 51) — an approach that is slowly gaining popularity as discussed above. However, the opposite is rarely done explicitly: Connecting fan conflicts to examples and concepts of political polarization occurring outside of media fan communities. My aim with this thesis is to contextualize the fan conflicts of my case studies within the political contexts and platform incentives that sustain and shape them.

The political movement most closely connected to fan culture in scholarship is the rise of the alt-right. It is “an alternative to the right-wing conservative establishment” (Nagle 16), arising around 2010, drawing from “the image- and humor-based culture of the irreverent meme factory of” online messaging boards such as 4chan (16), joined primarily in their opposition to political correctness (21) with otherwise often diverging stances on political topics. The alt-right is particularly characterized by its tendency to present itself as apolitical,

using jokes to “[render] extreme right views as harmless” (Lamerichs et al. 182). Discussion of alt-right parallels and connections will feature throughout this thesis.

Closely related issues of online polarization are the so-called “manosphere” or “red pill” online movements (Nagle 75) which are “concerned with the decline of Western masculinity” (21) perceived to be fueled by social advances for previously marginalized groups. This is a theme that is also essential to many fan conflicts which are concerned with the perceived threat of women entering previously male-dominated fan communities such as science-fiction, gaming, and comics (Scott, *Fake*; Flegel and Leggatt; Chess and Shaw).

Given the attention hate, harassment, and the potential for political radicalization have received in non-fandom online spaces and the strong ties between (TV and film) fan culture and (progressive) political engagement, an in-depth study of politicized conflict in TV and film fandom is overdue. It is furthermore essential to bridge the previously discussed gap between studies into fan activism and (TV and film) fandom’s progressive potential and research on (largely reactionary) political polarization on social media.

American Culture Wars

While it may seem trivial for fans to fight over whether or not the quality of the newest *Star Wars* movies is indicative of the decline of modern Western culture, such proxy discussions of popular culture serve as “the battleground on which the new culture wars are being fought” (Proctor and Kies 127). Proctor and Kies see fan conflicts as a “post-millennial spin on the extreme [US American] partisan polarities of the 1980s and ‘90s” (127).

While it is contested whether such fan conflicts are best described as a “culture war” (e.g. Hills, “An Extended Foreword”), this framework is useful for two reasons: Firstly, it encourages us to think of these fan conflicts not as isolated events but as responding to American political discourse which frequently leans into the “culture war” idea, such as the idea of a “war on woke” (e.g. Springs), necessitating a need for contextualization. Secondly, if

we consider those involved in anti-fan activism as seeing themselves as soldiers engaging in a “war” that extends far beyond their fan community in order to save their “culture”, this can explain the intense engagement of those involved.

The idea of a “culture war” is deeply rooted in American political history and culture, yet with it fueling online conflicts, it even enables such conflicts to spread globally beyond the American borders from which the concept originates, with fandom serving as one prominent vehicle. Particularly Anglophone media fandom as well as social justice activism “around queerness, gender and race” (Pande, “Who” 327) are heavily shaped by US culture and “USA-centric language and theorization” (327). And “the history of America, for better and worse, is largely a history of debates about the idea of America” (Hartman, *A War 2*) – thus to understand fan conflicts, particularly around American media, it is important to relate them to the American cultural context shaping them.

The original “culture war” describes a response to the real social transformations of the 60s (2) – including civil rights movements, feminist and gay liberation movements and anti-war protests (4). In consequence, the 80s and 90s were marked by “angry quarrels” (1) about various cultural topics. Issues that polarized the nation since the 1960s include “abortion, affirmative action, controversial art and censorship, evolution, feminism, gay rights, multiculturalism, national history standards, pornography, school prayer, and sex education” among others (1). Only a few of these issues are reflected in recent fan conflicts, particularly those relating to gender and sexuality, with religion being notably absent⁴.

Although Proctor and Kies place emphasis on previous decades, many classic culture war issues are still just as relevant in the 2020s, such as abortion, LGBTQ rights (although with the focus shifted from homosexuality to trans rights) or immigration. As Hartman writes, “such

⁴ Although fandom is surprisingly often discussed as a form of religion (e.g. Elliott), perhaps reading “fandom as religion” is rooted in the notable absence of expressions of religious beliefs in many fandoms.

conflict was now being fought in a different register, one shaped by the ever-intensifying disruptions that neoliberalism has been wreaking on American life” (*A War* 286) – and fandom may very well be one of those new sites of enacting these conflicts.

This is most apparent in the fact that many fan conflicts seem to be between progressives and conservatives, i.e. those who want to preserve social norms and traditions, or reactionaries, i.e. those who want to return to a previous status quo (that may or may not be imaginary). This is in line with how the culture war is thought of as a “dramatic struggle” between “liberal, progressive [...] Americans” and “conservative, traditional” (and often religious) Americans (*A War* 7) over what constitutes American identity and institutions – with the American two-party system lending itself to such a dichotomous view of disagreements. It is thus vital to understand “fan wars” in the context of American culture and discourses.

Even though many democracies, such as the US, appear deeply polarized today, scholars have argued that “American public opinion is considerably more ambivalent and internally inconsistent than the image of a culture war implies.” (Thomson 1) – this also applies to fandom. Nevertheless, “whether one thought the nation was in moral decline was often a correlative of whether one was liberal or conservative” (Hartman, *A War* 4) – and this equally applies to its contemporary incarnations in fandom: In all case studies, fans are generally considered to be progressive or liberal and anti-fans reactionary or conservative. Such descriptions may come from fellow fans, journalists, or Fan Studies scholars. However, as chapter 4 will discuss, this simplistic alignment is misguided, with progressive ideology driving instances of anti-fandom as well.

Fan Conflicts and Polarization Within Fandom

Given the strong emphasis in Fan Studies on fan cultures’ relevance for political activism (Jenkins et al., *By Any Media*; Hinck) and as a powerful site of informal learning (Gee; Booth), the limited interest in fan conflicts and particularly their relation to political events

outside of fandom is astounding. When it has been done, it is mostly related to reactionary fandom in video gaming and science-fiction fandom and their ties to the alt-right. Fan conflicts by TV and film fans as well as progressive-leaning fans are largely underrepresented. Particularly in this area, a more comprehensive analysis of the interplay between anti-fan activism, its ties to political ideologies and the impact of social media platforms and cultural context on the discourse is needed – which this thesis addresses.

Fan conflicts are generally the source or result of polarization within a fan community, when opinions on the source text or norms within the fan community greatly diverge. There are several recent works on conflicts within fandom, specifically regarding gender. General marginalization of fan factions are for example explored in works such as *Fractured Fandoms* by CarrieLynn D. Reinhard from 2016 which discusses fans experiencing harassment, often resulting from “the harassers [feeling] empowered to impose their ideals for fandom on the other person” (106) – although this is not directly related to political disagreement or fan identity. *Anti-fandom* by Melissa Click (2019) and *Dislike-Minded* (2021) by Jonathan Gray offer motivations and case-studies of dislike which however often do not delve into how and why anti-fans clash with fans, especially as the focus is often on anti-fandom being directed against (elements of) the source text.

A narrower focus on conflicts related to gender is offered by *Fake Geek Girls* (2019) by Suzanne Scott which analyzes the way women are made to feel unwelcome in some fan spaces due to being treated as “fake fans”. Indeed, works on toxic fandom have overwhelmingly focused on the threat of toxic masculinity (cf. Proctor and Kies) to the neglect of female and queer fans’ engagement in antagonistic behaviors. On the other hand, there is a “glaring absence of race as an aspect of analysis” as pointed out by Rukmini Pande in *Squee from the Margins* (2018), even though racism may shape antagonistic interactions just as much as misogyny.

Finally, there is a selection of scholarship that explicitly analyzes how fandom is polarized as a reflection or “battleground” for ideological conflicts. Such works often focus on reactionary fans of video games and comics. Mueller demonstrates that there is a long history of political polarization shaping fan conflicts, from socialist sci-fi fans to discussions of race in literature and fandom (nicknamed “RaceFail ‘09”) to the marketing of *The Hunger Games*. While she acknowledges that social media has changed political fan discourse, her case studies do not focus on how these contemporary negotiations work.

Generally, a majority of works on political polarization have refrained from explicitly connecting fan culture to phenomena observed in political online spaces and highlighting the existing parallels and shared mechanisms. So far, this is mostly done regarding the so called “gates” in comics and video gaming fandom. Many notable case studies that analyze conflicts within fandom focus on the hashtag #Gamergate which is often seen as the beginning of the alt-right (Nagle; Woods and Hahner; Winter). In this backlash against feminist criticism of video games that came to be known as #Gamergate, “gamers, rightist chan culture, antifeminism and the online far right” (Nagle 24) intersected in a way notable to the mainstream for the first time. After the rise of #Gamergate, a misogynistic harassment campaign claiming to be concerned with ethics in video game journalism (Chess and Shaw), works on political polarization in online spaces increasingly started to take the role of fan cultures into account: The events of #Gamergate have demonstrated that the origin of fan conflicts as well as their impact lie beyond disagreements in fan communities but rather reflect larger cultural conflicts and how such movements “have blurred the boundaries between mainstream politics, organized misogyny and white supremacy” (Salter 255). Consequently, there is much literature that discusses #Gamergate and its connections to the rise of the alt-right (Bezio; Massanari, “Gamergate”).

Other notable examples worth pointing out in the realm of comics are Condis' and Stanfill's article "Debating with Wertham's ghost" and the monograph *Superhero Culture Wars* by Leggatt and Flegel which both discuss the influences of recent reactionary (populist) politics on fan backlashes often nicknamed "Comicsgate". Finally, Kreiter as well as Dosser both analyze the discourse of reactionary sci-fi literature fans who participated in the "Puppygate" campaign against what the participants perceived to be a trend towards politically progressive message fiction. Such fan backlashes by gaming, comics and sci-fi fans are generally perceived to be a zero-sum game by the anti-fan activists involved in them: One side gaining something must automatically mean the other side must lose something, with particularly "straight white men" (Condis and Stanfill) being seen as the losers of contemporary fan culture. Such case studies illustrate how "alt-right extremism emerges from perceived culture wars waged in pop culture fandom" (Kreiter 126).

While also known for their conflicts between male fans (e.g. Hartmann), I do not review conflicts within sports fandoms here as Fan Studies is usually only concerned with fans of "media, comics, celebrity, music, [and] anime" (Coppa, "A Brief History" 56). This seemingly arbitrary distinction may have allowed scholars to paint media fandom as this almost utopian resistant space – yet "if we see attachments to whiteness and xenophobic or racist affect as frequently central to fan practices, then sports fandom ceases to be an outlier" (Wanzo 1.4).

The different focal points in these fields that I have outlined so far seem to suggest a false dichotomy between progressive leaning fans of TV and film often acting as fan activists, and the inherently reactionary fandoms associated with male fans (video games, comics, sci-fi literature), with their ties to the alt-right analyzed in studies on polarized political online behaviors. This upholds the misguided notion of film and TV and particularly women's fandom as the vision of progressive and united fan communities early Fan Study scholarship often

painted. Consequently, my focus on *Star Wars* film and TV fandom expands the pre-existing scope of fan conflict case studies.

Viewing fan conflicts on social media as both reflection and central site of contemporary struggles over political ideas necessitates analyzing how they draw from, mirror, or consciously employ rhetoric and mechanisms of interaction observed in political phenomena, such as the rise of misogyny, populism, conspiracy theories, and white supremacy in online spaces. This dissertation consequently aims to analyze this under-explored intersection between fan activism and toxic online behaviors and contextualize it within the (American) political issues being negotiated within *Star Wars* fan conflicts.

Following the categorizations outlined in this literature review, this thesis will frequently categorize participants in discourse as progressive or reactionary. These denote different directions in social movements with progressives wanting to move society in a new direction and reactionaries calling for the reversal of social changes. Generally, progressives are concerned with changes towards a (in their eyes) more socially just society. However, as Stanfill writes, “reactionaries, too, want to change society” (“Introduction” 128) for the better in their eyes. Thus, these labels are generally also assigned based on associations with specific issues.

When it comes to fandom, progressive fans are generally associated with typically left-wing issues such as LGBTQ rights, racial equality, and feminism – issues that are often summarized under the label “identity politics”: “The term identity politics is widely used throughout the social sciences and the humanities to describe phenomena as diverse as multiculturalism, the women's movement, civil rights, lesbian and gay movements” (Bernstein). In the 90s already, the term was commonly “used as a derogatory synonym for feminism, anti-racism, and anti-heterosexism” (Bernstein 48) and is still commonly used as such in the fan conflicts analyzed for this thesis.

Reactionary online commenters and fans on the other hand are usually associated with right-wing ideas, most notably traditional gender roles and race relations as well as opposition to “political correctness” — something that had already been observed in the original culture wars (Hartman 287). There is a large overlap between reactionaries and opposition to the more recent iteration of “political correctness” which is called “wokeness”: While “woke” originated in AAVE (African-American Vernacular English) meaning “alert to racial prejudice and discrimination” (Browne 12) with positive connotations, it is nowadays generally used as an insult towards progressive ideology. Particularly when used by reactionaries, it is now globally understood as “[p]unishing people who don’t think the “right” things on social justice issues” (Browne). A TV show may for example be considered woke when its audience perceives it as featuring women, People of Color or queer characters to the detriment of white men (see chapter 3). Consequently, in my case studies I use anti-woke interchangeably with reactionary.

1.3 “(Fan) Wars in (Online) Space”: Research Questions and *Star Wars* Case Study Selection

As I have just described, there is a vast unexplored field of media fandom and politically polarized discourse intersecting that can be particularly well explored in fan conflicts. To understand how fan conflicts on social media work as ideological negotiations, I analyze conflicts in the modern *Star Wars* fandom involving significant amounts of antagonism, either against other fans’ behaviors or against the text and its producers.

Star Wars offers many different types of fan conflicts, often concerned with representation of marginalized identities on screen or in fandom and whether such representation is (in)adequate or (in)appropriate. Gender and sexuality are central topics in these conflicts. Fans’ and other commentators’ views on the social roles and the power such groups should hold shape not just their perception of the movies, but also their stance and

behavior in these debates. Such conflicts can for example be about liking or hating female lead character Rey (see chapter 2), dislike of how Kathleen Kennedy has led Lucasfilm in recent years (chapter 3), or (dis)liking a potential relationship between Rey and Kylo Ren (see chapter 4).

I investigated three core questions on...

- 1) the topics: What issues are these fan conflicts concerned with? What stances on these issues are negotiated by different antagonistic factions of fans when discussing pop cultural texts (particularly TV / film)?
- 2) the political context: What are the origins and consequences of these conflicts? Which mainstream political events or movements are referred to or paralleled? Does the fan conflict impact mainstream or political discourse outside of the fan community?
- 3) the discourse: How are fans' stances on these issues expressed? Which arguments, rhetoric and strategies of self-presentation or interaction with other fans are used when aligning one's reading of a text with a specific ideology? Specifically, in what way is anti-fan activism enacted?

Case Study Selection

To answer these questions, I used recent fan conflicts (2015 – 2024) in the *Star Wars* fandom as exemplary source material. This includes primarily the sequel trilogy set of films, encompassing *The Force Awakens (TFA)*, released in 2015, *The Last Jedi (TLJ)*, released in 2017 and *The Rise of Skywalker (TROS)*, released in 2019. Additionally, I address issues regarding the recent live-action Disney+ *Star Wars* series, which include *The Acolyte*, *The Mandalorian*, *The Book of Boba Fett*, *Obi-Wan Kenobi*, *Andor*, and *Ahsoka* where relevant to sequel-related conflicts.

Star Wars was created by George Lucas and initially owned by his Lucasfilm company, which has belonged to Disney since 2012 with Kathleen Kennedy as its president. It is notably

deeply tied to American identity with Gerathy suggesting that particularly the original trilogy was “designed to speak to Americans in need of social and moral guidance” (197), responding to “contemporary issues that faced America in the sixties and seventies” (197). It is thus far from surprising that it has been central to contemporary culture war discourses.

The *Star Wars* franchise is exceptionally well suited to exploring fan conflicts, as it is among the most popular media franchises in the world, together with *Harry Potter* and the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*. In 2015, *TFA* was the most successful movie by a large margin with almost twice as much gross revenue as Marvel’s *Age of Ultron* (“Domestic Box Office”). Additionally, while “fandom activity” is hard to measure metrically, in 2022 it was the 6th most popular fandom for writers to produce fanfiction for on fanfiction archive *Archive Of Our Own* (toastystats), suggesting popularity both with casual movie-goers and creative online fans.

As a franchise that started in 1977 with *A New Hope*, *Star Wars* also represents not just a big but also heterogeneous fandom, of both older fans with emotional attachment to the earlier movies as well as younger fans only introduced to it in recent years. It is also a fandom well-known for its numerous conflicts about its characters (such as the reception of its first female protagonist Rey), its movies’ politics, its actors (particularly those of Color and their right to exist within the franchise), and how its fans should or should not engage with the franchise (especially what relationships between the characters to support).

Due to its sheer size and productivity alone, the *Star Wars* fandom presents a number of fan conflicts common to online fandoms and is thus a valuable case study to understand how such conflicts are both reflections of as well as part of shaping larger discourses about real-world political issues such as feminism, diverse representation in media, sexuality, and digital activism. Specifically, I focus on fan conflicts regarding feminist politics and the role of women between fans and anti-fans. I look at reactions to the sequel trilogy’s heroine Rey as well as minor spin-off show side character Cara Dune and conflicts regarding a perceived leftist, so-

called “woke”, political agenda in recent installments of the sequel trilogy. Additionally, I also look at conflicts regarding sexuality and the morality of fans supporting specific fictional relationships, particularly the one between Rey and Kylo Ren, between so-called “(anti-)shippers”. As these phenomena can be found across a multitude of fandoms, the value of these case studies is thus not limited to understanding *Star Wars* fandom but will help understand anti/fan-conflicts more broadly. The title of this thesis, “anti/fan activism”, was chosen to denote how such identities often overlap, with users being perceived and acting both as fans and anti-fans at the same time.

My case studies focus predominantly on gender and sexuality, two topics often explored for their progressive activist fans in Fan Studies (Stanfill, “Introduction” 126), while only tangentially touching upon racism in fandom. When I do so, I primarily focus on anti-woke fans and their anti-diversity arguments that link the inclusion of non-white characters to “pandering” and a decline in narrative quality. It is important to acknowledge that race is an important dimension of fan conflicts in the *Star Wars* fan community that did, however, not lend itself well to my approach of discourse analysis. None of this is to suggest that racism and white supremacy are not important issues to examine or not influential in *Star Wars* fandom.

Primary Materials Selection

For the selection of specific posts, I have primarily focused on discourse enacted on social media due to its aforementioned “low barriers” of entry that allow a wide group of fans to participate. Social media means any “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content” (“Social Media”). I have mainly collected and analyzed relevant social media posts – which I understand to encompass text, images, and video clips – from *X* (formerly *Twitter*), *Tumblr*, and *YouTube*:

YouTube is one of the most popular social media platforms used by young people. It is central to many expressions of fandom.

Twitter (now *X*) was one of the world's most important discursive platforms. It was central to many political discourses.

Tumblr is considered the “home of fandom” and has significantly shaped contemporary social justice discourse.

Despite their different affordances, such as *X* / *Twitter* being primarily text-based and *YouTube* a primarily video-based form of communication, all of these sites allow users to be in “conversation” with one another even if they are not “talking” to one another directly. For example, one way to show support for a message found on all three platforms is the “like” as well as the ability to comment on a given tweet / post / video.

The three selected platforms are characterized by different affordances and platform cultures which will be addressed in the related chapters. Notably, in July 2023, the platform formerly known as *Twitter* was renamed *X* (Conger). As during time of research it was still named *Twitter*, I will refer to it as *Twitter* throughout the following chapters except if I refer to a post written after July 2023.

These platforms were selected as they are particularly relevant to fan discourse and as they, due to spread of content and ideas from one platform to another, often form a larger, overarching discourse: For example, a tweet may respond to something the user has read on a news site, several tweets about this issue may result in a “trend” which a YouTuber will then discuss on their channel and a *Tumblr* user may later link to this YouTuber's video and write a blogpost disagreeing with the video. Frequently, each platforms' limitations encourage links and references to the others.

Additionally, the multivalent nature of these platforms – where fan community-specific, mainstream, and political discourses happen in the same space by sometimes the same

users – allows for “collapsed contexts” (boyd 48). Such circumstances allow ideas and patterns of behavior to spread far beyond the community they originate from: A *Star Wars* fan on *Tumblr* may blog about a non-*Star Wars* related issue despite their mainly *Star Wars*-themed blog, *YouTube* may recommend non-*Star Wars* related videos after a fan has watched a *Star Wars* video, or a fan may use *Twitter* for fan-purposes only but see political topics trending – there are many ways for followers or subscribers to come into contact with other topics unrelated to their fandom merely due to being on these social media platforms.

I have chosen to focus on three different social media platforms to gain a more comprehensive understanding of fan discourses. Despite discourse often being spread across several platforms, single-platform analyses, particularly of *Twitter*, have dominated research into social media (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas; Tufekci). Due to its multitude of short messages from numerous users as well as ease of data-mining access, *Twitter* has been particularly popular for quantitative studies, particularly sentiment and content as well as social network analyses (Karami 67709). This did not seem adequate for the fan conflicts I am interested in: While all anti/fan conflicts that I have chosen to focus on are represented on all three platforms, there are clear preferences for each topic to occur on a specific platform, depending on the issue debated and the participants involved. For example, anti/shipper conflicts arising from the activities and values of fan culture prominently found in fandom on *Tumblr* are consequently also most actively discussed on *Tumblr*. Additionally, in my personal experience of using these platforms, exchange of ideas between *Tumblr*, *Twitter*, and *YouTube* in the form of links, screenshots or references is common, while *Reddit*, *Instagram*, and *TikTok* form their own closed “ecosystems” which did not significantly intersect at time of research for the given fandom.

Furthermore, these are social media platforms I am personally familiar with and had been using before beginning my research – this is essential for contextualizing the presentation,

tone, reference to inside jokes known primarily on specific platforms and other aspects of posts which can be difficult if one is unfamiliar with a given platform's culture. On *Tumblr* for example, users might include “[call] [backs] to cultural movements and moments in tumblr's history in such specific jargon as to be all but impenetrable to those who are not part of the community” (Burton 14) in their posts. Such behavior aims “to produce a sense of shared heritage and cultural unity among the platform's users” (Burton 14) – consequently requiring familiarity with platform-specific events or ways of engagement. Particularly for the selection of relevant conflicts and posts it was necessary to rely on familiarity with the *Star Wars* fandom on these platforms. Deciding whether a post fits the norms of a given platform's subculture or understanding callbacks to earlier events on the site or fandom requires a high degree of familiarity with the fandom on a given platform. Else it might be nearly impossible for a researcher to analyze complex discourses on these sites. Mainly for this reason, *Reddit*, *Instagram*, and *TikTok* have been excluded from analysis.

As fandom scholars Marks and Stanfill have similarly noted when working on racist communication on social media, there are many reasons to rely on personal experience with discourses: Due to the fast-paced nature of the Internet and the slow-paced nature of academic publishing, “[t]erms identified by scholarly and activist sources, in research that was quite new by academic standards, were not widely used by the time” (72) the authors conducted their research. Content may be presented differently over time, e.g. by using “humor, irony, neutral terminology, untagged content” (73) due to content moderation policies or changing platform culture. Hashtag and keyword searches may thus yield little useful results. New relevant hashtags and keywords can instead be found by analyzing the posts of users identified as relevant or using recommendation algorithms to find content similar to that of a given user.

Related to the fast-paced and frequently highly niche nature of the Internet and its subcultures, it is important to point out a glaring lack of relevant literature for many fan-related

topics discussed. There are for example several instances in this thesis' chapters where there were no academic accounts of how certain informal terms had changed meaning, risen in popularity, or came into being in fan culture. I thus relied on crowd-sourced but highly informal sources such as *Fanlore* (a crowd-sourced wiki for fan culture) or *Urban Dictionary* (a crowd-sourced dictionary for slang words) or inferred the rise and spread of certain terms from their search query relevancy illustrated by *Google Trends*. While academically unconventional, I consider such sources highly appropriate for the topics discussed⁵.

On the chosen platforms, publicly accessible posts created between December 2015 and June 2024 were analyzed. Posts were collected from May 2019 to June 2024 using the following methods:

- 1) Posts created when audience reactivity was particularly high were collected. For example, when *Star Wars*-related hashtags were trending on release dates of the sequel movies on *Twitter* or when *Tumblr* blogs and YouTubers I followed posted more frequently than usual.
- 2) Posts that ranked high in popularity under relevant hashtags – for example, the official hashtag for a film's premiere – formed the basis of identifying relevant keywords, users, and comment threads to investigate further, e.g. "Star Wars + woke". Using the search function as well as clicking on profiles of creators of popular posts, collection of further posts followed a snowball system.
- 3) Well-known conflicts often mentioned within the fan discourse as well as scholarly literature and conferences – which do not suffer from the same time lag as the published literature – were further explored by targeted keyword

⁵ Additionally, many studies have found crowd-sourced wiki *Wikipedia* to be as, if not more, accurate than traditionally published sources on certain topics (e.g. Casebourne et al.). Concerning niche subcultural topics on the *Fanlore* wiki, it is highly likely that fellow fans are better equipped to provide accurate fact-checking than peer reviewers in academic journals who may be well-versed in the theoretical background of an article's subject but potentially unfamiliar with the fandom of a case study in question.

searches that led to more investigation of users' blog content and comment section which often instigated further targeted keyword searches.

Additionally, articles on news sites that responded to the topics in question (such as the reception of a controversial movie or TV show or fan discourse-specific key terms such as "Mary Sue" or "Reylo") were researched via *Google News* and taken into account.

Materials were collected until saturation was reached: No new themes, arguments, or rhetorical strategies were identified by adding further primary sources. As I am interested in the dominant discourse, it is not necessary to take all existing posts or minority arguments into account, only those most widespread and prominent.

Having identified key patterns via a preliminary thematic discourse analysis, close readings of representative examples were performed. For this I picked posts ranking high in popularity suggesting an argument that resonated with many users as well as texts with few likes that, however, contained many themes I had seen in a large number of posts I analyzed. It is important to acknowledge that my selection and interpretation of which issues and posts are most relevant is likely to have been shaped by being a white woman sympathetic to progressive activism.

Ethics

My ethnographic approach to post collection to build my primary sources for further analysis followed the strategy of "non-participant observation" due to the sensitive nature of the topics and my interest in discursive strategies and not fan experiences. Although I consider myself a fan of *Star Wars*, I have never actively participated in its online fandom, such as by contributing posts or interacting with other fans. Posts on my selected platforms are publicly accessible⁶, thus not requiring any interactions or self-identification. More closed-off communities, such as *Discord* servers or *Facebook* groups, have thus been excluded.

⁶ Or have been at the time of data collection.

The general practice of contemporary ethnography often involves revealing one's identity as a researcher. However, this is not always advisable when researching sensitive issues. Ideally, informed consent is obtained "for every piece of data one gathers online" (Fuchs 388), yet this can be difficult when dealing with large amounts of texts whose authors might not be active anymore or opposed to the work of the research being done – such as their potentially harmful impacts on a fan community being discussed. This "may not just result in rejection, it could also draw the attention of [extremists] towards you as a critical researcher and put you in danger" (Fuchs 386).

Additionally, to deal with the issue of protecting research subjects, Fan Studies scholars have often resorted to "ethical fabrication", which means "to obscure public data by rewriting sentences to paraphrase" them (Dym and Fiesler 5.10). This "can allow researchers to delve into contentious or sensitive subjects in fandom without potentially putting community members" – or themselves – "at risk" (Dym and Fiesler 5.10).

However, this approach poses a challenge when the identity of the user or the exact words used are of interest to the researcher. Fuchs discusses this dilemma in his aptly named "Dear Mr. Neo-Nazi, Can You Please Give Me Your Informed Consent So That I Can Quote Your Fascist Tweet". He suggests that for public figures "a researcher does not have to obtain informed consent for analysing and quoting comments" (392). For "users [that] are not public figures themselves, but only make public comments [...]", it is appropriate to "not mention the usernames in the analysis" (392). However, with a quick *Google* search many post fragments can easily be traced back to their creators, limiting its effectiveness. Consequently, this thesis contained original citations in its unpublished form to demonstrate academic honesty and makes use of ethical fabrication for smaller users who are not public figures in its published form to protect both their identity and the researcher's safety.

1.4 “Millions of Voices Suddenly Cried Out”: Methodology, Limitations, and Critical Discourse Analysis

Unlike many works in Fan Studies, I am not interested in interviews or analyses of fan art (Evans and Stasi), but in what is being expressed in written, memetic, or audiovisual posts as part of a larger discourse surrounding controversial issues. Discourse is generally understood to mean “particular way[s] of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)”, ways which do “not neutrally reflect our world, identities and social relations but, rather, play an active role in creating and changing them” (Jørgensen and Phillips 1).

This approach to studying communication owes much to Foucault’s theories on discourse, power, and knowledge. As Jørgensen and Phillips describe it, “Foucault adheres to the general social constructionist premise that knowledge is not just a reflection of reality. Truth is a discursive construction, and different regimes of knowledge determine what is true and false” (13). Based on this framework, analyses of discourse generally assume that “it is fruitless to ask whether something is true or false. Instead, the focus should be on how effects of truth are created in discourses” (14). This means that “the analyst has to work with what has actually been said or written, exploring patterns in and across the statements and identifying the social consequences of different discursive representations of reality” (21).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) relates back to my earlier discussions of ideology in which I defined it as a worldview. While the definition of ideology in CDA is contested, for this thesis it is most useful to follow Fairclough’s concept that “[i]deologies are created in societies in which relations of domination are based on social structures such as class and gender” (Jørgensen and Phillips 75). Accordingly, “discourses can be more or less ideological, the ideological discourses being those that contribute to the maintenance and transformation of power relations” (75). These are exactly the kind of discourses this thesis is interested in, ones that for example relate to gender roles, the hierarchical positions of men, women and non-

binary individuals in fandom and society, and how such relations should potentially be transformed.

The focus on fan discourse – which is so far largely underrepresented in Fan Studies – was chosen as “[d]iscursive practices may have major ideological effects - that is, they can help produce and reproduce unequal power relations” (Fairclough and Wodak 258). The goal of CDA is then to analyze “opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (Weiss and Wodak 15). To do so, there are several layers of context to what is being said in a given text. Following the Discourse-Historical Approach to CDA outlined by Wodak in *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse*, these are: the socio-political or historical context, the current discursive context, the internal context within the given text and intertextual references to other texts “which have influenced the specific discursive practice” (73). It may be of interest to the researcher which discursive strategies are used, such as “how events/objects/persons are referred to” (74) or “what characteristics are attributed to them” (74). These questions work well for analyzing fan conflicts.

CDA is well-suited for use in fan conflicts and understanding their intersections with political polarization: It goes beyond the methods common to Fan Studies such as interview-focused ethnography, textual and psychoanalytic studies of fanfiction stories⁷ (Evans and Stasi) as well as beyond the focus on (textual) content analysis common to studies of toxic online behaviors (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas) in Media and Communication Studies. Methods of CDA are interested in “analysing, understanding and explaining social phenomena that are necessarily complex and thus require a multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approach” (Wodak and Meyer 2) that aims to “[deconstruct] ideologies and power through the systematic

⁷ Although recently more works particularly on reactionary fandom are using discourse analysis (e.g. Rouse et al.).

and retroductable investigation of semiotic data” (4) and understands “language as social practice” (5).

Consequently, understanding how power relations are maintained and contested in fan communities cannot be understood only by analyzing fans’ experiences expressed in interviews or the fanworks they create, but also needs a look at how fans talk to one another on social media. Research in Media and Communication Studies has often favored automated and quantitative content analysis methods (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas) with a strong focus on texts. However, online communication, particularly in fan communities, is often image-heavy, multimodal, intertextual, and interactive beyond a simple text post, severely limiting such methods (Tufekci 505). Users might for example respond not directly to an original post, but use screenshots, allusions (e.g. so-called “subtweets”), or censored versions of keywords (inserting for example an asterisk into the word, such as in “R*ylo”) to reply to a controversial statement and avoid algorithmic detection (Tufekci). Users may also draw meaning not merely from textual, but also hypertextual (e.g. links, hashtags), paratextual (such as usernames, icons, profiles...) and visual (images, gifs, video clips, emojis...) elements of a post (505). To fully understand the discourse, close readings and contextualization are therefore indispensable.

Given these observations, I am not merely interested in the arguments and references to other discourses expressed in these posts, but also in how they are expressed, including the use of visuals and other supporting elements, ways of engagement and platform of distribution chosen. These form an important part of shaping the discourse which are often over-looked in other approaches: For example, specific emojis (e.g. a blue butterfly for Rey/Kylo Ren shippers) that are added to profiles or posts can signify membership in a group (e.g. the shipping community). When authors are using such paratextual elements to ensure that only other fans who can “decode” these are addressed by a post, such elements become a way to establish an in-group/out-group binary and may frame a given post in a certain way. Consequently, for

understanding these complex relations between different elements of a post and its relation to larger discourses and power structures, limiting analyses to textual content analysis is ineffective.

Methods of CDA do more than this by going beyond a look at what is being said on a linguistic level: They take into account “all aspects of communicative context [that contribute] to text meaning” (Wodak and Meyer 8) to understand “discourse as the instrument of power and control” (9) shaped by socio-political context. Thus, CDA is particularly suited to explore how text, images, and methods of engaging on a given platform are used by fans to express ideological stances, establish community boundaries and fan hierarchies, and reinforce norms of appropriate behaviors. CDA brings together my previously described questions on the form and resulting functions that these conflicts operate with.

Consequently, a CDA approach will help illuminate the ideological negotiations inherent in pop culture fandom conflicts on social media and thereby expand the methodological repertoire of both fields I am drawing from (Fan Studies as well as Media and Communication Studies) with the goal of capturing dimensions other approaches have neglected so far. Thus, this approach not only connects fields of inquiry – such as fan activism and political polarization online – and concepts – such as anti-fandom and populism – previously only analyzed independently (as discussed in 1.2) but furthermore aims to demonstrate a so far under-employed methodological approach’s potential to bring these fields together.

Selected posts were first analyzed for prevalent issues and to identify overarching shared themes and patterns between different posts, before analyzing the rhetorical strategies in a close reading of relevant passages. I particularly pay attention to framing which means “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral

evaluation and/or treatment recommendation” (Entman 52), as (anti-) fans often focus on different aspect of a character, movie or fictional relationship and thus come to different conclusions.

Furthermore, when analyzing these conflicts, I take parallels to broader trends in political discourse on social media into account. These require contextualization particularly, but not limited to, within contemporary American culture. As previously described, American culture is closely linked to the idea of the culture wars and has heavily influenced Anglophone fandoms. This contextualization may include highlighting keywords commonly associated with the far-right or intertextual references to other fan conflicts. It also includes contextualizing posts within the history of the respective franchise or its fandom which contributes to understanding why certain conflicts arose at a certain moment in time. Connecting fan posts to the promotional and journalistic paratexts of its release explicitly referencing feminism will, for example, demonstrate the interplay between sociopolitical tensions and conflicts in fandoms. Understanding the broader cultural context may include *TFA*'s release in temporal proximity to feminist events, such as the #MeToo movement and aftermath of the misogynistic #Gamergate fan movement.

Such an approach can illustrate how fan conflicts go beyond disliking a text for the text itself but rather express stances towards larger cultural issues. I also draw comparisons to other fandoms where relevant to demonstrate the widespread significance of the phenomena and generalizable mechanics of the interactions I am describing, as similar conflicts can be found in many more franchises and fan communities besides the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy. It will become apparent that fan conflicts taking on extremes are not isolated accidents but just the most visible manifestations of much more widespread forces at work that pervade all of fan culture as they are intrinsic parts of how discourses on social media work.

In light of these advantages of CDA, there are nevertheless potential limitations to these case studies that must be addressed: CDA is sometimes criticized for “cherry-picking” (Mautner 23) as the collection of data can seem random or biased by the scholar selecting them. However, other qualitative methods common to Fan Studies, such as interviews, are also likely to be influenced by self-selection bias: For example, certain types of fans are more likely to respond to calls for participants (cf. Riley) such as the harassed rather than the harasser.

My selection of posts could potentially over-emphasize some topics or arguments that seemed more salient to me, although I have followed several strategies to avoid this: For some aspects it was easier to ensure my examples were picked from representative samples and that my methodology could be explained and re-traced, such as analyzing reviews by well-known newspapers or critical videos by the most successful YouTubers as there was a limited amount of reviews or videos available. For *Twitter* and *Tumblr*, however, there were more posts than I could realistically read or identify as relevant. I thus relied — as discussed previously — much more on ethnographic observations and a snowball principle which are much more prone to bias and being skewed by encountering one blog but not another. I have tried throughout my chapters to give different kinds of measures to demonstrate that the arguments I refer to are not isolated incidents — such as choosing videos with high view counts on *YouTube* or highly retweeted or reblogged posts on *Twitter* and *Tumblr* which indicate that many fans may agree with the views expressed therein. I have also highlighted how the same arguments occur in posts by different users on different platforms or are even reported on by news sites as proof of their high discursive visibility and impact.

Finally, by the very fact that my approach is grounded in the works of Foucault whose “ideas were [considered] nothing less than an assault on Western civilization” in the culture wars (Hartman, *A War* 3) and Marxist theorists who are by the (contemporary online) far-right considered to “conspire[] to destroy Western civilisation by taking over key cultural

institutions” (Busbridge et al. 722), I am biased towards the progressive-aligned factions in these fan conflicts. The reactionary fans I will analyze will frequently argue from the premise that there is objective truth, i.e. what constitutes “good cinema”, that gender is essentialist and not socially constructed, and that anything related to the academic theoretical frameworks Cultural Studies draws from is a Marxist attack on Western civilization – notions rejected by CDA and Cultural Studies. However, as CDA is not concerned with determining who is right and who is wrong, this has little impact on the final analysis.

1.5 “Million Different Ways to Engage”: Chapter Overview

In the following, I will present three case studies taken from controversial *Star Wars* fan discourse on social media, concerned with issues of feminism and representation of women, broader progressive politics in modern movies and the representation of relationships in fan works respectively. Each chapter presents a different way that anti-fan activism is enacted.

The second chapter, **#MarySueGate: Mapping Socio-Political Disruptions onto Anti/Feminist Fan Conflicts**, examines how debates over the representation of women in *Star Wars* reveal broader socio-political anxieties about feminism and the right-wing instrumentalization of fandom. This case study focuses on the bigger picture: It analyzes how the representation of women on screen is negotiated in discussions of female characters in *Star Wars* by different factions of the audience. I focus my case study on the origin and evolution of the “Mary Sue” discourse about how *Star Wars*’ female characters, particularly Rey, are presumably badly written due to feminism. The relevant discourse is primarily observed in (left- and right-leaning) news articles and on *Twitter* (and *YouTube* where relevant) with attention paid to the interplay between them. I analyze texts by fans, journalists, and political figures regarding the sequel trilogy, particularly those that discuss Rey, the “Mary Sue” issue, or Dune actress Gina Carano.

I argue that fans “wanting better women characters” is a proxy-debate to express broader socio-political anxieties about 2010’s popular feminism. This is increasingly used to attract new audiences to right-wing and far-right voices and ideas, using a “fanization” of political discourse as a rhetorical strategy to gain more visibility for one’s ideology.

Such (seemingly niche) fan conflicts have far wider reaching impacts than one may assume as they map broader socio-political and related fan-cultural disruptions onto discussions of perceived narrative disruptions in fan discourse. The chapter introduces the key term “Mary Sue” as a central concept around which this fan conflict crystallized (2.1). To understand the wide resonance of this fan conflict, I situate it in its contributing contexts, the decreasing dominance of male fans in geek fandoms (2.2) on one hand and the rise of popular feminism in society on the other (2.3). Additionally, I discuss the factors leading to the ever-increasing visibility of this fan discourse outside of its fan community due to platform affordances and incentives amplifying the discourse (2.4). Such amplification encouraged an evolution of fanization: I analyze the resulting increasing mainstream right-wing instrumentalization and reshaping of the early anti-feminist discourse (2.5). Based on the more recent related discourse surrounding “good female role models” and the firing of actress Gina Carano which both introduced new topics and targeted wider audiences, I finally discuss how such fan discourse can increasingly function as a far-right “rabbit hole” (2.6).

The third chapter, ***Star Wars Is (Not) Political – The Fan-Populist Style of (Reactionary) Media Analysis Essays on YouTube***, then zooms in on one specific case study of all the groups participating in the discourse from chapter 2, the reactionary “anti-woke” fandom YouTubers and their discussions of a perceived “political agenda” of “forced diversity” in recent *Star Wars* installments as well as their targeted anti-fan activism against Lucasfilm president Kathleen Kennedy. I argue that reactionary anti-fan activist video essays follow a fan-populist style which emphasizes authentic (male) fandom in opposition to

perceived corporate elite enemy figures and is expressed through typical elements of the populist style (Moffitt, *The Global*) such as authenticity and bad manners, as well as constructing a constant state of crisis contrasted to nostalgia for a fictive “heartland” of previously “apolitical” fandom.

I mainly analyzed more recent videos on *YouTube* by four successful reactionary creators to illustrate how the sequel trilogy is discussed, especially post-*TROS*. I demonstrate how their use of a fan-populist style aligns them closely with right-wing populism despite claims by these creators to be “apolitical media critics”. I contrast the style of these YouTubers to the works of leftist YouTubers to highlight the different approaches to discussing politics in videos on popular culture in the differing creator communities to illustrate how the fan-populist style is specific to right-leaning channels.

To do so, the chapter sets up my motivation by discussing parallels between “anti-woke” discourse on *YouTube* and its mainstream representation in *South Park* (3.1). I then briefly explain the genre of the video essay and political YouTube communities before defining fan populism (3.2). My analysis of a leftist video compared to a reactionary video-essay demonstrates how fan activism and self-proclaimed apolitical anti-fan activism differ in these communities, especially in regards to one’s self-presentation (3.3). I then discuss the populist “us vs them” dynamic set up between the “true fans” and “corporate elites” represented by Kathleen Kennedy (3.4) before analyzing how the populist elements of constructing a state of crisis and nostalgia for the heartland are enacted (3.5). My conclusion addresses the radicalization potential to the far-right of such *YouTube* channels (3.6).

The fourth chapter, **“Reylos Deserve to Die”: The Performance of Progressive Values in Negotiations of (Female) Sexuality in Anti/Shipping on *Tumblr***, zooms in on fans neglected both by the previous two chapters and Fan Studies at large by providing a case study of anti-Reylo-shippers and fans’ negotiations of (women’s) sexuality or romantic desires.

Those fans are opposed to the imagined relationship between Rey and Kylo Ren (i.e. “Reylo”) in the sequel trilogy. Particularly on *Tumblr*, they engage in anti-fan activism, arguing that liking the idea of such a presumably “abusive” relationship is morally wrong, often resulting in harassment towards those liking the relationship. This illustrates that anti/fan conflicts do not always follow a divide between “woke” vs. “anti-woke”, as well as calling into question the idea of shipping fandom as affinity space. I argue that despite surface similarities to reactionary movements in their rhetoric and perception as “conservative intruders” of anti-shippers by other fans, anti-shippers perform an exaggerated version of values closely tied to the history of fan activist culture, particularly on *Tumblr* and its focus on (feminist) social justice: Their strategies often perform a type of “weaponized pedagogy” in order to remove unwelcome opinions and fans from fan discourse. To understand this phenomenon, I first explain what motivates Reylo shippers who are by many accounts interested in a seemingly uncontroversial relationship following the tradition of Romance novels (4.1). I then illustrate the anti-shipping conflict and discuss the prevalent framing of anti-shipping as inherently conservative (4.2). To understand this framing, I then discuss parallels to reactionary rhetorical strategies, addressing commonly voiced parallels to historical censorship, purity culture, reliance on silencing strategies which evoke associations with the alt-right, and conservative concerns about minors and how such similarities frequently remain superficial (4.3). To demonstrate the strong similarities with progressive activism, I discuss topics of rising feminist awareness in the 2010s such as toxic masculinity or dealing with triggering content (4.4). I further highlight how anti-shippers draw on the values and language of *Tumblr*’s social justice activist culture and especially its focus on the (positive) impact of representation (4.5). I finally argue that Reylo anti-shipping evolved out of a long history of shipping related activism and specifically *Twilight* anti-fan activism (4.6). After having argued that Reylo anti-shippers are

not inherently reactionary, I address the potential of such progressive anti-fan activism in aversion spaces to nevertheless form coalitions with reactionary movements in the future (4.7).

In my conclusion, in the fifth chapter, **The Fandom Is (Still) Political: *The Acolyte* and the Loss of Certainty**, after briefly summarizing findings from the preceding chapters, I address the newest *Star Wars* fan conflict to date surrounding the Disney+ show *The Acolyte* (*TA*). I discuss which elements of my analysis from previous chapters still apply to demonstrate stable elements and continuing trends in anti-fan activism, illustrating how *TA* discourse still follows the patterns outlined in chapters two and three. I also highlight new emerging insights, particularly the shift from anti-feminism as a focal point of fan backlash to broader anti-diversity stances in line with broader shifts in American political discourse. In 5.1 I first address the role of paratextual framing of a show for its perception by reactionary fans as “not meant for white men”, such as pre-release interviews and news reports as well as the race and queer identities of the cast and creator. In 5.2 I highlight the function of “the lore” in criticism of the show as an overflowing signifier in line with the fan-populist trends of chapter 3 which particularly symbolizes a stable worldview that is perceived to be disrupted by feminism. 5.3 focuses on how lesbians are perceived as particularly threatening to (geek) masculinity which is reflected in an over-emphasis of “lesbian space witches” in negative reviews of *The Acolyte*. 5.4 then highlights that beyond anti-feminist anxieties, such fan conflicts address more general anxieties about living in an ambiguous world that does not offer black and white answers. Based on my findings, I return to my motivation and evaluate what the anti-fan activism observed in my case studies means for fandom as a space of learning.

Chapter 2:

#MarySueGate: Mapping Socio-Political Disruptions onto Anti/Feminist Fan Conflicts

*“What about the women?” she asked the professor,
whereupon Campbell explained that the women were the hero’s mother, his protectress and
the prize at the end of his quest.*

What more did she want?

“I want to be the hero,”

- Tatar (1)

December 2015, the long-awaited continuation of the *Star Wars*-franchise opened with its first installment, *The Force Awakens (TFA)*, and introduced its first heroine, Rey. In many ways, the release of *TFA* felt like a keystone moment to young (white) women like me who had grown up imagining to be Harry Potter, Frodo or Luke Skywalker and wondered if their heroes could ever look like them. A question that even the students of Joseph Campbell, famous for his description of The Hero’s Journey that shaped many of the most beloved works of popular culture, including *Star Wars* (Jenkins and Hassler-Forest 15), sometimes wondered about: When would women be the heroes, not just the mothers, protectresses and prizes? In some ways, *TFA* did then indeed mark the beginning of a new era in which women were no longer relegated to the sidelines but held leading roles in several legacy franchises to (mostly) great financial success, being superheroes, space-and-time traveling aliens or starship officers: From *Ghostbusters* (2016), *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017), to *Doctor Who*

(2018), *Ocean's 8* (2018) and *Captain Marvel* (2019), the late 2010s had many well-known blockbuster franchises helmed by women. Yet not everyone embraced these changes, with these movies and shows often receiving widespread backlash online.

As it was the first in this line of fan conflicts, this chapter will use the case study of responses to the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy in order to explore the political negotiations behind the negative responses to female protagonists. Fan conflicts around *TFA* and later installments of the sequel trilogy, like many women-led shows and movies, often centered around their female characters being “Mary Sues” and more broadly the texts’ perceived detrimental feminist messaging – a set of arguments which I call the “Mary Sue Discourse” or MSD even if they do not always use the term “Mary Sue” explicitly. The main narrative of the MSD is that intentional insertions of feminism into a text lead to badly written female characters which can also go hand in hand with weak male characters.

This exemplifies one way fan and political discourse increasingly intersect: Such fan conflicts that act as “proxy discussions” frequently blur the lines between narrative-centered fan discourse and anti-feminist political discourse, when fans complain that Rey made *TFA* seem like “feminist propaganda” due to her being too perfect and flawless. Interestingly, in such complaints, fans usually do not simply dislike Rey but attribute their dislike to a fixed trope from fan culture, the overly perfect female character described as “Mary Sue”, (which will even be featured in more mainstream discourse later on). These traits are regularly attributed to feminists not understanding how to tell a good story. Such arguments link perceived “feminist politics” to their criticism of the text – a common pattern in the MSD.

Rey and the MSD appeared to be the beginning of irreconcilable divisions not just in the *Star Wars* fandom but pop culture as a whole – and unlike previous conflicts about women in pop culture such as #Gamergate, it even ultimately spread into mainstream political discourse, turning it “fanized” with politicians using arguments from fan discourse. One of the most

memorable instances of mainstream reactions to the on-going MSD may be conservative British politician Nick Fletcher. During a political debate in 2021, he argued that “every male character”, such as *Star Wars*’ Luke Skywalker or the Doctor from *Doctor Who*, was being replaced by women nowadays — consequently, he asked whether it was “any wonder that so many young men are committing crimes” (P. Walker) when they may at best see themselves represented as violent killers but not as the heroes any longer. This shows that not only did the MSD not remain limited to *Star Wars*, the US, and fan communities, but that this discussion of women in fiction was seen as a topic of global political concern – even a pressing political concern if one considers the alarmist consequence of a perceived “feminist agenda” where women overshadowing men in fictional texts leads to more crimes committed by men that Fletcher paints.

These examples suggest that it is worth paying attention to how anti-fan activism, specifically the MSD about how feminism presumably harms modern pop culture, intersects with political discourse. The MSD serves as an important steppingstone in spreading anti-feminist discussions about popular culture from more niche fan cultural discourse about *TFA* to other franchises, the mainstream, and ultimately politicians’ statements. Consequently, in this chapter, I will trace key aspects of discussions of feminism in the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy, such as its origin, rhetoric and parallels, to other fan conflicts in pop culture. For this, I particularly look at the reception of *TFA* in 2015. Since it is the first in a series of works discussed within the MSD, it lends itself to being a potentially generalizable case study in which important patterns were established. I also take into account the reception of the follow-up movie *The Last Jedi (TLJ)* in 2017 and – due to the last installment, *The Rise Of Skywalker (TROS)* being a mostly uncontroversially received movie in terms of feminism – the firing of Gina Carano from *The Mandalorian* in 2021 which has built on the MSD.

I particularly focus on discussions of “Mary Sues” and feminism regarding *TFA* and *The Last Jedi (TLJ)* in the 2010s. Using primarily fan responses on *Twitter/X* and *YouTube* as well as news reporting on the movies, my aim is two-fold:

- 1) To trace the mainstreaming of politicized fan discourse, i.e. how the MSD moved from fan conflict into mainstream (as exemplified by well-known news sites) and political discourse (i.e. discourse by politicians and professional political commentators). I argue that fan conflicts tend to express broader socio-political anxieties by proxy, e.g. the rise of (men’s) anti-fan activism against perceived feminist influences in *Star Wars* in response to anxieties about 2010’s popular feminism.
- 2) To demonstrate the increasing rise of “fanization”, i.e. arguments from fan discourse being instrumentalized by anti-feminist politicians for their purposes, especially from 2018 onwards, making it a common feature of political rhetoric.

This case study is based on materials collected over time, including targeted searches for “Mary Sue” and “Rey”, sorted by popularity and combined with other keywords such as “Star Wars” or “The Force Awakens”. It is also based on popular texts (tweets, videos, and journalistic articles) including the movies’ titles, found via the sites’ own search engines and *Google News* that exemplify the reception of the movies. I also added targeted searches for news articles on more politically fringe websites, such as those associated with the far-right. Selected texts had to address feminism or the gender of the characters in question prominently to be considered for closer analysis. This has resulted in about 100 *YouTube* videos, 100 tweets, 20 *Tumblr* posts, and 180 news articles saved for closer analysis.

Notably, I did not limit my primary sources to social media posts despite my primary interest in social media discourse. Rather, I also use news articles from news outlets from all across the political spectrum to get an impression of the discussion of the movies and the MSD

outside of intra-fandom discourses. Additionally, I contrast social media posts from *Twitter* and *YouTube* with news articles in order to highlight parallels and differences between more mainstream and intra-fandom discourses. In this case, I understand mainstream to mean news addressed not primarily at fan audiences (who may already be aware of fan conflicts to begin with), as opposed to fan-centric news sites that only cover pop culture and fandom topics. I assume that such news articles are likely either written from the perspective of a non- or casual fan (i.e. those who enjoy watching the movies but may not necessarily engage with online fan communities) or primarily addressed to non- and casual fans⁸. Therefore, a look at the flow of arguments illustrates the increasing blurring of these initially largely separate spheres of discourse. Many arguments seem to have been shared by only a loud minority: Tweets with “likes” in the hundreds or thousands and video views of about a million are still small compared to over 111 million tickets sold for *TFA* in the US alone (Mendelson). However, I interpret news articles responding to fan discourses to discuss or echo their arguments as a sign that what may only be social media posts by a minority of fans online has gained enough relevance to address it. Thus, I view news articles as an important gauge of how much fan discourse affects more “mainstream” discourse.

In 2.1 I explain the central concept of the “Mary Sue” trope and discuss how a specific perceived narrative disruption, i.e. something that fans think does not work well such as Rey’s characterization, can channel the anxieties about socio-political and fan-cultural disruptions into expressions of narrative dissatisfaction, i.e. the anti-fan activism against Rey and other women in the *Star Wars* franchise. This gives visibility to the underlying anti-feminist ideology without explicitly discussing it. To understand the dissatisfaction channeled into discussions of female characters, in 2.2 I address fan-cultural disruptions, the perceived loss of inherently

⁸ Although we may also interpret it as non-fan-oriented news sites discovering fans as a demographic worth addressing or assuming that fandom has become so commonplace that most of their readers might also be fans of big franchises. In any case, the effects are identical.

male-dominated fandoms which also maps well onto the sequel trilogy. I introduce a model of how fan conflicts develop and sketch how “Marysuegate” lines up with previous fan-cultural conflicts of other “gates”. This fan-cultural disruption works in tandem with socio-political disruptions such as the rise of popular feminism which I discuss in 2.3. I propose that the sequel trilogy aligns well with this popular feminist era in several dimensions, thus making it an ideal target for such debates. Such fan conflicts make not only the narrative dissatisfaction but also the socio-political dissatisfaction that is frequently directly tied to it more visible. Yet, to leave the fan sphere, these fan conflicts need mechanisms which amplify the fan conflict in order to reach the mainstream which I explain in 2.4. This makes fanization an attractive strategy for one’s ideological standpoints. Consequently, in 2.5, I explain how the fan discourse has been instrumentalized by bigger political figures and news sites. Finally, in 2.6, I discuss the evolution and flexibility of the MSD by addressing the latter turn to fan-activism supporting actress Gina Carano and her character Cara Dune in *The Mandalorian* and consequently reflect on the radicalization potential to the right of such fan discourse.

2.1 “Marysuegate”: Channeling Anti-Feminist Sentiments into a Catalyst Term

Many arguments in the MSD center around Rey and, later on, other female characters of the *Star Wars* franchise being unlikable “Mary Sues” – sometimes explicitly using the term, sometimes just alluding to it. Thus, it stands to first look at the role this trope played for the MSD and for instrumentalizing discussions about a character and related narratives to make broader political arguments, lending them increased visibility in online discourse. In this sub-chapter I explore the importance of the term “Mary Sue”, as it condensed complex frustrations into a culturally resonant shorthand that made the backlash more visible and spreadable through several mechanisms.

Origins and Usage

The backlash to *TFA* most prominently manifested in discussions about whether Rey was a “Mary Sue”. This debate served a proxy function to voice broader social anxieties, particularly anti-feminist sentiments. However, the popularity of the term and perhaps even the whole discourse at first came into existence to a degree by chance, potentially mixing the right moment in time with rising fan discontent: Based on a tweet by screenwriter Max Landis who (disapprovingly) claimed that “they [finally] made a fan fic movie with a Mary Sue as the main character” (qtd. in Sproull)⁹, “Mary Sue” was soon an established term in *TFA* discourse to discuss particularly why Rey was a badly written character, albeit only by a few creators with small direct reach (e.g. retweets, likes, or *YouTube* views). Early contributions to the MSD generally consisted of listing all the ways in which she has unrealistically exceptional skills as well as a perceived lack of weaknesses, often compared to her male predecessors Luke and Anakin. The central argument was that this made her boring.

The Mary Sue Trope

The term “Mary Sue” being pre-established in fandom – although in the progressive, women-dominated transformational fandom of fanfiction writers (Mueller 56) – may have allowed for an attractive air of legitimacy and a “feminist touch”, seemingly aligning it more with progressive-feminist fandom than reactionary fandom. The term connected this new discourse to decades old discourse: The term “Mary Sue” originated in sci-fiction fanfiction culture, i.e. stories written by fans about pre-existing works, specifically the *Star Trek* universe and was first coined in 1973 (“Mary Sue”). Its appropriation to other contexts was mainly popularized due to *TFA* discourse, starting, as described, with Landis’ tweet. Fan-created and -curated wiki *Fanlore* describes this character archetype as “an original character in fan fiction [sic], usually but not always female, who for one reason or another is deemed undesirable by

⁹ As with other sources in this thesis, this tweet does not exist any longer, thus the reference is to someone’s archived version of it.

fan critics” (“Mary Sue”). This is often due to her being “competent in too many areas, [...] physically attractive, and/or [...] viewed as admirable by other sympathetic characters.” (“Mary Sue”) – exactly what many criticize Rey and other female characters for, with and without explicitly using the term.

Although coined by a woman, writer Paula Smith, in a good-humored parody, it had always been perceived by many fans to be inherently sexist: Despite a male version theoretically existing, it is almost exclusively applied to female characters, often for traits that are considered typical of male protagonists. Even Smith herself in an interview before “Mary Sue” gained mainstream visibility points out that “[p]eople never notice the male version” (C. W. Walker 2.25), they look at “wish fulfillment characters like James Bond or Superman” (2.26) “whose presence in any universe warps it way the heck out of reality” (2.27) but is not similarly criticized because it involves men. As one fan writes for *Gizmodo*, a Mary Sue was typically “an author surrogate” that allows them to live out “the fantasy of [...] getting to live at Hogwarts or travel on board the U.S.S. Enterprise” (Anders). As the majority of fanfiction authors tend to be women (Mueller 56), it was predominantly female characters who disrupted the original universe and characters. However, in the past, the term was mainly restricted to the realm of fanfiction and a very specific kind of female character within it.

In the original tweet by Landis, it is notably implied that Rey is a “wish fulfillment” character, explicitly calling *TFA* a “fan fic movie” and thus referring to the original implications of the term as an author surrogate. This strongly aligns the perceived problems with *TFA* with female fan culture as transformational fandom, i.e. the kind that produces fan art and fanfiction and is predominantly queer and female (Mueller 56). Landis’ claim of Rey being wish fulfillment (with traditional Mary Sue-style characters usually being an idealized version of the female author) is to some degree nonsensical, as the movie was written by a man. It does however imply “wish fulfillment” for women to be a negative thing despite the Hero’s

Journey in all its iterations and particularly *Star Wars* having long been considered to be created specifically for this purpose. As Palumbo writes, “Luke’s adventure” in the original trilogy “is an adolescent wish-fulfillment fantasy” (21). This seems to suggest that wish fulfillment is only a problem when it fulfills the wishes of female fans who are not the established target audience. Establishing a new meaning of the term “Mary Sue” was likely an important catalyst event that allowed pre-existing anxieties about women in pop culture to be expressed in a more socially acceptable (as it was presented as critiquing the writing of *TFA* with a well-established critical term) and spreadable, networked manner that was already inherently connected to a rejection of female fan culture.

Crystallization Nucleus Function

I consider events such as the emergence of the term “Mary Sue” best described as a kind of “crystallization nucleus”: “The formation of the crystal structure requires a starting point, which is called the crystallization nucleus. Such a nucleus can be “the smallest quantities of [...] foreign molecules” (“Crystallization”). Similarly, many backlashes seem to center around a specific event or character, around which a seemingly united dissent forms. It is likely that just as a crystal grows from molecules already present in a solution when a tiny disruption is introduced, the anxieties expressed in “gates” discourse existed before – however, we can only see a crystal and fully perceive the depth of fan-cultural and socio-political dissatisfaction in fan culture when they become structured and grow around a specific nucleus event. Out of such events certain repeating patterns arise. Just as a crystal is characterized by repeating patterns, so do bigger fan conflicts “crystallize” around talking points such as “feminism ruining geek media” (as discussed in 2.2), thereby growing in visibility.

“Mary Sue” was both an easy shorthand – with brevity being essential to Twitter’s 140 (later 280) character limit for a post – to communicate that a female character was deemed undesirably “perfect” and also an easy way to give resentments more legitimacy and ties into

fan culture, by repurposing the meaning of an already established term. For this to happen, the release of *TFA* and Landis' tweet provided a helpful catalyst event. It is notable that big fan conflicts such as the "gates" frequently rally around very specific causes to express broader anxieties – be it the Mary Sue archetype, concerns about "ethics in games journalism" (in Gamergate) or what kind of literature wins a Hugo Award (in "Puppygate"). Notably, all "gates" started seemingly randomly from someone pointing out something that could be considered a legitimate concern, from video game reviews in #Gamergate to the list of nominees for the Hugo Awards to Rey's superficial characterization – but grew from there on to stand for much more.

Sarkeesian's feminist podcast served a similar function for #Gamergate: After a crowdfunding drive for an episode on "sexist representation of women in video games" (Banet-Weiser 160) by Sarkeesian and the release of the indie game *Depression Quest* by game developer Zoe Quinn, both faced accusations of unethical behavior as well as ensuing targeted harassment. This eventually developed into a wider movement claiming to be concerned with the "ostensibly legitimate [purpose]—to register their objection to questionable journalistic ethics" (159). However, the hashtag and movement was more akin to "a ruse for a chilling misogyny" (159) with users engaging against feminist, queer and antiracist gamers.

Similarly, "Puppygate" in 2013 began "when speculative fiction author Larry Correia" (Dossier 35), "a conservative author frustrated over what he perceived to be a left-leaning trend of the awards" (88), first started his "Sad Puppies" campaign to get his novel nominated for a Hugo Award" (35). As the Hugo award is considered a "prestigious science fiction and fantasy (SFF) award" (Kreiter 1), this was perceived to send a broader message about trends in sci-fi literature. Only in the 2010s did the list of nominated works begin heavily featuring women which encouraged discourse "about the role of politics in the genre" of science-fiction (1). This turned into a "movement dedicated to delegitimizing works they deemed as liberal

propaganda” (4). The similarity between #Gamergate and Puppygate suggests that a “Marysuegate” uses patterns established by its predecessors of using seemingly legitimate concerns for proxy discussions about broader resentments towards social progress which crystallize around (superficially) simple questions, such as whether Rey (or, later on, other female characters) are Mary Sues.

Sexism Associations and Counter-Backlash

The concept of the Mary Sue lends itself to a fan conflict because it creates strong affective responses and offers an easy target to argue against for those who want to perform their feminist identity online. Unsurprisingly, given the direct comparisons drawn between Rey and previous male heroes and the already sexist history of the term, the MSD and particularly the updated concept of the Mary Sue was widely perceived as sexist with many users pointing out the hypocrisy of applying this term only to female characters. This often took the form of debating an imagined sexist Other instead of addressing real users’ criticisms – in line with how political online commenting practices are often driven by “individual and collective identity performance” (Barnes 9), many fans ridiculed the concept to display their opposition to sexism – and defending Rey’s skillset as realistic. Many tweets released featuring the term “Mary Sue” also point to the stark lack of such criticism for male characters, with even Rey actress Daisy Ridley later on arguing that calling Rey a Mary Sue was sexist because “Luke had the exact same [capabilities]” (Morris). Such refutations comparing Rey to male heroes, gained much support on notoriously progressive- and feminist-leaning platform *Tumblr* (cf. McCracken et al.), where for example one post with over 125.000 interactions did exceptionally well.

Additionally, out of the few news sites that picked up on the term and discourse in December 2015 to early 2016, all shared the perception of it being a sexist accusation. They thus involuntarily helped spread the term and MSD arguments. The news articles about the

MSD either refuted the accusation (Anders) or argued that even if Rey was a Mary Sue, there was nothing wrong with it – as for example Tasha Robinson argues that even though Rey in her eyes is too flawless, “joyously proficient lady badasses are just as important to a diverse, rich, fulfilling cultural landscape as troubled, complicated lady heroes.” (T. Robinson).

Rising Term Usage

Despite the responses to this term and the surrounding arguments suggesting that the MSD was widely perceived as sexist, it proved useful enough to those using it to gain popularity over the years and spread to other franchises. The “Mary Sue” trope increasingly became a symbol for the perceived oppression of “geek” men globally. While both the regular name “Mary Sue” and the fannish term had existed before, *Google Trends* suggests that it came into widespread usage with some latency after the release of *TFA*. Likely the movie led many *Google* users to search for it only after being used in relation to Rey. Initial interest for the term based on *Google Trends* was particularly high in the US and other Anglophone countries, specifically searched for together with “Rey” or “Star Wars”.

The discussion seems to only have reached the non-Anglophone sphere right before *TLJ* was released with a sharp spike in European countries such as Germany in November 2017, although a small spike in search queries in December 2015 already demonstrates the globally connected nature of the MSD. This speaks to the impact of fan discourses in an age of participatory culture: An idea from American *Twitter* that is now used both globally and in relation to many other films. Indeed, “Mary Sue” has since been applied to a wide variety of characters, such as the eponymous *Captain Marvel* (e.g. Podcast Now) or *Galadriel from Rings of Power* (e.g. Literature Devil, “Rings”), or Michael Burnham from *Star Trek: Discovery* (e.g. Treksptertise).

The term “Mary Sue” was of course well-suited to spreading on social media, as it was both short enough to fit into a tweet, specific enough to be easily recognizable and searchable,

and unspecific enough to be a stand-in for a variety of issues. The concept of the “Mary Sue” thus proved useful to channel people’s resentment towards Rey and other female characters as well as feminism in general into an easily spreadable and seemingly legitimate form of criticism, based on the perceived narrative shortcomings of these characters.

2.2 “Women Are Coming for Your Franchises”: The Crisis of (Geek) Masculinity in the late 2010s

In early reactions to *TFA* when the focus of criticism was still strongly on Rey as a Mary Sue, male fans already expressed feeling like there was a shift from them being the target audience towards women or young girls, with Lucasfilm trying to “push an agenda”. Such reactions set up a false dichotomy that came to dominate much of MSD between old, male (white) fans, and “girls” as a “new audience”, implying someone with no prior connections to the franchise. Associating the perceived loss of quality of *Star Wars* with it being suddenly aimed at girls, implies that girls were not already interested in *Star Wars* as well as echoing a zero-sum idea of popular misogyny where “men are suffering because of women [...] and feminism” (Banet-Weiser 5): If something is targeted at girls, it cannot possibly also be targeted at men who will be forgotten.

I explore the dynamic of “true” fans vs. a corporate “elite” perceived to “push an agenda” more in chapter 3 – what is relevant for this chapter is the idea that *Star Wars* fan culture is being disrupted. In order to explain why such fundamental backlashes tend to happen in some fandoms, but not others, and how the MSD mainstreamed a pattern pioneered by the earlier “gates”, I am drawing from Hills’ theory on toxic fandom. Hills proposes that toxic fandoms arise as a result of disrupted fan doxa, although I argue a fan-cultural disruption needs to align with socio-political disruptions to be expressed in a fan conflict.

Doxic Disruptions

Building on Bourdieusian field theory, Hills suggests that fan spaces are structured by “doxa”, i.e. “unquestioned sense of how capital can be amassed” (Hills, “An Extended Foreword” 106). Capital in this case, of course, means “cultural capital” (Bourdieu) and more specifically fan-cultural capital, such as the kind of knowledge and activities that lead to a higher social status as a fan. Social movements, however, can lead to fan doxa becoming questioned and “a matter of debate rather than an accepted common-place” (Hills, “An Extended Foreword” 107). This disruption to “previously stable doxa” (107) is when toxic “online behaviour emerges” (107) is Hills’ main claim. I have discussed potential problems with the term “toxic” in the introduction; thus, I apply this concept to the emergence of fan conflicts more broadly. He furthermore suggests that “toxic fandom might [...] render explicit, visible and conscious, logics of disparagement and (de-)legitimation that are structured into [...] fan identities” (108). In the case of *TFA*, this means that it threatened previously held assumptions that *Star Wars* was essentially a franchise for men and thus the long-held but often unspoken notion of *Star Wars* fandom as inherently masculine was made explicit in the fan conflict.

This disruption of fan doxa could be applied to many franchises, yet not all are equally involved in visible fan conflicts. It also does not explain how fans deal with these disruptions. Thus, building on Hills, I propose a more complex explanation of how fan conflicts arise: There are different dimensions of disruptions – namely the socio-political, the fan cultural and the narrative – that need to align for fan conflicts to rise to prominence. In the case of current fan conflicts, such as “Marysuegate”, they center around perceived feminist disruptions of fan culture.

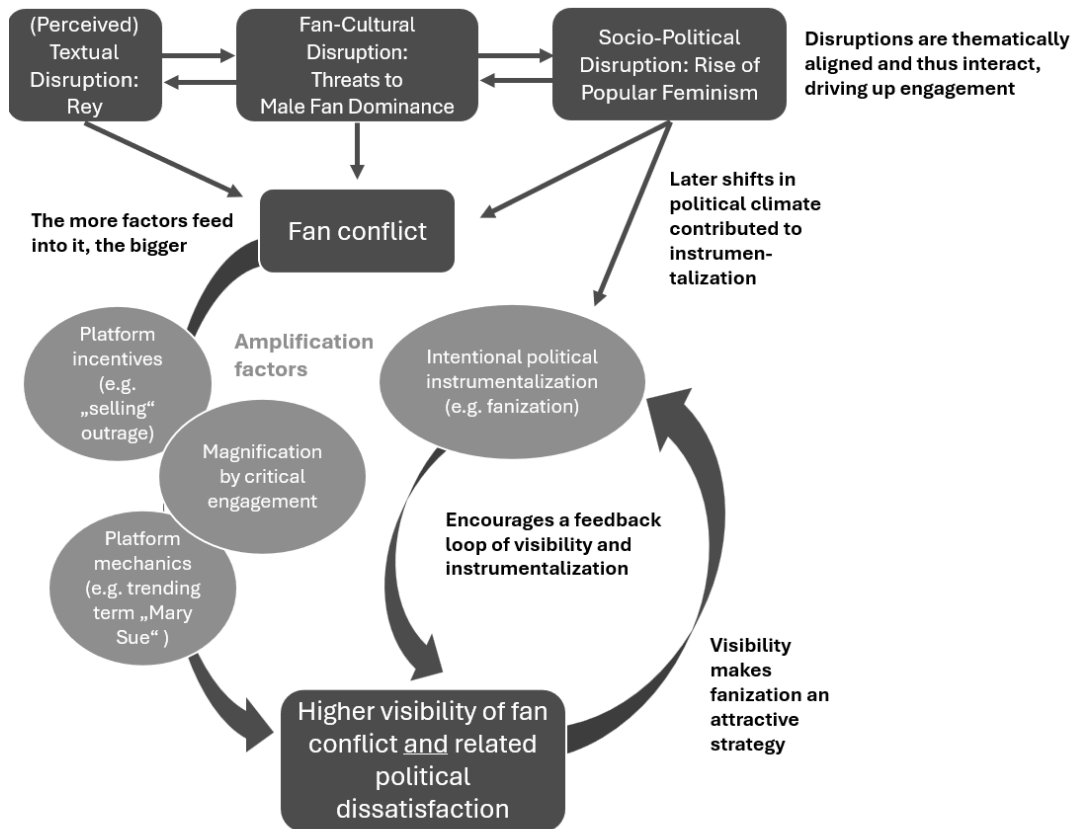


Fig. 4. Model of factors contributing to the rise and polarization of anti/fan conflicts. Graphic by author.

In this case, there was a strong alignment between these disruptions: A movie with new characters, especially a heroine instead of a hero helming the movie (narrative disruption), at a time where many franchises were creating women-led works that were not primarily catering to male audiences (fan-cultural disruption) and at a time where such changes seemed particularly salient as feminism was a present cultural topic (socio-political disruption). Such disruptions work hand in hand, influencing each other bi-directionally: On the one hand, feminist changes to society also tend to change the dynamics within the entertainment industry and fan culture and allow female fans to become more visible. On the other hand, the fan-cultural changes make fans more aware of the socio-political changes already happening around them, making them more likely to notice and react to them. How the resulting fan conflict grows in visibility is further explained in 2.4 and 2.5.

“Male” Legacy Franchises

In order to be disrupted, there first needs to be a fan culture to be disrupted. The 2010s were shaped by popular feminism and this was also reflected in the movies being produced which particularly impacted franchises traditionally aimed at men, such as action, sci-fi, superheroes and fantasy. 2015 onwards saw more and more women-led blockbuster movies being released, with *TFA* being one of the first. To illustrate the rise of heroines on screen and related backlashes, I have created a table including (but not limited to) events I will address later in this chapter:

2012 - 2015	Release of <i>The Hunger Games</i> trilogy
2013 - 2017	"Puppygate"
2014 - 2016	"#Gamergate"
May 2015	<i>Mad Max: Fury Road</i>
Dec 2015	<i>The Force Awakens</i>
2016 - 2018	"Comicsgate"
Jul 2016	All female <i>Ghostbusters</i> reboot
Dec 2016	<i>Rogue One: A Star Wars Story</i>
Jun 2017	<i>Wonder Woman</i> : DCEU's first woman-led film
Sep 2017	<i>Star Trek: Discovery</i> released on Netflix, first <i>Star Trek</i> led by a Black woman
Jan 2017	Women's March
Oct 2017	#MeToo
Dec 2017	<i>The Last Jedi</i>
Mai 2018	<i>Solo: A Star Wars Story</i>
Jun 2018	<i>Ocean's 8</i> : A gender-swapped sequel
Oct 2018	13th Doctor in <i>Doctor Who</i> is the first female incarnation
Nov 2018	<i>She-Ra and the Princesses of Power</i> released on Netflix
March 2019	<i>Captain Marvel</i> : First female-led Marvel film
Dec 2019	<i>The Rise of Skywalker</i>
Feb 2020	<i>Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)</i>
Jun 2020	Video game <i>The Last Of Us II</i> release
Feb 2021	Firing of Gina Carano from <i>The Mandalorian</i>

Fig. 5. A non-comprehensive timeline of (anti-)feminism-related events in pop culture. Graphic by author.

As fig. 5 illustrates, while *The Hunger Games*¹⁰ may have been one of the first significant female-led blockbusters of the decade, *TFA* was the one with a serious anti-feminist backlash online. This is likely because *The Hunger Games* was neither a pre-existing franchise with a pre-existing fandom nor part of a genre traditionally considered “for men”, as Young Adult novels (from which the movie has been adapted) of the 2010s overwhelmingly feature female protagonists (Cox). Characters often described as “Mary Sues” such as Captain Marvel, meanwhile, share that they are all part of traditionally “geek” genres of sci-fi and fantasy, but also that they happen to be the first female leads in otherwise male-led pre-existing franchises (such as the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*), which we could thus describe as “male legacy” franchises.

Star Wars specifically has long been considered a “boy’s franchise”, even by those working on it, and consequently a perceived shift in target audience marks a huge disruption to its fan culture. As *TFA* director Abrams declared before the release of the movie, “*Star Wars* was always a boy’s thing and a movie that dads could take their sons to, and though that’s still very much the case”, he was hoping *TFA* might change that it’s *only* for boys (H. Lewis). This is also echoed by many men commenting on the MSD, even by prolific figures such as conservative political commentator Ben Shapiro who argues that “from one type of fandom to another “Disney [...] decided that they were only going to have female heroes from now on” even though “Star Wars is essentially a little boy’s property.” (@JasonSCampbell).

Additionally, seeing *TFA* as the first in a row of related disruptions can explain why the MSD continued to grow even beyond the end of the sequel trilogy and even beyond *Star Wars*: While at the time of release, having a female lead in a “geek” franchise could have been a one-off event, the more movies with female leads were released, the more *TFA* and Rey began to

¹⁰ Although some notable earlier highly popular action movies with women in lead roles include *Aliens* (1986), *Terminator 2* (1991) and *Kill Bill* (2003), these movies did not, as the decade-wide gaps between them illustrate, have a lasting impact on action movies protagonists’ gender equality.

symbolize a continuing trend and to embody the fact that geek fan culture was changing and thus the “Mary Sue” and the assumed “feminist agendas” behind it became a central target to attach one’s grievances to. We find, for example, that the most popular video on *YouTube* discussing the term “Mary Sue” and weighing in on arguments that had already arisen in 2015 was only released in July of 2020, thus more than half a year after the sequel trilogy ended (Jordan, “Was Anakin”) and yet was seen over 2,5 million times, speaking to a continued interest in the topic.

Framing Rey as a Feminist Disruption of Star Wars Fandom

Despite being released in a different political climate, *TFA* is not radically different from previous *Star Wars* movies. *TFA* was the beginning of several movies (see fig. 5) that Derek Johnson suggests are best described as “social justice reboots”, meaning it was very similar in narrative structure to the original *Star Wars* trilogy (127), yet it had significant changes at the superficial “representational level” (127) which respond to “political struggles to transform exigent inequalities of representation” (128). Such superficial changes are also in line with how popular feminism sees visibility “as the end rather than a means to an end” (Banet-Weiser 23) and thus generally “[stops] short of [...] naming, or disrupting the political economic conditions that allow that inequality to be profitable” (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 886).

Such superficial changes could imply to viewers that previous movies were inadequate and in need of being “redone properly”. More likely though, news reporting contributed to the perception of *TFA* as a fan-cultural disruption: Many reviews invited comparisons with previous installments, addressing *Star Wars*’ history of women that are portrayed as inadequately feminist to highlight the novelty and importance of Rey¹¹. This suggested that the *Star Wars* beloved by fan culture was lacking. For example, *The Atlantic*, like many other news

¹¹ There are of course many more complex women in the Extended Universe tie-in stories.

sites, specifically contrasts her with the women of the original and prequel trilogies to highlight the novelty of Rey's storyline: Unlike Leia and Padmé in previous movies, she is a "*feminist* protagonist" as she is not a "distressing damsel, she's instead a fighter and a survivor and a nurturer and an all-around badass" (Garber). This implies that previous characters were damsels and victims and not "badass". Similarly, *Jezebel*, a notably feminist news website, contrasts Rey to Padmé dying "to advance the plot" and Leia's "power [being] best used in the service of others" (S. Edwards) and describes the movie as a "a radical shift" for the franchise and sci-fi in general. Especially Leia is a character beloved by fans of old and often seen as a memorable feminist character who was even "a potential culture icon for women and second wave feminism" in the 1970s (Hilck 34). However, paratexts – such as the movie itself being a soft "reboot" and several news articles inviting comparisons – frequently suggest that the characters of the previous trilogies were inadequate. Consequently, this makes *TFA* a movie reflecting the recent fan-cultural disruption of well-established franchises (and their fandoms) being perceived in need of becoming more feminist.

Continuing Disruption of Fan Culture

In addition to being the first of a new era of women-led movies and thus marking a turning point in popular and fan culture, *TFA* was released into an online culture shaped by other backlashes against progressive changes to media such as #Gamergate and "Puppygate" (see fig. 5). These two backlashes may have both modeled how to react to fan-cultural disruptions as well as primed fans to be particularly receptive to the idea of "losing" yet another field that used to "belong" (in their eyes) to male geeks, thus paving the way for *TFA* backlash by "pioneering" the proxy-rhetoric the MSD uses.

The first notable event in this trend of anti-feminist backlashes was "Puppygate" from 2013 to 2015. This event established the rhetorical pattern of the MSD of using seemingly legitimate, i.e. textual, not political, concerns for proxy discussions about broader resentments

towards social progress. Notably, those involved “claimed to care about the writing itself, even as their primary concern was their presumed victimage” (Dosser 94) due to more diverse sci-fi protagonists. Common arguments revolved around how “message or identity politics [have] become far more important than entertainment or quality” (106) and thus led to a decline of “good” or “entertaining” sci-fi novels. This rhetorical strategy is almost identical to the MSD wherein feminism is linked to a perceived decline in narrative quality of *Star Wars* in order to get a “message” out or to create “propaganda”. This was the first significant event in recent fandom history where we could see a clear pattern of masking ideological opposition as neutral concerns over quality. This pattern established during Puppygate would later reappear in the *Star Wars* discourse surrounding Rey, where accusations of her being a “Mary Sue” similarly allowed anti-feminist sentiments to be expressed under the guise of narrative critique.

Beginning later than Puppygate and directly preceding the release of *TFA* was #Gamergate (see fig. 5), a movement in gaming fandom where “participants imagined themselves as “crusaders” in a war against feminists” (Salter 253). As Hills observes, “female gamers could represent a loss of male power” (“An Extended Foreword” 109), a loss which was “threatening to shift the unquestioned, industrially-supported and naturalised doxa of masculinised [sic] gaming capital into a position of “orthodoxy”, open to heterodox challenge and reworking” (109). Banet-Weiser similarly points to #Gamergate as an example of popular misogyny and describes men’s fears expressed in #Gamergate as being about “men feel[ing] threatened by potential change in an industry in which they are entitled and they feel that they own” (146). Similarly, the new *Star Wars* sequel trilogy threatened male fans’ sense of ownership over the franchise with its placement of women in lead and heroic roles. In both cases, participants seemed eerily more interested in discussing the perceived damage feminism does to pop culture than merely expressing criticism of a character or of the behavior of video games journalists (cf. Massanari, “Gamergate”).

#Gamergate has also been seen as providing the “playbook” for the alt-right (cf. Massanari, “Gamergate”), the movement that would contribute to the rise of far-right politics in the US. As Strick discusses, many “American right-wing figures [...] received their first publicity through *gamergate* [emphasis original], and its anti-feminist and misogynist core message translated easily into the anti-emancipatory politics of [...] right wing populists” (213). Similarly, as I will discuss later, it is particularly far right news sites, conservative politicians and political commentators that became “fanized” and adopted arguments from the MSD and voiced them in non-fan contexts, thus mainstreaming the MSD.

Although few popular videos in the MSD explicitly address #Gamergate, there is a sense of feminism spreading to “infect” other areas of fandom and that all these franchises are likely to appeal to the same type of male fan: This link was more frequently emphasized by many early and less popular *YouTube* videos on this issue, with early Mary Sue videos hashtagged #Gamergate and complaints of *Star Wars* being the next victim of feminism. That framing #Gamergate as a precursor of the MSD became rare later on suggests that fans perhaps wanted to distance themselves from a movement that was at large not taken seriously by mainstream news and rarely covered (positively) outside of fandom news sites at the time.

While more recent videos usually do not explicitly highlight the connection, they are nevertheless generally sympathetic to #Gamergate, such as YouTuber The Quartering rejecting comparisons between *TLJ* anti-fans and #Gamergate and pointing out that the “comics gate community [...] don't want the same crap that was trying to ruin video games to fully ruin their favorite hobby” (Hambly, “Star Wars” 05:39-05:49), thus assuming that *Star Wars*, video games and comics are generally liked by the same male fans. Therefore, the spreading of “feminism” (or political correctness or social justice or other descriptors for progressive politics that are frequently used synonymously) from one type of pop culture to another embodies the threat of men “losing” their dominion over geek or pop culture.

2.3 “Feminist Propaganda”: *TFA* and *TLJ* as Reflections of Popular Feminism in the 2010s

In addition to the rise of women-led blockbusters, the rise of popular feminism worked in tandem with shifts in fan culture to create a growing sense of threat to (geek) masculinity. In order to understand why Rey (and, later on, other female characters of the sequel trilogy) was strongly associated with a (negative) influence of feminism by anti-fans, it is essential to understand the type of feminism dominating the late 2010s. The rise of popular feminism can be seen as a disruption to social norms with which the movies aligned in several dimensions. Combined with the mirroring strategy of popular misogyny, it resulted in mapping discussions of feminism onto discussions of a pop-cultural text.

Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny in the 2010s

As Banet-Weiser discusses in *Empowered*, in the second half of the 2010s, we are witnessing the rise of popular feminism (7) and with it a corresponding rise in misogynist backlash (3). *TFA* reflects this feminist zeitgeist of the late 2010s and thus lends itself to being a target of popular misogyny and to have discussions about feminism mapped upon its textual disruptions. This aligns with how Banet-Weiser’s case studies demonstrate how men’s rights campaigns often mirror women’s empowerment campaigns (59) in order to mock their claims. She sees such “mirroring”, i.e. addressing the same topics and arguments for the sake of “restoration of male privilege” (38) by exposing the “apparently faulty logic” (61) of popular feminism, as “a central mechanism in an economy of visibility” (62). If we transfer this logic to *TFA*, exposing the perceived flaws of Rey (and later other characters) who is perceived as a product of popular feminism, allows criticism of feminism to gain wide visibility and fit into wider patterns of misogynist backlashes outside of fandom.

TFA and specifically Rey as its lead symbolize current socio-political disruptions through popular feminism for several reasons. One is, of course, temporal proximity to an era

characterized by popular feminism. Additionally, the MSD was enacted on social media which coincides with the rise of what many have come to see as the fourth wave of feminism, being similarly enacted in “spatial” proximity in social media spaces. Typically, the initial wave of feminism is characterized by advocacy for legal rights, while the second wave encompasses, among other issues, reproductive rights. Finally, the third wave is distinguished by its focus on “the reconceptualization of sex and gender (including discourses on queerness and transgenderism)” (Zimmerman 55). The fourth wave is mostly defined by “social media, used as a public forum” (56), which “provide an unprecedented means for solidarity and activism” (54). While it has been contested whether this fourth wave exists as “increased usage of the internet is not enough to delineate a new era” (Munro 23), the issues and forms of engagement of contemporary feminist politics are heavily shaped by the networked nature of the Internet.

Framing TFA as Feminist

Most notably, feminism in the late 2010s was defined by “media-friendly” (Banet-Weiser 4) popular feminism. This concept is strongly reflected in the conception and marketing of *TFA*. Popular feminism focuses on individual empowerment (12) and the “presence of women” as a “solution for all gender problems” (12) instead of challenging “deep structures of inequities” (11), i.e. it is not “disruptive to capitalism or mainstream politics” (11). This type of feminism is frequently driven by commercial interests which is likely to have similarly affected the choice to focus on a heroine for the new *Star Wars* trilogy: Popular feminism often takes the shape of selling merchandise proclaiming feminism or acts such as “femvertising”, i.e. using tropes such as women’s empowerment to advertise a product or movie (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 885) – this has for example been observed in relation to Disney princesses (Mollet 40). Consequently, when anti-feminist fans blame feminism for *TFA*’s quality, they are not making up arguments, but they are validated by an era that has indeed discovered popular feminism as a marketing strategy.

In addition to this, the paratexts advertising the sequel trilogy frequently aligned *TFA* with popular feminism: Those involved in the production highlighted the increase in quantitative representation in front of and behind the camera. This follows the zeitgeist of popular feminism as well, which Banet-Weiser criticizes as often relying on the logic that the mere “presence of women” (12), be it in STEM or Hollywood, will improve gendered inequalities. For example, Rey actress Daisy Ridley, in promotional interviews of the movie, highlighted that “having a woman like this in a film is hugely important”¹² (Woerner). As the article does not elaborate on this further, it is implied that readers are aware of the significance of her lead role. Similarly, in several interviews Kennedy emphasized the importance of women in key “positions of responsibility”, such as in the writers’ room where they could offer “a female point of view” (Woerner). These two statements address a representational significance of increasing the number of women both before and behind the camera. Notably, such interviews did not claim the movie or characters to be feminist but merely highlighted the improvement in the number of women behind and on-screen, suggesting it to be a positive development, in line with the common “just add women and stir” belief of (liberal) popular feminism (Banet-Weiser 33).

Journalistic Framing as Feminist

However, the discourse surrounding Rey with claims that a “feminist agenda” prioritized “badass”-ness over good writing (as cited in the introduction to this chapter), begs the question whether *TFA* was even widely perceived by audiences as a feminist movie. Indeed, several news sites hailed Rey’s introduction as a significant feminist change to pop culture, as the “feminist hero we’ve all been waiting for” (Cipriani) (for similarly titled articles see also:

¹² Notably, Rey is played by white British actress Daisy Ridley, the type of “white, middle-class, cis-gendered, and heterosexual” (Banet-Weiser 13) (at least as far as we know) woman that benefits most from popular feminism. Although Rey and many other characters in the MSD present a non-intersectional type of “female empowerment” narrative that may be the most palatable to mainstream audiences, it still invited a backlash “from patriarchal culture” (2) just as all other expressions of popular feminism have.

C. Cohen; T. Robinson). *The Atlantic* for example titled their article on *TFA* “The Feminism Awakens”, claiming Rey was “a female character they can finally feel un-weird about liking” (Garber). Both titles suggest a sense of such a character being long overdue and so far missing, with their emphasis on “waiting” for a character they can “finally” enjoy. Thus, not just pre-release interviews but also post-release reviews strongly align *TFA* with its feminist era.

Many articles highlight qualities of *TFA* they consider feminist, often in relation to other blockbuster movies, in a way that fits the trend towards the “empowerment” narratives of popular feminism (cf. Banet-Weiser). For example, many highlight that Rey is a uniquely “badass” heroine who can fight — compared to other depictions of women in action movies, with *Decider* for example emphasizing her to be “the first female protagonist that can save herself AND best a bad guy in an explosive lightsaber fight” (O’Keefe). O’Keefe addresses how despite the fact that “every so often you get a Ripley or a Sarah Conner, [...] usually action and sci-fi heroines are relegated to sidekick status” while highlighting the significance of *Star Wars* and other 2015 releases as “the year when more and more female characters overcame sexism to save the day”.

Additionally, interpreting *TFA* as a feminist film was frequently also related to its emotional resonance with journalists and potential to uplift the play of young girls, also following the “empowerment” narrative of popular feminism. These (female) authors often emphasized their emotional reaction to seeing Rey for the first time, such as Sally who cried seeing “the Jedi hero [she] dreamed of as a child” (Sally) or Laura Bradley, who imagines “the adventures little girls will have with the *Star Wars* universe to come” (Bradley) who will no longer be relegated to imagining themselves as Leia only. Such reviews are often combined with anecdotes about their own childhoods growing up as little girls who loved *Star Wars* (see also: Heckman).

Popular Feminism as Uncontroversial

News articles across the spectrum mostly frame Rey as a welcome addition. Reviews explicitly framing the film as feminist were released mainly by news sites considered liberal, feminist or center-left. While right-leaning news at large did not praise the movie for its feminism, they nevertheless mostly reported positively on Rey. For example, White for *National Review*, a renowned conservative news site, points out that “[Finn] is subordinate to the new gallantry of Daisy Ridley’s Rey, who embodies the female empowerment denied to Princess (now General) Leia.” (“Star Wars”). Craig for *Fox News*, a news site commonly considered right-wing populist (Moffitt, *The Global* ch. 6), is even highly positive, echoing feminist sentiments when he highlights how “Daisy Ridley is the driving force behind the film. She takes Princess Leia’s wit and Han Solo’s brawn to a new level, creating the franchise’s first true female action hero. It’s about time. In a year that saw many strong female action roles, Rey is a welcome addition to the genre and the series.” (Craig). Such reviews suggest that, at this point in time, popular feminist influences were not yet considered a divisive topic but indeed, as the name suggests, “popular” and welcomed across the political spectrum.

All in all, *TFA* is emblematic of its era and reflects the increasing mainstream acceptance and commodification of feminism in the 2010s which shaped the entertainment industry, likely due to neoliberal considerations of the marketability of surface-level social equality for women. Thus, it offers an ideal target to engage with feminism through expressions of popular misogyny which Banet-Weiser argues regularly arises in response to feminist advances. It often takes the form of “a need to take something back” (35) that has been perceived to have been “taken” by feminism, as will become apparent in the discussion to follow on how feminism “took” *Star Wars* from its male fans.

Feminism as Controversial post-2016

Feminism came to be a controversial topic again around 2016, as the election of Donald Trump as president coincides with a rise in “popular misogyny, from men’s rights activism to

[...] the growing state-by-state retraction of abortion rights” (Banet-Weiser xi). Trump’s election expressed growing anti-feminist sentiments among the public and later politics reinforced the growing popular misogyny, with “the federal government [...] organized around white male injury” (Banet-Weiser 38). As Banet-Weiser argues, “‘making America great again’ is explicitly about recuperation – and primarily the recuperation of men whose very masculinity has been threatened” (111).

Such discourse about male injury is most prominent in discussions of *TLJ*, released in December 2016. While *TFA* reflects a movie that was not widely perceived to be divisive in an era that was largely shaped by the embracement of shallow feminist values, *TLJ* offered not just a more provocative text but was also released in an era where feminism was beginning to be more contested. *TLJ* thus provided a particularly strong alignment of textual disruptions and socio-political disruptions which were also strongly supported by the framing of its reviews: In response to the Trump presidency, 2016 and 2017 saw controversial feminist campaigns such as #yesallwomen, the Women’s March and #MeToo (8). Feminism as a disruptive and contested topic was therefore much more central to the time in which *TLJ* was released, priming audiences to react more strongly to narrative and fan-cultural disruptions.

Framing TLJ as a Feminist Movie

This is reflected in reviews more explicitly tying the movie into current feminist issues beyond “empowerment”: Many more outlets analyzed *TLJ* in relation to its feminist content compared to *TFA*. Such reviews highlighted the diversity of the women on screen, such as Rose being played by Asian-American actress Kelly Marie Tran and Vice-Admiral Holdo by middle-aged actress Laura Dern. *USA Today* for example points to not only the quantity of women but them “embody[ing] a spectrum of femininity” (Lawler). Additionally, it was perceived to address feminist issues of our times, such as women’s opinions not being respected, especially in professional settings. *MTV* for example describes *TLJ* as the “Most Feminist ‘Star Wars’

Movie Yet” due to it “featuring a cast of complex female characters” while men “not only learn to listen to women but also suffer actual consequences when they don’t” (Bell). *Digital Spy* similarly reads the movie’s message as “things [being] kinder, more humane, better organised and a lot more peaceful” “[i]f the universe was run by women” (Fletcher). *Inverse* praises the women for “steal[ing] the show”, calling it “the most feminist *Star Wars* movie to date” (Busch, “Women’s Stories”) in which women have agency and their interactions and arcs do not revolve around men.

Such reviews also tie into increasing discussions of toxic masculinity (being on the rise in 2018), thus moving away from the “safe, friendly” (Banet-Weiser 15) nature of popular feminism. *Inverse* for example points out that “feminism isn’t just about people who identify as women” and praises the film for allowing the male characters to “grow and change and *feel their feelings* [original emphasis]”. Holdo is particularly highlighted as not being “the bitch”, but her actions of “sham[ing] a favorite male character like he’s an insolent child” are rather seen as a positive. *Vox* highlights as well that the movie deals with feminism as in wanting to “teach gynophobic fanboys the scariest lesson of all: That they should listen to women” (Roberts), while *Vanity Fair* praised *TLJ* as a “Harsh Condemnation of Mansplaining [...] Need[ed] in 2017” in a “post-Trump era” (J. Robinson). It is clear that the movie is being read as a product of its time and perceived as more than the surface level empowerment feminism attributed to *TFA* due to the existence of its female characters, and rather associated with the more activist feminism that would drive rallies and campaigns in 2017.

Initial reviews by right-wing sites criticized *TLJ* for many reasons and refrained from highlighting its feminist elements – thus diverging from the reception of *TFA* which was less polarized along ideological lines – but feminism was not the biggest point of criticism. Some studies such as by White and Baldwin suggest that survey respondents expressing sexist beliefs

were more likely to dislike *TLJ*, but overall, this association was not yet encouraged by right-leaning news (more on later alignments in 2.5).

Revival of the Man-Hating Feminists

In fan discourse, *TLJ* was more explicitly associated with anti-feminism than *TFA*, particularly associations of feminism with man-hatred. This, too, marks a turning point, where feminism was no longer perceived as “friendly, safe” empowerment narratives (Banet-Weiser 15), but rather older associations rose to the surface again. As Banet-Weiser writes, “historically, the visibility of feminism in the US media has pre-dominantly been as angry, defiant, man- hating women” (15). Similarly, Mary Sues are perceived to symbolize how feminism (in the eyes of anti-feminists) puts men down and paints women as superior. YouTuber Literature Devil explains that “Social Justice Warriors” want “Mary Sue”s to “fulfill[...] all the author's social justice bias” (“Why Are” 06:49-06:52) where “all good men are gay or submissive” (06:52-06:53) and particularly “straight white men are evil” (06:53-06:55).

This argument resurfaces in other characters and franchises drawn into the MSD as well. In one review of *Captain Marvel* released shortly after the movie, YouTuber Podcast Now criticizes that Captain Marvel has no weaknesses unlike Superman’s Kryptonite. Such a lack of weaknesses is attributed to the creators consciously inserting “feminist male-bashing elements” for the sake of a “political feminist agenda” which sends the message that “males are bad and worthless” (McGloin). Thus, the Mary Sue is a concept around which fears about men being replaced in both fan culture and broader culture are crystallizing.

2.4 “Battle in the Economy of Visibility”: How Media and Celebrities Spread the MSD

While everything I have discussed so far explains why a small group of mostly male fans would react negatively to these new changes to *Star Wars*, the question is how did the anti-fan activist

posting of a few fans become a widely visible fan conflict – to a degree that increasingly political discourse on news sites and by politicians became “fanized” and engaged with the MSD to promote or reject feminism?

As Banet-Weiser explains, “visibility means being accessible to a large, popular audience” (10). She argues that “popular feminism engages in a feedback loop, where it is more popular when it is more visible, which then authorizes it to create ever-increasing visibility” (10-1). Similarly, with the MSD, there are several issues working in tandem that have led to its huge visibility outside of fandom – as well as a larger impact on the entertainment industry. Many have read *TROS* with its particularly inoffensive narrative as a direct response or even “apology” to the ire directed at *TLJ* (Stolworthy). This demonstrates, even if there was likely merely a loud minority of *TLJ*-anti fans, that their backlash had a strong impact and potentially influenced how the last movie of the trilogy was made or at least its reception. This illustrates how anti-fan activism can be a powerful force, enabled by media, politicians, and well-meaning fans spreading their message, particularly with the goal of demonstrating their ideological allegiance. There are two important mechanisms to the visibility of the MSD that work in tandem, thus providing a dual amplification function drawing from shared anti-fandom or the shared aversion space: Fan discourse’s ability to highlight political discourse, even if only by performatively refuting it, and political figures intentionally using fanization, i.e. instrumentalizing fan discourse to spread their, generally right-wing to far-right, arguments.

Early Intentional Politicization

With backlashes such as #Gamergate that intentionally used hashtag activism to their benefit (cf. Marwick and Lewis), many participants were aware of the potential to gain visibility by participating in trending topics on *Twitter*. Consequently, some politicization of fan discourse was also instigated intentionally from the start. By connecting something many people are talking about at a given moment, such as a new *Star Wars* movie, to their political

cause, political movements and figures can gain additional visibility, particularly reaching those who may have otherwise not come into contact with their issues – such as far-right views.

Such intentional discursive overlap benefits from context collapse which “refers to how people, information, and norms from different settings all converge into one context” (Loh and Walsh 1). In this case, such discursive overlap is more likely a “[c]ontext collusion [which] occurs when individuals “intentionally collapse, blur, and flatten contexts” (1). In contemporary political discourse, as Barnes argues, “the barrier between public and private and two types of talk (i.e. political and social), has been removed resulting in a fusing of our social and political identities” (129) – and potentially fan identities as well. Drawing from the shared vernacular of fandom can create the sense of different participants being part of the same fan community (Barnes 44). Creating a sense of an “us” is even more successful when one shares the same anti-fandom (47) by being opposed to the same thing. Therefore, discourses surrounding *Star Wars* may have been attractive to political movements and figures to reach a new demographic to more easily spread anti-feminist or far-right sentiments in an era where visibility is key. As Banet-Weiser suggests, “popular feminism and popular misogyny battle it out on the contemporary cultural landscape [...] in an economy of visibility” (2) – and fan discourses can provide increased visibility.

While the MSD seems to have arisen coincidentally, other early events surrounding *TFA* suggest a much more intentional politicization that can be seen as an early attempt at fanization, i.e. acting as fans for politically activist purposes: Men’s Rights Activists and racists created hashtags in response to Finn being a prominent Black main character in *TFA* as well as Rey being the lead character, such as #BlackStromtrooper and #BoycottStarWarsVII. *The Independent* explains that its instigators claimed that the “new characters Finn and Rey took lead opportunities away from white [male] actors” (Denham). One group involved is “Return of Kings”, an example of so called “Men’s Rights Activists” (MRA). They had also railed

against *Mad Max: Fury Road* for its female protagonist in May 2015 (De Coning) and then tried to get men to boycott *TFA* which they claim was successful (Denham). While this claim is doubtful, by tying their cause into the discourse surrounding a popular movie, they were covered by many news sites, such as the *Independent* which I cited. This illustrates the effectiveness of participating in fan discourse in order to achieve greater visibility for their cause.

Additionally, anti-feminist arguments were intentionally attached to MSD by various far-right political activists who were otherwise not known for discussions of pop culture and who did not merely see feminism as “damaging to good narratives”. There is, for example, Dave Cullen, a far-right white supremacist and successful YouTuber (M. Brooks; Siapera), who is considered part of *YouTube*’s reactionary right alternative influence network (R. Lewis, *Alternative Influence*). Cullen reviewed *TFA* as “more [Political Correct] nonsense [that depicts how] women don't need men's help at all right because you can never be a female damsel anymore” in late 2016 (Cullen 11:10-11:18). He links this depiction to modern society “pushing women to be strong females [...] which basically means act more like men” (08:57-09:06) which will mean “women will not procreate because men won't go next door near them if they keep acting like men” in the future (09:13-09:18). He claims that “this is ideological feminist indoctrination” (09:21-09:24). His review is one of many examples that do not merely express dislike for the trope of the Mary Sue but rather explicitly connect the movie to a perceived real-world threat of feminism with its far-reaching consequences beyond fandom.

Spotlight Magnification by Refutation

Such attempts to gain more visibility for anti-feminist and racist ideology were involuntarily encouraged by feminists and anti-racists as well as by the way algorithms on *Twitter* work. Proctor observes that despite many news outlets reporting on calls for boycotts, the #BlackStromtrooper hashtag was primarily not populated by racists but rather by those

refuting their arguments (“I’ve seen”). This shows the downside of performative activism as an accidental amplification mechanism. Proctor found that the “most hostile tweets were not written by racists at all, but, rather, by those challenging – and Othering – an imaginary and imagined corpus of reactionary fans” (“I’ve Seen” 172). I disagree with his conclusion that there were no racist reactions to Boyega at all and it was solely “imaginary” racist fans – it does however illustrate the effectiveness of using outrage and hashtags to spread an idea.

Likely, well-meaning refutations of Rey being a Mary Sue on social media and by news outlets amplified the discourse significantly. Dosser coined the term spotlight magnification for the process where “engaging with content, even to refute it, [...] can bring more attention to it, magnifying the content, and exposing more people to that ideology” (146). It is likely that despite only a few users actually using the “Mary Sue” term to criticize Rey, it was easy to amplify its visibility due to the frequent use of the term by all types of fans, especially performative displays of feminism. As Lane recounts, the term was “trending” in December, i.e. it showed up in the trending topics section of *Twitter* due to its high usage within a certain time frame, likely leading curious people to Google it (see 2.1).

As outlined by blogger Rewriting Ripley, the radical collective of white supremacist website VDARE blogged about the success of the #BoycottStarWarsVII hashtag which they joined in spreading by claiming that it “trended worldwide all-day yesterday”. The collective writes that even if many people engaging with the hashtag were mocking it, “getting people to think in the terms a movie is “anti-white” is a huge positive, because it allows them to consider the notion of their own dispossession – especially if they’ve never even thought of this reality before” (Kersey). This underlines how refutations not only aid goals of increasing visibility for their ideology, by causing the hashtag to trend and thus become widely visible on *Twitter*, but are used intentionally by some groups.

Considering the tweets available as of 2024, negative reactions to those reacting negatively to Rey and calling her a Mary Sue were more visible than the negative responses to Rey themselves. Tweets containing “Mary Sue” from December 2015 to early 2016 predominantly feature refutations and users parodying the criticism of Rey being “too perfect” and pointing out that men are allowed to be such wish-fulfillment figures. While the earliest responses did not gain much traction (i.e. high numbers of likes or re-tweets), they by far outweigh users using the term earnestly. As Marwick and Lewis explain in relation to #Gamergate, which profited from the hashtag and thereby made it seem more like a unified movement than it was: “Due to the need to constantly produce news content that will lead to the greatest number of clicks, with limited resources, reporters and bloggers rely on social media, so a trending hashtag [...] can frequently lead to mainstream coverage.” (43) – which is what happened eventually.

Spotlight Magnification by News Reporting

The MSD was not immediately picked up by news media aimed at mainstream audiences and when addressed by smaller, more fan-oriented news sites, refuted and dismissed as sexist, for example by *Vox* which asks “Is [Rey], in fandom speak, a “Mary Sue”?” and provides a long essay on why the answer is “No” (Framke). This was published in December 2015, right after the release of *TFA*. Early reporting already speaks to the role of trending topics. Lane for *The Mary Sue* writes about how she noticed “the term “Mary Sue” was a trending topic on Twitter” and thus decided to write about it and defend “calling Rey a Mary Sue, there’s nothing wrong with that—as long as we’re also willing to call Luke Skywalker one too”.

Despite such initial responses not being widely visible (being neither widely retweeted nor published on widely read news sites), they already suggest a central role of a “backlash to the backlash” in giving fan conflicts visibility. Further public reactions are more commonly

found in late 2016, such as reports on Daisy Ridley's response to the MSD which was covered by *Time Magazine* and other well-known outlets appearing only in October 2016: In late 2016 "Marysuegate" had gained enough visibility in fan discourse for Rey actress Daisy Ridley to address the issue, explicitly calling the term "sexist" and using a similar argument found in many fan posts and fan site articles (e.g. Lane) by pointing out how "Luke had the exact same [capabilities]" (McCluskey). The response of such a well-known actress, of course, made this topic more relevant for reporting even by news sites geared towards mainstream audiences and not just fans who may already be aware of or interested in fan discourse.

Additionally, later articles on *TLJ* and fan reactions to it heavily relied on citing tweets and other fan reactions, with some articles even consisting of more tweets than actual article text. This added to the perception of a large controversy and made fan discourse much more visible. Notably, such coverage by news can even incentivize the creation of more polarizing content as the more outrageous and anti-feminist it is, the more likely it is to be covered in order to create feminist outrage: For example, when one user cut a version of *TLJ* with all the scenes with women removed, termed the "chauvinist cut", it was covered among others by *Inverse*, *Business Insider*, *Digital Spy*, *Men's Health*, *Teen Vogue*, *The Guardian* and many more, as well as director Rian Johnson himself and various actors (L. Nolan). Putting a huge spotlight both on a fan-edit by a single individual and tweets by random fans gives visibility to ideas that otherwise may have gained little traction in fan discourse. While it is unclear for what reason the "chauvinist cut" was created, such "proliferating media coverage" even "though it treats MRA/alt-right toxicity as a problem [...] also acts as a prize for such activism" (Hills, "An Extended Foreword" 113) and thus allows such arguments to move from niche "subcultural [...] circulation" into "[m]ainstream debate by piggybacking on the "media meta-capital" of blockbuster franchises" (Hills 113) – in this case amplifying the MSD narrative of

feminism having created bad female characters in *TLJ* and thereby indirectly also the narrative of feminism threatening pop culture more generally.

Celebrity Magnification

Particularly with *TLJ*, more and more celebrities and well-known political figures, mostly from the right, began to share their opinions on *Star Wars* in regard to the perceived war on men. This is particularly note-worthy as earlier fan conflicts, such as #Gamergate, did not receive this level of mainstream visibility through public figures. In accordance with the previously used terminology, this could be described as “celebrity magnification” where something being discussed by a well-known figure makes it more visible, both to their followers and due to news considering comments by public figures more newsworthy. The early instances included Ridley discussing the sexism of the “Mary Sue” term. Particularly after *TLJ*, others involved in the franchise, such as Luke Skywalker actor Mark Hamill, Finn actor John Boyega, or director Rian Johnson also participated in mocking sexist fans, particularly the aforementioned fan-edit of *TLJ* that cut out all female characters (Boucher) – thus increasing the visibility of fans who feel the movie needs to be “De-Feminized” (MagooRobbie) because it had too much “Girlz Powah” and did not portray that “[w]omen are naturally weaker than men” (MagooRobbie). Without the widespread mocking, even by celebrities, the fan-edit may not have gained much traction – however, by being widely shared, sexist fans and their arguments were magnified.

The Visibility Feedback Loop

Post-*TLJ* many *YouTube* channels either pivoted towards anti-*TLJ* content from #Gamergate content or increasingly connected the MSD to broader anti-feminist arguments. This may be due to such arguments offering visibility, as previously discussed, which can turn outrage into views and thus into money. *TLJ* became especially attractive as an outrage topic

because its narrative choices could be framed not only as “bad writing” but also as threats to masculinity and feminism’s influence on culture.

A central point of connection between #Gamergate and *TLJ* reviews are concerns about Luke Skywalker and thus the portrayal of masculinity. Salminen suggests that themes of “female heroism” and a “failure of masculinity” were perceived particularly by the alt-right and Men’s Rights Activists “as a threat to white masculinity, which is already in their perception in a state of crisis” (205) at that point in time. Castleberry similarly writes that the “de-mystification of Luke Skywalker was essentially perceived by white male fans in particular as something in a long line of politically correct de-powerings” (12), thus tying together particularly *TLJ* with male-hatred in the minds of many fans.

This issue fits well with the rise of the “manosphere” in the 2010s, “a noteworthy conglomerate of ‘niche’ communities, roughly aligned by their common interest in masculinity and its alleged crisis” (Ribeiro et al., “Evolution” 196) due to a “feminization of society” (206). Such views broadly overlap with those of the alt-right which, according to reports (e.g. Bradley and Jacobs for *Huffpost*), claimed to use bots for attacking director Rian Johnson on social media due to the perceived insults to masculinity that were Poe’s “mansplaining” plot and Luke being “turn[ed] gay” due to the “feminist agenda” – such statements, too, focusing strongly on the idea that feminism is perceived to be put into the movies to enact an “agenda”, i.e. politically influence its viewers on purpose.

Many *YouTube* channels in the late 2010s shifted from “‘skepticism’ (such as critiquing religion and debunking pseudoscience) [content] to framing feminists and ‘social justice warriors’”, also called SJWs, “as the new threats to rationality and ‘centrism’” (Flegel and Leggatt 11) during #Gamergate. After #Gamergate, in 2017, the discourse that came to be considered #Comicsgate started around a perceived problem with increasing diversity in comics. This soon led to “numerous *YouTube* channels emerg[ing] to cover what they

constructed as the undue influence of “SJW” politics on comics, and to stoke audience anger against a variety of targets, mainly women in comics” (Flegel and Leggatt 9). *TLJ* being released around this time when a shift towards new targets for such anti-SJW content was happening made it potentially particularly attractive to incorporate into earlier narratives about women ruining geek fandoms.

The high visibility of the MSD and *TLJ* controversies made *Star Wars* a prime target for channels shifting towards anti-SJW content. One study by anonymous data scientist Rewriting Ripley, for example, found that most negative tweets about *TLJ* stem from gaming-related accounts who have *YouTube* accounts. Their observation that “a considerable amount of hate against The Last Jedi is generated on YouTube” also aligns with my observations – as previously discussed, *Tumblr* almost exclusively and *Twitter* overwhelmingly featured posts defending Rey against Mary Sue accusations.

Furthermore, these patterns of amplification on *YouTube* did not operate in isolation but intersected with a broader socio-political climate increasingly preoccupied with feminism’s “threat” to masculinity. 2017’s increased socio-political tensions regarding feminism (see 2.3) primed fans to read *TLJ* through a lens of threats to masculinity as well as to intentionally tie it into anti-feminist discourse. Far-right political commentators and YouTubers not only saw that they could reach a large audience by participating in the MSD fan conflict, but by making it more explicitly political than early iterations which focused more heavily on the “bad writing” aspect, they could strategically feed the feedback loop: By tying particularly *TLJ* into narratives of a “masculinity in crisis”, they could create more outrage and thus more attention.

2.5 “A Fandom Divided”: The Rise of Fanization post-*TLJ*

I have so far discussed what caused the Mary Sue fan conflict to arise as well as become widely visible. My earlier examples suggest that it was initially mainly feminist voices that were

amplified by spotlight and celebrity magnification, albeit not with a (fan-)activist dimension: They were defending the status quo, not asking for changes to the franchise or society. However, post-*TLJ* it was predominantly right-wing figures using the MSD to spread their ideology via fanization. *TLJ* both marked a turning point by being a more disruptive film, diverging from the safe “reboot” concept of *TFA*, and being released into a more divisive era with rising anti-feminist sentiments (see 2.3).

Consensus Criticism

Despite later reviews and posts often suggesting that Rey was immediately divisive (she was not, see 2.1) or that *TLJ* broke the fandom (e.g. Filmento) and “killed the franchise” (e.g. Boseley) due to its presumed “wokeness”, immediate reception of *TLJ* was still fairly positive and uncontroversial along ideological lines. Indeed, its initial reception was mostly very favorable, both regarding reviews by critics as well as CinemaScore, a survey system that asks opening day audiences to rate the movie they have just seen which resulted in a favorable A grade for *TLJ* (Vejvoda, “Star Wars”). However, *TLJ* lent itself to anti-feminist arguments as it was already discussed as a polarizing work at its point of release. It offers a significant amount of what can be described as “consensus criticism”: Elements that were considered flaws by a wide range of fans across the political spectrum.

It is not surprising that the news sites positively highlighting the feminist themes and women of *TLJ* were almost exclusively left-leaning. Nevertheless, while reviews by right-leaning news sites were more likely to be negative, this was at large not due to anti-feminism and shared many criticisms also voiced by left-leaning news sites. The main criticisms were initially not related to representation at all: The movie was largely considered “too jokey” in tone and the plotlines not working well, particularly the movie’s subplot centering around war profiteers in a casino on Canto Bight. While the latter was often criticized for being unnecessary political messaging about war profiteering and animal abuse being bad, this was not related to

a left-right or Democrat-Republican-aligning dichotomy. A *National Review* article by K. Smith, released mid-December 2017, mainly focuses on how *TLJ* is unoriginal as *Star Wars* has become “a cover band of itself”. Such criticism is shared by many reviews from across the political spectrum. For example, *Variety* is also critical of how the movie is too similar to the original trilogy with its “unwillingness to stray too far from the official text” (Debruge). Among the most prominent criticisms was the characterization of Luke Skywalker, something that even actor Mark Hamill complained about, pointing out that Luke wouldn’t give up, “if he made a mistake, he would try to right that wrong” (Cavanaugh). Consequently, many anti-feminist reactions later referred to consensus criticism but offered alternative explanations, attributing things widely perceived as flaws to feminism or presumed progressive agendas.

Fanization

Increasingly after 2017, we see political figures perform a rhetorical strategy of “fanization”. Fanization is usually applied to traditional realms of politics when “[v]oters, political commentators and politicians alike engage in practices of language play and play with popular culture to engage in politics” (Petersen 8). This is frequently applied to behavior such as “fan-like attachments to politicians, [...] selfies with politicians, or the sharing of memes of gifs of politicians one admires” (Dean and Phoenix 325). While the focus in fanization scholarship is often on fans of politicians, I want to focus on politicians as fans or at least participants in fan discourse: Sharing both what one is a fan of and one’s opinion on issues of fan discourse, such as whether Rey is a Mary Sue, is a fan behavior one would not necessarily expect from a political figure.

This is not entirely unprecedented and continues pre-existing trends to some degree: Pop cultural vernacular and specifically *Star Wars* references have long been used to connect with political subjects through shared fandom. However, this situation is different as it primarily builds on shared anti-fandom. In the past, this merely meant that several politicians,

or rather their audiences, drew from the symbolism of *Star Wars* and specifically superficial references, be it the “Star Wars Program” (Krämer), the “Evil Empire” speech of the Reagan administration (Nadel) or the metaphor of “going to the dark side” in Dick Cheney’s “War on Terror” speech (Bridwell et al. 8). Even more recently, there are examples such as Hillary Clinton ending a 2015’s debate with “May the force be with you” (Beauchamp) or Elizabeth Warren talking about how she sees herself “more as Princess Leia than [...] Darth Vader” in 2016 (Warmbrodt). Notably, none of these participate in fan arguments, but rather superficially use single words or phrases to create associations with a popular franchise.

This is very different from the way *Star Wars* was incorporated into political discourse after *TLJ*, a time when particularly right-wing political figures began using fanization: Rather than appeals to common fandom, it was the perceived problems with the story itself that was an issue to discuss from a political perspective. This also follows patterns previously seen in #Gamergate and even the alt-right more broadly: Both movements are characterized by a broad coalition of widely differing ideologies but united into a coalition through shared dislike or anti-fandom – be it of feminists, general “wokeness” or Mary Sues.

We can see how political figures picked up on the appeal of anti-fandom and participating in fan discourse, for example the well-known conservative political commentator and self-proclaimed *Star Wars* fan Ben Shapiro. Shapiro initially, in a review published by the *Daily Wire*, mostly takes issue with storylines in *TLJ* that he considers going nowhere. The only political dimension is his criticism of the “Social Justice Warrioring” of the Canto Bight subplot discussing “income inequality”, “animal abuse” and “weapons dealing” being bad and unnecessary political commentary. These are notably not the “identity politics”-associated topics usually associated with “social justice warriors” (as discussed in the introduction). Rey, meanwhile, he merely describes as “far cooler” than before (Shapiro, “Star Wars”). Popular hyper-partisan conservative news sites (Dowling et al.) like the *Daily Wire* publishing pop

culture reviews to begin with, especially as no review of *TFA* is published there¹³, suggests a growing interest in attracting fans to one's site. Nevertheless, the review of *TLJ* appears unbiased and unrelated to arguments from fan discourse.

However, Shapiro later describes *TLJ* retro-actively as ruining “all of your favorite characters” due to Kathleen Kennedy's “feminist streak” which led to only women being “competent or good” in his review of *TROS* (Daily Wire), thus tying discussions of fandom and politics together by echoing arguments by anti-feminist anti-fans. As his judgment of the movies became harsher over time and included the popular argument of Kennedy's feminism being to blame that became particularly popular in reactionary fan discourse (see chapter 3), it seems that he may either have been influenced by fan discourse becoming more visibly radicalized or intentionally tried to appeal more strongly to reactionary fans as a potential audience.

Such fanization is not only enacted by addressing fan discourse but can also involve merging one's role as a political commentator with one's fan identity: Many political commentators weighing in on the MSD, including Shapiro, also position themselves clearly as fans. Shapiro, for example, emphasizes how much of a *Star Wars* fan he has been from early childhood on. Specifically, this shared fandom allows him to weigh in on the common anti-feminist sentiment among (mostly male) fans that *Star Wars* is being “taken from them” as Disney only wants “female heroes from now on” (@JasonSCampbell) which he sees as “absurd” given that *Star Wars* fans are (he assumes) overwhelmingly men. His argument is similar to that of fans on *YouTube* who think Rey being a Mary Sue is an example of feminism that wants to replace men as heroes, thus suggesting a feminist threat towards fiction meant for men. The statement by Shapiro is directly tied to him arguing that *TROS* explained “why Rey

¹³ Although several other short articles on *Star Wars* exist, such as pre-release speculation on *TFA*.

was such a Mary Sue” (Daily Wire) and thus draws from the MSD, assuming those watching his show to be familiar with the term and argument.

Increasing Media Fanization

Furthermore, only a few of the initial reviews and reactions criticize elements of gender representation in *TLJ* and are thus tied to the MSD. All in all, early criticism of *TLJ* mainly steers away from voicing explicitly anti-feminist arguments. For example, *National Review*, in an article released December 2017 was largely critical of *TLJ* for not taking itself seriously due to its jokes and weak writing (White, “Fishy”). Only a minor sidenote disparagingly calls the Canto Bight subplot a “PC”, i.e. politically-correct, “multi-culti play of Finn’s partnership with Rose Tico” and mentions a “take-charge feminism of purple-haired Vice Admiral Amilyn Holdo”, while at the same time contextualizing the movie as “follow[ing] fanboy tradition”. This subtly implies that the presence of actors of Color makes the film “multi-culti” which has racist undertones. Additionally, it suggests that Holdo as a leader was to appeal to feminists in order to be “politically correct” in a time where feminism is popular and something audiences expect to see. All of these dimensions of political critique subtly echo the alt-right which is often tied together by “their opposition to political correctness, feminism, [and] multiculturalism” (Nagle 18). However, these are just two subordinate clauses in a larger list of factors that hurt the movie: They are neither considered the primary reason the movie did not work on a narrative level nor are they considered a unique feature of *TLJ* – on the contrary, it is still a “fanboy” movie according to the author, thus still appealing to the correct target audience in his view.

With *TLJ*, we also see more alarmist news sites turning towards fandom, such as infamous far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones of the far-right news site *InfoWars* who told his viewers that he will not see the movie which is “total SJW”, i.e. Social Justice Warrior, and “state-sponsored brainwashing” that “beat[s] viewers over the head with” (A. Jones, “Alex

Jones” 00:53-00:55) how “every bad guy [is] a man” (00:36-00:39)¹⁴. He goes even further to argue that “Leia has a girlfriend with purple hair” (“RWW”) and in “every movie, the women [...] are the heroes, they’re all lesbians” (“RWW”). Particularly the reading of Holdo and Leia as lesbians is interesting, as there is no such relationship in the text, yet feminism, lesbianism and man-hatred are commonly associated with one another (Scharff 827), projecting previously discussed fears of men being replaced as heroes and in society onto the movie.

The Retro-Active Politicization of TLJ post-TROS

Finally, there was a shift in news reporting on the MSD and *TLJ* shortly before and post-*TROS*, suggesting a notable impact of fan discourse on mainstream discourse. This included a noteworthy shift from politicization in the form of connecting *Star Wars* to feminism in reviews mainly by the left-leaning publications towards a politicization linking *Star Wars* to feminism mostly by anti-feminist, right-leaning reviews. Moreover, this politicization often retro-actively characterizes *TLJ* (and less frequently *TFA* and Rey too) as more divisive than it was initially portrayed as by the same news sites or political figures. *TLJ* post-*TROS* is frequently framed in a more “fanized” way, i.e. sharing more arguments with the MSD in order to make an anti-feminist argument drawing from anti-fandom.

Political commentator Ben Shapiro offers a typical example of the on-going politicization of discussing the movie with retro-active changes regarding *TLJ*: He didn’t release an official review of *TFA*, but he did of *TLJ*, featuring rather reasonable points related to the plot and not perceived political influences (Shapiro, “Star Wars”). Most importantly, he generously applauds that “Rian Johnson, the director, didn’t play it safe, and that’s great” and while there are flaws, the movie was “better than *The Force Awakens*”. Later on, he attunes his opinion to fit with *TLJ*-anti-fans tenor: His *TROS* review explicitly calls out “Kathleen

¹⁴ Due to Alex Jones being banned from *YouTube* in 2018, the full original video is not publicly available anymore and fragments are sourced from different news sites.

Kennedy [who] has this feminist streak where the only characters [who] were allowed to be competent or good are apparently the female characters” (Daily Wire), echoing MSD arguments. He even appeals directly to fans who “feel like [the previous two movies] ruined [their] childhood” (Daily Wire) by suggesting those will enjoy *TROS*.

TLJ becomes more negatively reviewed over time. Staying with the example of Ben Shapiro, we can see that he continues to revisit the issue of *TLJ* in 2020, emphasizing the shared dislike between him and *TLJ*-anti-fans when he connects the 2020 elections to *Star Wars* (fig. 6), thus leaning more strongly than before into the shared anti-fandom aspect discussed in 2.4:

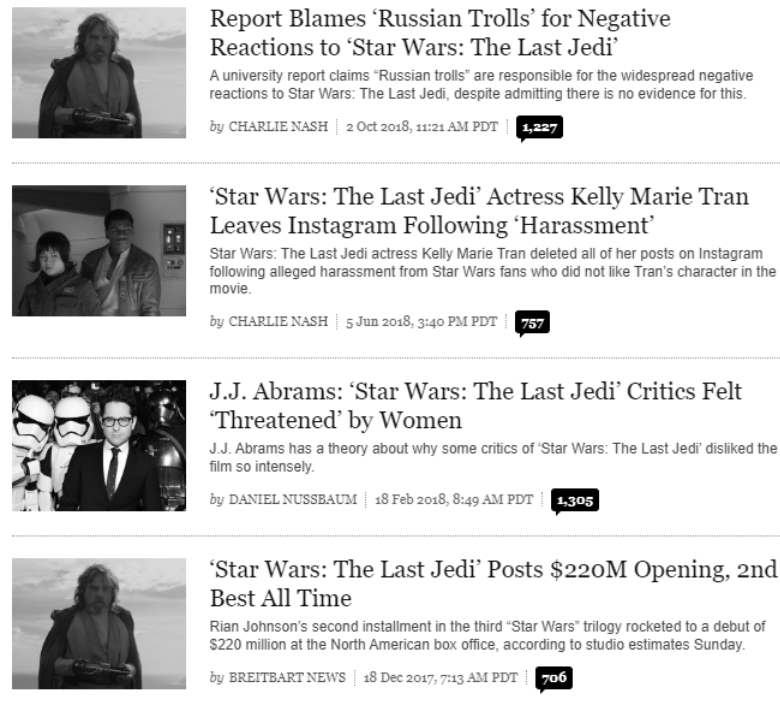


Fig. 6. Tweet by @benshapiro about *TLJ* and the 2020 elections

This tweet suggests *TLJ* to be potentially the worst *Star Wars* movie. However, his initial, rather balanced review, suggested it was “[o]verall, better than *The Force Awakens*” but “below *Return of the Jedi*”. This suggests the possibility that Shapiro did not see it as beneficial to share his true views in his official review in 2017 and that fanization by drawing from MSD only came to be seen as a good strategy as the MSD grew in visibility post-*TLJ* (as described in 2.4). It can also suggest that he could have intentionally written his earlier review to appeal to “casual” fans and his later posts more in line with the MSD in order to appeal to *TLJ* anti-fans, demonstrating their increasing relevance to the discourse – once again, likely due to their increased visibility.

From Movie Review to “Culture War” Review

How reviews of *TLJ* became increasingly intertwined with the idea of a “culture war against wokeness”, moving from texts aimed at fans to rather “fanized” political arguments, is best illustrated by far-right leaning *Breitbart* due to it being more likely to publish articles with offensive content in order to appeal to its audience without trying to appear unbiased.



The screenshot displays four news articles from Breitbart.com, each with a small image, a headline, a brief summary, the author's name, the date and time, and a comment count. The articles are:

- Report Blames 'Russian Trolls' for Negative Reactions to 'Star Wars: The Last Jedi'**
A university report claims "Russian trolls" are responsible for the widespread negative reactions to *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, despite admitting there is no evidence for this.
by CHARLIE NASH | 2 Oct 2018, 11:21 AM PDT | 1,227
- 'Star Wars: The Last Jedi' Actress Kelly Marie Tran Leaves Instagram Following 'Harassment'**
Star Wars: The Last Jedi actress Kelly Marie Tran deleted all of her posts on Instagram following alleged harassment from *Star Wars* fans who did not like Tran's character in the movie.
by CHARLIE NASH | 5 Jun 2018, 3:40 PM PDT | 757
- J.J. Abrams: 'Star Wars: The Last Jedi' Critics Felt 'Threatened' by Women**
J.J. Abrams has a theory about why some critics of *'Star Wars: The Last Jedi'* disliked the film so intensely.
by DANIEL NUSSBAUM | 18 Feb 2018, 8:49 AM PDT | 1,305
- 'Star Wars: The Last Jedi' Posts \$220M Opening, 2nd Best All Time**
Rian Johnson's second installment in the third "*Star Wars*" trilogy rocketed to a debut of \$220 million at the North American box office, according to studio estimates Sunday.
by BREITBART NEWS | 18 Dec 2017, 7:13 AM PDT | 706

Fig. 7. An example of articles on *Star Wars* on *Breitbart.com* using the site's search function, showcasing the seemingly neutral earlier reporting

Breitbart used to cover *TLJ* content similar to liberal news sites. In an article published in February 2018, it still neutrally quotes J.J. Abrams from an *IndieWire* interview, discussing fans “accustomed to [...] privilege” feeling threatened by more female characters despite it being about “fairness”, not “oppression” (Nussbaum). While articles mostly presenting someone’s point of view without the author providing much framing are common on *Breitbart*, the inclusion of such quotes suggests some form of endorsement of Abram’s statements and the assumption that this is content *Breitbart* readership wants to read¹⁵.

¹⁵ Although this earlier approach to more unbiased-seeming coverage did not always align with their viewership, with its article on dislike of the female characters in *TLJ* (Nussbaum) leading commentators to repeat the previously discussed MSD arguments.

Potentially to align more with its readership in late 2018, *Breitbart* discusses *TLJ* again, described explicitly as “the beginning of the end” (Nolte, “Go Woke”) in order to explain the box office failure of stand-alone movie *Solo*, released in 2018. In this review, the author echoes the, particularly in alt-right circles, infamous credo “Go woke, go broke” (Cheng and Frommann). This is to mean that works that are socially progressive, for example by featuring feminist themes or diverse casts, are more likely to be financial failures. Thus, this review’s themes are now more closely linked to broader “anti-social justice” stances. The article points to producer Kathleen Kennedy as the problem – something common to anti-*TLJ* fan discourse as I discuss in more detail in chapter 3. By doing so, it was among the first news articles to do so, describing her as a “committed left-wing social justice warrior and feminist [...] using the *Star Wars* franchise to push her obnoxious agenda” (Nolte, “Go Woke”). This is particularly interesting given that it was not *TLJ* but *Solo* that failed commercially which tells a rather traditional adventure story centered around a male hero and does not offer much that can be called feminist.

A significant tone shift is also visible in the review of *TROS* which directly puts it in contrast with *TLJ*, calling it “[a] limp apology for TLJ” (Nolte, “Star Wars”). It directly brings up that Rey is a Mary Sue, something previously relegated to comments and defenses of her in their reporting. It also echoes fan sentiments in claiming that Rey “serve[d] as an avatar for producer Kathleen Kennedy’s obnoxious woke politics” – thus, like many other examples previously discussed implying that Kennedy wanted to instrumentalize the movies for her progressive agenda. Later reporting further leans into *TLJ*- and sequel-trilogy anti-fandom, publishing articles on it even post-*TROS* which are similar to the revisitations and click-bait like titles of many YouTubers with dramatic word choices such as “killed”, “demolishes”, “disaster” and anti-“woke” key terms such as “woke” and “man-hating” (fig. 8).

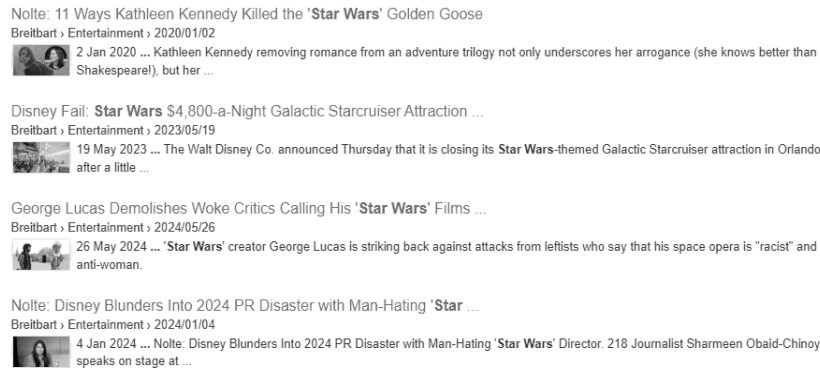


Fig. 8. Example of typical later, more polarized, anti-feminist, anti-woke and MSD-borrowing articles on Breitbart

One notable article is +2020’s recollection of how Kathleen Kennedy killed *Star Wars* (Nolte, “11 Ways”) – similar both in title and content to typical anti-woke *YouTube* videos (see chapter 3) – by blaming it on “feminist politics” with which Kennedy wants to “lecture [the fans]”, framing *TLJ* as the worst display of such feminism and “anti-male” bashing in action. It also leans strongly into broader “anti-woke” sentiments, calling the characters of *Color* “affirmative action hires” and railing against the lesbian kiss in the background of a scene in *TROS* that it harms children, picking up on the homophobia already present in arguments against *TLJ*.

Additionally, its tone has also become notably aggressive and “unprofessional”, with the author directly insulting an imaginary feminist, writing that “Romance isn’t about The Patriarchy, you morons”. Nolte believes that the “immature and childish” “woke leftist[]” politics of Kennedy are to blame for a lack of romance despite the movies being notorious for fans enjoying the Rey and Kylo romance which even resulted in a kiss in *TROS* (“11 Ways”) – however, this article largely received supportive comments, illustrating how leaning more into the MSD was likely a choice to better appeal to their readership or potentially gather new readers from anti-sequel trilogy anti-fandom. Such coarsening of the language is also in line with the rise of populism under Trump, as in 2019 the president had been in office for 2 years

already and thus a populist style with its typical “bad manners” (Moffitt, *The Global*) had been more widely adopted by the far-right at that point.

Outrage Fandom as a Business Model

MSD and *TLJ* criticism being visible, and therefore being discussed controversially, thus staying visible in the feedback loop, has also fed a trend of continued revisitations of discussing *Star Wars*, especially on *YouTube*, post-*TROS*, i.e. after the end of the sequel trilogy. In addition to *TLJ* being retro-actively framed as a divisive movie that turned viewers against the franchise, rather than the moment where anti-fandom became a “mainstream” strategy to gain visibility, the MSD has continued long after the end of the sequel trilogy, even increasing in popularity. This continuation of the MSD and specifically *TLJ* is surprising as *TROS* was not considered particularly divisive and particularly not feminist, and not being discussed as such by either left- or right-wing news or YouTubers. One might have expected that a movie to “appease” fans would have stopped the fan conflict. It is thus likely that this continuation was not due to any new disruptions but due to the feedback loop driving intentional capitalization on the politicization of the MSD.

Platform incentives likely play a big role in the staying power of the MSD: Many YouTubers have frequently put out new videos on the MSD and *TLJ* over the years to often great popularity, thus gaining even more popularity as a channel, with viewers potentially expecting content similar to what they subscribed for. Many content creators benefit financially off this topic as many videos are monetized, i.e. the content creators make money off ads on the video. Many critical videos on *TLJ* with high view counts released on *YouTube* are only 4 years old, so created shortly before and after *TROS*. Few videos from early 2018 were created or gained high view counts – for example, the highly viewed critique of Holdo by YouTuber Jordan (a.k.a. The Critical Drinker) discussing whether she is a “Toxic Leader” (Jordan,

“Admiral”) was only released in September 2020, almost a year after *TROS*. Still, it gained over 2,8 million views.

Jordan is a good example of a YouTuber revisiting what made him successful: His channel does not feature many videos (and thus was either unused or old content was deleted) before his rise to popularity with his reviews of *TFA* and “the problem with Rey” (“Star Wars”) therein in 2018 as well as his video on “the Assassination of Luke Skywalker” (“The Last Jedi”) in *TLJ* in July 2018 – both videos notably released significantly after each film’s release. As his other videos, such as games reviews, did not achieve similar viewing numbers, it may be little surprise that he started revisiting his dislike of *TLJ* several times, such as with a parody of someone appreciating *TLJ* in March 2019 (“The Genius Part 1”) and in April 2019 (“The Genius Part Two”). These reviews continue to contain the claim that the movies were “overseen by a woman who was a political activist first” (“The Genius Part 1” 00:39-00:42) and thus continuing the narrative that the movies were ruined due to Kennedy’s feminist agenda. Other creators also revisited issues such as “Rey is an over-powered Mary Sue” in 2024 (e.g. Jordan, “Was Anakin”) – sometimes even almost 5 years after the sequel trilogy ended (Buechler’s “Death by Mary Sue-icide”) – due to *Star Wars* being misused as a “platform for things like identity politics and intersectional feminism” (Buechler 3:48-3:52). High view counts in the millions suggest an on-going interest in the topic, oftentimes even higher than in 2017.

Final visibility escalation: Merging topics and discourses

Recent revisitations by these YouTubers are often inserted into a grand narrative of feminism (or broader progressivism) threatening all of entertainment, linking “gates”, especially #Gamergate, and more recent movies discussed in the MSD (such as Captain Marvel) in a form of a fannish super conspiracy theory. This can, for example, be seen in WorldClassBullshitters’s 2019 video where he discusses how “The Media Fires Back at Marvel’s Feminist Agenda” and claims that the “culture war” first targeted “the video games,

then the comic books and now Star Wars” (01:10-01:13) – which, despite the video’s title, is notably not a *Marvel* production. Yet many franchises are added to the list of perceived victims of a “feminist agenda” to create an over-arching narrative which suggests that not only those behind specific media franchises but all of entertainment are plotting to insert feminist messages into anything, from video games to comics to various movies.

This theory of a feminism threat being applied to all kinds of franchises and types of media is similar to many contemporary conspiracy theories: As Knight observes, “over the last decades conspiracy theories have shown signs of increasing complexity and inclusiveness, as once separate suspicions are welded into Grand Unified Theories of Everything” (204). Similarly, many smaller arguments – from the debate about ethics in video games journalism in #Gamergate to the discussion of Rey being a Mary Sue – have been incorporated into the overarching narrative of feminists trying to ruin all of entertainment for their perceived agenda of weakening men. The construction of such a super-narrative raises interest in anything that can feed into it. Consequently, it makes sense that even with new fan conflicts, old arguments will be brought up again, gaining more popularity but also becoming less specific overtime as the focus of anti-fan activism shifts from Mary Sues to entertainment industry-wide “feminist agendas”. The rhetorical style of fan-populism is present in many of these newer videos on *YouTube* which I discuss in-depth in chapter 3.

As such conspiracy-like anti-feminist (or later: anti-woke) super-narratives are broad and endlessly adaptable, they provide the connective tissue that allows aversion spaces to form: (anti-)fans on YouTube, news sites (such as *Breitbart*) and political actors can draw from the same narrative of cultural crisis and resulting shared anti-fandom or aversion space to turn fan conflicts into shared political battlegrounds: The Mary Sue has become emblematic for a perceived problem with society.

2.6 “Carano made Star Wars fun again and Disney canceled her”: Fan Conflicts as a Far-Right Rabbit Hole

The continued and increasing attractiveness of fanization even by more well-known public figures, particularly by drawing from anti-fandom such as the MSD, can be seen in 2021 when Republican and Texan Senator Ted Cruz (who had unsuccessfully tried to run for president in 2016) disapprovingly described Rey as a “tortured Jedi” on *Twitter* (@TedCruz, “Texan”) and implied that she wasn’t the type of character “who girls [could] look[] up to”. Unlike “Texan Gina Carano [who] broke barriers in the Star Wars universe”, as she “played a woman who kicked ass & who girls looked up to.” His comment participated in the MSD about what kind of female role models the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy was promoting – illustrating that long after the end of the sequel trilogy, such discussions are not just voiced in fan communities but even given a platform on the political stage. By doing so, he also mirrors arguments given by feminists that audiences need good female role models on screen, thus using the mirroring strategy Banet-Weiser argues is common to online anti-feminism. Role models, particularly for young audiences, have always been an issue of controversy – yet in the past an important issue was to preferably depict flawless role models who did not engage in violent or immoral behaviors (see chapter 4). Outrage about characters being seemingly “too flawless” seems to be a completely new sort of controversy – yet “Marysuegate” is only one in many attempts of anti-feminist to even far-right actors to attach themselves and their ideology to fan discourses.

From Anti-Feminism to “Anti-Cancel Culture”

Notably, more recent MSD engages with a broader set of issues while still predominantly centering its concerns around the depiction of female characters, thus demonstrating another escalation of the previously discussed “super narrative”. This is well illustrated by the 2021 discourse surrounding *The Mandalorian*’s Gina Carano, as mentioned

in Cruz's tweet. The actress was fired from the show after comparing being conservative to being a Jew during the Holocaust. She had previously also shared other controversial statements online such as mocking mask mandates during the Covid-19 pandemic, even implying that "Democratic Government leaders now recommend we all wear blindfolds along with masks so we can't see what's really going on," and shared various conspiracy theories such as about Weinstein being killed and the US election being stolen (Brown). Additionally, she mocked trans people and trans allies' tendency to include their pronouns in social media info (Brown). This led to calls to #FireGinaCarano in February 2021 which may have contributed to Lucasfilm's decision to fire her. All of this is conveniently left out by Cruz when framing her firing as motivated by her "making *Star Wars* fun again".

Her firing garnered her much sympathy, particularly by right-wing figures worried about a perceived rise of "cancel culture". As *Google Trends* suggests, the term rose to particular prominence in 2020 and 2021 as a new flashpoint in the "culture war" narrative. This resulted in the conservative network *Daily Wire* hiring her specifically as a symbol of retaliating against cancel culture. This move was framed by spokesperson Ben Shapiro in *Star Wars* fan vernacular as "[showing] Hollywood that if they want to keep cancelling those who think differently, they'll just be helping [conservatives] build the X-wing to take down their Death Star" (Pearce).

The Carano case demonstrates how the pre-existing MSD continued to be re-shaped and merged with new issues that were arising. This aligns with a shift away from (anti-) feminism as a central political conflict of the 2010s to the conflicts of the 2020s that were all well-embodied by Carano: Rising tensions over trans rights (Hummel Mota), over free speech, over how to handle the pandemic and the rise of extreme Democrat-Republican polarization. This polarization was accompanied by conspiracy theories about the US government such as the QAnon conspiracy theory which is directed against "Democrats, liberals, progressives, and

leftists by claiming prominent members of these groups engage in a global [child] trafficking ring” (Reinhard et al. 1154). Those believing in it “came to view themselves as an ‘army’ of ‘True Patriots’ who wage war on the so-called liberal ‘Deep State.’” (1154), often incorporating events such as the pandemic. Carano is similarly connecting it to a ruse by Democrats to “blindfold” the public to “what’s really going on” – a vague statement that may allude to her sharing QAnon beliefs or can be read as supportive by those who believe. She also alluded to voter fraud preventing Trump’s re-election in 2020 (@GinaCarano). While this theory was popular with QAnon believers, “Republican politicians” generally have started “using the specter of voter fraud in general and the “stolen election” in particular afterwards to introduce voting restrictions” that would particularly make voting harder for groups likely to vote Democrat (Butter, “Conspiracy Theory” 804). Thus, Carano embodied many right-wing and potentially even far-right to conspiracist views of the 2020s. This made Carano an ideal figure to rally around that aligned perfectly with contemporary socio-political disruptions. This created an interesting reversal of previous anti-fan activism against Rey towards fan activist engagement for Carano and also specifically for her character, despite her character not being associated with any of these political issues.

Rabbit Hole Events

Notably, Cruz does not just weigh in on a fan argument about who is the best female character. Rather, he ties this into the “anti-feminist super-narrative” by pointing out that Carano “was instrumental in making Star Wars fun again” and for that was cancelled, referring to the narrative of the “gates” about entertainment being destroyed to further an agenda. This framing of her cancelation as another example of politics “invading” fandom also functions as a “rabbit hole event”: A moment where seemingly niche fan conflicts become entry points into wider ideological conflicts. Such “rabbit hole events” can lead fans otherwise uninterested in politics towards engaging with far-right ideology. Veale argues that in #Gamergate the

harassment of individual women worked as “rabbit holes that spread and recirculated across social media” (53). Such events lead users to want to find out what the outcry is about. As the most prominent voices discussing issues of “Mary Sues” range from conservative to often far-right actors, such figuring out can quickly lead users to encounter further anti-feminist to “anti-woke” arguments. As this anti-wokeness is claimed to be intrinsically connected to the decline of their favorite franchises, it may attract particularly fans upset by changes to legacy franchises they previously identified with – this is most often white male fans who used to be the primary audience of sci-fi, superhero and fantasy franchises.

The fanization of political discourse in general can be considered as setting up a kind of rabbit hole: While achieving much more mainstream support than its predecessors, “Marysuegate” follows a pattern established by #Gamergate. Steve Bannon may have been one of the earliest politicians to realize the potential of harnessing online fan culture when he realized that “[y]ou can activate that army” (Snider) by appealing to gaming fans. This equally applies to broader pop cultural issues, as fans will “come in through Gamergate or whatever and then get turned onto politics and Trump” (Snider). By now, many seem to have realized the same thing and try to participate in fan discourse.

Cara Dune and the Mimicry of Feminist Fan Activism

Interestingly, in this case study, the way participation is enacted differs superficially: Early MSD has somewhat mirrored – as popular misogyny tends to do (cf. Banet-Weiser) – arguments about empowerment. The MSD often argued that overly perfect women and weak men were hurting gender equality and that those expressing concerns about Mary Sues were not sexist. The main focus remained on critiques of storytelling. However, the more recent iteration of the MSD surrounding Carano uses a form of mirroring better described as “mimicry”, where feminist or more broadly progressive arguments are not reversed, but rather copied more closely. Like other recent conservative argumentation, those supporting Carano

were using “the language that the left has deployed” (Lazere 95), thus superficially imitating feminist rhetoric for the sake of “right-wing propaganda” (96). This has been observed in alt-right discourses as well, such as white supremacists “mimic[king] left-oriented discourses on the value of diversity [to] retool[] them for racist purposes” (Gallaher).

Initially, several reactionary fans were apprehensive about her before her debut and worried that she would be a “woke” Mary Sue (cf. for example Jarbo), but her role on the show was mostly uncontroversial. However, Dune mainly rose in popularity after Carano was fired. After this, “strong female characters” such as Dune became something lauded by her supporters — even highly influential ones like Ted Cruz. Notably, his post on Twitter created high engagement with over 56.000 likes and over 16.000 retweets, suggesting strong resonance with his followers, the success of this new rhetorical strategy. This post is particularly interesting because he does not address free speech or cancel culture – issues associated with Carano defenses – but focuses particularly on the role of women in the *Star Wars* universe, thus using his public platform to participate in what is primarily fan discourse. He mimics feminist arguments by contrasting Dune with previous female characters who were merely princesses and victims, most likely referring to princess Leia and Padmé respectively – a comparison also done by many feminist reviews of *TFA* as discussed in 2.1.

Progressive fan activism has long mobilized around fictional characters to advocate for improved representation of women, LGBTQ identities, and people of color (Navar-Gill & Stanfill) – demands to remove an actress for her views like Carano being a more unusual development. By contrast, Carano’s defenders appropriated this framework not to advance inclusivity, but to position Carano as both a symbol of embattled free speech and the “right kind” of female role model. This is – unlike previous fan activism – unrelated to her actual character who does not particularly fit conservative ideals of womanhood: Cara Dune is a muscular bounty hunter with a minor role in *The Mandalorian*, a show otherwise focused

predominantly on a father-son-relationship. This case demonstrates a certain flexibility of the MSD. Right-wing figures shifted from positioning “strong female character” as a negative attribute in regard to Rey as well as other characters perceived as “Mary Sues”, such as Captain Marvel who in 2019 was often “described [...] as [a] strong female character in the most negative sense” (Budířská 53), to it being a desirable trait that fans should not be deprived of.

Dissolving the Fandom-Politics-Boundary?

The Carano case suggests several trends to the evolution of anti-fan activist discourses such as the MSD. It is notable not just for the many political issues it touches on, far beyond feminism, but also for the lack of pretenses that it is an apolitical discussion about “good writing”, with a turn towards more explicit political activism. Interestingly, this “anti-cancel culture” and “pro-female role models” centered activism was still frequently portrayed as apolitical. Many tweets for example are similar in tone to a petition with its over 90k signatures (“Rehire”) that asks Disney to “just leave politics out of the industry” and consider how “The Mandalorian wouldn’t be the same” without Carano’s portrayal of Dune. Despite articles and interviews on her firing focusing much on the importance of “free speech” and her “uncanceling” being important for standing up for “free speech” (e.g. R. Smith), the social media campaign focuses strongly on her character and on the argument that politics should not influence entertainment at all. Many posts in support of Carano also used the hashtag #WeLoveCaraDune at the same time, blurring the lines between support for the actress and the character. By conflating actress and character and emphasizing the irrelevance of her political views, these users do not have to endorse the actress’ controversial statements and even frame the reinstatement of Carano as something in the interest of feminists by highlighting her importance as a “strong female character”.

While earlier MSD discourses cloaked its anti-feminism in arguments about “good writing,” the Carano case more openly fused fan discourse with political concerns, even as it

continued to present itself as apolitical. This shift proved effective: unlike earlier debates about Mary Sues, which rarely generated large-scale support, the Carano controversy drew in far greater engagement, from mainstream political figures to social media users with thousands of likes. Many Carano-related tweets had likes in the 1.000s range, demonstrating much more engagement with this topic – although still often by those mocking the hashtags. However, unlike with the previous backlashes detailed, there were notably also posts with thousands of likes in actual support of Carano. All of this suggests that using fan discourse to promote right-wing political ideology has developed into an attractive platform between 2015 and 2021 (and onwards).

“Dropping the veil”, so to say, on the ideology behind the argument may make such fan discourse an even better rabbit hole and more spreadable to wider audiences: On the one hand, explicitly linking the fan conflict with “culture war” issues (such as cancel culture) makes it increasingly difficult to engage with pop culture online without encountering potential rabbit holes to predominantly the ideas of the far-right actors. On the other hand, explicitly addressing issues from both fan discourse and wider political conflict makes the post available to share or refute for fan and non-fan audiences (who may have otherwise missed the political message that was only implicit in early MSD) alike, thus giving it even higher visibility.

In the introduction I highlighted the importance of affinity spaces to informal learning and community-building in fandom. However, this MSD case study also demonstrates the growing significance of “aversion spaces” where people come together not in their shared affinity but in their shared aversion towards perceived political agendas in pop culture. Particularly right-wing figures and media outlets have used fanization to appeal to the demographic of anti-fans to gain high visibility for their ideology from the interplay of outrage, magnification mechanisms, and platform affordances. By using the narrative of having to “save” *Star Wars* from feminism and “political correctness” (such as embodied by

“cancel culture”), they can draw fans onto their side of ideological debates. In doing so, they potentially create pathways by which anti-fandom engagement can serve as a gateway to broader far-right ideological content across *YouTube*, *Twitter / X*, and alternative media ecosystems, inviting anti-fans to consider other content these prominent voices have to offer. In this sense, much like Bannon envisioned, anti-fans may “come in through Marysuegate and then get turned onto politics.” – and this time, this rhetorical strategy seems to have broken through the margins of online subcultures into the mainstream.

Chapter 3:

Star Wars* Is (Not) Political – The Fan-Populist Style of (Reactionary) Media Analysis Essays on *YouTube

“Which Power Ranger are you?”

Take this quirky quiz

Obama sent the immigrants to vaccinate your kids”

- Bo Burnham in “Welcome to the Internet”

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, fan conflicts arise when textual dissatisfaction aligns with fan-cultural and sociopolitical disruptions, making the text an ideal projection space for proxy debates. These have increasingly been instrumentalized for political discourse by political figures publicly engaging with the fan conflict which I have described as fanization. For the previous chapter, I focused on a broad overview of the topic and the question of who becomes involved in the fan conflict and how it is amplified through different participants and media platforms, but not yet on the way fan conflicts work on a closer rhetorical level – how can fan conflicts be used to engage in ideological conflicts, particularly for right-wing radicalization? At the same time, my thematic focus was more narrowly on anti-feminism – yet as Mamié et al. discuss, anti-feminism is often the first step in a radicalization towards right-wing extremism and as the Carano case study shows, the discourse about “strong female characters” later encompassed a variety of other political topics deemed “woke” as well. Thus, my focus is now on broader issues of “anti-wokeness” negotiated in anti/fan activist videos on *YouTube*.

The line of Bo Burnham’s song cited above perfectly encapsulates the subtle way in which polarizing issues may become connected in fans’ minds on the Internet: Just as the lines about engaging with a pop culture fandom appear close to the seemingly unrelated line about vaccine conspiracy theories, so may videos about *Star Wars* suddenly be followed up by discussions of right-wing conspiracy theories. One moment you may nod along to a critical dissection of *Star Wars*: Yes, the sequel trilogy didn’t work because “each movie was written without the input or knowledge of the next director” (EndymionTv, “How Woke” 10:43-10:47) and so they are “completely different tone wise” (10:49-10:51). That makes sense... The video goes on: “The company is currently in the toilet” (10:59-11:02). You may not be sure how so, but it must be true, after all the latest movie wasn’t that great and the YouTuber in question has seen a “leaked shareholders” (11:08-11:09) meeting. They are worried about the stocks falling. Of course, everything is bad because Disney is “pushing content meant to groom children” (11:12-11:15) *Oh*. Suddenly there’s a clear allusion to a popular far-right conspiracy theory often pushed by supporters of the QAnon conspiracy theory that links LGBTQ support with pedophilia and human trafficking (Peterka-Benton et al.).

As I discussed in chapter 2, particularly right-wing participants profit from and contribute to the fan conflict, so this is not a surprise. The examples I discussed often worked in allusions and “dogwhistles”, i.e. terms only recognizable for those who may share a similar ideology but offering “plausible deniability that [the writer] violated any social norms” (Drakulich et al. 372). Such an approach avoids voicing the ideology underlying the criticism about the fan object in question, instead focusing on proxy discussions such as “badly written female characters”. Due to their only implicit statement of values, such works might be even more successful at interpellating fans into more extremist right-wing ideology than if such a stance had been voiced outright. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, this is aided by the fan-populist style of reactionary fans used when voicing such arguments on *YouTube*.

At the same time, such veiled right-wing fan discourse is far from niche: In 2023, it had gained enough visibility that long-running satirical cartoon *South Park* dedicated a whole episode to *Star Wars* fans and their theory that “all Disney movies suck now” (Parker) because Lucasfilm president Kennedy presumably wants to “put a chick in it and make her lame and gay” (Parker). While the anti-LGBTQ tone of the show is more moderate and not leaning into conspiracy theorizing in the way the example by EndymionTv did, it is nevertheless impressive that echoes of fan discourse that originated with the MSD have made it into a popular mainstream TV show. Dedicating a whole special episode to it assumes that enough of its viewers may be familiar with it to understand and appreciate the jokes. Such highly visible discourse raises the question: How exactly are reactionary and anti-feminist to sometimes even far-right and conspiracy theorist sentiments shared in fan discourse?

In this chapter, I propose that reactionary fandom in its anti/fan activism uses a right-leaning fan-populist style in its video essays on *Star Wars*. This demonstrates a sharp contrast between anti-fan activism and fan activism with the right-leaning anti-fans predominantly framing their commentary as apolitical and text-focused activism while left-leaning fan activists clearly frame their video essays as a politically motivated activist intervention. I identify the ways in which what I have termed a fan-populist style is enacted that specifically draws from fan identity — both as a source of authenticity and locus of crisis. Drawing on the concept of science-related populism (Mede and Schäfer), I thus illustrate the workings of “fan populism” as a rhetorical strategy which constructs antagonism between the “true fans” and the “corporate elite” as well as a constant “state of crisis” for the fan object which requires fans to re-establish a “heartland”.

This chapter is based on a case study of selected YouTubers and videos on *Star Wars* released between December 2015 and January 2024. The main research was completed between July 2021 and February 2023 and consisted of using the search function to find 1)

popular videos discussing *Star Wars* generally as well as specific recent installments (such as continued discussions of *The Last Jedi* and *The Rise of Skywalker* or new Disney+ shows such as *The Mandalorian*) as well as 2) finding popular videos which addressed *Star Wars* in combination with keywords from chapter 2 such as “Mary Sue”, “feminism”, or “woke” as well as 3) scanning the content of YouTubers known for political media commentary (from chapter 2 as well as secondary literature) for videos addressing *Star Wars*.

For each targeted search I listed videos sorted by number of views and analyzed the thumbnail, title and short description for themes with a cut-off point of the 100th result in order to understand common topics in *Star Wars* fan discourse on *YouTube*. I skimmed videos in which the title and topic didn’t make it clear whether the video fit the “fan activist” and “anti fan activist” framework. Videos which, for example, did not argue for changes to the text or society but just discussed aspects the creator liked and aspects they disliked were discarded. This process also resulted in notes on a few central channels re-occurring in my results due to large amounts of content created which frequently associated their reviews with political issues. For each relevant channel identified, I focused on the thumbnails and titles of their 50 most recent videos to get a feeling for what franchises and issues they focus on and trends in their presentation style. After scanning their content, I chose to focus on six (two fan activist, four anti-fan activist) main content creators I will present later in this chapter. Based on both processes I selected 105 videos for download and closer analysis of their script and presentation. As many videos were very similar, only the ones which featured most of the relevant key themes arising from the close reading or which were particularly clear examples of these key themes were used for this chapter.

In order to understand the mainstream reach of the arguments put forward by reactionary anti-fan activist YouTubers, in 3.1 I first analyze the most recent episode of *South Park* and how it echoes fan discourse, as exemplified by one of my case study creators. In 3.2

I set up relevant definitions and concepts for understanding the video essay genre, political content creator communities on *YouTube*, and my fan populism framework. Then in 3.3 I first present the ways leftist and reactionary fan activist creators on *YouTube* use the video essay format to discuss and politicize *Star Wars*, using Jessie Gender’s reading of *Andor* as an anti-fascist text as an example. This example I then contrast to the self-presentation of my four selected reactionary YouTubers, Jordan, Buechler, Hambly, and EndymionTv to illustrate how their political ideology is more implicit and framed as “objectivity” and “rationality”. 3.4. will then demonstrate how the latter creators present themselves as “the fans”, an analogy to “the people” in populism, in contrast to the corrupted “corporate elite” represented by Kennedy who is the target of the anti-fan activism. I focus particularly on their performances of “authenticity” and “bad manners” through visual and oral presentation style. Furthermore, in 3.5 I argue that their videos uphold a constructed state of crisis combined with a wish for a return to the “heartland” of Lucas-led *Star Wars*. In 3.6 I reflect on potential consequences of this fan discourse, particularly how it can encourage radicalization towards the far-right.

3.1: When Fan Backlashes Go Mainstream: From *YouTube* to *South Park*: Joining the Panderverse

Fan discourse about whether *Star Wars* is “currently in the toilet” — as EndymionTv had suggested (“How Woke” 10:59-11:02)— and what the reasons for this may be, seem like a trivial squabble between a handful of YouTubers. These accounts may have a large enough audience to make a living, yet compared to the over 330 million people living in the US alone, an audience of one million views for some of the most successful videos seems laughably small. However, these users are of course merely representative of larger discourses that can be found on several social media platforms and in several fandoms. My case study is thus likely generalizable to wider trends which are not limited to the *Star Wars* fandom.

South Park

That these discourses resonate widely enough that mainstream audiences may enjoy seeing them ridiculed is best emphasized by *South Park: Joining The Panderverse*: A special 48-minute long episode of the long-running satirical cartoon show that aired on October 27, 2023. This episode illustrates many particularly salient arguments that I will address in this chapter that have been put forth by reactionary YouTubers engaged in anti-fan activism, i.e. YouTubers who are opposed to progressive social changes as well as to modern *Star Wars* installments which they see as heavily influenced by such changes.

The *South Park* episode in question deals with one of the four main characters, Cartman, first dreaming of and then being transported to a parallel universe in which all *South Park* characters are “diverse women”, meaning women of Color. Depicting a world full of people of Color as someone’s worst nightmare and equating “diversity” to casting people of Color in formerly white roles is undoubtedly racist and even echoes white supremacist fears of a “Great Replacement”, i.e. the “systemic conspiracy theory, where white Europeans are supposedly being replaced by immigrants from non-European countries through the actions of politicians and power elites” (Ekman 1130).

Nevertheless, the episode does not simply rehash alt-right talking points from white supremacist fans, but rather echoes a common narrative among reactionary YouTubers that Disney is purposefully inserting “diversity” into all of their properties, thus displacing straight white men from where they belong. Cartman experiences this first-hand when he switches places with the alternate universe-Cartman, a Black woman. In typical *South Park*-fashion the episode side-steps taking a clear position on diverse casts as the show typically tends to avoid any “conclusive ideological meaning” (Frim 166). Rather, it frames the story through the lens of Cartman, a character known for displaying racist behavior and often in need of learning a lesson as he “is usually portrayed as an ardent conservative and as the show’s least sympathetic

character” (161). Thus, the episode remains somewhat ambiguous on how much the “woke agenda” of “forced diversity” is a “real” phenomenon and how much it only exists in the mind of “toxic fans” like Cartman. Still, the episode putting forth such arguments from fan discourse was seen as a validation to some users regularly voicing them. Additionally, it lends these arguments further visibility. This is, as discussed in chapter 2, an important resource in contemporary political struggles.

The episode also addresses a popular narrative about where to place the blame for such developments, which is with Lucasfilm president Kathleen Kennedy and her “personal agenda”: Eventually, only by working together with Kathleen Kennedy who has been replaced with an evil version from another alternate universe can Cartman and Kennedy save the multiverses. This episode summarizes many arguments commonly seen on reactionary *YouTube* channels: Disney is ruled by a dictator-like Kathleen Kennedy who wants everything fans like Cartman love to be replaced with “diverse women” who “complain about the patriarchy” (Parker) and also to “make it gay and lame” (Parker) which resulted in Disney’s financial ruin as the stocks keep falling (Parker) — a complaint reminiscent of EndymionTV’s description of enraged shareholders.

However, later on the episode reveals a more sympathetic version of Kennedy, thus potentially implying that theories about an “evil Kathleen Kennedy” are wrong. The “true” Kennedy had only wanted to create entertainment that everyone will love (Parker) but after getting hate mail, she felt the need to double down on her “pandering” and became in her own words “lazy” and “reckless” (Parker), thus causing the company harm. Although it is worth mentioning that even in this version, “good” Kennedy is still motivated by wanting to “bring about social change”, so an echo of the theory that movie making in contemporary Hollywood is “agenda driven” still remains, even in the more sympathetic portrayal of Kennedy. Indeed, many of the channels I analyzed have felt validated by this representation in mainstream media,

with Buechler for example praising how it shows “things that have gone wrong in the entertainment industry and trying to describe how the situation came about” (“South Park” 16:36-16:41) that all the “projects keep flopping over the last years” (17:15-17:17). He considers this a great development as now an open “conversation about all the pandering in Hollywood” (18:35-18:38) can be had.

Eventually, Cartman learns his lesson that writing hate-mail is bad, as he single-handedly drove Kennedy to more extreme “pandering” with 10 000s of messages sent. In this resolution typical for *South Park*, the episode avoids addressing systemic issues and rather falsely places the blame on a handful of individuals. This is to some degree an accurate portrayal, as it is likely that as in many polarized discourses, a few prolific voices may make the amount of “toxic” fans in a given fandom appear larger than it is. The YouTubers in this chapter alone, as I will discuss later, produce a large percentage of reactionary fan discourse by creating content several times a week. On the other hand, it separates the Kennedy haters for “rational reasons”, as many of the YouTubers I will analyze consider themselves, from the toxic fans who write hate-mail instead of merely creating *YouTube* commentary about hoping for Kennedy’s immediate job loss as my case studies do. This thus absolves other reactionary critics from being addressed by the episode, as it suggests the problem in this fan conflict lies solely with the few “bad apples” of the fandom, such as Cartman. Consequently, despite broadcasting this fan conflict to a massive audience, the episode ultimately suggests this to be merely the squabbling of a few trivial and particularly hateful fans – not part of a broader trend of engaging with pop culture that may even encourage political radicalization.

Overall, the episode suggests that Disney should return to creating original content instead of “rehashing stories” with a more diverse cast that merely looks different but re-cycles the same characters and stories. This seems to tie into a form of inoffensive consensus criticism. This message is not only voiced by Kennedy in her final epiphany, but also illustrated

structurally by the episode's multiverse plot itself: While the characters from the alternate *South Park* may look different and occasionally mention their hatred of the patriarchy, they still have the same personalities: Black woman Cartman for example is still a self-serving inconsiderate person who makes rude remarks about Kyle's mother which is underlined by Kyle expressing: "This is Cartman for sure!" (Parker). The same plot about a practical fart joke and Kenny having a crush on a classmate also play out in both universes in the same manner with the episode even ending on replaying the running gag of Kenny being killed in absurd ways in the "woke", i.e. overly politically progressive, alternate universe. These parallels strongly imply that "woke" shows do not have any original ideas but merely dress up the same content in superficial "diversity", in line with the "social justice reboot" interpretation of *TFA* discussed in chapter 2.

While this may seem a reasonable demand that fans from all over the political spectrum can agree on, it is somewhat surprising that the episode focuses very much on Kennedy who is only responsible for *Star Wars*, not Disney more broadly. Disney has indeed retold almost identical stories in their real-life remakes with only slight "diversity" changes, such as gay LeFou in *The Beauty and the Beast* (Sharf, "Josh Gad") or Black Ariel in *The Little Mermaid* (Bero). On the other hand, many characters in the *Star Wars* universe that have received intense backlash for perceived pandering have been part of unique stories, such as *TFA*'s Finn (Blistein), *TLJ*'s Rose Tico (CBS/AP) or Reva from *Obi-Wan Kenobi* (Sharf, "Star Wars") — notably all played by people of Color. The seemingly valid consensus criticism (cf. 2.5) that many might agree upon offered by the episode thus ultimately does not align with its narrative of Kennedy replacing everyone with diverse gay women of Color — just as is often the case in the fan discourse the episode borrows from. As discussed in chapter 2, the idea of "gay" characters being placed in everything (see also Jones in 2.5) is a projection that is based in anti-

fans' fears about attacks on masculinity but not in the source text, with no main characters in any of the discussed *Star Wars* productions being LGBTQ.

YouTube

In many ways, this episode is similar to Jordan's video "Kathleen Kennedy 'Saves' Star Wars (Again)" uploaded in 2020. This video is just one of many of its kind by various channels on *YouTube* critical of the new *Star Wars* installments who regularly upload their criticism and intertwine it with advocacy for their reactionary views. YouTuber Jordan, aka The Critical Drinker, in this video as well tells a story about the life and works of Kathleen Kennedy, as he invites his viewers to "gather round" and listen to "a tale" (00:00-00:03). Using this framing as a storyteller allows him to distance himself from providing factual support for his depiction of Kennedy as an opportunist who rose through the ranks by leeching off men more famous and skilled than herself in her pursuit of power to distribute her message. She befriends a producer who "rises to become one of the most successful and sought-after directors in the world" (00:36-00:41) — a description fans will easily recognize as referring to George Lucas, creator of *Star Wars*. He goes on to describe the narrative of Kennedy's "progressive agenda" that fueled *South Park*'s Panderverse plot, including a suspenseful description of a betrayal to emotionally engage the audience:

[George Lucas] decides to trust you (01:49-01:50) [...] but before the ink is even dry you promptly say: Fuck it! (01:58-02:02) [...] You've never particularly cared for Star Wars [...] (02:31-02:34), you see it more as a giant megaphone with which to project your own personal ideology into the world (02:49-02:56). [...] Mandating the all-new Star Wars movies will have a strong female character (02:59-03:02), [...] you hire a new story group staffed entirely by progressive activists chosen because of their ability to tick diversity

boxes rather than because of any actual skills (03:18-03:28). (“Kathleen Kennedy ‘Saves’”)

Both stories want to convince the viewer that Kennedy’s agenda is the reason modern *Star Wars* is focused on “diversity” and “promoting personal ideology” to the detriment of telling a good story (echoing the MSD from chapter 2). It is clear that such YouTubers’s narratives were ultimately familiar enough to so many fans that *South Park* considered them a topic worth covering. This suggests that Kennedy has become a prominent symbol of the perceived threat of “forced diversity” irrespective of her actual involvement. *South Park* is well-known for a “both sides are idiots” approach and has been criticized for promoting political apathy (Fathallah); consequently, it does not whole-heartedly endorse the “Kennedy’s Woke Agenda” theory. Still, given the visibility and impact of this type of fan discourse on mainstream discourse, it warrants a closer look at how such *YouTube* videos work — rhetorically and stylistically.

3.2: The Activist and Fan-Populist Styles of Video Essays as a Form of Engaging in (Reactionary and Left-Leaning) Politicized Fan Conflicts

For this chapter I have chosen to look at political *YouTube* video essays as contributions to fan discourse. At first glance, such a video essay may seem more isolated and not part of a larger discourse compared to social media posts which other fans often directly respond to. Many previous studies into fan conflicts have focused on Tweets and *Reddit* posts (e.g. on #Gamergate: Peckford; Massanari, “#Gamergate”; or Trice and Potts.). However, video essays are part of a vivid online discourse in several ways: Video essays as part of fan conflicts are created in response to creators to criticize their choices in creating a movie or show in a certain way, e.g. creating a character such as Rey (see chapter 2), as well as in response to other video essayists, political commentators, politicians, or arguments seen on social media. They can also

be put into direct dialogue with one another: Response videos that comment on other videos, often by showing large segments of source videos followed by commentary, are a common genre of *YouTube* content which may even incite harassment of those responded to (Lewis et al. 735). Opinions, be it from specific individuals or more generalized issues, may also be included by showing video footage, still images, or screenshots of news headlines and social media posts as well as merely spoken allusions.

The Video Essay

One example of this genre are the videos of Lindsay Ellis which exemplify typical elements of video essays. Lindsay Ellis with her over 1.2 million subscribers is among the more well-known video essayists, particularly within leftist communities on *YouTube* (Saarela). A video essay is at its core a video in which the creator explains their standpoint on an issue and tries to convince the audience of their argument. Lindsay Ellis for example argues in one video that the fascist ideology in *Star Wars* is hollow and that the First Order does not actually believe in anything. Coughlin describes the videographic essay as “between transformative works produced by fans as a means of critical engagement and an audiovisual genre that is meant to prompt a scholarly argument” (12), having evolved from the “traditional written essay” (12). Lindsay Ellis for example responds critically both to the sequel movies’ portrayal of the First Order under the framework of it being intended as a depiction of fascism as well as Disney’s merchandising strategy when she discusses Captain Phasma Christmas ornaments sold on *Amazon* (2:14-2:16). A picture of the ornament with voice-over-narration is contrasted to a scene from *TFA* that parallels Nazi imagery. By doing so, she among other things analyzes parallels between the aesthetic of *Star Wars*’ villains and propaganda in the Third Reich and muses on Disney’s use of fascist imagery to sell merchandise.

Given the topics of the video I just described, it may be of little surprise that media analysis in video essays often has a political and (anti-)fan-activist dimension. As Nyguen

describes it, the genre was particularly “responsible for introducing a generation to first-person commentary on all sorts of cultural and political phenomena”. When it comes to media texts, creators may often argue either for progressive or reactionary changes to existing or up-coming movies and shows. Thus, even those not searching for political content but merely looking for dissections of their favorite movies or shows by other fans may be introduced to political ideas and online communities through video essays – particularly when watching right-leaning channels. In this sub-chapter, I will highlight how left-leaning creators are explicit about their political activism and how the right-leaning creators tend to veil their position behind self-representations as neutral and rational reviewers.

Generally, a video essay is trying to convince their audience of their argument(s) about a media text, but can use different approaches to do so. Particularly leftist essays often show clear parallels to the academic essay, for example by citing both primary and secondary sources (cf. Coughlin). Ellis, for example, analyzes narratives and cinematic intertextuality in the original and sequel *Star Wars* trilogies, contextualizes her analysis by talking both about the history of fascism as well as its scholarly theorizations and criticizes capitalism and right-wing talking points, thus taking a clear left-wing stance. She shows clips from the *Star Wars* movies to support her claims and discusses scholarly works such as Umberto Eco’s 14 features of fascism. The more right-leaning video essays which I discuss later will not be as scholarly in style, although they may also use clips and summaries of the primary text.

The impact of video essays cannot easily be measured just by how many people like it or leave a comment, but it may be assumed to be a particularly powerful contribution to fan discourse. As the echoing of popular fan discourse arguments in *South Park* suggests, the reach and relevance of arguments from such video essays goes beyond the video and its direct view counts and thus we need to ask what arguments are being produced and spread in these videos.

Political Video Essays

However, video essays are far from a monolith: I argue that ideological negotiations through video essays in the *Star Wars* fandom focus on different issues and take different forms depending on whether they're discussing the franchise from a progressive or reactionary point of view. Furthermore, I argue that due to the implicit and fan-populist way they present their issues, anti-fan activist and reactionary video essays (which in these specific case studies can be used interchangeably) may be a gateway to more extreme right-wing beliefs.

Yet particularly right-wing video essays are an understudied part of fan discourse: Studies on the genre of video essays are more interested in left-leaning channels, potentially due to personal preferences for the content or because of the more interesting stylistic choices of such creators. As Nguyen points out, “[s]ome of the best-known video essay creators [...] are often associated with [...] left-leaning, long-form [...] intellectualized commentary” which often uses creative stylistic elements, such as multi-screen compositions, collaborations, or re-enactments (Coughlin).

For this chapter, I am primarily interested in “political” or “politicized” video essays on media texts. This means specifically video essays that criticize *Star Wars* on grounds of its political message or impact, such as its lack of or its perceived over-abundance of diversity of representation. Additionally, this criticism has to be central to the video essays and not merely a sidenote in videos primarily focused more on issues such as incoherent plots or CGI errors. On the other hand, there are channels focused mainly on political issues that also make use of pop culture references – either as examples to illustrate a given argument or to entertain viewers through shared “in-jokes”. However, they are not primarily concerned with media analysis. Occasionally, pop culture will even serve as the window of exploring a topic, such as in “HBO's Chernobyl & Personal Responsibility” (Thorn), but the focus of so-called LeftTube¹⁶ channels

¹⁶ LeftTube (occasionally used interchangeably with the term BreadTube) is an established term of loosely associated leftist video creators on *YouTube* (cf. Kuznetsov and Ismangil or Sylvia and Moody).

is mainly social commentary without advocating for changes to the media text — thus they are not (anti-) fan activist.

The corresponding right-leaning counterpart to LeftTube is often described as “anti-woke” *YouTube* (Hosseinmardi et al.), which may also include “red pill” content or be part of the “alt-lite” or the so called “intellectual darkweb” (Doody). Such creators range from conservative to often far right in their views and do not have a similar self-designation as LeftTube (also called BreadTube) does (Finlayson). Plenty of channels that primarily discuss political issues from a right-leaning libertarian, conservative, or extreme right perspective exist and often overlap with designations of “anti-woke”, “red pill” or “intellectual darkweb” *YouTube*. Finlayson argues that all these diverse creators fall under different aspects of “contemporary radical conservatism” (180) which are unified by their hostility to the idea of the “Social Justice Warrior” (178) whose perceived radical pursuit of “feminism and anti-racism” (178) is similar to what other authors summarize as “wokeness” (as discussed in chapter 2).

Many “anti-woke” channels have made occasional videos about *Star Wars* – such as Joe Rogan, Matt Walsh, Ben Shapiro or Jordan Peterson. However, their focus is not primarily on media commentary of pop culture franchises but on political commentary and thus not likely the first place a *Star Wars* fan turns to for criticism of the franchise. To have a category specifically for channels that combine pop culture analysis and social critique or activism in video essays of popular media texts such as *Star Wars*, I have thus, based on my analysis of different *YouTube* channels engaging with pop culture and or politics, coined the terms Left-Adjacent Video (Analysis/Essay) Tube (LVT) and Reactionary Video (Analysis/Essay) Tube (RVT).

LVT is named so due to their overlap with what is already called LeftTube, out of which I am interested in its intersection with pop culture analysis (see fig. 9). The

corresponding counterpart I have named Reactionary Video Tube (RVT) which intersects pop culture analysis with anti-woke social commentary and activist channels (e.g. the “red-pill” and manosphere communities) that are generally perceived to be right-leaning, ranging from “alt-lite” to far-right (see fig. 9). As there is a wide range of ideologies in these groups, I describe them primarily as reactionary: RVT channels are characterized by an opposition to changes in media texts that are likely the result of social progress – such as more women or people of Color in lead roles or inclusion of queer characters.

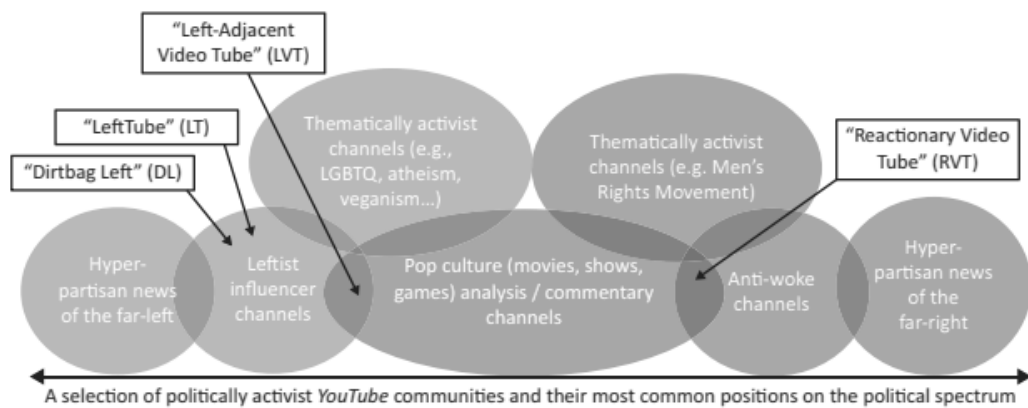


Figure 1. A selection of politically activist YouTube communities and their most common positions on the political spectrum.

Fig. 9. Illustration of different political YouTube communities (Wurst, “Bread”)¹⁷

While my main interest in the following chapter is RVT and its fan-populist style, I will also analyze an example from LVT to contrast the distinctions between these types of channels. It has already been shown that video essays about social issues rather than pop culture commentary (Wurst, “Bread”) and response videos focused on social issues (Lewis et al.) follow different strategies depending on whether they lean left or right. One may assume that given the shared affordances of the platform, they may gravitate towards similar strategies but that is not the case as my comparison of LVT and RVT will confirm.

Fan Populism

¹⁷ This graphic was first published in an article on non-fan activist political YouTubers who engage with popular culture which arose out of this case study.

A main differentiating aspect consists in RVT videos employing what I consider an example of “fan populism” which can be found across a variety of fandoms beyond *Star Wars*. Fan populists consider, analogous to traditional populists, popular culture “to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 6), the “true fans” and the “corrupt corporates”, which are fannish substitutes for the “pure people” and “corrupt elite” (6). For this I borrow from Mede and Schäfer’s concept of “science-related populism” which targets not politicians but rather the “(allegedly) unvirtuous academic elite” (474) which transfers well to the narrative against the “Hollywood elite” of Kennedy and Disney described in the introduction. Many videos in this case study express the demand that Disney should create what the “true fans” want to see, in line with populists who “argue [] that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 6). Besides reference to the ideational approach put forth by Mudde and Kaltwasser, for the concept of fan populism I draw on Taggart’s concept of the “heartland” (*Populism* 95-98) which Mede and Schäfer identify as a central element of science-related populism: Fans similarly long for a “once-existent ideal state of” (Mede and Schäfer 476) not society, but rather fandom, and “call for (re)establishment of the heartland” (476) – by wanting to return to the dominance of white men of the original trilogy as well as the leadership of George Lucas in this case study.

Additionally, given the audiovisual format and YouTubers as the typical prosumer who not only consumes but also produces content (Moffitt, *The Global* ch.5), it is useful to look at RVT through the lens of the populist style: The YouTubers make use of “bad manners” (Moffitt, “Taking” 7), they present themselves as being part of the common fans (people) treated unfairly by the elite (movie and TV show producers or politicians with an “agenda”) (7) and they elicit the idea of a world or at least several franchises in crisis (7). Moffitt himself suggests that, so far, the “visual politics of populism” remain an “under-researched avenue” (7). This framework

has, for example, previously been used to discuss political memes (e.g. Morger) as well as more social-issue- than pop culture-focused political video essays (e.g. Wurst, “Bread”). Consequently, it can highlight how RVT content creators enact their political views even when the focus of the video is on a more trivial topic that seems removed from the political discursive sphere such as *Star Wars* commentary and which thus offers less concrete evidence of their political ideologies than a politician’s speech would. RVT creators’ style explains how they gain a large following despite their content frequently focused on negativity.

3.3: “Art Must Inspire Us” VS. “Objectively, This Is Bad Storytelling”: LVT- and RVT- Self-Presentation as (A)political Channels

The Fan-Activist Style of LVT

A notable difference between LVT and RVT channels is whether they self-identify as political channels with LVT often presenting explicitly as activist and RVT as apolitical. One LVT YouTuber engaging with popular sci fi media is Jessie Earl of the channel Jessie Gender who prominently highlights her activist intentions: The channel description acknowledges her looking for “nuance in the nerdy” and focusing “on issues facing the LGBTQ community, transgender specific community, women, nonbinary and autistic folks as well as other social and political issues through and within geek topics, with an eye to the most vulnerable” (Earl, *YouTube*).

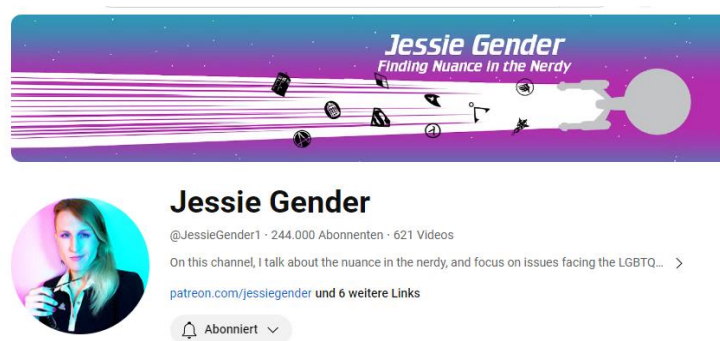


Fig. 10. Self-presentation of Jessie Gender (Earl) with trans flag colors in her channel’s banner and her profile picture

Additionally, the username includes “gender” and the — as of now — profile picture is draped in the colors of the trans flag (fig. 10). Her channel mainly discusses *Star Trek* but also other sci fi topics as well as occasionally also social issues, such as her experiences growing up and living as a transgender woman in the US. Coughlin describes her work as an “example of a transformative work, reflecting how the practices encouraged within fandom prompt fans to critically engage with a specific fan text” (12).

When she discusses *Star Wars*, she focuses on notably leftist issues such as the problems with capitalism (“Baby Yoda”), depictions of fascism and revolution in the *Star Wars* series *Andor* on Disney+ as well as the three trilogies (“The Revolutionary Spirit”, “The Decaying Monomyth”), or the question of sexism and Mary Sues (see also chapter 2; “What is a Mary Sue”). The titles of the videos and thumbnails clearly express the political issue in question. It is clear to viewers before they even open the video that the text will be analyzed through a specific lens. With her intention of providing “welcoming” content and focus on “joy and love for each other” (Earl, *YouTube*), it makes sense to clearly signal to viewers from potentially vulnerable groups that these videos are meant for them: They will not discourage their identity or their political ideology. As far-left ideology that advocates for radical changes towards a more equal society particularly including anti-capitalist stances is a minority view in the US (“Modest Declines”) and views on transgender acceptance is still divided in the US (Parker et al.), it makes sense that creators and videos advertise themselves in a way that makes it easy for like-minded fans to find the content.

In order to later analyze how RVT videos aim to appear apolitical and also differ stylistically, I will provide a closer analysis to demonstrate how Earl as a typical example of LVT intertwines pop culture and political activism. Notably, the video I selected for analysis is not primarily interested in diversity in representation – although it will link back to queer and other marginalized identities at the end of the video essay. “The Revolutionary Spirit of

Star Wars Andor” is a video that focuses on close analysis of the Disney+ series *Andor* in 2022. It is a spin-off of the spin-off movie *Rogue One*, which was released in 2016 and focused on a story set shortly before the original trilogy.

In the video, Earl presents herself as occupying several roles: She is first and foremost a nerd, a trait which, as she points out to her audience, they have in common, when she addresses her audience in the video with “I know if you're a nerd like me” (00:00:10-00:00:12). Beyond her own statement, her nerdiness is illustrated by the props and costumes seen throughout the video: She sits on a couch wearing and surrounded by merchandise of several “nerdy” franchises (00:05:37) or appearing in two different costumes including cosplay, a typical fan activity (Lamerichs).

At the same time, she emphasizes her role as someone of a marginalized queer group several times throughout the video. She closely links her role as a nerd and as a transgender woman, such as when she reminisces about her outfit: she bought it as “little pre-out transgender me” (Earl, “The Revolutionary” 00:02:49-00:02:50), referring to the time when she still presented herself as a man to the world but already dreamed of looking like Padmé. This is part of the introduction of the video: Before delving into her analysis of the show, she makes the position from which she will look at the show clear.

Furthermore, beyond being just a queer fan, she comes across as an expert on *Star Wars* that consumes a lot of textual and paratextual materials, as is common for “affirmational” fans, when she for example discusses a George Lucas interview about the conception of the original trilogy being “intentionally about the Guerrilla War of the Vietnam War” and Lucas intentionally modeling the Empire after the US (“George Lucas Reveals”). This dual nature of “expert/entertainer” (Coughlin 73) is also present in her videos on *Star Trek* and a typical staple of (leftist) video essays in which both “paraphernalia” and “performative elements” express an essayists fannish-ness and expertise (74).

Additionally, by drawing this parallel to real world political conflict as well as by presenting herself as someone versed in political discourses and actively engaging in them throughout the whole video, she is visibly part of a leftist community. Her progressive social stance towards the LGBTQ community as well as her frequent criticism of capitalism clearly establishes herself as left-wing with a tendency towards the more far left socialist end of the spectrum which frequently manifests in outspoken criticism of capitalism. The aim of these channels generally does not seem to be to hide the ideology shaping their reading of the texts when they use the texts as vehicles to discuss how the world should be – rather they explicitly aim to make these ideologies more accessible to their viewers. This also becomes clear in the subject matter and the references Earl uses throughout her video essay on *Andor* as well as in her final call to action. Throughout the video, she discusses real world political issues such as the Vietnam war and America’s role in it, 9/11 and the Patriot Act (cf. 00:14:00) or America being “at a turning point [of] fascism” (00:08:19) right now.

By discussing the historical context and contemporary parallels of the *Star Wars* franchise, Earl highlights how movies are not merely entertainment but just as much shaped by the world around us as they have an impact on it. In order to showcase the parallels between the Rebellion in *Star Wars* as depicted by *Andor* and our world, Earl meticulously breaks down plotlines and scenes to support her reading. As is common in video essays (Coughlin 46), the video often includes scenes with voice-over narration which points out the relevant aspects the audience should pay attention to. Her close readings of different characters add to her overall thesis that these characters provide insights into how supporters of a fascist system think and become part of a system, such as Dedra who is described as “[representing] a sort of girl boss feminism, only wishing to get ahead for herself in a system that harms others” which she is willing to do “as long as it means that she gets ahead” (“The Revolutionary” 00:54:49-00:54:56). Earl also supports these readings with well-established academic literature. To

analyze the movies and TV shows of the *Star Wars* universe, Earl for example also draws on Herman and Chomsky's concept of "Manufactured Consent" ("The Revolutionary" 00:43:47, cf. Herman and Chomsky) as a framework for her reading of one *Andor* plotline.

Much of her approach suggests that she assumes that she will most likely be "preaching to the choir", to audiences who have a certain understanding of leftist politics already. She, for example, discusses specific leftist discourses on communism and revolution and uses terms and historical references most people might not be familiar with. However, she does not explain these, thus assuming her audience is already familiar with them. Her video, for example, segues into a comparison of *Andor* with *Metropolis*, claiming that both work as a "pro Marxist critique of a capitalist world, even showcasing a worker's rebellion that seems similar to *Andor*'s prison storyline" (01:26:33-01:26:39). This primary aim of addressing her community is also supported when she follows up her description of different leftist factions by pointing out that these often "worked with and against each other" (01:01:38-01:01:40) which means that "all of our ideologies are [not] necessarily aligned" (01:01:46-01:01:49, emphasis mine). The "our" suggests this video to be by leftists for leftists. It seems clear that she primarily wants to inspire, not convert, through her video essay and she uses *Andor* to show her audience that "in true *Star Wars* fashion, [*Andor*] shows [them] the way out: That hope can be inspired by working together" (01:38:02-01:38:07) and overcome differences and that it is necessary to "use this art to inspire us to continue the fight, continue to push back" (01:51:39-01:51:44) against fascism.

Finally, she ends the video with a call to action that clearly emphasizes both her leftist political affiliations as well as the anti-fascist and pro-LGBTQ rights activist intentions behind her analysis. She switches from more neutral analysis to addressing and including her audience. First, in the later middle, she interjects that audiences can learn from *Star Wars* that "we should never let ourselves off the hook for what we have to do against fascism" (00:59:21-00:59:25). The frequent use of "we" in this section of the video implies an understanding of her and her

audience as part of a community with a shared ideology. The switch from discussing what the text is doing to what consequences for audiences arise from it illustrates the activist intention.

Eventually, in the closing section of the video, she adds current events onto her analysis. Her final call to action illustrates how video essays work not only as contributions to wider discourses but also as acts of community building and activism in a participatory culture on social media: She ends the video by addressing how “a person entered an LGBTQ nightclub Club Q in Colorado Springs, Colorado, and killed five people” (01:40:45-01:40:52) on the 19th of November 2022. This event affected her personally and added to her cathartic experience of *Andor*'s season finale. Her reading of the finale becomes heavily intertwined with her call to action, addressing viewers particularly urgently: Following her analysis of fascism depicted in the world of *Star Wars*, she urges that “no matter what you do, fascism will try to take Community from you, it will take everything” (01:47:10-01:47:18). As fascists “don't want us to have each other, they want us to be scared and alone [...] and take away our community with that fear” (01:49:09-01:49:19), but that art can “show us the way forward how to fight for each other and build community” (01:55:13-01:55:16). Her plaidoyer emphasizes a need to take action and a need for community. All in all, in LVT videos, it is not necessarily *Star Wars* that has to change but rather it should inspire audiences to change the world.

The Anti-Fan-Activist Style of RVT

What I have described above is the type of media analysis that video essays are most well-known for. However, media analysis more aligned with a right-wing perspective works differently and most importantly aims to not present itself as a political or activist work – despite heavily advocating for reactionary changes to media and society. The channels I have grouped together as RVT channels do not have a common denominator they or their fans

identify them under¹⁸. “Anti-woke” as a descriptor to such channels is generally applied by scholars rather than being a positively-connotated community identifier self-selected by fans such as BreadTube or LeftTube. Anti-woke channels are known to “not identify themselves as politically conservative, and often position themselves as nonideological or even liberal “free thinkers”, although “in practice, their positions are largely defined in opposition to progressive social justice movements, especially those concerning identity and race, as well as critiquing institutions such as academia and mainstream media for their “left-wing bias” (Hosseinmardi et al. 1). Thereby, “anti-woke” channels “typically do not explicitly endorse far-right ideologies” but are often in various ways part of “legitimizing far-right ideologies” (1).

Out of this broader group of anti-woke channels, RVT are an understudied subgroup that present themselves as media analysis channels. Despite some thematic overlap in their anti-wokeness-stance, RVT channels focus much more on media analysis than social commentary and are for this reason not commonly considered part of the “Intellectual Dark Web” (Doody), anti-feminist “red pill community” (Nagle 75) or other “anti-woke” social commentary (R. Lewis, “This Is”) genres of *YouTube* content.

The word “woke” as a pejorative term features prominently in many videos, both in titles and scripts and subsumes a variety of progressive positions, whose advocates are often pejoratively considered “social justice warriors”. As Atkins writes “[t]he term woke has largely been a cultural slang term for someone who is aware of social injustices and oppression. Right-wing media, however, has taken woke as a derogatory term for progressive policy” (321). It is frequently used synonymously with “Social Justice Warrior”, arising from alt-right discourse (Sobande et al. 1579). Nagle writes about how the alt-right considers those concerned with modern progressive politics, such as “gender fluidity and providing a safe space to explore

¹⁸ Some may consider these creators “The Fandom Menace”, a term stemming from “Comcigate” which I will discuss later on.

other concerns like mental ill-health, physical disability, race, cultural identity and ‘intersectionality’” (Nagle 62) overzealous “Social Justice Warriors” (SJW) – opposition against which unites them. These topics are similarly associated with “wokeness”.

Based on the prominence of negatively-connotated “woke” in their discourse, I consider such channels right-leaning, with evidence from their other arguments often pointing towards alt-right sympathies. This includes displays of sexism, racism, as well as anti-feminist, and anti-LGBTQ stances as well as condemnations of leftist ideology as harming modern society which I will point out later on. One may even consider the expression of such sentiments an explicit political alignment or dogwhistle, i.e. a veiled signal to others of similar political leaning – yet these channels tend to explicitly describe themselves as apolitical.

Thus, RVT channels are an example of anti-fan activism whose activism is (seemingly) focused primarily on the media text (and by extension those responsible for it such as Kennedy), not its wider social impact as in the example by Earl. Their anti-wokeness stance seemingly arises merely from trying to protect their franchise as it once was, like the reluctantly political populist. This is in line with the fact that populists generally consider what they want to be based on “common sense” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 18), not a specific political ideology. Particularly for the right-leaning populism relevant for my case studies, this works well together with the idea that “white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity are all systems that have been, at one time or another, legitimized under the claim that they are biological realities rooted in a ‘natural’ order” (Esposito 100). Consequently, particularly in the alt-right, “patterns associated with whites dominating blacks, or men dominating women, or homosexuals being regarded as pathological, are not assumed to be predicated on any ideology or political agenda, but rather constitute part of a universal structure that is apolitical” (100). This presumed natural order of things may then explain why “populists are only ‘reluctantly’ political – that unconventional populist leaders will often claim to be in politics as a temporary

measure to fix a crisis” since “[p]olitics is a degenerative activity” (Taggart, “Populism and Unpolitics” 81) that regular people just want to avoid. Similarly, RVT channels may present themselves not as advocating for something, as LVT fan-activist creators like Earl do, but rather merely exasperated by something they dislike, having to “reluctantly” discuss politics in order to protect their franchises in an act of anti-fan activism.

Based on my first preliminary research into well-known *YouTube* media analysis channels associated with the left and right, I grouped together creators that convey anti-woke themes in their videos and are being discussed together in *Reddit* threads and in LVT videos by (anti-)fans or interacting with one another on *Twitter*. Many channels featured here are considered part of “The Fandom Menace” (cf. “The Fandom Menace”), “a group of (predominantly) white men” generally considered racist and sexist who are united by their hatred of *TLJ* and new “woke” movies (Ford 109) who were often also involved in #Gamergate and Comicsgate (see chapter 2). This name was partially chosen by participants, partially attributed by others and is rather vaguely defined, hence why I am not using it. While they are considered “anti-woke”, it is contested whether only the right-wing can be “anti-woke” with some arguing that leftists can be opposed to overzealous progressive activism as well (Neiman), hence why it is not an ideal descriptor either. As these channels are more right-wing aligned and opposed to progressive social changes, often expressing the sentiment that media and society were better in the past, reactionary seems an apt descriptor, hence RVT.

Generally, RVT channels aim to present themselves as rational media analysts without a political bias shaping their media commentary and without their own identity influencing their analysis. For this chapter, I am focusing particularly on four users out of the RVT sphere which have all produced popular videos criticizing *Star Wars*, particularly in regard to perceived “woke” influences. I selected channels that are representative of different “types” of

RVT to illustrate the spectrum of users and similarity of their content. As these descriptions illustrate, none describe themselves as political or right-wing:

1) “The Critical Drinker” has about 1,9 million subscribers at the moment of writing and is thus the most successful channel out of those I have analyzed.

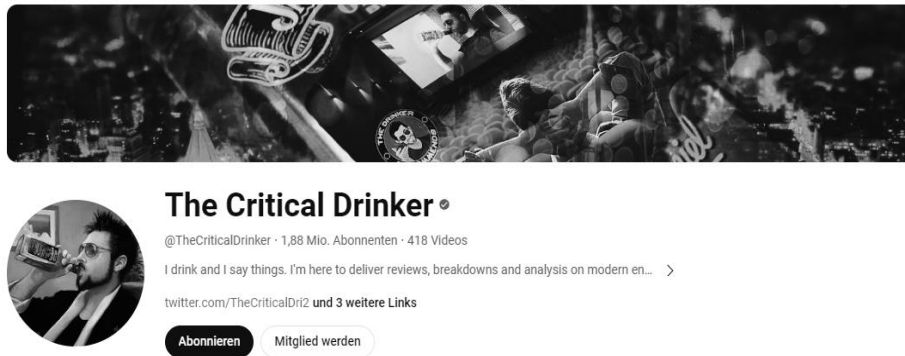


Fig. 11. Channel info of *The Critical Drinker* (Jordan)

Creator Will Jordan from Scotland describes his role in his *YouTube* info as “deliver[ing] reviews, breakdowns and analysis on modern entertainment media” with “a healthy dose of sarcasm, biting criticism and low-functioning alcoholism” (Jordan) (fig. 11).

2) The second most successful channel from this sphere is “TheQuartering”:

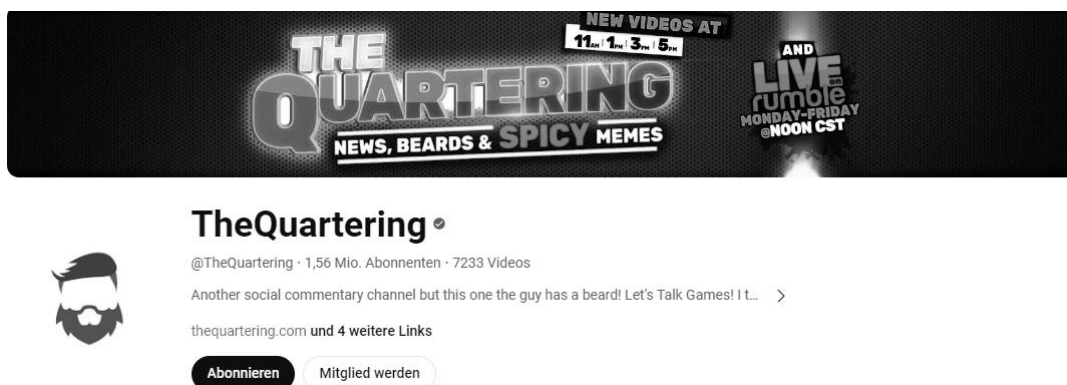


Fig. 12. Channel info of *TheQuartering* (Hambly)

Behind this channel with its almost 1,6 million subscribers is Jeremy Hambly (“The Quartering”), an American YouTuber and “guy with a beard” (fig. 12). While he describes his channel’s focus as more on “social commentary” with the aim for his audience to be “entertained & informed”, he primarily talks about “issues many of us care about in the gaming

industry, comics, and the world at large” (Hambly). Although a few videos are not focused on pop culture, most videos focus on *Disney*, *Marvel* and *Star Wars*. Out of all channels being analyzed in-depth, he is closest to being a political commentary channel and also more likely to create response videos to things said by well-known public figures such as Stephen Colbert, Tim Pool, or Elon Musk. He is, however, commonly discussed with the other RVT channels and has also discussed *Star Wars* in-depth; he is thus representative of the part of RVT that is closer to general “anti-woke” political channels.

3) The third most successful channel, Nerdrotic, has close to a million subscribers as well with over 900k.

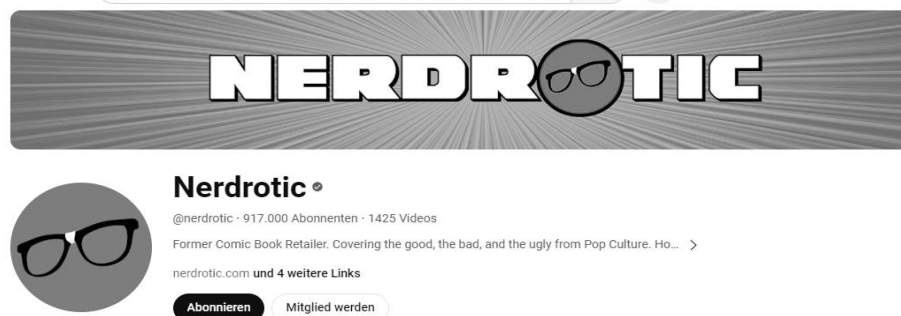


Fig. 13. Channel info of Nerdrotic (Buechler)

Gary Buechler’s (“Nerdrotic”) channel description states that he used to be a comic book retailer and uses his channel to cover “the good, the bad, and the ugly from Pop Culture” (fig. 13). His videos focus very much on typical geek culture, such as comics, sci-fi, and video games which is a big focus of the channel’s self-representation, given the name and the stereotypical “nerdy” glasses in the logo. He could thus be seen as the RVT analogue to LVT’s nerdy science-fiction analysts such as Jessie Gender.

4) EndymionTv has merely 200k subscribers, but was included as he seems very prolific and several of his videos show up when searching for controversial *Star Wars* topics on *YouTube* when sorted by relevance and view counts. He only joined *YouTube* in 2021 and thus represents the newer participants in RVT discourse.



ENDYMIONtv

@EndymionTv • 192.000 Abonnenten

A commentary channel from the mind of a cynical man. Email: EndymionYT@hotmail.com Twitter: @EndymionYT Instagram: ...

Abonnieren

Fig. 14. *EndymionTv's simplistic channel info (EndymionTv)*

His channel description simply describes himself as producing “commentary [...] from the mind of a cynical man” (EndymionTv, fig. 14), slightly similar to Jordan’s self-description of being sarcastic. The channel info is otherwise rather minimalistic. Potentially because his channel is the smallest and youngest, he is the least subtle about his dislike of everything he considers “woke” and thus often lends himself to being used as an example in the following, but I would not consider him more radical than the other channels, just more prone to “saying the quiet part out loud”.

Despite all of these creators’ videos clearly focusing on “anti-woke” content and their political affiliation likely right-leaning, as will become more apparent in the following analyses, their political stance is not part of their channels’ descriptions. While leftist channels, particularly by people of marginalized identities, make this central to their channel info and presentation, the presentation of RVT channels is seemingly neutral and thus they appear as apolitical channels, merely interested in discussing pop culture.

Performance of Objectivity

The content of the videos analyzed ranges between speculation on leaks and rumors to the analytical review. Analyses generally focus on the plot being coherent and faithful to the lore, but do not offer analyses of themes, allegories, or cultural influences which are more typical for LVT. Several of these four YouTubers for example point out “plot holes” in *Star Wars* movies and series in their analyses, thus focusing on the narrative’s quality. Plot holes are “logical inconsistencies that should normally prevent the progression of the plot” (Ryan 66), for example characters who suddenly act a certain way without the movie providing a reason for their behavior (Ryan). Buechler for example reviews *TROS* in “The Rise of

Skywalker Destroys George Lucas' Star Wars | Spoiler Review” and judges that “this film had more than plot holes, it had plot wormholes” (30:22-30:25). Similarly, Jordan in “The Rise of Skywalker, and The Fall of Star Wars (Part 2)” even breaks down the plot step by step in a 2-part video series, to criticize inconsistencies in writing and ultimately judges the movie “an absolute mess riddled with plot holes contrivance” (20:32-20:36).

Videos will regularly allude towards elements of film criticism in a somewhat mechanical understanding of film analysis. Both example videos allude to theoretical frameworks on movie structure: Buechler points out many commonly criticized problems, such as that it was a “meandering MacGuffin chase” (“The Rise” 01:23-01:25). “The term, popularized by Alfred Hitchcock, refers to an object or goal that kicks the story into action and drives it to the third act” (Windolf) – this is not explained in the video but can be recognized by viewers familiar with the term. While not naming it MacGuffin, Jordan refers to the same problem when he points out that “45 minutes into the movie and we haven’t really done anything except to replace our first objective with a different objective” (“The Rise Part Two” 00:50-00:57). With criticisms like this, the reviews appear valid, drawing from “consensus criticism” by voicing problems many in the audience saw, and partially informed by film theory. Thus, it appears they are looking at the movies through a neutral lens and are interested mainly in narrative structure and storytelling choices.

The RVT YouTubers commonly refer to this view of themselves as “objective analysts” as well, when they feel like criticisms like theirs are portrayed by Disney and news media in bad faith. For example, Hambly in his review of *TROS* “Box Office TANKS Again & Star Wars Fans Blamed! The Rise of Skywalker Mess” defends audiences reacting badly to *TROS* as well as its predecessor *TLJ*: He states that “objective film issues” (08:23, emphasis mine) such as “bad storytelling” (08:28) and “bad disrespecting Star Wars lore” (08:30-08:33) are the main reason to dislike the movies. These “are objective and non-emotional reasons to not like

the film” (08:35-08:38, emphasis mine). Yet he claims Disney sees such critics who point out “objectively bad filmmaking” (08:13-08:14, emphasis mine) as “just a troll” (12:07), i.e. someone who only wants to enrage others for fun.

Notably, in their “objective criticism” the creators regularly construct a false dichotomy between quality of writing and “diversity” or “wokeness” – a strategy common to such fan conflicts (see also chapter 2). For example, Jordan in the video analyzed in 3.1 claims Kennedy hired people based on their “ability to tick diversity boxes rather than because of any actual skill” (“Kennedy Saves” 03:23-03:28). This implies an either-or scenario where such “diverse” hires cannot possibly have “any actual skill”. A similar strategy of creating a false dichotomy or false dilemma wherein art can either be “politically correct” or “woke” or of good narrative quality, has also been used in regard to games (#GamerGate), comics (#Comicsgate) and novels (“Sad Puppies”, Kreiter), in short: In all major recent backlashes to popular culture. Kreiter, for example, writes about how in backlashes regarding science fiction novels, such as the “Puppygate” response to diversity in science fiction novels, “works of fiction [...] adding more diverse representations [...] are dismissed as focusing on “PC token characteristics”” (54) by reactionary fans. “The implied logic is that these stories are sacrificing quality narratives in favor of PC (politically correct) tokenism” (54). Additionally, the “Puppies” characteristic “discursive tactic used [is] to discredit the political opposition to [the rational] Sad Puppies as irrational, and thus illegitimate” (96) – a common implication in RVT as well, where RVT having “objective” reasons implies their opponents to be irrational and “ideology”-driven.

Claims emphasizing the importance of objectivity and rationality versus emotions are also heavily present with RVT creators and parallel the popular dichotomous idea of men as rational beings and women as emotional. Women’s affective responses towards media texts are frequently treated as almost hysterical obsession (Jenson 15) and a lesser form of engaging with media (Scott, *Fake*). Despite the clear influence of emotions on their analyses, the video

creators frequently point out their rationality and “non-emotional” reasoning. EndymionTv for example assumes that the *Star Wars* franchise is not doing well financially because “the rational thinking public is winning” (“Fans Demand” 14:14-14:16) – among which he considers himself.

While an emphasis on objectivity may make their criticisms appear more valid than ones based on emotional responses, it is not consistent with their provided commentary which often focuses on their emotions: They frequently support their claim that a show is bad based on how they could not relate to a character or were bored by them or specific shows. Hambly for example discusses how the *Star Wars* tie-in TV shows on Disney+ “do nothing for [him], it's just completely boring” (“Kathleen Kennedy Finally Fired” 05:50-05:57). Negative emotions often serve as shortcuts for explaining why a movie or TV show was bad without necessarily providing any further backup for their argument.

When further explanation is provided, the language used when describing a storyline they did not enjoy is often highly emotionally charged. For example, Buechler in his *TROS* review talks about *TLJ* “desecrating the corpse” of *Star Wars* (“The Rise” 02:56-02:57). RVT creators show a particularly strong attachment to the original trilogy and its main characters. Consequently, they often express bitterness about the fate of the original trio of Luke, Han and Leia. Jordan for example laments that Leia deserved “a glorious swang song” (“The Rise Part Two” 20:14-20:16). Buechler similarly sees “Luke's story, Princess Leia’s story, Chewbacca’s story and my favorite character in Star Wars, Han Solo [destroyed]” (“The Rise” 31:46-31:53), calling Leia’s death “the most shameful moment in this film” (20:44-20:46). The cynical tone with which he mocks the scene indicates that the character’s death did not have the gravitas that it deserved in his eyes.

The negative emotions are even expressed as feeling like the movies “hate them” for their identities as (white) men which are otherwise considered irrelevant: EndymionTv for

example discusses how he does not want to support movies, in a tangent about DC, by “someone who openly hates me without knowing anything about me” (“Fans Demand” 13:32-13:34) because of the director being perceived to “[hate] conservatives and white people” (11:46-11:48). Similarly, Jordan in his *TROS* review hands it to the movie that compared to *TLJ*, at least he didn’t feel like the movie “hated [him] because of [his] race and gender” (“The Rise Part Two” 18:03-18:05). It is apparent that the content creators’ identities as white men and the perceived rejection of white men by the franchise does significantly play into their negative evaluation of the movies. Yet, unlike the videos by marginalized creators, they distance themselves from this dimension of their analyses and do not acknowledge their positionality as relevant to their reception of the texts.

Furthermore, the analyses given often mix criticism of a show’s or movie’s structure or narrative with its perceived hostile (anti-male) message and emotionally-charged language. This is best encapsulated by EndymionTv’s video “How Woke Ideology Is Ruining Star Wars and Can It Be Saved” in which he complains that “Rey is quite literally everything wrong with modern cinema and its storytelling: She’s an ultimate no flaws space Jesus that rejected the teachings of a Jedi master only to appropriate his name and then assume his identity” (03:54-04:08). On the one hand, while calling back to the Mary Sue discourse discussed in chapter 2, he points out a narrative problem with Rey: She has no flaws. This is assumed to be self-evident, as no further explanation is given on how this is what’s “wrong with modern cinema” (03:56-03:58). On the other hand, he then seamlessly connects it to a plot point he did not like for personal reasons: “Reject[ing] the teachings of a Jedi master” (04:02-04:04) may seem a particular offense to many reactionary fans who often place great importance on adhering to the established lore – as for example pointed out by Hambly (“Box Office Tanks”). Even worse, Rey steals “[Luke’s] name and [...] his identity” (EndymionTv, “How Woke” 04:06-04:08): The charged language of “appropriation” and accusation of identity theft makes it seem like he

feels offended on behalf of fictional character Luke Skywalker. As no narrative explanation is given for why this is bad storytelling, it is easy to read the problem on an abstract level: Rey “stealing” Luke’s identity symbolizes the fear of men being replaced by women in modern entertainment and society (see chapter 2). Thus, half of this argument is based on the fact that a plot line made him feel uncomfortable as a fan and man.

Consequently, despite claims to neutrality and objectivity, the movies are often judged based on the YouTubers’ feeling like the scenes didn’t do their favorite characters justice as well as tying this into a perceived hatred of (white) men by Hollywood. Despite this, these YouTubers do not talk about what it feels like to live as a white man in the Anglophone world – unlike Earl in my earlier example who frequently addresses her identity as a transgender woman. Consequently, both LVT and RVT videos discuss pop culture in light of the creators’ identities and the emotions the works thus inspire in them, yet the white man as a traditionally unmarked category remains unacknowledged (S. Robinson 1¹⁹). As they downplay both their positionality and their use of emotional arguments, RVT creators present their works as seemingly objective and unbiased despite their own works proving these claims untrue. Nevertheless, at first glance, LVT videos appear as primarily political works while RVT videos are framed as primarily analytical “apolitical” works by their creators.

3.4: “True (Male) Fans” vs. Kathleen Kennedy, the “Disney Elite”: Authenticity, “Bad Manners” and Scapegoating in the Fan-Populist Style

Besides their self-proclaimed focus on narrative over politics, videos by RVT creators are characterized by a strong fan-populist antagonism between the “true fans” and the “corrupt elite” of Disney executives, particularly Kathleen Kennedy. I will first illustrate how these fans

¹⁹ Assuming that white masculinity is always invisible is of course, although a common perception, an oversimplification, as discussed by S. Robinson in her book.

portray themselves as the true fans of *Star Wars* and then how they create a progressive scapegoat out of Disney and Kennedy.

As EndymionTv describes the situation, “the relationship between Disney and the fans is that of an abusive one – we are all seeing the potential of something we love being squandered” (“How Woke” 00:20-00:28, emphasis mine). This – in populist fashion – makes the fans seem to be one monolithic group with right-leaning sentiments for which the RVT creators can speak. While Earl, for example, addressed specifically the leftist queer community, RVT creators often do not address a specific audience of their videos, but rather all *Star Wars* fans. They also do not acknowledge that Disney may cater to some fans, just not to them, frequently implying that all “true fans” hate Disney. Recurring language like Disney “push[ing] for woke content” (EndymionTv, “How Woke” 11:43-11:45) further implies a top-down imposition and denies the possibility that part of their audiences may want to see the type of content that is being created.

Rather than acknowledging this possibility of a pluralistic fanbase, they assume that Kennedy only cares about “getting [her] message out” (Jordan, “Kathleen Kennedy” 10:40-10:42) or that she is trying to “pander” to audiences (see my analysis of *South Park*) but does not realize that those to whom her “agenda” would appeal are not her true fan base. As Buechler for example puts it, he does not think people “have disposable income for intersectional feminism, identity politics or political correctness” (“Kathleen Kennedy Cancelled” 05:30-05:35), implying that whatever the reason for the political message focus of *Star Wars*, it will not bring Disney money because it is not what the true fans want to see. Consequently, RVT channels heavily imply that they are representative of the majority of fans that do not enjoy political correctness, i.e. they are likely conservative, yet would bring Disney money if only they were catered to. Although RVT creators rarely but occasionally substitute “the fan base” with a quantitative descriptor, they still see themselves as the majority, using descriptors such

as that there was backlash by “huge parts of the Star Wars fan base” (Jordan, “Kathleen Kennedy” 04:52-04:54, emphasis mine) or saying that Disney “shame[s] more than half of [their] fan base” (Buechler and Chan 06:31-06:33, emphasis mine). This is in line with populists generally assuming they are the “silent majority” (Mudde und Kaltwasser 11).

“True Fans”

If “the fanbase” is a monolithic group, it is one made of male “geek” fans who enjoy the original trilogy and adhere to affirmational fandom: A group with which RVT creators align themselves. Their channels mostly cover “geek” topics such as gaming, comics, sci-fi and fantasy. For example, EndymionTv started out as a videogame discussion channel before branching out into broader “wokeness” in entertainment, while Buechler used to review shows such as *Game of Thrones*, *Marvel*, *Star Trek* or *Doctor Who*. Furthermore, they regularly invoke lore as a point of criticism, i.e. how much new *Star Wars* aligns with pre-established facts about its fictional universe. This aligns these creators with “affirmational fandom”, i.e. fans that know a lot of facts about the object of their fandom, which is traditionally associated with men’s culturally privileged fandom. As Scott has observed, it is “overwhelmingly white, cisnet men who” engage in the “affirmational modes of fan engagement” who are “sanctioned by the convergence culture industry” (*Fake* ch. 5). Such fan practices “reaffirm the source material or debate elements of the text while staying firmly within the established “rules” of the fictional universe” (Obsession_inc).

Comparing LVT and RVT, both types of channels present themselves as authentic fans but appeal to different types of fan communities. Earl, for comparison, similarly demonstrates extensive knowledge about the franchise at hand, yet focuses more on how *Andor* attempts something new rather than how it references and incorporates pre-existing elements of the *Star Wars* universe. Additionally, she engages in cosplay which, while considered closer to

affirmational fandom, is nevertheless often seen as a lesser form of fandom done by women who are not “true fans” (Scott, *Fake* ch. 3).

“Low Effort” Productions

Given the different ways of performing fandom, it is of little surprise that RVT creators also create a different style of video devoid of the usual characteristics of a video essay (cf. Coughlin), such as skillful scripting, editing and academic argumentation. The way RVT channels present authentic fandom is one of several ways in which their content aligns with a fan-populist style: They present themselves as ordinary people (Mudde and Kaltwasser 10) and make use of “bad manners” (Moffitt, *The Global*). In my eyes, the emphasis on RVT creators’ “authentic” fan-ness and use of “bad manners” are intrinsically linked: Resorting to “bad manners” is one of several strategies with which RVT creators – similar to populist politicians – present themselves as authentic fans who are just like their audiences (see also the fanization strategy of politicians in chapter 2). It does not make them appear like professionals who earn their full-time living with their *YouTube* channels – even though with over 100k, often over 1 million, subscribers they likely are (Morjax). As this case study is not looking at professional politicians but at professional YouTubers in fan communities and as Moffitt concedes, what constitutes “bad manners” “may differ from one cultural context to another” (*The Global* ch. 3), I consider it “unprofessional” or “bad mannered” for content creators to present seemingly “low effort” videos despite having enough subscribers to potentially create content full-time using professional editing. Yet eschewing the appearance of “high production value” videos allows them to present themselves as authentic and down-to-earth fans.

One notable characteristic of RVT videos is that they generally do not use many of the genre conventions associated with the modern video essay genre. This includes editing techniques such as using voice-overs overlaying footage of the text in question, adding quotes to footage, combining original footage with acting out sketches or asking viewers to draw their

own conclusions from combinations of images, texts and music without telling viewers how specific elements of the video relate to one another (Coughlin). Particularly in LVT videos, juxtapositions of different visuals or sketches may be added on purpose to enhance the message of a video (Coughlin). RVT channels tend to either focus on the respective content creator speaking into the camera or showing footage with disembodied voices. If the Youtuber is seen, they are often surrounded by memorabilia which emphasize their authenticity as an affirmational fan. This can for example be seen with Buechler in fig. 15. Edits are usually restricted to showing relevant footage. However, as footage is edited to fit what is being said and often taken from several sources and there is not merely a commentary to a run-on video or screenshot, they still fit the category of “video essayist” even if they are at the low-effort end of the spectrum.



The Rise of Skywalker Destroys George Lucas' Star Wars | Spoiler Review

Fig. 15. Buechler (Nerdrotic) in front of his large collection of figurines

Buechler, for example, can be seen in his videos as a regular guy with a microphone who comments on scenes shown in the upper corner of his video. He is neither particularly dressed up nor does he use a set or special lighting. In contrast, LVT videos are often highly elaborate productions (Coughlin 92) – for example Earl in her *Andor* video is not only wearing a costume and make-up but has put up a related background and set up blue-lighting to recreate the sense of being in a dimly-lit corridor on a spaceship.

Jordan and EndymionTv, meanwhile, rarely appear in their videos beyond their voices, representing the second approach. This further emphasizes that they are first and foremost analyzing what is in the text and not centering themselves as a person. This fits their role as being “the voice” of “the people”, speaking for the presumably “silent” (or at least “ignored by Disney”) “majority”. It also aligns with their identity, beyond being a fan, being unmarked and seemingly not of relevance. Given that RVT creators do not use elaborate editing or costuming, but rather present themselves as regular, sometimes even (almost) faceless individuals speaking their unfiltered thoughts into a camera, they intentionally invoke a sense of authenticity and align themselves with the “common people” or “common fans”.

In addition to a lack of editing and staging, RVT videos often appear unscripted or less scripted than LVT works, thus further increasing their “authentic” appearance. This can also be considered a form of “bad manners” as it suggests low effort being put into a video. RVT videos often contain pauses and hesitation markers such as “um”s while LVT videos are often highly scripted and edited (Coughlin). Repetitions and hedges regarding the information given are also common. One line that exemplifies most of this is: “what made me leave the corporate world, um, when I was... I... I forget... I was like 26 or 28... somewhere around there, just a kid” (Hambly, “Kathleen Kennedy Devastated” 11:54-12:02, emphasis mine). This more straightforward and plain presentation style aligns with their image as individuals who are not carefully considering their words as this may be seen as potentially trying to manipulate their audience. Being unscripted rather suggests they are speaking honestly and from the heart.

RVT creators’ “low effort” presentation style may be intentional or simply due to creators wanting to quickly create a large quantity of videos and not having time to write scripts or edit the audio. In any case, it may help them come across as authentic, particularly combined with their fan-populist style: It has been observed that populist politicians were regarded as more trustworthy, particularly if they “present their “honest” version of the story in a seemingly

unmediated and unfiltered way” (Enli and Rosenberg 4) on social media. On the other hand, voters considered “the performance of politicians in a highly staged setting”, such as a talk show, untrustworthy (4) – this may similarly make LVT’s elaborate styles seem untrustworthy to the audience of RVT videos.

In addition to the presentation style, RVT videos also generally eschew traditional journalistic and academic standards of supporting claims with references or literature. LVT content creators are working with theories particularly from the humanities which may appear to audiences as elitist. Populists are often skeptical of academic institutions (Mede and Schäfer 473). Given that institutionalized education and particularly the humanities are often perceived by right-wing actors as part of a brainwashing operation to disseminate “woke ideology” (Busbridge et al.), it makes sense that particularly right-leaning content creators would rather distance themselves from this sphere of academia. Additionally, populists tend to use “anecdote[s] as ‘evidence’” or even display “studied ignorance of that which does not interest [them]” (Moffitt, *The Global* ch.3). They may rather privilege “emo-truth [...] where emotion serves as inference” (Mede and Schäfer 479) and “common sense” (480) instead of relying on facts and statistics. Here again, it is not clear whether this opposition to references is intentional or the result of “low effort” as it requires less time and effort to write a video without references. In any case, it may particularly appeal to a fan-populist audience skeptical of “academic elites”.

LVT frequently and heavily refers to academic scholarship – be it by directly quoting articles or referring to well-known theories and scholars as when Earl cites Eco. In addition to this, their claims are generally supported by news articles and statistics, following an academic style. Sources are either included on screen or in the description to allow for fact-checking and further reading. Those interested in Earl’s sources will, for example, be guided to videos on J. Campbell’s monomyth, Eco’s essay “Ur-Fascism” or her background reading on *The History and Politics of Star Wars* by historian Chris Kempshall in the video’s description.

In comparison, RVT generally eschews references to academia, theoretical frameworks, statistics, or supporting sources to back up their claims. They generally invoke common knowledge, hearsay from other channels, or common sense as a basis of judgment, such as when they repeatedly discuss *Disney* and *Marvel* being in a financial crisis or Lucasfilm president Kathleen Kennedy's being fired soon (e.g. Hambly, "Kathleen Kennedy Finally Fired") despite that turning out to not be true. This fits Moffitt's observations of a preference of populists for anecdotal "evidence" and intentional ignorance as a way to align themselves with the "common people" – or, in this case, the "common fans" who are assumed to be more likely to buy a Boba Fett figurine to put into the collection on a wall behind their computer than to do extensive research before stating why a piece of media does or does not speak to them.

However, this does not mean these creators display no expertise at all. It is merely more grounded in affirmational fandom than academic tradition. Marwick and Partin argue that "the notion that populism is inherently anti-expertise" should be complicated towards "whose expertise matters and how expertise is defined" (2540). They similarly observe that "many adherents of populism are skeptical of mainstream knowledge-making institutions" (2540), particularly the far-right populists they analyzed, who find "alternative structures of expertise aligned with their own ideological commitments" (2540). RVT creators' focus is on fannish expertise which gives them credibility as "true fans". This aligns with their presentation style of often being surrounded by merchandise and with the focus of criticism often relying on discussing perceived "lore breaks".

At the same time, the distance from academic styles of analysis is also apparent in their superficial style of analysis which relies either on counting plot holes and (what they perceive

to be) incorrect lore²⁰ (see 3.3), expressing how a media text made them feel bored (see 3.3), disliking the perceived message of the plot or feeling like their favorite characters were treated unjustly. This often takes the shape of an observation followed by their interpretation without further elaboration on how they came to their conclusion — which often seems to be rooted primarily in socio-political anxieties. EndymionTv, for example, argues that *Star Wars* and Marvel are bad because they “promote [media] as starring a strong male character, only [for him] to be replaced and outdone by a woman instead” (“How Woke” 09:19-09:25), which happens in many other films and series according to him and he therefore lists further examples. Notably, all examples are of men being “replaced” by women, thus it is clearly not a criticism of general “bait and switch” tactics of writing. As no further explanation is given why this is narratively bad, it strongly implies that audiences will agree with him that women should not “outdo” men. There is also, for example, Buechler criticizing the ending of *TROS* for “robbing Luke of his entire story” (“The Rise” 29:56-30:00) by having the ending of *TROS* have Rey walk in front of the iconic two suns of Tatooine, just as Luke does in *A New Hope*. This means “she even takes Luke's sunset” (29:55) from him. This once again lacks further explanation but draws from the negative emotional reaction of this scene seemingly diminishing the impact of the original story by having another (female) character in a similar scene. Thus, such arguments also subtly draw from fears of men being replaced that is so common to online anti-feminist, “manosphere” spaces which believe that “feminism and gender ideology” are attacking “the normative notions of the strong and invulnerable men through a philosophy of softening masculinity” (Copland, “Weak Men” 118) which is “injuring men individually and as a collective” (118).

²⁰ I discuss how “lore breaks” are also seen in facts that established canon either does not contradict or even confirms in more detail in my final case study in the conclusion.

As these examples illustrate, RVT creators recognize thematic parallels between different works, but their analyses often remain limited to pointing out such similarities and frequently interpreting them to be intentionally anti-men. This can be contrasted with the breakdown of *Andor*'s plotlines by Earl I discussed in 3.3 in which for example parallels to other works are used to emphasize the pro-Marxist capitalist critique she sees in *Andor*. She argues how the narrative and visuals support this theme and how related academic concepts (such as manufactured consent) can be applied throughout the show. RVT creators instead seem to assume their audience will agree that the message such scenes as the ones outlined above are sending is bad. Thus, they do not need to explain why and how they are bad. This ties their analyses back into a populist reliance on “common sense” and opposition towards critical, theory- and supporting evidence-driven academic analysis.

Language

Besides the *YouTube*-specific “bad manners” of having more “low-effort” presenting videos without editing and sources, RVT creators also engage classic “bad manners” as outlined by Moffitt such as using rude language, swearing, and insults, as well as punching down by making ableist or fatphobic jokes, thus eschewing “politically correct” polite manners. As Moffitt explains, populists see themselves as the arbiters of “common sense” who, due to the “urgency of the matter”, resort to a “coarsening of the political rhetoric, and a disregard for ‘appropriate’ modes of acting in the political realm” (Moffitt, *The Global* ch.3). There is for example Jordan asking his audience to “take a shot with [him]” (“The Rise Part 1” 03:44-03:45) whenever he will describe something that “sounds totally incongruous or contrived or just plain dumb” (03:40-03: 44) – an allusion to drinking of the type he often makes, in line with his name and self-description as an alcoholic. The references to party-game-like alcohol consumption also add to his image as a regular man not trying to be artificially sophisticated or high-brow. Similarly, “unprofessional” for a review or media analysis, Buechler, for

example, describes *TROS* as a film that plays “out like a two hour and 20-minute trailer directed by someone addicted to Adderall who decided to take up booger sugar on the side for a hobby” (“The Rise” 01:28-01:36) – with Adderall being a typical treatment for ADHD and “booger sugar” a slang term for cocaine. Such jokes also suggest that their reviews – despite their claims to do objective media analysis – should not be taken too seriously by viewers.

RVT channels also use more swear words as well as “politically incorrect” insults. While LVT videos may also contain swear words, especially for comedic effect, it is rare and more subdued. Returning to Earl as an exemplary case study: In one instance she remarks that “this shit all costs money” (“The Revolutionary” 00:32:36-00:32:39) or praises *Andor* as “so fucking brilliant” (01:11:24), using these words for added emphasis. The RVT videos on the other hand use swear words as insults, for example when Jordan tells *TROS* to “fuck off, film!” (“The Rise Part 1” 06:10-06:12) — a display of what would typically be considered “bad mannered” speech.

Furthermore, insults are commonly connected to “punching down” at progressives, often in a way reminiscent of the alt-right. EndymionTv, for example, in a detour on Disney Park policies, imagines people to whom the change in question matters to be “obese blue-haired feminists stuffing their faces with corn dogs who think being fat is a sexual identity” (“Star Wars Plot” 11:22-11:27). He invokes several clichés at once: Feminists with blue-hair is a common stereotype of angry, man-hating, “woke” modern feminists. As defined by Urban Dictionary in 2020, blue hair usually symbolizes a “person that is typically aligned with the social justice warrior platform. Commonly a feminist” (“Blue Hair”). He furthermore links fatness to the idea of moral corruption (Grønning et al. 267) and feminism as well as “sexual identity”. “Fat queer feminist” is also a popular insult with the alt-right, with Yiannopoulos for example “regularly describ[ing] feminists as fat and [...] ‘lesbianic’” (Nagle 56). He also uses a joke common in anti-woke circles that everything is a gender or sexual identity nowadays

(Blake et al.), thus ridiculing queer identities. Such behaviors intentionally demonstrate a disregard for “political correctness”.

At the same time, it is important to note that while they do not follow the professional standards of LVT pop culture commentary, their “rudeness” is not on the same level as that of the alt-right which often does not conceal its sexism and racism. RVT creators try to distance themselves from appearing white supremacist and sexist by, for example, claiming to not hate a character because “she's black [as] fans clearly have loved and continue to love old and new characters of color, [this one] just sucks” (EndymionTv, “How Woke” 01:53-02:01). There is also pointing out their support for Gina Carano (see ch. 2) and claiming that “Kennedy hates strong independent women” (Hambly, “Kathleen Kennedy Devastated” 05:07-05:10). Thus, they strike a balance between expressing hate for “diversity”, “feminism” or “political correctness” in a “bad mannered” way but not appearing too hostile towards viewers who are not straight white men. This has similarly been observed by scholars to be common in other fan backlashes, such as against *Doctor Who* (Hills, “Toxic YouTubers” 79) or Comicsgate’s concerns with “too much diversity” in comics (Condis and Stanfill 5): By not eschewing civility completely, such anti-fan activists can construct “opposing political positions and institutions” – be it the *BBC*, Marvel or Disney – as the ones who are actually “hateful, entitled and toxic” (Hills, “Toxic YouTubers” 79).

“Corporate Elite”

RVT videos provide two types of answers for who this “hateful” enemy is: The liberal or progressive agenda and Disney, with Kathleen Kennedy often synecdochically embodying both. As Mudde and Kaltwasser describe, in populism, the “elite are defined on the basis of power” (12), such as being in leading positions in the media industry. Notably, the “elite is corrupt” (11). The elite is often portrayed vaguely so they can be “conceive[d] [...] as a cohesive, monolithic entity detached from the people but ultimately deciding over their future”

(Mede and Schäfer 476). This is a common theme in RVT videos, for example by portraying Kennedy as a corrupt and backstabbing opportunist (Jordan, “Kennedy Saves”, see also my analysis of Jordan in 3.1) with near unlimited power to decide what will be written or as a hypocrite who claims to support women but not Gina Carano who is a “courageous women that [Kennedy] silence[d]” (Hambly, “Kathleen Kennedy Devastated” 06:52-06:54). Disney is similarly characterized as “a maligned contorted mess of corrupted ideals” (EndymionTv, “How Woke” 17:30-17:32, emphasis mine). Buechler, reading out a tweet by Gina Carano, describes how they are hypocritical as they are “pushing aggressive agendas and trying to silence the people criticizing them” (“The Marvels” 01:49:46-01:49:49): Disney supposedly compares their critics to “the Empire”, the evil autocratic forces in *Star Wars*, while they themselves “are literally trying to squash the little guys, the Rebellion” (01:50:01).

Kennedy and Disney are further often conflated with feminism and progressive ideologies which are ultimately constructed as the true enemy of *Star Wars*. Kathleen Kennedy, president of Lucasfilm, symbolizes these vague concepts and gives the audience a clear target to blame. In all RVT videos, there is a suggestion that “intersectional feminism [...] or political correctness” (Buechler, “Kathleen Kennedy Cancelled” 05:30-05:35) and “woke identity politics and “The Force Is Female” marketing gimmicks” (EndymionTv, “How Woke” 17:24-17:28) will destroy *Star Wars*. This is often attributed to Kennedy’s personal “identity politics” (Jordan, “Kathleen Kennedy” 07:40-07:4) and her assumed wish to have “female centric diverse politically progressive TV show[s]” (09:13-09:17) over a focus on making good entertainment.

Kennedy is central to many video titles, thumbnails and narratives, likely as a uniting factor: Irrespective of their exact beliefs, many viewers can agree on hating Kennedy. Populists generally may not always have “primary linking characteristics beyond a shared opposition to ‘the elite’ or an associated Other” (Moffitt 99). It is often primarily this enemy figure that unites

them. Similarly, RVT's opposition to concepts associated with left-leaning politics strongly aligns RVT channels within the spectrum of right-wing ideology: It is never explained what these terms mean yet aligning them with the "corrupt elite" who pushes "woke identity politics" that does not understand or care for their fanbase, suggests that these concepts oppose the values of their "true" fans. However, just as with "anti-woke" spheres generally or the alt-right, the exact beliefs of viewers beyond what they oppose may vary.

This individual and embodied enemy figure also provides a potential solution: If Kathleen Kennedy was fired, as many videos hopefully speculate about, the franchise might be saved – despite the fact that the RVT creators often address Kennedy as merely part of a wider political agenda. Kathleen Kennedy had been president of Lucasfilm under Disney since 2012 when Disney acquired it from George Lucas (Kovach). Kennedy is a film producer who has worked closely with George Lucas in the past, having worked on several *Indiana Jones* movies alongside Spielberg and Lucas (della Cava). While she has considerable influence on the production of *Star Wars* installments, she is working under contract and had her contract extended despite the failure of *Solo: A Star Wars Story* and the backlash towards *The Last Jedi* (Kit). Her creative choices thus seem to be supported by the stakeholders at Lucasfilm and its parent company Disney. Additionally, she does not seem to follow a specific vision as there was, for example, no clear plan for the sequel trilogy, at least according to writer J.J. Abrams suggesting that they "legitimately shot *The Force Awakens* with only a rough idea of how the Skywalker trilogy would end" (Langmann) and last-minute major changes, such as Kylo Ren's redemption arc, being added late into the trilogy's production (Sharf, "Adam Driver"). All of this suggests that Kennedy is unlikely to have a masterplan which she is pushing on writers despite presumably ruining the company financially against the wishes of her superiors.

In spite of this, a common narrative in RVT videos puts the blame almost solely on Kathleen Kennedy as an obstacle to be removed. She is often depicted with burning evil red

eyes to portray her as someone intentionally evil in the thumbnails. Many videos discuss her potentially being fired as what will save the franchise. Kennedy-blaming tendencies have also been observed in other case studies, such as by M. Bay, who found “in a significant number of the tweets [regarding TLJ] analyzed, [...] fans blame Johnson, Kennedy and Disney, sometimes collectively, sometimes as individuals, for this supposed leftist/feminist turn in the *Star Wars* franchise”. This concept of a return to a supposed glorious former state being linked to Kennedy is, for example, illustrated by the aptly named “Kathleen Kennedy Finally Fired? Star Wars Saved? [...]” by Hambly. In this video from 2022, he confidently shares the false rumor that “Kathleen Kennedy is out at Lucasfilm – that is correct” (00:58- 01:02), demonstrating that stoking the drama is of higher importance than substantiated claims and that such news about a “defeat” of Kennedy are what RVT’s audience wants to hear.

This specific targeting of Kennedy has a (geek) misogynistic dimension to it. While the sequel trilogy and especially Rian Johnson’s *TLJ* have been divisive, the blame is put almost solely on Kennedy who (according to RVT) “did probably even more damage to the Star Wars franchise” (04:18-04:21) by “[dividing] the fan base at levels that you know like nothing I’ve ever seen” (04:22-04:28), not on Rian Johnson, the actual writer. EndymionTv spells out that even though Kennedy has not been fired, it is what fans “DEMAND” in “Fans DEMAND Kathleen Kennedy FIRED As Star Wars FAILS [...]”. Other creative executives often criticized in these videos, such as Disney’s Bob Iger or Marvel’s Kevin Feige, do not similarly helm the thumbnails and titles of videos on the RVT channels. At least initially, RVT creators even attributed good “fandom” to Bob Iger, CEO of Disney, while portraying Kennedy as a “fake fan” – a common insult towards female fans, especially in sci-fi and comics fandoms (cf. Scott’s appropriately titled *Fake Geek Girls*) – who “never particularly cared for Star Wars” (Jordan, “Kathleen Kennedy” 02:31-02:34). While Jordan speculates that Kennedy is merely tolerated by her boss “as long as [her ideology] doesn’t get in the way of him making truckloads

of money” (06:12-06:16), Buechler imagines a “Cold War” between Iger and Kennedy with Iger “covering for her for a long time” (“Kathleen Kennedy Cancelled” 09:24-09:32) for unknown reasons. In both cases they assume the men in the company could not possibly share her “agenda”. This fits well with a tendency of “spreadable misogyny” that can often be observed in such traditionally male-dominated “geek” fan spaces, such as the *Star Wars* fandom. Scott writes, “[misogyny] is deployed as a tactic to win the space of fan culture” (*Fake* 85) – similarly, it is particularly a woman that is considered the root of the fan conflict.

Interestingly, despite all these other differences, RVT creators share some similarities with LVT creators as they recognize Disney cares more about profit than their audience, albeit the profit motif is interpreted flexibly to fit different narratives: There are two conflicting theories as to why Disney presumably follows a woke agenda which they put forward as the cause of the franchise’s decline: On the one hand they do not know their “true fans”. They think their audience wants “woke” content and are misjudging badly that they can use progressive values as a “marketing gimmick” (EndymionTv, “How Woke” 17:28-17:29). On the other hand, they do not care about, perhaps even hate, their audience, and intentionally “focus more on social justice than financial profitability” (13:48-13:51). In some narratives, this almost accidentally earns them money. Hambly argues that *TLJ* “was poorly written, poorly executed, but you know it made money, so whatever” (“Terrible News” 10:35-10:37). This paradox between “woke” content not selling and Disney still making money is also apparent in Buechler’s complaint that “laziness, greed and corporate Hollywood politics” (emphasis mine) ruined the sequel trilogy and yet Disney “would have made more money if [they] would have shown more respect to the [...] fans” (“The Rise” 32:00-32:05): Disney is both too greedy and not focused enough on its profits. Such contradictions are not resolved but do not matter as long as Disney is corrupt in these narratives – similar to how “strong women”

could be bad or something fans want depending on the narrative needed, as discussed in chapter 2.

While LVT creators attribute dissatisfaction with capitalism to the capitalist system, RVT creators generally do not link the perceived decline in quality due to profit-orientation to any problems with the capitalist system of film production. Rather, they redirect the blame towards feminism or “wokeness” and specifically individuals such as Kennedy, offering a seemingly easy solution for a complex structural problem. Such simplifications are in line with populist rhetoric: by “simplifying issues [and] treating the political as dichotomic, [...] populism can make politics easier to grasp for those who may not have the time, patience or civic education to understand complicated policy debates” (Moffitt ch.5).

Consequently, the true (male) fans are portrayed as at odds with a company that is out of touch, both with their fans and with what makes for a good story. This idea of Hollywood being either willfully or due to ignorance out of touch with the “true” fans echoes populist beliefs of the political elite being out of touch with the majority of voters and not representing the general will of the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser 10). Hills, in his study on the *Doctor Who* backlashes, suggests that YouTubers often present themselves “as ‘punching up’ at the media company responsible as a powerful institution whilst actually ‘punching down’ at social justice fandom and feminism” (Hills, “Toxic YouTubers” 78). Additionally, portraying Disney as greedy and corrupt allows RVT creators to draw from “consensus criticism” that Disney is too focused on its profits and thus to intertwine their more radical “anti-woke” arguments with “anti-greedy executives” arguments that even left-leaning *Star Wars* fans would agree with.

3.5: “Star Wars is DEAD and Wokeness KILLED it”: Constructing A State of Crisis and Nostalgia for the Heartland

The previous subchapter analyzed the participants in this conflict, the true fans and the corrupt corporate elite Disney / Kennedy and how they are portrayed in RVT’s fan-populist style. In this next part, I am concerned with how RVT channels enact a “state of crisis” as this is a dominant theme running through almost all videos produced by these channels. While for populism generally, it is contested whether populism is connected to crises and what this term entails (Moffitt, “How to” 194), this concept works well for fan populism. Moffitt builds on early populism studies by Laclau who proposed that “populism simply cannot emerge without crisis” (191). However, he (building on Taggart) puts the focus on crisis not as an event that happened but rather on the question how “populist actors’ ability to create a sense of crisis” works (195) and how it is used to spread (in this case often far-right) political messages (195). Similarly, this subchapter is interested in how a sense of crises and breakdown is maintained both stylistically (such as through thumbnails) and rhetorically and suggests a possible motivation for this style to be rooted in intentional “rage baiting” strategies. Additionally, I focus on how the performance of crisis by RVT channels is linked to a perceived need to re-establish the heartland of the original trilogy, expressed through nostalgia for George Lucas.

Performance of Crisis

One of the most salient features that distinguishes RVT channels from LVT channels or more centrist media analysis channels which adds to the cultivated appearance of being “bad mannered”, not to be taken seriously and in a state of crisis, are the thumbnails and video titles: Many of them capitalize on fan conflicts and particularly the antagonism between fans and Disney / Kennedy:

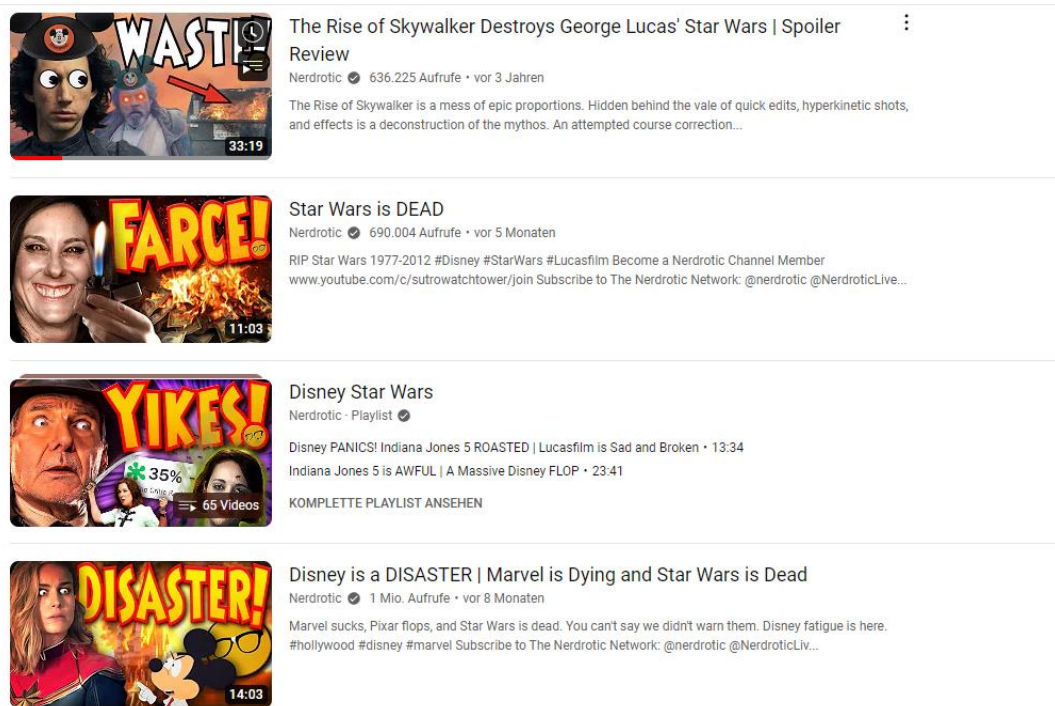


Fig. 16. Example of YouTube thumbnails by Buechler with funny faces

Buechler for example often uses funny faces for his thumbnails (fig. 16), such as editing the eyes of depicted individuals to over exaggerated expressions of shock or evilness: In the 4 thumbnails in fig. 16, there are Luke Skywalker with glowing red eyes (first video) and Kathleen Kennedy with demon-like black eyes (second video). The images also frequently feature fire; for example, in the second thumbnail of fig. 16, we can see Kennedy purposefully burning a pile of cash with a lighter. In the first thumbnail of fig. 16, we can see a literal “dumpster fire”, i.e. “something that causes a lot of harm or that is dealt with or done very badly” (“Dumpster Fire”).

These thumbnails additionally emphasize that the channels in question are not meant to be taken seriously – they are providing entertainment that is purposefully presented as exaggerated. The purposefully dramatic thumbnails and titles may thus suggest that the creators are not taking themselves all too seriously and consequently allow creators to point the finger at anyone taking their content seriously. Thus, the thumbnails make their more extreme “anti-

woke” disparagements of progressive politics appear less political: It becomes ambiguous whether they are serious or merely “trolling” (Phillips).

This is similar to how “today’s alt-right movement relies on irony, humor, and memes for recruitment and radicalization on the internet” (Greene 43). Materials designed to “troll”, i.e. “provoke a response from a target (an individual, group, or member of an organization, etc.)” in addition to “the ‘just joking’ defense of disparaging humor” (48), allows the alt-right to “not accept responsibility for any hurt they cause or for the ideological implications of their actions” (48). As Greene discusses, to “members of the alt-right, a meme may only be a joke” but “despite their producers’ stated intentions, their playful-ness, and their capacity to generate laughter, alt-right memes have a serious sociopolitical function” (42). Similarly, even if, as the thumbnails may suggest, RVT creators do not take what they say wholly seriously but are trying to “troll” or simply generate views to earn money, the introduction to or affirmation of alt-right related talking points to wider audiences can still have political consequences.

Besides the humorous and dramatic thumbnails, negatively connotated words are central to each of Buechler’s thumbnails in fig.16, highlighted in alarming, large yellow and red letters. Besides “waste”, “farce”, “yikes” and “disaster” in the screenshots provided above, “doomed”, “failure” and “ruined” are also popular choices. In addition, such “terms of disaster” are also highlighted in all caps in the video titles to catch the readers’ attention. This strategy is similarly used by other RVT channels with little variations. EndymionTv often uses red background instead of red-lined fonts and often adds short three-word phrases instead of single words (fig. 17), Hambly may use whole phrases and combine red and white fonts (fig. 18).

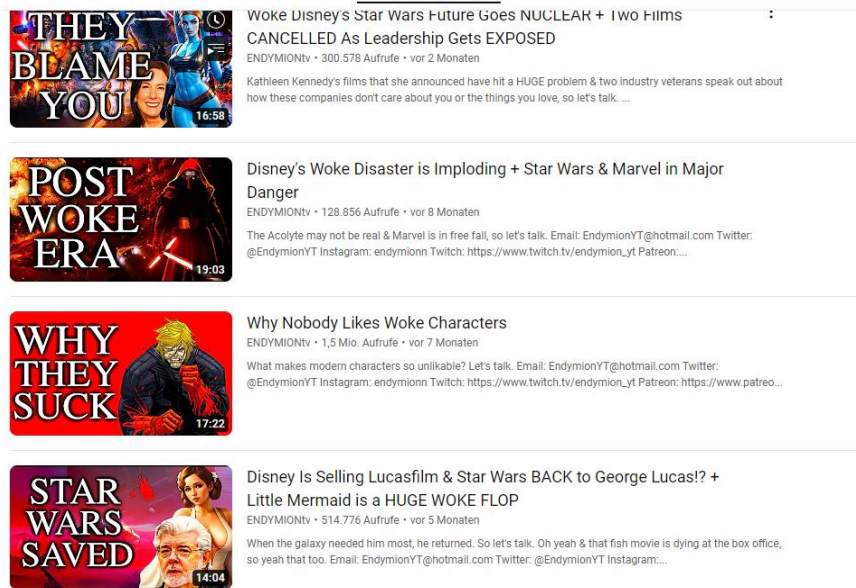


Fig. 17. Example of YouTube thumbnails by EndymionTv

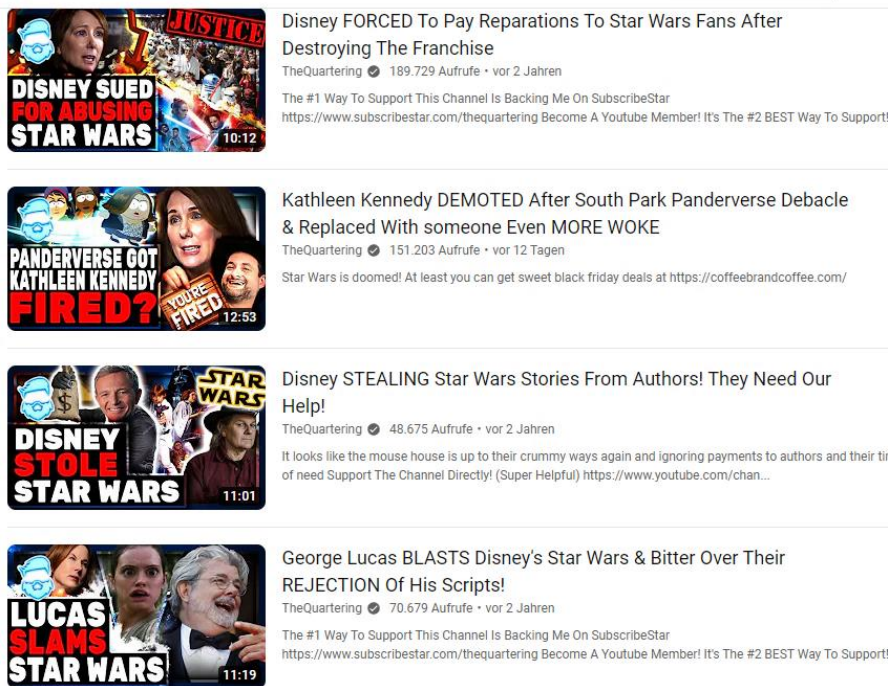


Fig. 18. Example of YouTube thumbnails by Hambly

These examples also follow the pattern of highlighting in capitalized letters negatively charged words which is very characteristic for RVT channels. Out of the selected creators, only Jordan does not follow this style – however, other RVT channels not included in this case study do (e.g. Overlord DVD, Geeks + Gamers, No Bullshit, Bounding Into Comics, Heels vs Babyface, WorldClassBullshitters, and many more). It may be the most characteristic shared

trait among reactionary pop culture commentary channels. This style is not commonly seen with professional political commentators on either side of the spectrum nor with LVT channels. Such easily recognizable content can attract those who may either have felt disappointed or enraged by media that has let them down or those who enjoy drama for its entertainment value. These thumbnails quickly signal that the movies, shows, people or companies in question will be discussed negatively and potentially ridiculed. In this way, the visual presentation of RVT channels serves a similar function as the markers of queerness (e.g. pride flag colors) in many LVT videos: To signal to their audience that these videos will make them feel seen.

Such a style of presentation also intentionally primes audiences to feel outraged about what is to follow, likely for financial reasons. These content creators use strategies similar to (tabloid) newspapers, particularly the strategy of “ragebait”. As Forest describes, “‘ragebait’, a variation of the ‘clickbait’ term [...], are built on the same kind of understanding about what is most likely to provoke the target”, as angry people are likely to interact with and share the stories that upset them (Forest 99). This form of clickbait focuses on provoking a strong negative emotional reaction in order to attract views or comments. Strong emotions may then lead them to share the video with others, “hate-watch” in order to mock the video (Cohen et al. 136) or to leave a comment (be it supportive or enraged). All of these behaviors can help a video to be more widely promoted and thus earn the creator money, providing a strong financial incentive to create more polarizing content.

The videos also follow strategies common to tabloid news by having sensationalist and oftentimes hyperbolic titles: As previously described, the titles about “FAILURE”s, “DISASTER”s and “DEAD” franchises often imply a state of irrevocable crisis – even though the franchises in question seem to be in crisis every week for many years. Moffitt points out that “[i]t is difficult to propagate and perform crisis continually: the efficacy of the invocation of crisis often stems from its episodic and ‘out of the ordinary’ character, whereby crises are

constructed as temporally limited events” (“How to” 207). However, RVT creators can easily switch between different franchises – such as Marvel or Disney (see fig. 32) – and new events, such as interviews, rumors, new TV shows and episodes (see fig. 33) to find something new that confirms or seemingly deepens the crisis.

Such videos exemplify the troubling potential of social media and its financial incentives to act as amplifiers of political polarization by encouraging strategies such as “ragebaiting” through constructing a permanent state of crisis. Content creation on platforms such as *YouTube* allows creators to gain “fame and fortune”, i.e. economic and social capital, which “[incentivize] users to game or hack platform systems to increase the visibility of their posts” or videos (Marks and Stanfill 70). Commenting on popular culture comes with the advantage of being more easily able to attract viewers interested in specific texts, such as *Star Wars*, compared to original content, with “ragebaiting” offering one strategy to increase clicks on the video and thus visibility. As one study found, “social media may be creating perverse incentives for divisive content because this content is particularly likely to go ‘viral.’” (Rathje et al. 1). Particularly “posts about political opponents are substantially more likely to be shared on social media”, with “this out-group effect [being] much stronger than other established predictors of social media sharing, such as emotional language.” (Rathje et al. 1). This potentially explains the focus on Kennedy as an enemy figure. Moreover, “social platforms also incentivize users to spread and validate extreme views to get approval from peers with similar views and gain social capital” (Marks and Stanfill 71), switching narratives if necessary.

This strategy of focusing on a crisis seems to attract a large audience with many more successful RVT channels existing beyond the four discussed here. RVT creators upload very frequently, potentially incentivized by monetary gain. By doing so, they maintain the state of crisis through discussions of new additions, as they need new dramatic developments to attract viewers’ attention. High view counts are hugely beneficial to the modern content creators —

particularly users with high follower numbers tend to create content for a living. Due to the monetization affordances of content creation on *YouTube*, money can for example be generated from ads on given videos. One report by *BusinessInsider* suggests that YouTubers with 1 million subscribers earn between 14.000 and over 50.000 dollars in a single month solely from advertisements (O'Brien). Additionally, creators may use monetized subscription services (e.g. via *Patreon*), have sponsors, ask for donations, or sell merchandise. Fans of Buechler can for example buy T-Shirts or mugs ("Nerdrotic Merchandise."). The high upload frequency of short videos of on average about 15 minutes length with similar topics suggests a main motivation of these channels to be producing content for content production's sake. Buechler for example uploads at least 1 video every week, EndymionTv 4 videos a week and Hambly even about 5 videos in a single day – which is easy to do for this channel, as he merely comments on pop culture as well as news topics and does not edit together footage as the other channels in this case study do.

Consequently, the co-occurrence of clickbait-tactics and a construction of perpetual crisis in line with the populist style seems only natural in fast-paced and competitive media environments such as *YouTube*. It is also important to note that such a populist style seems to often co-occur specifically with right-wing content. It seems logical that in the "attention economy" of the Internet, where attention is a limited resource and much content is vying for our attention (Marwick, "You May Know Me" 344), "clickbait"-strategies would prevail. However, leftist and right-wing "anti-woke" *YouTube* creators seem to follow different paths to success with the characteristics outlined here highly specific to RVT channels. Saarela suggests that the new online left arose specifically in opposition to the alt-right (52). Consequently, leftist video creators may aim to "be as distinct as possible" from mainstream news as well as from right-leaning creators (Wurst, "Bread" 221.). Thus, these marketing

tactics relying on outrageous appearing thumbnails and titles seem to be typical for RVT channels and amplify their opinions through quantity and high visibility of uploads.

Beyond the paratextual elements discussed so far, such as thumbnails, titles and upload strategy of a video's creator, crisis is narratively enacted in two ways: The commercial and narrative failure of *Star Wars* or modern entertainment more broadly and the perceived attack on (white) male fans. Both are frequently contrasted to an idealized version of the past, a "heartland" fans want to return to. In populism, "crisis is most usually signified [...] through linking it to failure – whether that be of the financial system, political system, public policy, democracy, representation, masculinity and so on" (Moffitt, "How to" 197). Using dramatic but unspecific descriptions of doom, Jordan, for example, describes how *Star Wars* used to be "one of the greatest [intellectual properties] in the history of cinema" ("The Rise Part Two" 28:16-28:19) but now all that is left for Jordan is to ask whether "the destruction [...] of characters beloved by whole generations [...] was all worth it" (28:20-28:38), implying the potentially irreversible decline of the franchise due to ignoring what fans wanted and a loss felt on a personal level. This failure only becomes a crisis through its mediation which allows it to become seen as "symptomatic of a wider problem" (Moffitt, "How to" 197).

Accordingly, there are dramatic descriptions of "a void where *Star Wars* and others once stood" (EndymionTv, "How Woke" 17:37-17:39), emphasizing that this point in time is the "last chance before it's too late" to turn things around (17:48-17:50). The perceived decline of *Star Wars* is mostly linked to its perceived financial failure, following the "get woke, go broke" narrative popular with "anti-woke" commentators (Cheng and Frommann). Modern *Star Wars* is frequently described as "box office poison" (Jordan, "Kathleen Kennedy Saves" 08:06), which is "bleeding money and fans" (EndymionTV, "How Woke Ideology" 11:46). This is usually not supported by any references besides pointing out that *Solo* lost money (Hambly, "Box Office") – despite the fact that *Solo* as the only *Star Wars* movie to lose money

(Carollo) was closest to the original *Star Wars* trilogy out of the new movie releases, featuring a male lead and original trilogy member, Han Solo. Consequently, its failure does not support the argument that new characters or “strong female characters” are harming *Star Wars* financially. RVT channels also offer plenty of other crises regularly linked to (perceived) financial failure: Not only *Star Wars* is dead but also the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (Buechler, “The Marvels”), *Doctor Who* (Buechler, “Doctor Who”), *The Witcher* (Buechler, “The Witcher”), even all of “Woke Hollywood As We Know it” (Buechler, “It’s the End”) – at least according to Buechler’s newest releases, thus seemingly confirming a widespread trend of “get woke, go broke”. Such narratives tie a constructed financial crisis of these franchises to a rise of “wokeness” as its cause.

Such content has been growing in popularity and with it both the quantity of crisis portrayals and their dramatization. For example, Buechler only switched to the creation of “anti-woke” video essays from reviewing single episodes of TV shows six years ago, so most of these franchise “deaths” have been recent. Jordan, too, used to mostly review video games until four years ago, while Hambly was participating in the #Gamergate discourse before switching to TV and film. Yet not only did discussing pop culture failures only gradually become the focus of these channels, but also their polarizing approach to it: Buechler, for example, was still discussing with question marks whether entertainment was “too PC”, i.e. politically correct, with more neutral thumbnail images in 2018:

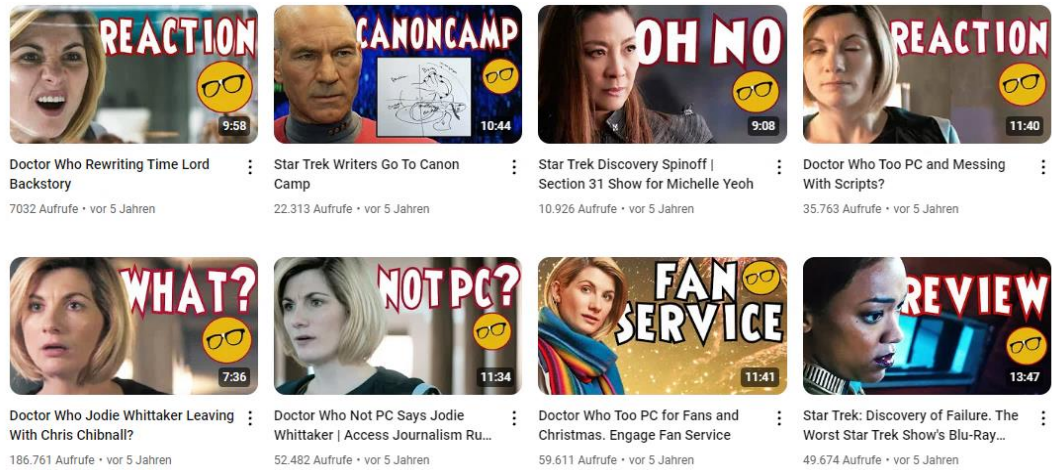


Fig. 19. Early YouTube thumbnails by Buechler around 2019

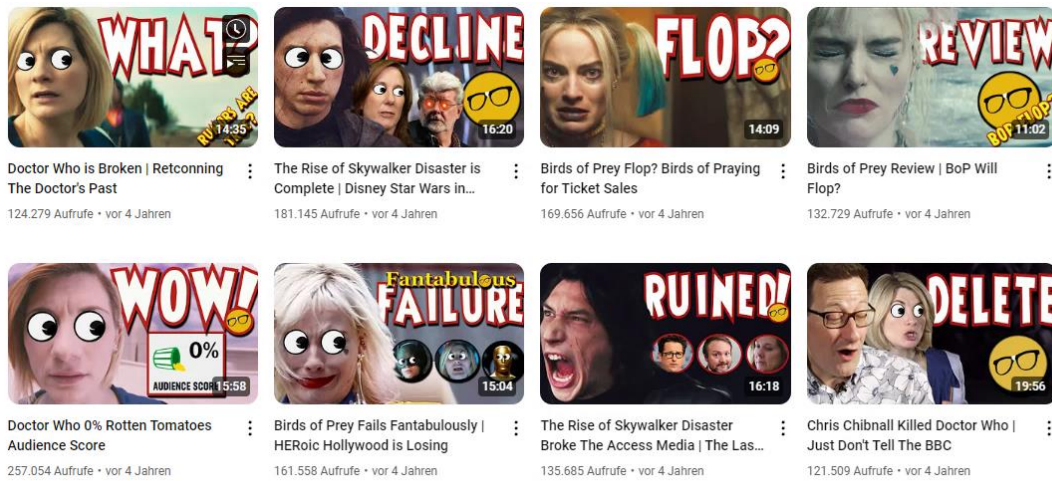


Fig. 20. Later YouTube thumbnails by Buechler around 2020

Failure was initially also often attributed to specific installments, such as *TROS* or *Birds of Prey* being bad (fig. 20).

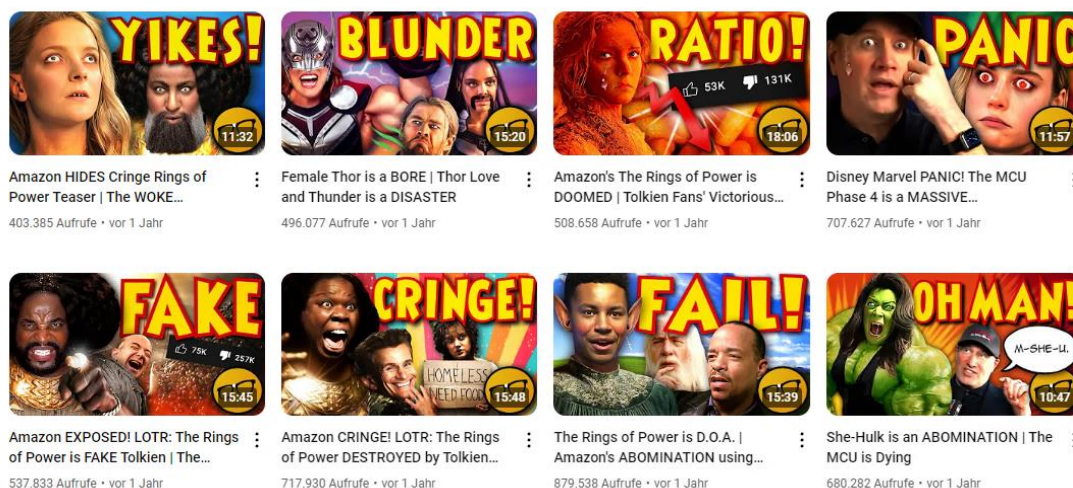


Fig. 21. More recent YouTube thumbnails by Buechler around 2023

2022 then saw a shift from question marks (fig. 19) to exclamation-marks (fig. 21), more dramatized language with “terms of disaster” – not merely broken or a flop in lower case letters but “DOOMED”, “DISASTER” or an “ABOMINATION” (fig. 21) – and most importantly a shift towards generalizing failure: Not individual movies are bad but more and more big companies such as Amazon, Disney, or Marvel’s Cinematic Universe (MCU). All of this suggests that only within recent years, since about 2019, these RVT channels have developed their content niche and increasingly a specific style of lamenting a permanent crisis in all of pop culture. It is notable that this genre of “ragebait” videos with their stronger fan-populist style only developed after *TROS*, despite *TLJ* (as discussed in chapter 2) often being described as the moment that “broke” or radicalized the fandom, further supporting my argument that *TLJ* was retro-actively framed as highly controversial while in actuality the narrative of “a woke agenda ruining media (and society)” has been steadily growing since the 2010s.

The time after *TROS* was released was a time marked by crisis and a surge in populist and conspiracist rhetoric. The first Trump presidency coming to an end in January 2021 had likely normalized a more populist style of political communication in general that may have

influenced YouTubers as well. Trump had focused heavily on the narrative of “America as a state in crisis” in his speeches which “both echoed and amplified a broader public sentiment” (Homolar and Scholz 348). This generated an “ontological insecurity manifested simultaneously as a sense of loss and a desire for belonging” in many Americans (Homolar and Scholz 360).

This vulnerable state coincided with the Covid pandemic in early 2020 which may have significantly contributed to the rise in popularity of RVT content and their shift in style. Science-related populism (Mede and Schäfer) was on the rise which provides a blueprint for the fan-populist style described here due to fears about the handling of the pandemic: Conspiracy theories around Covid bloomed on *YouTube*, many “[i]n the fashion typical of science-related populism” casting “Fauci [...] as the member of a corrupt scientific elite that is not interested in the truth or the wellbeing of the people but promotes a corrupt agenda instead.” (Butter, “Conspiracy Theories” 34). During this time, many people turned to *YouTube*, not just for entertainment during lockdown and social distancing periods, but also because they were dissatisfied with “the mainstream media, social media companies, and Democratic politicians [who] all parroted the same liberal ‘narrative’ which was fixated on spewing identity politics, criticizing Trump, and promoting COVID-19 restrictions” (Ma 207).

Especially for right-wing citizens, the alternative media on *YouTube* offered an approach to truth via a “bootstraps epistemology”, i.e. “the belief that an individual can only access political truth and knowledge by rejecting inherited dogmas and pursuing a highly individualistic process of research and rational deliberation” (Ma 212). Similarly to conspiracists’ calls to “do your own research”, this epistemology emphasized the “Enlightenment ideals [of] ‘first-hand inquiry, independent thinking, and a scepticism about information passed down by authorities and experts’” (Ma 215). Such information is notably assumed to be “devoid of judgment-clouding feelings and emotions” (Ma 216; compare 3.3).

RVT videos are line with content catering to such “bootstrap epistemology”. While likely several factors worked in tandem to cause the rise of RVT content using a fan-populist style around 2019, the prevalence of similar reactionary content on *YouTube* and pronounced feelings of a “world in crisis” may have contributed to the popularity of RVT’s “Hollywood in crisis” content.

In addition to the narrative of all of modern entertainment failing (financially and with their fans), RVT channels also cater to a narrative about white masculinity in crisis as Kennedy apparently “has some weird resentment towards the male fans of [the Star Wars franchise]” (Buechler, “Kathleen Kennedy Cancelled” 11:41-11:44). I’ve already discussed in 3.4 how analysis in RVT videos often remains on the level of pointing out when a woman “outdoes” and “replaces” a man. This is maybe best dramatized by Buechler, who attributes Han Solo’s death in *TFA* to a hatred of men, as he recounts the moment Kylo Ren kills Han Solo: “Han Solo tells Kylo, it's okay that you killed me, I'm just a male and a father in Hollywood, so that's meaningless” (“The Rise” 20:31-20:38). This implies that Hollywood more broadly hates men, potentially even more so if they fulfill traditional gender roles by being a father.

This theme of man-hatred is strongly linked with feminism (see also chapter 2), echoing the common stereotypes that feminists hate men (Dye 3). This implies a state of crisis specifically for male fans who do not feel welcome anymore when watching modern *Star Wars*. EndymionTv, for example, when discussing the ruinous influence of feminism on *Star Wars* links it to hatred of men as well as trans and non-binary people’s existence: “If the first Jedi ends up being a man-hating feminist with they / them pronouns that wants to smash the patriarchy, I will become the Joker” (“How Woke” 05:21-05:30). As is also common in alt-right circles, he uses humor and pop cultural references to express his disdain, expressing his anticipated enagement with the metaphor of “becoming the Joker”. More notably, he uses man-hating as a natural descriptor of feminists whose identity only becomes more ridiculous if

the character was also using pronouns usually associated with non-binary people. This not only denigrates feminism and queer people, but more importantly it is merely an off-hand remark within a longer monologue – it needs no further explanation as he assumes it is “common sense” for his audience. Towards the end of the video, he positions diversity of which he claims to hope the up-coming show “Ahsoka has plenty” (14:55-14:56) against “portray[ing] all men as weak or evil” (14:58-15:00): This suggests that he is in favor of diverse representation, yet at the moment writers are unable to portray women or queer people without it “com[ing] at the cost of other representation” (14:52-14:54), i.e. without having to negatively portray all male characters. Such comments make it seem like not only feminism, but progressive ideals of diverse representation more generally are threatening towards male fans.

Nostalgia for the Heartland

Both the idea of *Star Wars* as a profit-oriented franchise and geek masculinity more broadly in crisis lead to a strong theme of nostalgia for the original trilogy and its creator George Lucas, similar to common populist desire for a return to the “heartland”. The heartland in the sense of Taggart is “a once-existent ideal state of society in which politics and societal life had been pervaded by orderliness, dutifulness, and predictability” (Mede and Schäfer 476). In this case, the fan-cultural heartland is the assumed state in which pop culture was “apolitical” and purely “good entertainment” – as well as when white men were naturally the main target audience. Such nostalgia is typical for these reactionary pop culture backlashes. Dosser in his study on Puppygate, the aforementioned backlash to more diversity in sci-fi novels (see 2.2), also points towards a link between white masculinity – notably, all four creators in this case study as well as most other RVT channels I am aware of are white men – and “melancholic attachments to an imagined past when white men were supposedly whole” (Kelly in Dosser 22). This ties such pop culture backlashes to the alt-right and other right-wing “anti-woke” movements due to shared affect. Particularly nostalgia for the fan-cultural and sociopolitical

“heartland” allows reactionaries to cast themselves as victims and “bring people into their philosophy” (Dosser 129) in which longing for the past fuels “hatred about the present and fear for the future” (129).

A large part of the nostalgia is for a fictional apolitical past that the creators are emotionally attached to. This fits well with the idea that “populists often commit themselves to an once-existent ideal state of society”, a “heartland”, that consequently needs to be re-established (Mede and Schäfer 476), yet the elites are “keeping the people from reaching it” (476). Dosser similarly observes how Puppygate “demonstrate[s] the key role of nostalgia in the affective economies of reactionary movements” (90) as the “Puppies” long for a past where speculative fiction was more conservative, “a time that never truly existed” (90). Similarly, RVT channels often mix up an apolitical past with a past without “progressive agendas”, thus implying conservative politics to be apolitical: As Jordan for example explains, all of the problems he previously listed are due to Disney wanting “to push [their] half-baked politics and [...] agendas into a story that was once timeless and universal” (“The Rise Part Two” 28:42-28:49). He contrasts this with modern *Star Wars* that is “focused on our present-day fears and frustrations and petty grudges” (27:44-27:49). He condemns the inclusion of such aspects as he argues that *Star Wars* used to be appealing precisely because “it was an escape from all of those things” (27:54-27:56). In this video, it does not become clear what these agendas, fears and grudges that had not yet existed in the originals are. While all entertainment is shaped by the era it is produced in, specifically *Star Wars* is well-known for being inspired by divisive political issues such as the Vietnam War. However, as Earl correctly points out, *Star Wars* “has existed for so long, the initial political intentions of the original work tend to grow outdated and less directly prescient” (“The Revolutionary Spirit” 00:20:49-00:20:55) and thus “re-watching the old movies through a nostalgic lens” (00:21:18-00:21:20) may make them appear un-related to the political contexts of their time that shaped them.

This incorrect view of past media texts as “apolitical” or at least as not “pushing a message” may not need to be factually correct for these creators because it is an “emo-truth” (Harsin): Something that is assumed to be true because it feels right to those who believe in it. Emo truths matter more than facts when it comes to the heartland, which I consider a highly appropriate term as fan populism addresses issues close to the heart of its “true fans”. Nostalgia may also explain why most franchises experiencing backlash that follows patterns of the “Mary Sue Discourse” are (as discussed in chapter 2) “legacy franchises” (or legacy genres, in the case of sci-fi novels, action video games, and superhero comics, the genres central to Puppygate, Gamergate and Comicsgate). Nostalgia for the fictive heartland and the crisis narrative of loss of what once was are important driving factors in the fan-populist rhetoric fueling these fan conflicts. Consequently, franchises (or genres) to which fans had strong previous emotional attachments are the most likely to feature in RVT videos. How much it personally hurts RVT creators to “lose” what they supposedly “used to have” is for example apparent when Jordan laments “the humiliation of characters beloved by whole generations” (“The Rise Part Two” 28:19-28:23) which almost makes it sound like the characters from the original trilogy were real people that he is defending. A similar tone is present when he criticizes “the nullification of all the struggles and triumphs and sacrifices that came before” (28:27-28:33) by the sequel trilogy. Jordan’s emotional and dramatic language clearly distinguishes a time of the “good” original *Star Wars* before the “brutal and permanent division of the Star Wars fan base” (28:34-28:37) the sequel trilogy presumably caused.

Additionally, the perceived “corruption” of recent *Star Wars* is often described with language alluding to larger progressive changes to society. Jordan for example goes on to claim that there was a “perversion of the heartfelt moral lessons taught by the original trilogy” (28:23-28:27), with perversion having a connotation of immoral sexual behavior to it. This may allude to the progressive politics he blames, as particularly LGBTQ issues are often conflated with

sexual perversion in contemporary political discourse. As Roth writes, “gender has moved center stage in right-wing extremist and populist discourse” (55), with for example Donald Trump claiming he will protect children from “perverts” who will “indoctrinate [the] youth [...] with gender ideology” (55) in a recent speech in 2023 — meaning LGBTQ-inclusive sex education. This topic of sexual perversion will become more central in later fan conflicts, see chapters 4 and 5.

This imagined apolitical past is often symbolized by George Lucas which also ties RVT creators' nostalgia into longing for a strong (male) leader. Populists often long for a “clear leader”, a “strong figure” (Moffitt, *The Global* ch.4). RVT channels tend to display a longing for Lucas to return and hope that his return may turn the franchise around. Such hopes are not completely unfounded as Lucas symbolizes the traditional auteur who had “creative autonomy and control of many critical aspects of each film in the franchise” (Sparrow 8). After Disney bought the rights to *Star Wars*, it followed a contemporary pattern in which “creative power [is given] to corporations rather than a single person” (8).

Nostalgia for Lukas as a “beloved auteur” who controlled the franchise – similar to the idea of a “once apolitical *Star Wars*” – suggests an imagined past in which he was not highly controversial, particularly for the prequel trilogy. The strong backlash against the prequel trilogy featured among other issues the harassment of several actors, for example Ahmed Best contemplated suicide after fans kept telling him he “destroyed [their] childhood” (Shoard). In a similar tone to the backlash against the sequel trilogy (see chapter 2), the prequel backlash against Lucas even featured a petition to stop him from writing the third episode due to fans’ “raped childhoods” (Dosser 140). Ultimately, the negativity surrounding the prequels lead Lucas to ask himself why he should create more movies “when everybody yells at [him] all the

time and says what a terrible person [he is]” (N. Cohen) before selling the franchise to Disney²¹. Despite the striking similarities to the reactions to the sequel trilogy, these past events are largely ignored by RVT creators to present Lucas as universally beloved and uncontroversial unlike the sequel trilogy which is described as highly divisive (as discussed in chapter 2).

Rather, Lucas’ infallible genius is romanticized and positioned as a possible way to save the franchise and thereby re-establish the “heartland”. Advocating for the removal of Kennedy and her “politically correct” values and replacement with Lucas may offer the “simple answers for the crisis” (Moffitt, “How to” 204) commonly preferred in populist enactments of crisis. Hambly, for example, speculates on how Lucas could possibly return based on a “wild rumor” he heard (“George Lucas”, 0:28). His video thumbnail depicts Lucas with a crown and adds “Return of the King” to the image as well as an emoji with crying heart eyes, thus already portraying him as a savior figure by the thumbnail alone. Hambly describes Lucas as a hero that Disney desperately needs and someone who could “save Star Wars” by “tak[ing] the reins from Kathleen Kennedy” (08:53-08:54). Additionally, Hambly discusses that Lucas did not want *TFA* made which aligns everything wrong with *Star Wars* with the lack of Lucas’ input. Similarly, Buechler thematizes Lucas’ dislike for the sequel trilogy several times (E.g. “George Lucas Hates”; “George Lucas Roasts”), pitting him against Kennedy whom Lucas is portrayed to hate. As Dosser similarly observed for “Puppygate”, “reactionaries are angry over their perceived loss [...] to progressives, but they are also hopeful they can restore it, often through [...] destruction” (98) – in this case by criticizing Kennedy and exposing her flaws and hypocrisy in order to restore Lucas to his perceived rightful place.

Conspiracy Theory: Cultural Marxism

²¹ This is at least occasionally acknowledged, for example described by Jordan, perhaps a bit euphemistically, as Lucas reluctantly “thinking about retiring” (“Kathleen Kennedy Saves” 01:11-01:13) after “his latest batch of Star Wars films didn’t go down too well” (01:08-01:11).

Besides removing Kennedy, another suggested solution to the (presumed) crisis of *Star Wars* and restoration of the heartland lies in moving away from progressive politics. Although political views are usually not explicitly discussed, a right-wing mindset is naturalized by seamlessly linking the decline of *Star Wars* to ideologies and identities usually associated with center to left political alignment. Such explanations may even play with conspiracy theories, illustrating the “big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable” (Hofstadter 38) typical for conspiracist thinking that I already alluded to in the introduction to this chapter. EndymionTv illustrates this well: He starts this segment explaining the “completely different tone” (“How Woke” 10:49-10:51) of the sequel trilogy installments due to a lack of a unified vision by the screenwriters – a reasonable criticism based on known facts about how the sequel trilogy was written. He moves on to speculation about infighting in Disney meetings to CEO Bob Iger “pushing content meant to groom children” (11:12-11:15, emphasis mine), following the same anti-LGBTQ ideas as Trump’s speech cited above that children need to be saved from the indoctrination of “gender ideology”. Due to EndymionTv discussing this right after his analysis of the sequel trilogy, one may assume that it is also this trilogy that “grooms children”. Only several minutes later does EndymionTv start to discuss Iger being against “Florida’s new bill that protects children from kindergarten to grade 3 from being taught about sexuality and things like gender and all that nonsense” (13:20-13:28, emphasis mine) even though “they should be more focused on having fun running around and [...] being kids” (13:37-13:42). By doing so, he only alludes to political context but does not explain it in-depth while also linking it to a counterargument that most viewers can likely agree with. This makes his position seem to be the “common sense” one. It is likely that this bill is what he was referring to previously when he discussed Disney grooming children, treating Iger and the company as interchangeable. However, only a few seconds later, he describes how Disney, not Iger as a person, “will find a way to push gender identity and woke ideas into [its upcoming *Star Wars* shows] because

nothing comes before pushing the message” (14:22-14:28, emphasis mine). Due to the repetition of “pushing” and “gender”, this may, for the audience, link the earlier grooming statement with Disney movies’ messages. While the first claim about Iger is substantiated by Disney’s position on the bill, the conclusion that Disney “will [...] push [...] woke ideas” (14:23-14:25) remains unsubstantiated but is presented as logically following from the political position of the company’s CEO and, moreover, subtly implies by association that “woke” ideas within Disney movies may endanger children by being related to “grooming”.

By presenting Disney as pro-grooming, a term technically used in relation to pedophiles but often used by alt-right actors in connection to queer people (Di Leo and McClennen; Doody 86), EndymionTv also endorses far-right queerphobic arguments. Specifically, he frames the political argument he is alluding to in a way that makes it seem less controversial than it is: Florida’s “Parental Rights in Education” also informally called “Don’t Say Gay” bill, sets the audience perhaps not yet familiar with the bill up to associate it with child endangerment. This is reinforced by the word choice of “protecting children” specifically – rather than protecting parents’ rights as conservative politicians have presented the issue: “Supporters of the legislation say it’s meant to allow parents to determine when and in what way to introduce LGBTQ topics to their children” (Diaz). This is also mis-portrayed as only being relevant to “kindergarten to grade 3” age students, despite the bill applying to all grades if the content is presented “in a manner that is not age appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students” (*House Bill 1577*) which may pertain to all queer content, even for older students.

Moreover, such thematic links do not merely suggest a right-wing point of view through which the *Star Wars* franchise is analyzed but also tie Disney’s “woke message” or “agenda” subtly into the popular alt-right conspiracy theory of Cultural Marxism – the group of people Lindsay Ellis jokes about in the video this chapter’s introduction refers to when she names “cultural Marxists masterminding multiculturalism” (14:51-14:55) as one fear of fascists. This

fear is commonly evoked together with the aforementioned topic of “gender ideology” as a threat to children, with even public figures such as Trump claiming that he will get “Marxists hands off [the] children” (Roth 55). RVT channels resorting to conspiracy theories is not surprising given their fan-populist style, as conspiracy theories in the Western world tend to generally “function[] exactly as populist counter-narratives”. (Butter, “Conspiracy Theories” 41). They are not only frequently used by populists to perform “bad manners”, but can even be considered “a secondary feature of populism” as they “offer a specific explanation as to why the elites act against the interests of the people” which are not necessarily “believed by everybody in the populist movement or party in which they are circulating” (28).

However, the presumed threat of Cultural Marxism, while pervasive in RVT channels, is never explicitly spelled out by most channels. While RVT channels refrain from mentioning the conspiracy theory by name, their ideas closely resemble what has come to be known as “Cultural Marxism”: As Busbridge et al. explain, this idea “was once the preserve of the very fringes of the American far-right but has now seemingly gone both global” (723). It connects “political correctness” with “a sinister plot to destroy Western civilisation” (723). It has gained enough prominence to have been “invoked by far-right and conservative politicians and public figures” in several countries. (Busbridge et al. 723; cf. also Neiwert). Generally, those opposed to “Cultural Marxism” believe that elites and cultural and social institutions want to subvert traditional Western values. This is often assumed to be achieved through education at schools and universities – as we can see with EndymionTv connecting Disney’s moral corruption to its CEO’s opposition to the Florida’s Parental Rights bill. However, in fan discourse the media industry is implicated as well.

RVT channels do not believe, as discussed previously, that audiences want to see “diversity” or “political correctness”. Rather, they assume it is imposed on the movies by nefarious progressive forces — despite potentially leading to financial ruin (see 3.4) This varies

between merely Kennedy instrumentalizing *Star Wars* “as a giant megaphone with which to project [her] own personal ideology into the world” (Jordan, “Kathleen Kennedy Saves” 02:50-02:56) and Hollywood itself being the problem. In Hollywood, according to Hambly, the “only political ideology that you’re allowed to talk about online or push” (“Kathleen Kennedy Devasted” 01:22-01:32) is feminism. Buechler goes one step further and reads out a quote by Gina Carano who attributes this not merely to Hollywood but even the Democratic party itself: She “refuse[s] to discriminate based off of powerful people telling me how to think and act” (“The Marvels” 02:07:06-02:07:11) despite Hollywood discriminating against those “who think differently”, i.e. conservatives such as herself. Buechler argues that this presumably shows how “bigotry has not gone away in Hollywood” (02:07:37-02:07:45) similar to how “the bigotry in the certain party that's in control of most of the cities in America” (02:07:51-02:07:59) – most big US cities are led by Democrats (“Party Affiliation”) – “hasn't really gone away, it just rebranded” (02:08:00). He also explicitly compares Hollywood and the government under Biden as being similar in that both are “virtue signaling that they are standing up for minorities but instead using them as a shield and a weapon” (Buechler, “The Marvels” 02:04:45-02:04:56). Such parallels between Democrats and Hollywood combined with him claiming that “powerful people” are trying to tell him “how to think and act” suggest that progressive, specifically Democrat, forces are controlling both government and Hollywood in a bigoted manner.

Such thought control is assumed to be enacted through “healthy doses of intersectional feminism, identity politics and political correctness” (Buechler, “Kathleen Kennedy Cancelled” 11:27-11:35) imposed on audiences to influence their thoughts. All of these elements on their own are merely empty signifiers vaguely alluding to reactionary ideology but do not yet make a conspiracy theory, without them being attributed to a nefarious agenda of people in power working together. This often happens very subtly: While my example by

EndymionTv has already alluded to some of the elements attributed to Cultural Marxism, such as “identity politics”, he also describes *Star Wars* as “push[ing] woke agendas [even] when they’re clearly not working” (“How Woke” 15:26-15:29). The last part of the sentence suggests that these agendas are pursued despite potentially hurting their capitalist goals, thus potentially with the goal to influence audiences above all else. This idea can also be seen with other RVT channels: Buechler in “The Rise of Skywalker Destroys George Lucas' Star Wars | Spoiler Review”, for example, expresses frustration about fans’ – this is implied to include him and his audience by the collective noun “our” – “favorite characters [...] being sacrificed on the altar of agenda” (01:51-01:55). The idea of “sacrifices” on an “altar” frames Lucasfilm / Disney as cult-like, potentially even evoking Satanist associations. Moreover, it suggests that there is a higher goal being pursued for which Lucasfilm / Disney is willing to hurt their fandom.

Furthermore, in videos focused on Disney more broadly and not merely on *Star Wars*, Hambly even goes as far as to accuse Disney and politicians of trying to “brainwash” children by putting inappropriate content such as “critical race theory” and “gender ideology” into movies to “[push] extreme left-wing activism” (“Massive Backfire” 05:45-05:50). “Critical Race Theory” is by many opponents of it considered “a form, or direct descendent, of cultural Marxism” (Weigel 6510) which connects “CRT to a well-established image of the enemy” (6515). Frequently, Weigel observes, CRT or the Black Lives Matter movement are connected to Cultural Marxism by assuming they are just like Cultural Marxism “a plot by Jewish cosmopolitans to convince non-Whites to overthrow White civilization” (6515).

However, such an enemy is mostly alluded to in RVT videos. Few videos clearly name “Cultural Marxism” or “Critical Race Theory” (which was only referenced in other videos from my selected channels not concerned with *Star Wars*). One exception is, for example, when Buechler shares a livestream of “Razorfist” (Lack of Entertainment) who urges his audience to “look up Antonio Gramsci” (“Woke Marvel” 10:54-10:56) as he is the “beginning of modern

cultural Marxism” (10:59-11:02) which wants to “tak[e] over seemingly banal entertainment” (11:07-11:11) in order to take away people’s “avenues of escape from politics” (11:18-11:20) in order to cause “class conflict” (11:32) and thus ultimately bring about the communist revolution (11:32-11:36) – and people like Buechler or Hambly who analyze media and its “wokeness” ultimately are “doing more for the cultural war and to stave off Marxism than [political] pundits” (11:48-11:52). It is important to note that he considers this clip by another YouTuber worth sharing – but those are still someone else’s words. Indeed, RVT videos seem to toy with vague references to “agendas”, thus implying the potential of a grand conspiracy to “brainwash children”, yet refrain from discussing such ideas outright too often or in too much detail as to who is behind it.

This strategy may give their conspiracist criticisms of Hollywood “plausible deniability”: Similar to how the alt-right often uses humor to be able to potentially deny espousing extremist ideas, these video creators use vague references that may only be fully understood by those already well-versed in such discourses. Allusions, just as jokes, allow them to accuse others of “reading too much into it” while at the same time providing a sense of community and recognition to those who “get it” (cf. Greene). As conspiracy theories are largely considered “illegitimate knowledge” (Thalmann 196) in contemporary Anglophone countries, it makes sense to not explicitly espouse such theories on channels presenting as rational media analysts. RVT channels may toy with allusions to larger conspiracy theories which they may or may not actually believe “to provoke and to alienate, to gain visibility, clicks, and capital” (Thalmann 196) similar to alt-right associated actors such as Milo Yiannopoulos.

At the same time, similarly to Trump’s claims to keep “Marxists” away from children that lacked any elaboration on how Marxism and “gender ideology” are connected, it may also be that modern “conspiracy theorists no longer have to construct elaborate narratives which

accommodate all kinds of evidence and arguments; they can merely use a handful of terms and tropes to invoke already existing (cultural) narratives and hint at already well-known conspiracy theories” (Thalmann 200). Thus, RVT channels may not have to elaborate beyond the use of associated keywords such as “gender ideology” or “political correctness” to invoke ideas of “Cultural Marxism”. Additionally, presenting the idea of a “progressive / leftist / feminist Hollywood agenda” being “pushed” in the entertainment industry as common sense that does not require further elaboration, may make it easy for audiences not yet familiar with “Cultural Marxism” to be open to the introduction of this conspiracy theory after having been familiarized with a more “watered down” version of it.

3.6: “Just Some Haters on *YouTube*?”: The Radicalization Potential of RVT

Ideological conflicts in fandom can be negotiated in many ways and places. As this chapter has shown, RVT videos on *YouTube* present one way of introducing reactionary to alt-right perspectives into fan discourses, making use of fan-populist rhetorical strategies to garner large audiences. The fan-populist style is inherently tied to fan identity as a “true fan”, both in its performance that emphasizes authentic (male) (and often “bad-mannered”) fandom, as well as in its argumentation that is strongly based in how RVT creators feel about the source text (despite claims to “objectivity”) and a need to restore the source text to the state in which they used to enjoy it, the fannish (and supposedly “apolitical”) “heartland”. Particularly performing antagonism between “true fans” and “corrupt corporate elites” as well as constructing a state of crisis that establishes a need to return to the “heartland” of earlier *Star Wars* installments can unite fans of differing ideologies in their shared anti-fandom of recent *Star Wars* and introduce them to the conspiracy theory of “Cultural Marxism”.

Psychological Effects

While RVT YouTubers may seem like people who just encourage outrage to earn views and money, for several reasons it is important not to dismiss their potential influence on fans: For example, people are more likely to believe statements they have heard before – even when it is mis- or disinformation. Due to the so-called “illusory truth effect”, someone may hold on to a previous belief even when confronted with corrective information (Begg et al.). As they have read or heard a fact or argument frequently, it holds higher credibility for them than a potential counterargument. We can thus easily imagine how hearing allusions to sinister “woke agendas” repeated every day in frequently uploaded and easily consumable short videos may establish a belief, particularly in young audiences, that “Cultural Marxism” is a credible threat.

This threat may be intensified by parasocial relationships with the creators, as the “illusory truth effect” is compounded by information being presented by people one trusts. While affinity spaces have traditionally been viewed as a powerful site of learning (Gee) due to binding people together because of a shared affinity, “aversion spaces” such as “wokeness-anti-fandoms” may be even more successful at this: One study, for example, found that Facebook friends were perceived as more credible than traditional news organizations (Tandoc). As RVT creators present themselves as just regular fans that loved original *Star Wars* as much as their intended audience and share in their disappointment in the sequel trilogy, viewers may feel like they “know” these creators and see them as fellow fans with whom they might even have interacted via comments or live-streams already and thus consider their statements particularly trustworthy.

Additionally, the political statements by these creators are not the main focus of their pop culture-themed videos – and in many cases also not the primary focus of their channel overall. They are merely mentioned as side notes in the primary analysis as if they are common sense, often seamlessly linked to all the problems identified with *Star Wars*, and often only alluded to but not explained in-depth. Thus, such statements may be less likely to be questioned

than if they were the central thesis presented in the video. This is similar to incidental news exposure, where “people are increasingly exposed to news on various channels without actively seeking it” (Strauß et al. 1181). Some studies have shown that especially individuals with low media literacy may internalize such messages (Borah et al.) more readily than if they were intentionally consuming news — or in this case, political content.

Rather than openly discussing their political stance, the RVT creators try to present themselves as apolitical and objective and thus appeal to audiences who may not be interested in politics. Instead, they frame their right-leaning ideology as “common sense”, as opposed to feminist or “woke” ideologies which are framed as being “pushed” into the media text. This may additionally encourage a sleeper effect, where audiences may initially forget or dismiss the RVT creators’ minor political side notes: “According to this effect, when people receive a communication associated with a discounting cue, such as a noncredible source, they are less persuaded immediately after exposure than they are later in time” (Kumkale and Albarracín 143), so when they are later confronted with political content, they experience more familiarity with the far-right ideas they’ve previously heard about and might be more open to them.

Radicalization Potential and Conspiracy Theories

Furthermore, due to algorithmic recommendations of similar content, pop culture content such as RVT videos can easily work as part of the “YouTube radicalization pipeline”. “The site recommends videos to users based on what they have watched or searched for, and anecdotal and empirical evidence shows that these videos grow increasingly extreme and fringe as the user continues down the rabbit hole” (Marwick et al. 30). Thus, RVT videos can lead fans to discover other anti-woke spheres such as the “Intellectual Dark Web”, “manosphere”, “redpill” and similar content and from there discover more extreme alt-right content. (Ribeiro et al., “Auditing”; Lewis et al.; R. Lewis; Marwick and Furl; Doody). Ribeiro et al. for example

found that “a large percentage of users who consume Alt-right content now, consumed Alt-lite and [Intellectual Dark Web] content in the past” (“Auditing” 1).

In addition to algorithmic linkage, there is also intentional crossover between RVT and far-right channels, such as between Ben Shapiro, who is generally considered far-right (Halaly), and The Critical Drinker (Shapiro, “The Future”); or Matt Walsh, a self-described “theocratic fascist” (@MattWalshBlog) who is considered a far-right extremist by the Southern Poverty Law Center (“Matt Walsh”), having a debate with Hambly (Duncan). Most notably out of all crossovers, Buechler and Hambly have hosted infamous (cf. Thalmann 197) far-right conspiracy theorist Alex Jones several times, for example in 2021, announcing the episode as “The Legendary ALEX JONES Interview!” (Buechler, “The Legendary”). As Thalmann explains, “Jones is influential and economically successful within his own (online) sphere and among a community of conspiracy theorists” but “he is nevertheless also vehemently opposed by mainstream media outlets, scientists, and intellectuals” and for this reason “in 2018, Jones and any accounts associated with his alternate news platform InfoWars were even banned from Twitter and Facebook for promoting conspiracist and other inflammatory content.” (7). As he was also banned from *YouTube*, such crossovers nevertheless give him exposure and visibility.

I have argued earlier on that no RVT creators explicitly endorse conspiracy theories – at least not in the *Star Wars* centered videos I analyzed. Buechler and Hambly’s strategy is thus still similar to Trump’s regarding conspiracy theories: Butter suggests that despite Trump avoiding to voice conspiracy theories himself, “[s]imply by appearing on Jones’s show, Trump signaled to conspiracy theorists that he was one of them; he did not need to endorse any specific theory explicitly” while “[a]t the same time, not committing to specific conspiracist claims was designed to avoid alienating potential voters who were skeptical of such theories” (Butter, “Conspiracy Theory” 797). Inviting Alex Jones follows an almost identical strategy.

One may think that perhaps viewers who engage with RVT videos are already far-right and do not truly believe that they are watching apolitical content. While an analysis of the commentators on RVT channels is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is notable that the top comment under the Alex Jones video I cited is by a user who claims that he “thought Alex Jones was insane” but after watching the video, he has realized that he “was entirely wrong” as Alex Jones “is just burdened with horrible truths that no one would accept for decades” (Travis_Adams). While it is likely that viewers interested in anti-woke content such as RVT’s *Star Wars* content are predominantly right-leaning to begin with, such content can nevertheless still be what may convert them to the far-right and extremist beliefs such as Cultural Marxism and other conspiracy theories espoused by Alex Jones.

In addition to *YouTube* showing increasingly radicalized recommendations, be it due to algorithmic recommendations or links to the channels and websites of crossover partners such as Alex Jones, it is also likely that fans are more willing to follow these suggestions after encountering allusions to obscure forces which are destroying their beloved pop cultural entertainment in RVT videos. As the content is emotionalizing with its use of rage-baiting and dramatization of a crisis yet politically vague with its allusions to broader “agendas” that audiences are supposed to already be aware of, such content seems primed to encourage users to learn more about how wokeness destroys society and how it can be fought. Thus, they may willingly follow *YouTube* down the “radicalization pipeline”.

Consequently, as this chapter has shown, fan conflicts and video essays weighing in with their stance on such trivial issues as whether the new *Star Wars* installments – be it the sequel trilogy or the Disney+ spinoff shows – are the worst or best piece of media ever created can carry more political weight than one may initially assume. RVT videos may look silly with their overly dramatic thumbnails with big googly eyes, yet we should not dismiss them. Anti-fan activist videos from reactionary channels may be effective at reaching and politically

influencing an audience due to their use of a fan-populist style that frames a reactionary political position as the urgently needed and “common sense” way to “save” *Star Wars*.

Chapter 4:

“Reylos Deserve to Die”: The Performance of Progressive Values in Negotiations of (Female) Sexuality in Anti/Shipping on *Tumblr*

“You're on the canon ground, I'm up in crack ship space

Let's start a shipping war, don't care if I get hate.

Don't like my pairings, well, then you can hit the bricks.

This is my OTP, I'll go down with this ship!”

- Not Literally Productions “I Ship It”

Online fandom has always been home to “shipping wars”, i.e. conflicts about which “ship” (fictional relationship) is the best. My perception of these aligns with what Not Literally Productions sing about: Some ships were rooted in “canon”, i.e. textually supported, some were “crack ships”, i.e. unlikely combinations of characters. While fans would constantly “start a shipping war” and complain about ships they disliked, fans did not necessarily care “if [they] got hate”. This state of fandom in my personal experience mostly followed the “Don’t Like, Don’t Read” (*Fanlore*) credo: Fans tagged their stories with the ships featured therein, so users could curate their experience according to their own preferences and avoid content they did not want to see – those who didn’t, could “hit the bricks”.

In 2015, I noticed things had changed when I read the most popular fanfiction, i.e. a story about *Star Wars* written by fans, published on the fanfiction archive *Archive Of Our Own* (AO3), called “a reylo fic”. This was kudo-ed (i.e. “liked”) by almost 60.000 users as of time of writing – an unusually high number. It is tagged as a Reylo fanfiction, i.e. it is about the romantic relationship between Rey and Kylo Ren, and simply reads: “rey picks up kylo and dunks him into the garbage. fucking obliterated” – not the kind of complex story one would

expect to resonate with large parts of the fandom and notably not a romantic one, as readers would expect from the Reylo tag. The tag seemed to intentionally “trick” others into consuming content meant to mock shippers and thus indirectly dissuade them from further shipping, i.e. it is an example of “anti-shipping”. The story was published just two days after the US release of *The Force Awakens*, the first installment of the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy – at a point when a fandom around these new characters had not yet been formed, yet this fanfiction suggests an immediate negative reception of a potential relationship between these characters, foreshadowing the controversies around this imagined couple to come: Something seemed to cause a violent rejection, a form of anti-fan activism, of a fandom that had not even really formed yet.

I soon began to see conflicts between shippers and anti-shippers on several social media platforms, including *Twitter* and *Tumblr*. Reylo shippers would report being harassed and bullied, complaining, for example, about getting private messages that they are disgusting for shipping a presumably abusive relationship and should best kill themselves. Anti-shippers would comment on dedicated blogs that such harassment is justified due to shippers enjoying an immoral relationship that was abusive and racist. Hundreds and hundreds of such posts and interactions exist – and not just in the *Star Wars* fandom. This was not the kind of “shipping wars” I knew from the past, sung about in 2013 in the song cited above. Thus, I began to ask myself what caused this vitriolic anti-shipping to arise and fans on *Tumblr* and *Twitter* to express an almost missionary zeal to convince Reylo shippers of how “problematic” this relationship and thus immoral their shipping was and dissuade them from it, if necessary by means of online harassment?

Therefore, this chapter explores the mechanisms as well as potential roots of the Reylo (anti-)shipper conflict. In contrast to the previous two chapters, this conflict is not concerned with which media is created by corporations, but with how it is consumed by fans, especially

its relationships (“ships” or “pairings”). Consequently, this chapter will also focus on a conflict where anti-fan activism is not directed (bottom-up) against the media franchise and its representatives, but occurs within fan communities which reject Reylo shippers’ interpretations and ways of engaging with the text, demonstrating what we could call “lateral anti-fan activism” Notably, despite the impression one might get from previous chapters as well as a large amount of Fan Studies scholarship that conflicts occur primarily between left- and right-leaning fans, anti-shippers demonstrate that progressive fan communities do not represent a conflict-free utopia (as discussed in the introduction in chapter 1) but that there is also disagreement between progressive fans.

I particularly focus on how anti-shipping functions as negotiations over (female) sexuality and morally acceptable expressions thereof – a phenomenon found in many large fandoms. For this case study, I have analyzed posts particularly on *Tumblr* and *Twitter* engaging with Reylo (anti-)shipping conflicts which is also one of the biggest and earliest examples of contemporary anti-shipping conflicts. *TFA* being released around the time anti-shipping arose makes it a good case study to understand the dynamics behind it.

I researched primary materials between July 2021 and March 2023. Relevant posts were partially identified using the *Twitter* search function and the *Tumblr*²² search function combined with *Google* searches for content within *Tumblr*. I particularly searched for content containing “Reylo is”, “Reylos are”, and “Reylo + abuse/abusive/problematic”. I paid special attention to dedicated accounts with anti-fan-activist names who had reblogged or retweeted (i.e. shared content created by other accounts) anti-Reylo content to identify further accounts to investigate in a snowball system (see introduction). Additionally, I came across Reylo

²² The *Tumblr* search function does not offer many options to sort by all-time popular or to only search posts from within a certain time frame and does not use full-text searches. Additionally, “the native search function of the *Tumblr* website is designed to search through only the first five tags of an original post, so the hashtags appended to a reblogged post are not searchable within the wider platform” (Brett and Maslen 3). Using *Google* to search within *Tumblr* is more effective.

content while following *Star Wars* related accounts and hashtags during all phases of writing this thesis. I archived 603 tweets (or threads²³) and blog posts for closer analysis that were particularly popular or exemplified often repeated themes. Notably, as discussed in 1.4., for this published version I am mostly paraphrasing posts to protect small blogs.

As this case study will demonstrate, these discourses do not fit the previously applied left vs. right dichotomy, but anti-shippers rather mix progressive, particularly feminist, views and fan-activist ideals with rhetoric and strategies more commonly associated with “anti-woke” or reactionary leanings – they may thus be perceived as “conservative intruders” into progressive fan spaces despite enacting behaviors generally encouraged in feminist *Tumblr* fandoms. Based on this, I suggest that anti-shipping needs to be understood as a phenomenon arising specifically from the ideals and dynamics of modern progressive fandom being over-performed in reaction to previous developments in fan culture as well as in response to sociocultural influences that impact fan behavior – either because these influences raise awareness of threats such as rape culture or because they are transferred into fandom, such as ideas about minors under threat common to contemporary conservative discourse.

This chapter will explore the arguments given and the rhetoric with which fans tie consumption of shipping related materials to morality in a way we can describe as “weaponized pedagogy” which in an interesting reversal of the previous two chapters is not so much concerned with visibility as it is with making invisible those voices deemed threatening and thus unwelcome. I contextualize these ideas within their fan-cultural and socio-political context, highlighting relations to progressive fan activism and elements that are perceived as more conservative-leaning. I first discuss Reylo as a popular ship within fan culture which is not unusual for fan culture or romance literature in 4.1. In 4.2, I outline the surrounding anti-

²³ If a message on *Twitter* is longer than the character limit, it may be continued by its author in the comments under the first post. All related messages are called a “thread” which I counted as one post.

shipping conflict and how anti-shippers are commonly framed as conservative intruders. To understand why anti-shippers are commonly perceived as conservative, in 4.6, I discuss how despite its starkly different core values, the anti-Reylo movement has parallels to reactionary movements in its use of morally-charged buzzwords and silencing strategies to fundamentalist Christian purity culture, and to conservative activist efforts to protect minors – while also pointing out where the comparisons fall short. To demonstrate that they rather heavily draw from and over-exaggeratedly perform the values of social justice activism, in 4.4, I discuss the socio-political context of anti/feminist tensions in the 2010s, especially the rise of discussions of rape culture, toxic masculinity and safe spaces which are recurring themes in anti-shipping discourse. In 4.5, I more narrowly discuss *Tumblr*'s social activist culture and how its values are reflected in the social justice-activist language of anti-shipping, particularly its focus on identity politics, media analysis expertise and the credo of “representation matters”. More specifically, in 4.6, I argue that Reylo is not an unexpected shift in shipping culture but evolved naturally from the history of fan activism and its history of being directed against a “problematic” other. Considering all of that, in 4.7, I urge that we need to pay close attention to such niche online movements and to be aware that online extremism can happen across the spectrum – especially as even superficial similarities may encourage coalition building across ideological lines.

4.1. “Tale As Old As Time”: Reylo Within the Romance Tradition

“Reylos” are those who support a relationship between protagonist Rey and her adversary, antagonist Kylo Ren; their names forming, as is common in shipping, a portmanteau name (“Portmanteau”). “Shipping” as a term was coined in the 1990s, and has, as Urbańczyk describes, “laid at the heart of female-dominated fandom since [the] early 1970s, organizing the imaginations of fan communities, dominating their literary work (fanfiction), visual art and

music.” (405). To those outside the fandoms, it may seem like a subjective matter of personal preference what to “ship”; to those inside specific fan circles supporting a specific ship may signal a certain morality and potentially even a license to re-educate those with the wrong preferences – sometimes by all means necessary, including sending death threats.

To understand why its anti-shippers are a notable phenomenon, it is important to first establish that Reylo is not an unusual pairing for a fandom to support, both in regard to fitting well within fan culture (such as the “Enemies To Lovers” trope) and literary tradition (which fans often analyze) and it is popular with many fans and mainstream audiences. Additionally, fans are at large specifically drawn to a version of these characters that have resolved their issues and overcome their conflict, not to their antagonistic dynamic itself. It is thus not the unusually controversial nature of this specific relationship that anti-shippers are concerned with.

Popularity Within Fandom

Reylo is likely the most popular ship in the *Star Wars* fandom. Despite anti-shipping controversies on the platform, Reylo has also enjoyed widespread popularity in fan spaces such as *Tumblr*, being for example considered “Tumblr's Top Ship of 2020” (Dorsch). For fanfiction written between 2017 to 2019 on *Archive Of Our Own*, it was ranked 11th most popular with 9083 new fanfictions created in this time period (Centreoftheselights, “AO3 Ship Stats 2019”), suggesting popularity with transformational fans. News reporting suggests that many fans not versed in shipping discourses and casual *Star Wars* viewers were either not aware of or interested in the fan conflict. Both fandom-centric and more mainstream oriented news outlets at large covered it positively (e.g. T. Hall; Romain, “Why Reylos”; Breznican). *The Atlantic* notably even discusses one Reylo fanfiction that “Predicted a Big *Last Jedi* Storyline” (Kornhaber), thus advertising popular Reylo fanfiction “Interstellar Transmissions” to their audience who may not even be aware of the concept of fanfiction existing.

Additionally, several works of Reylo fanfiction were turned into well received romance novels for the mainstream market (B. Edwards), suggesting a broad appeal of their dynamic both to fans specifically and romance readers more generally²⁴. As Fan Studies scholar Coppa notes, this is not surprising as “Reylo is a ship that is built on a lot of traditional narrative conventions for romance” (Coppa in B. Edwards). As noted in chapter 2, Reylo appealed even to some of the “anti-woke” crowd with well-known conservative political commentator Ben Shapiro emphasizing the pairing as one of the few good elements of *TLJ*. Consequently, one would not expect fans to take offense with it.

Those who did take offense seem to be a rather minor part of fandom, creating arguments that did not spread to other platforms, news sites or political discourse the way the MSD of chapter 2 did. The highly contained nature of the Reylo conflict suggests that this fan conflict is much more concerned with fan cultural norms than wider socio-political disruptions. Additionally, it speaks for the niche nature of “shipping” and its mostly female fans as well as social justice activism in a time when online discourse is dominated by fears of “wokeness”. Unlike “Marysuegate” that involved highly prolific YouTubers, political actors and coverage by large news sites such as *Forbes*, the “Reylo conflict” gained little mainstream visibility – despite the active nature of the Reylo fandom: *Google Trend* searches for “Reylo”, especially after the release of *TLJ* and *TROS*, widely surpassed interest in searches for “mary sue”, despite the term also being used as a regular name.

Canon

The huge interest in Reylo is not surprising given that Reylo presents a rather expected “ship” that was set up by the main text (the “canon”) and thus also does not contradict intended readings: While Rey and Kylo Ren start out as clear enemies in the sequel trilogy’s first

²⁴ This is not to be automatically expected. Fanfiction has developed niche genres and tropes that non-fans may find hard to understand, see for example Gonzales on the Omegaverse.

installment, *The Force Awakens* (2015), a romantic reading of the character's relationship was strongly suggested by the second installment (*The Last Jedi*) and confirmed by a kiss in the third (*The Rise of Skywalker*) – albeit without a happy ending, as Kylo Ren ultimately dies. While they are still enemies in *TFA*, the movie hints at a potential romance early on, with Kylo Ren obsessed with finding Rey and getting to know her secrets, then with winning her over to his side, offering to be her teacher and “show [her] the ways of the Force” (1:51:43-50) in their final encounter. Several well-established tropes support a romantic reading of *TFA*, such as when Kylo Ren bridal-carries an unconscious Rey to his ship (1:16:32-1:16:43), in a way resembling a romantic “Bridal Carry” which, as *TV Tropes* explains, “usually denotes or foreshadows a romantic relationship between the characters”. This also follows the tradition of the kidnapping of the bride by a monster throughout literary and film history, as noted by many shippers on *Tumblr* – a trope in which the woman usually ends up falling for her abductor (“Abduction Is Love”).

The relationship aligning with an intended reading of the source material also makes it an example of a more conservative form of engaging with the source text. Despite transformational fandom being traditionally known for “twisting [the source material] to the fans' own purposes” (obsession_inc), Reylo shippers engage with the romantic text set up by their source material: Particularly *TLJ* fueled romantic interpretations of Rey and Kylo Ren. While *TFA* also had moments suggesting fellow protagonist Finn as another potential romantic love interest for Rey, such as when he asked her whether she had a boyfriend. This plot strand seems to have been dropped in *TLJ* where Finn seems set up to have a close relationship with and kiss new character Rose Tico instead. Combined with Rey and Kylo Ren being drawn to one another throughout the movie, this set the audience up to primarily support Reylo. *TLJ* notably showed them moving away from being enemies towards understanding one another, culminating with Kylo Ren and Rey fighting villain Snoke together. This is followed by Kylo

asking Rey to join him. Several fan-centric news sites favorably reported on this fight, for example Vail for *Nerdist* argues that Kylo “at least partly kill[ing] Snoke to save Rey” is “ROMANTIC [sic]”.

Shipping Culture

However, while the potential for a romantic reading was set up in the movies, a fleshed out romantic relationship between these two characters only exists in the minds of the shippers, as Kylo Ren dies in *TROS* after saving Rey’s life. Still, this follows well-established patterns of fan culture: An interest in characters that are or start out as enemies is encapsulated by the terms “Enemies to Lovers” (“Enemies to Lovers”) or “Foe Yay Shipping” (“Foe Yay Shipping”). These terms being established and well-known already point to a pre-existing history of such fan behavior. This is also reflected in works of fanfiction with some of the top 15th most popular pairings in 2016 being enemies (Centreoftheselights). Reylo fans are notably not attracted to the pairing because of abusive dynamics or because they fantasize about abuse between the characters – despite that being what they are most commonly accused of by anti-shippers. Rather, *Star Wars* sequel fans tend to express their interest in dark characters, abusive relationship dynamics or SM-style kink by writing about Kylo Ren and general Hux, as reflected in the popularity of “Kylux” on *Archive Of Our Own* – a pairing not having a notable anti-shipping community.

While there are many things that attract fans to the “enemies to lovers” dynamic, for Reylo shippers the major appeal lies in two opposites balancing each other out. This was also set up by the source text. For example, director J.J. Abrams found “the dichotomy of [Rey and Kylo] [...] most fascinating” (Breznican) from the start. This was later developed into the concept of a “Force Dyad”. Drawing from J. Campbell’s monomyth that *Star Wars* was always heavily inspired by, *TROS* co-writer Terrio wanted to depict them as “the mythic dyad” and show “that they're two parts of the same whole” (*The Skywalker Legacy*).

Shippers picked up on this early on and have often described Reylo as being opposites that complete one another – notably emphasizing not their antagonism or hatred, but the opposite: A chance to find balance and growth through their differences. Fans’ analyses have for example discussed their potential to be “twin flames” that complement each other. Many shippers describe hopes that they will make each other into better people.

Consequently, while Kylo Ren’s darkness and antagonistic behavior against Rey is necessary for them to be opposites that overcome their differences and save one another, the emphasis in such fan theories is clearly on a relationship of equals as what appeals to fans despite their differences. Beyond blog posts, this interest in equal opposites is also supported by the themes of many fanfictions, such as the aforementioned highly popular “Interstellar Transmissions” which emphasized Kylo Ren “never [acting] against [Rey’s] consent” (Wurst, “Every Generation” 23) and Rey, despite her attraction, always “stay[ing] true to her ideals and keep[ing] her agency throughout the whole story” (26), with both of them saving the galaxy together. Thus, the shippers are generally behaving in well-established and non-transgressive ways that do not explain the rise of substantial anti-shipping.

Romance Literature

Support for this ship is often taken from how well it fits into romances from literature and film history. Besides their personal enjoyment, fans may argue for the pairing being set up by the movies themselves as well as paralleling other works of literature and film, described in “meta” blog posts, i.e. analytical essays that often feature close readings and draw heavily from academic style, concepts and literature (cf. Hofmann). Shippers’ reasons for supporting the relationship outlined in such metas are generally not rooted in morality or activist potential, but rather in “canonicity” and literary quality of the relationship. They may identify literary motifs and tropes seen in other well-known romance works. They may also compare them to famous romances such as Hades and Persephone from Greek mythology to emphasize the historic

precedent for such dynamics, or discuss how Kylo Ren may fit the pattern of the Byronic hero, a figure popular with famous romance works such as *Pride and Prejudice*.

In such metas, writers may address cinematic and literary parallels, such as to bride kidnappings in monster movies, that may not always portray what would be viewed as a “healthy” relationship through a contemporary lens. However, such parallels are used to explain why a scene reads as romantic to them, not to claim that certain behaviors are romantic in real life or good. Meta authors do not argue that certain scenes are morally good, only that they are symbolically meaningful and offer potential for predicting further storylines. Specifically, many fans express doubts that the romantic hints suggest a happy ending. They also often express the need for Kylo Ren to change before a romance would be possible. Many metas illustrate how Reylo shippers are aware of the pair’s antagonistic dynamics but do not endorse a romance with an unchanged Kylo Ren.

The nature of Reylo being “prototypical” romance fiction and a typical “ship” makes it an ideal projection space for larger ideological negotiations. Just as Rey and *TLJ* were used to express anxieties about the changing role of men in contemporary society (see chapters 2 and 3), so does Reylo lend itself to express broader anxieties about the vulnerable role of women in the light of rising feminist awareness and tensions. This is by no means a new development: The interest of women in romances has traditionally been devalued (cf. Radway). Many Reylo shippers point out that romance fiction has always served both as a way for women to explore their sexuality in a safe way and as an empowerment fantasy in which a woman “tames” a dangerous man. Thus, the rise of Reylo fits with the rise of popular feminism and its focus on female empowerment narratives (see chapter 2).

Furthermore, such arguments echo ideas of Radway’s foundational *Reading the Romance*, which has shaped the field of audience and thus Fan Studies. Radway, for example, describes how to her interviewees feminism “seem[ed] deeply at odds with [their] interest in”

the romance genre – yet Radway found that “readers of romances interpret these stories as chronicles of female triumph” despite their “traditionalism” (54). Thus, the tension between seemingly anti-feminist stories and feminist ways of reading them has existed long before Reylo.

4.2. “This Ship Fucking Sux”: Framing Anti-Shippers as the Conservative Intruder

Given my previous descriptions, Reylo may not seem to offer much potential for controversy. However, the most common criticism leveled against the relationship is that it is highly problematic to enjoy due to it being abusive. Fans may argue for this in monologic long-form essays, discussions with other anti-shippers, arguments with shippers as well as implicitly through jokes that position anti-shipping as the commonly accepted norm. This type of anti-fan activism often cites Reylo as abuse as the reason for its activist engagement. By the time of writing, there were over 8400 comments under treezie’s fanfiction. In an author’s note, treezie states “this ship fucking sux”. In a comment treezie elaborates further that it is “Fucking Awful [sic]” because it’s “abusive and there’s [...] probable [sic] incest”, so it is okay to “troll”, i.e. to deliberately provoke its fans by “tricking” them into reading a text mocking the relationship – thus establishing a link between the immorality of Reylo as a relationship that features abuse and potential incest and fan policing behaviors, such as mocking shippers and reminding them that this relationship is bad.

Anti-shipping

Countless social media posts and dedicated thematic anti-Reylo *Tumblr* blogs detail the abusive potential of Reylo. *Tumblr* is particularly suited to long-form essays and, accordingly, hosts many long-form posts on this subject. Such anti-fan activism against ships is considered “anti-shipping”. “Anti-shippers” or “antis” differ from the “anti-fan” that J. Gray defined as someone who “strongly dislike[s] a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally

bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel” (“New Audiences” 70). In the perception of fans, the “anti(-shipper)” goes a step further. They are usually associated with a need to let others know that what they like is morally reprehensive, sometimes to a level that justifies bullying the shipper. Thus, for an “anti”, as it is called in fandom, there is a strong association between liking a relationship and one’s morality as well as a perception of this immorality making someone a threat to a fan community that justifies taking action against the shipper.

Such potentially harmful opposition is not unusual in fandoms: Modern shipping may strongly correlate one’s romantic preference in fiction to one’s morality. One (in)famous essay within media fandom circles published in 2016 is called “Your Vagina is a Bigot; My Vagina is a Saint” (Franzeska) — this may very well be the slogan of so-called shipping wars: Debates within fandoms which pairings or relationships should be supported (“shipped”) or opposed. Particularly in recent years, as I will later explore, the question of which relationship appeals to a fan has become moralized: Finding some ships such as Reylo appealing makes one a “bigot”, liking another or simply disliking Reylo may make one a “Saint” in the eyes of some fans. The date of publication for this essay in 2016 gives an indication of such conflicts becoming particularly visible in fan discourse around the mid-2010s (“Anti-shipper”), the same time the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy was being released.

Harassment By Anti-Shippers

While in 2013 the popular parody song I cited initially still jokingly asked fans to “start a shipping war” because the singer “[doesn’t] care if [they] get hate”, contemporary anti-shipping often includes harassment to a degree that scares shippers. This “hate” they get may for example take the form of anonymous messages on *Tumblr*, with anonymous messages often suggesting violence that could be inflicted on shippers in a joking and exaggerated manner. Although the tone of such posts can be joking, the violent fantasies presented are likely to make fans feel unwelcome after encountering such death threats. Furthermore, many shippers

describe their experiences of being banned from certain message boards or fan community events as well as experiencing doxxing, i.e. the public release of their private information. Consequently, many Reylo fans have described feeling terrified of disclosing their status as a shipper. While it is not possible to have access to private messages sent to fans and thus determine the quantity and nature of the harassment received, both the availability of openly hostile posts published on *Tumblr* blogs as well as posts of people expressing their state of fear and attempts at counteracting the harassment – for example by using anti-cyberbullying strategies (Terry and Cain) – underline the existence of antagonistic dynamics and widespread fears of “antis”.

Such conflicts are not limited to *Star Wars* of course. The negative experiences of fans with anti-shippers disprove the widespread assumption of Fan Studies that progressive fans and practices commonly associated with female and queer fans, such as shipping, are inherently positive influences on fans. Larsen described in his PhD thesis how fans of a fictional relationship on TV show *Voltron: Legendary Defender* were often accused of supporting pedophilia for endorsing a relationship between two young adults with a small age gap. The resulting aggressive practices of “anti-shippers” included harassment, attempts at doxxing and death threats. Another researcher, Drouin, even received so much harassment for her survey on *Voltron* anti-shippers for her PhD thesis that she “was unable to continue [the] survey data collection” and for her “own safety, and on recommendation of faculty, mentors, and survivors of online harassment, [...] left social media for roughly six weeks” (132). She describes the experience as the “most emotionally draining and traumatic” period of her life that she “will ever experience” (134), underlining the intensity with which such fan conflicts are enacted.

Young Conservatives?

This seemingly new and widespread phenomenon begs the question of who these anti-shippers are and what is driving them. They are often characterized as young and thus not yet

educated in the ways of fan culture by those opposed to anti-shipping. Many critical comments suggest that “antis” need to behave like adults and curate their own online experience instead of expecting that others are responsible for what kind of content they encounter.

Furthermore, anti-shippers are widely perceived as not being part of the type of progressive fandom typical for shipping and *Tumblr* fan communities but are rather painted as a type of “conservative intruder”. That being called a conservative can be seen as a form of insult or explanation strongly implies that shippers are generally assumed to lean progressive. Indeed, in the culture wars of the 90s it was “conservatives, who claimed that vulgar cultural representations, which they deemed objectively immoral, corrupted the American soul” (Hartman 172) and thus needed to be censored – a goal very similar to what anti-shippers are trying to achieve. However, it is unlikely that the fan community was ever completely politically homogeneous and likely there have always been conservative fans and fans holding some conservative values in shipping and fanfiction communities. Additionally, it seems unlikely that these fans did not exist pre-2015 and that their mere presence led to the rise of anti-shipping.

Going further than just “conservative” as a descriptor, antis are often defined with words such as “puritanical”, “reactionary” or “fundamentalist”. Such definitions often co-occur with words that suggest an unwanted intrusion tainting the fandom, describing anti-shippers with terms such as “plague” or “infestation”. Such comparisons echo common reactionary rhetoric used particularly around immigrants, which are often similarly perceived as being outside of a nation’s culture. They are often described “through metaphors of “‘pollution,’ ‘infection,’ and ‘infestation’” (Cisneros 572) which implies a need to clean and to prevent further contamination (593).

Additionally, associations with (fundamentalist) Christianity strongly suggest that conservative Christian fundamentalist values (which I will discuss in more detail in 4.3) are

not an inherent part of fan culture and that antis, who are perceived to incorporate them, are in a way “poisoning” the fan community by bringing unwanted values with them, using metaphors of vermin and contamination to position them as both disgusting and threatening.

While the literature on anti-shippers so far is limited, works that have questioned the potential causes for anti-shipping have also implied strong connections to far-right ideology. Aburime, for example, argues that “[a]t the core of ‘anti’ debates is a foundation of beliefs rooted in conservatism that what a person consumes in fiction determines their real-life behaviours” (“Hate” 135). These behaviors “parallel those of conservative religious groups” (37). This clearly echoes the opinions of the users in my case study. Aburime further suggests that the divide between shippers and antis “cannot begin to properly heal until there is a concerted effort to approach the scientific reality of how fiction is processed” (151). This is also in line with the idea commonly voiced in fandoms that antis do not possess enough media literacy to understand the impact of fiction, although Aburime concedes that antis “largely cherry-pick what media they personally feel can truly shape reality” (139). Such cherry-picking suggests more driving factors behind anti-shippers’ behaviors than simple naivety about the impact of media I would argue.

Furthermore, so far, there are no definite theories on why this form of anti-shipping emerges. Anti-shipping has been compared to a moral panic by shippers and indeed shares some similarities in that shipping is frequently portrayed by anti-shippers as if it “represent[s] a crisis for that society” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 35). It consequently frames shippers as “legitimate and deserving targets of self-righteous anger, hostility, and punishment” (35). Moral panics often see the cause of the problem in “society’s feeble and insufficient efforts to control the wrongdoing” (35), such as the laissez-faire approach to shipping predominant in fandoms. They tend to “arise in troubled times”, such as contemporary rising tensions regarding feminism, and often portray “a relatively innocuous agent [as] dangerous and needful of

control” (36) – such as shippers who are unlikely to cause any substantial harm by writing about fictional romance. However, Reylo shippers are seen as one example of a wider societal lack of understanding media texts to the detriment of women with the impact of shippers on fandom and wider society seemingly blown out of proportion, as is typical for moral panics (40). Of course, in difference to “true” moral panics, anti-shippers are not paid much attention to outside of (overwhelmingly female) fan communities that engage in shipping.

Pasanen, in an analysis of moral panics regarding media texts, such as the ones concerning violence in video games or Satanism in Dungeons and Dragons games, suggests that “[c]ontroversies tend to surface, just before new media forms break into the mainstream and become familiar to the general public” (20). This may apply here, with fandom becoming more mainstream and accessible in recent years. One could imagine that fans may feel a need to present a more “sanitized” version of fandom to the mainstream and thus increase fan policing. However, traditional moral panics are enacted by outsiders – it was neither video gamers nor role-players that started these panics. Additionally, as discussed previously, although Reylo was popular online, it was mostly disregarded by news outlets aimed at mainstream audiences, so it is unclear how close it is to “breaking into the mainstream”.

Another theory by Urbańczyk, in her study of anti-shippers, suggests that anti-shipping is a way for “newcomers” to “establish their position in the field” (404) – which I disagree with. Such newcomers supposedly “disregard [...] tradition” of the fan community they arrive in and rather “seek[] legitimacy through new criteria” (417). Urbańczyk also observes that shippers would often “point to [a] lack of knowledge of fandom history as the sole reason behind the anti movement” (417). This perception is also shared by Drouin who argues that anti-shippers are “entering [new social contexts] without understanding the history that predates them” (73). Urbańczyk’s conclusion also subtly describes the anti-shipper as a form of foreign object that has changed the pre-existing and presumably more unified fandom of the

past: She claims that anti-shippers have successfully “impos[ed] their presence and [...] new ideals” (418) on fan spaces. I understand this to mean both that anti-shippers are doing something new that intentionally disrupts fandom of old and that they are different in their ideals from previous fans – however, in the rest of this chapter I will argue that they draw from social justice and fan activist traditions and values, very much in line with fan history.

All in all, social media posts and Fan Studies literature suggest a conflict between “good” progressive educated older fans and “bad” (i.e. disruptive) seemingly conservative younger fans. This upholds the dichotomy of “beautiful” transformational fandom and “ugly” reactionary fandom I discussed in the introduction to this thesis. It is important to point out that the users whose opinions I have summarized and scholars like Aburime are likely to have based their conclusions on different case studies which may feature different dynamics than the Reylo case study. Nevertheless, I think such interpretations of anti-shipping may too readily embrace viewpoints from fan discourse, potentially due to a wish to uphold the notion of “beautiful” fandom.

I will argue the opposite: Antis do not act as they do because they are new to fandom and do not know its norms or because their conservative norms fundamentally do not align with progressive fan spaces. Rather, these new fans perform an exaggerated version of being a good fan, particularly in social justice-aligned fan spaces such as Tumblr, by taking the progressive and left-leaning ideology most transformational fans hold as well as Tumblr’s affinity for creating “rich cultural analys[es]” (McCracken et al. 21) to an exaggerated extreme, building on the history of fan activism rather than intentionally disrupting it. This is encouraged by rising socio-political tensions, with anti-shippers reacting to the rise of popular feminism just like the anti-fans of chapter 2, but reacting in the opposite direction as feminism is not perceived as a “disruption” to their fan-cultural norms but fuels them.

4.3 “Girlbossed Too Close to The Hays Code”: The Reactionary Rhetoric in “Puriteen” Anti-Shipping Culture

The common description of anti-shippers as “reactionary” seems misguided to me, as there is not really a rise of conservative thought using progressive language to advocate going back to a previous status quo of media and society. Rather, anti-shippers want to move media production into a new and different direction where “problematic” content that is not progressive enough by their standards is no longer depicted positively. In the following, I will outline in how far anti-shipping parallels reactionary to far-right behavior and argue that this developed convergently out of progressive ideology and is additionally likely influenced by the conservative American culture many anti-shippers grew up in or encounter online: Both share a focus on protecting children (and women).

Protecting Children

One common argument by anti-shippers – albeit less widespread in the Reylo case study – is the accusation of shippers supporting pedophilia due to what is assumed to be a problematic age gap between characters. This is part of a larger recurring theme of protecting children as the (self-proclaimed) aim of anti-fandom which strongly mirrors common conservative arguments. For example, in a defense of Reylo, the claim that Reylo shipping means supporting pedophilia is the first one out of several criticisms one user debunks in a long *Tumblr* blog post defending Reylo. They contrast the definition of pedophilia with the fact that Rey is by legal definition an adult in the movies. Interestingly, one post on why the age gap makes one anti-shipper uncomfortable and reminds them of pedophilia is not only their own apprehension of older men taking advantage of young (although of legal age) women they know but the (purported) “fact” that the brain does not finish developing until age 25. This is seemingly an appeal to logic in order to expand the definition of pedophilia and yet also mirrors how recent anti-transgender legislation uses this scientifically false fact (Hu) to “claim that people under

age 25 should not have access to gender-affirming medical treatments” (Migdon) as they, too, have immature brains. Both anti-shippers and anti-trans legislators thus portray even legal adults as unable to give consent to relationships or medical treatments as they redefine how long one is a minor.

Such arguments that consider a relationship between legal adults an example of pedophilia may seem far-fetched, however, it fits a pattern observed both in shipping conflicts as well as wider contemporary youth culture. Once again, we find the same argument for example in *Voltron: Legendary Defender* fandom leveled against a same-sex ship that also does not fit the definition (Drouin; Larsen). We also find countless discussions of a more mainstream iteration of this in mainstream news outlets. In 2020, *The Guardian* wrote that “over the past few years, a sizeable segment of the liberal-left has decided that age gaps within relationships (eg a 40-year-old going out with a 23-year-old) are inherently problematic” (Greig). The author proposes that it stems “from a confluence of post-MeToo feminism and social justice politics” (Greig). Aburime argues that such re-definitions present a cult-like form of “[i]nformation control” in which antis intentionally “misrepresent the definitions of pedophilia and incest to mark specific targets of their ire” (“The Cult” 9). In anti-shippers’ definition, “power imbalances between adult characters are indicative of a writer's secret desire to engage in pedophilia, as they believe adult characters' having less power equates to them being childlike.” (Aburime, “The Cult” 9). I reject the comparison between anti-shipping and a cult as it implies a level of organization and leadership as well as spirituality (cf. Saliba) that is not there. While cult may be too strong a word, many young people seem to indeed turn their personal discomfort with age gaps into “overzealous” feminism-inspired activism.

Furthermore, ideas of sexual perversion are frequently invoked to portray shippers as morally reprehensible and dangerous. The reliance on shared social taboos is maybe best summarized by a post with over 13k interactions in which anti-shippers discuss how incest and

pedophilia support by Reylo shippers is not surprising given they also support bestiality – this claim being based on a single fanfiction of Rey and the rat from *Ratatouille*, a *Disney* movie, supposedly existing on the fanfiction archive *AO3*. The work of one user is generalized to what Reylos supposedly ship, based on one out of almost 30 000 of stories existing on *AO3* alone, painting them as an immoral outgroup. While such appeals to taboos are powerful exactly because they are generally shared across political persuasion, the equating of content one does not wish to see to sexual perversion may call to mind anti-queer conservative discourse: Be it books with LGBTQ representation, trans-supportive care, or drag queens, old arguments against homosexuality are seeing a revival in the 2020s with queerness frequently being associated with “grooming”, i.e. pedophilia (Selvaraj). This term was even used by some of the anti-woke YouTubers discussed in chapter 3 and is particularly popular on social media. Originating in alt-right circles, it is predominantly used to “attack LGBTQIA teachers and educators” (Selvaraj 3) and mainly presents “a repackaging of old sentiments equating LGBTQIA people to pedophiles” (Selvaraj 4). One example would be a video by conservative news channel *Daily Wire* claiming that seeing a family of two mothers in the show *Peppa Pig*, aimed at pre-school children, means “Gay Pigs Are Coming To Groom Your Kids” (Knowles), thus directly associating the mere existence of gay people in a show with zero sexual content with the threat of making children vulnerable to pedophilia.

The central belief that fiction can lead to imitation in reality follows the hypodermic needle theory line of thinking: The “hypodermic needle” idea is widely considered exaggerated but was, as Finklea explains, “[o]ne of the earliest theories regarding how the audience receives mediated messages” which was “[p]opular in the 1920s and 1930s” (1). It suggested “mediated messages could figuratively be injected into audience members” (2), thus assuming a strong influence of media “over an impressionable audience” (2). This too aligns anti-shipping with conservatives in the eyes of progressive fans, as conservatives are frequently assumed to have

a simplistic or outdated understanding of how media works. Studies generally support conservatives as more likely to believe misinformation they encounter online (Baptista and Gradim) and to be “more likely to perceive fact-checkers as liberally biased” (J. Collier). Moreover, early moral panics about the danger of popular culture such as the satanic panic about Dungeons & Dragons and metal music were famously (but incorrectly) associated primarily with conservatives. However, “[w]hile the New Right and the Republican Party were the primary proponents of Satanic conspiracism, the reeling political left also began to use it to their advantage to stay politically relevant throughout the period.” (T. Brooks 46). As Booker writes, “[p]oliticians across the spectrum linked these alleged threats together” and frequently linked metal music and role-playing games with “homosexuality, sexually graphic music, and child predation” (46). Framing anti-shippers as conservatives may thus draw from this false association between moral panics about dangerous media influences and conservatism.

Anti-shipping also echoes more recent moral panics, such as the infamous “war on violent video games”. In line with the “convergent evolution” theory of anti-shipping, this suggests that various factions can be drawn to the same issue for different reasons. As recently as 2005, Hillary Clinton, a Democrat, claimed that “violent video games increase aggressive behavior” (Markey and Ferguson 99). While studies never established a strong link between video games and violent behavior, they were an easy scapegoat onto which to project “overblown fears” to blame it “for a real (or often imagined) social problem” (100), especially in the aftermath of the 99’ Columbine school shooting. As already illustrated by me using Democrat politician Hillary Clinton as my example, this was a strongly bipartisan issue. Consequently, despite popular assumptions that conservatives are more likely to misunderstand media and overstate its dangers, moral panics about media have not been propagated solely by conservatives in the past.

A notable similarity between anti-shipping and reactionary movements also exists in their rhetorical strategy of accusing those unsupportive of their ideas of not caring about vulnerable children. This is why a large part of anti-shippers' strategy to control the fan community can be summarized as "weaponized pedagogy": They frame themselves as saving children through education (and punishment). Just as with the video games and other moral panics, in which it is often implied that "questioning the panic becomes tantamount to not caring for children" (Markey and Ferguson 108), many anti-Reylo posts suggest that they are primarily targeted towards young audiences with insufficient critical thinking skills to understand what they see on screen. Consequently, they should not be criticized – because who would not support protecting vulnerable young minds? For example, many anti-shippers on *Tumblr* expressed being concerned that impressionable young people may come to see abuse as a desirable relationship dynamic if exposed to Reylo. Larsen similarly considers the fact that there is widespread concern among anti-shipping communities that "young fans [...] do not have the critical thinking skills and maturity" to understand problematic relationships (65) as problematic. In *VLD*, too, anti-shipping has often been framed as concerns for minors in fandom who are "too young to have the critical thinking skills to distinguish what is okay in real life versus in fiction" (Larsen 49).

Both anti-shippers and contemporary conservatives are associated with the idea that especially young people are unable to critically consume media and thus need special protection. Notably, media literacy takes on a different definition in shipping conflicts: In the domain of education, media literacy "consists of a number of kinds of knowledge and proficiencies" which include "an understanding of how the media work, how they create meaning, how the media industries are organized, how they make money, and the goals toward which they work." (Varis 17). This can include understanding "how diverse people can interpret the same message differently", depending on one's cultural background or "different

subject positions like gender, race, class, or sexuality” (Kellner and Share 10). However, for anti-shippers, media literacy is not about decoding subtext and recognizing hints towards a romantic reading that Reylo shippers may pick up on but rather about evaluating which moral messages of a text should be embraced or rejected as dictated by the fan culture’s norms – particularly norms regarding sexuality. Notably, there is little discussion of violence or other non-sexuality related potentially “dangerous” influences nor room for the possibility of people engaging with content they may not want to replicate in real life. Additionally, the infantilization of protecting “young minds” may seem particularly outrageous to shippers that are already adults – which many are.

Similarly, many conservative parents feel that books with queer themes in school are considered akin to pornography that will direct assault “the mental, emotional, and spiritual health of children” and are being used to brainwash children into radical leftist ideology of “gender theory” (CRA Staff). These parents feel that children will not be able to critically engage with the existence of what they consider problematic sexual depictions. Both groups – anti-shippers and book-banning anti-LGBTQ parents – have in common that they consider sexuality-related content to be far more dangerous than for example depictions of violence. Some fans commonly joke that anti-shippers are more concerned with a “problematic age gap” for a ship in the *Hannibal* fandom than the fact that the characters are (middle-aged) serial-killing cannibals. Both groups assume that preventing young minds from seeing such materials is the only solution, thus they share the same preferred method for protecting children.

Hays Code and Feminism

This focus on censorship is an example of a convergent development in which anti-shippers’ (social justice-inspired) attempt to create safe spaces parallels media censorship movements of the past, such as the infamous Hays Code of Hollywood in the 1930s which forbid, amongst other things, depictions of sex, “perversion” as well as murder, drug use, and

profanity (“You Mustn't Do That”). One post very accurately describes the state of shipping conflicts (fig. 22):



Fig. 22. A widely shared post criticizing a perceived rise of conservative “puritanism” in fan spaces with an added commentary of hashtags added by user erikalynae (Undeadhousewife). Due to the high popularity of the post, uncontroversial nature of its content and difficulty of re-wording it without losing relevant meaning, I have chosen to keep the original post for this publication.

This is a perfect encapsulation of the dual dynamics behind anti-shipper conflicts such as the anti-Reylo movement: “to girlboss” is a term associated with modern popular feminism. It technically means a successful woman (“Girlboss”), yet as Austin details, the term was established in 2014 (6) and “girlboss feminism” soon came to be understood as “a type of discourse that takes feminist rhetoric and ideas and simplifies them so they’re marketable on a mass scale” (5). This term is contrasted with a reference to the Hays Code, an informal name for the infamous production code in the entertainment industry that regulated what could and could not be shown on-screen between 1934 and 1968, strongly influenced by Catholic thought (Pollard 49).

Guidelines in the Hays Code are eerily similar to fears echoed in anti-Reylo sentiments as it stated that “Hollywood films [...] carried a ‘special Moral Responsibility’ in their role as entertainment” (Black 171). In line with early theories on the hypodermic needle, Hays believed that seeing bad behavior “dragged humanity down” and films should rather “provide spiritual and moral uplift to audiences” (Pollard 53). This does not always mean not depicting bad acts at all: As Black writes, “the code stressed that no film should create a feeling of

‘sympathy’ for the criminal” and should not ‘leave the question of right or wrong in doubt.’” (172). Similarly, many posts by anti-shippers argue that technically they are not advocating for censorship, rather they disapprove of shipping because problematic relationships need to be framed as abusive, rather than being promoted as good, similar to films under the Hays code.

In contrast to anti-Reylo argumentation, however, these films were meant to “uphold, not question or challenge, the basic values of society” (Black 172) – while anti-Reylos are concerned with patriarchal hegemonic structures of society, such as rape culture and toxic masculinity, that they are aiming to challenge and change, rather than uphold. This is a progressive, not conservative ideology. Additionally, while many users describe anti-shippers as conservative or reactionary, not only do they not want to maintain the status quo, they also do not revert back to the norms of the Hays code such as heteronormativity or traditional gender roles. Most anti-shippers are clearly supportive of LGBTQ representation or want to see women in lead roles who do not let men mistreat them. It seems dangerous to me to treat anti-shippers and “anti-woke” fans as if they want the same out of media just because they both intersect on wanting some depictions of sex and relationships censored.

Despite this really important difference, the perceived parallels in a concern with the morals taught by movies are similar enough to have inspired this post in fig. 22. The framing by its author supports my argument that such behavior is firmly rooted in feminist values taken too far. As the *Tumblr* users in fig. 22 observed, in their attempts to be progressive feminists, anti-shippers embody a similar view of the role of cinema as conservatives in the 30s to 60s. Accordingly, erikalynae does not take their feminism seriously but rather mocks it by characterizing it as “girlbossing”, something that merely looks feminist on the surface. This is further underlined by the memetic format of the phrase: It parallels the phrase “girlbossed a bit too close to the sun”: A term that spread on *TikTok* in 2021. As one blog details in reference to the term, by 2021 “girlboss movement seems to do the complete opposite of empowering

women by bolstering this dichotomy” (Hime). At the same time, the use of “we” implicates the author of the post – and in some way, everyone reblogging the post – as part of the problem: These *Tumblr* users seem to be acknowledging that they might be part of the problem by being too focused on a (superficial) performance of feminism and progressivism as part of their fan identities while at the same time enabling reactionary consequences, such as a (perceived) return to a form of the Hays code. While this post was not written specifically about the Reylo shipping conflict, it exemplifies the wider dilemma of anti-shipping trying to enact feminist progressivism through fan policing that only morally pure content should be consumed and created by fans, potentially due to a lack of other ways to enact their activism.

Additionally, perceptions of anti-shippers as anti-feminist may have arisen from shippers arguing from a defensive position that support for romance in a male-dominated action-franchise is another progressive and feminist change to *Star Wars* and its fan culture – potentially to appeal to the feminist values of *Tumblr* and transformational fan culture. Several Reylo shippers discuss how Reylo fits (as discussed previously) into the Romance genre and its derision due to fears of female sexuality. This is in line with how shipping is often seen as women, along other minorities, carving out space for their interests in male fan-dominated franchises where they can “re-imagine a narrative and create their own minor narratives out of the major source material for their own pleasures” (Parry 128).

For this reason, trying to control women’s interest in romance fantasies is seen as a reactionary attitude although it can also draw from feminism. One post for example claims that anti-shippers infantilize women the same way people in the 19th century thought women had to be shielded from reading novels, implying once again outdated views from a more sexist era. It is, however, necessary to point out that feminism has always been ambiguous in its stance on sexual content, such as pornography. This was particularly prominent in the 80s in which a moral panic arose in which anti-pornography feminists came to see it as “an evil force

that oppresses, brutalizes, and subjugates women”, leading to “denunciations by feminists of feminists” (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 224).

Such discussions were notably publicly revived after sexually explicit novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* rose to popularity (Comella) in the 2010s and thus fans are likely to have encountered anti-pornography feminist arguments before *TFA*. It is interesting to note here that both anti-shippers and those opposed to them conflate any support of a relationship with sexual content – despite neither the sequel trilogy nor most fan discourse or fan art being what could be considered “pornographic”, unlike *Fifty Shades of Grey*. At the same time, there is of course a general rise in sex-negative legislation online that may impact fans’ attitudes – although much of it was passed only after the height of the anti-Reylo backlash, such as *Tumblr*’s adult content ban in 2018. Nevertheless, the rise of sex-negative or anti-pornography feminism and legislation may have influenced the feminism enacted by anti-shippers.

Additionally, *Tumblr* users frequently draw parallels between shippers and trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF), another movement on the rise in the 2010s, which acknowledges the feminism of anti-shippers yet still frames them as “bad” fans that do not belong in transformational fandom. It remains unclear in any such post I have encountered how criticizing unhealthy relationships is related to transphobia. Contemporary radical feminism is mostly considered reactionary due to its intersection with transphobia and thus has gained support from conservatives to even far-right politicians and evangelical Christians (Libby). However, I have not encountered any transphobic attitudes in my Reylo case study nor in the literature on anti-shippers. Dismissing the more sex-negative attitude displayed in some anti-shipping argumentation as “TERF”-like seems to try to acknowledge its feminist roots and still preserve the idea of anti-shippers as the conservative Other that are performing progressive fandom incorrectly in order to conserve the idea of progressive fandom as good.

While the girlboss-comment underneath it was merely a popular response, the original post in fig. 22 accuses people using “the guise of progressivism” of “recreat[ing] puritanism” – an important concept in these shipping conflicts to describe the perceived ideology of anti-shippers from the perspective of Reylo shippers. Another post on *Tumblr*, a message dedicated to the “Puritan Community” there, begs users to leave people “free to love [their] favorite problematic characters/ships/relationships” because “[n]o one deserves to be called an 'abuse apologist' and feel guilty for enjoying something IN FICTION!” (An-angels-fury, emphasis original). The reference to being “abuse apologists” links the statement directly to several shipping conflicts – such as Reylo, which is also among the ships referred to in the hashtags of the post. The interesting part is that anti-shippers are addressed as a “Puritan Community” within *Tumblr* fan communities. It thus stands to ask what causes them to be perceived not merely as conservative but puritan(ical) specifically?

Demands for positive representation of relationships without “problematic” aspects has often mockingly been described within fan spaces as the rise of “puriteens” which appear very similar to how Reylo anti-shippers are described. This phenomenon is not limited to fan spaces although it likely originated there before spreading to other spaces. *Fanlore* suggests that the concept of a puriteen as “young fans (not always literal teenagers) who hold puritanical views about problematic ships and kinks” came about in the 2010s (“Puriteen”). It has since been applied to Gen Z more broadly. The *Rolling Stone* covered the term in 2021, explaining puriteens as “[extreme] online youth that is incensed by any display of sexuality on the internet” (Dickson) – no longer limiting this definition to fandom. While this statement may suggest puriteens to be a mainstream phenomenon, the author bases the article on a highly popular tweet with over 250k likes which covered specifically anti-shipping from the anime *My Hero Academia*. The author defines puriteens as generally anti-porn and anti-kink but pro-LGBTQ. *Urban Dictionary* similarly defines a puriteen as “[a]n online child who is deeply

uncomfortable with the sense that people online might present sexual characteristics and who proactively demands that people curtail behavior that they interpret as sexually suggestive” in a definition from 2021. What all given definitions share is the assumption that a puriteen or puritanical anti-shipper is generally very young – this seems to be supported by ethnographic studies, and prominently highlighted in the title of Larsen’s study of the *VLD* fandom: “It makes me, a minor, uncomfortable” (Emphasis mine) (Larsen). Both definitions also focus particularly on opposition to sexual content. *Urban Dictionary* understands the term more broadly while *Fanlore* specifies that it is particularly “problematic” relationships and kink content that fans are opposed to.

Fandom journalist Aja Romano even goes as far as to argue that “Puritanism took over online fandom — and then came for the rest of the internet”. I do, however, think this terminology is misleading. It associates anti-shipping with the past and an outdated version of Christianity, thus contributing to the framing of anti-shippers as conservatives or reactionaries. Romano argues that on social media, many users “see oversexualization in just about everything” which stems from anti-shipping discourses in fandom, particularly on *Tumblr*, in which social justice language and a “rise of “call-out culture”” in the 2010s led to harassment of those engaging with “problematic” relationships which eventually grew into what has now permeated social media: People “cry[ing] “gross” at everything from R-rated rom-coms to fictional characters and queer people having sex to consenting adults with slight age gaps to dating short people” (Romano). It is, however, not entirely clear what “puritanism” has to do with anti-shipping. It is likely associated with the colloquial meaning of puritanical as someone with “very strict moral principles” who “tr[ies] to make other people behave in a more moral way” (“Puritanical”). Additionally, it may conjure up the idea of witch hunts for which the Puritans were infamous. “Puritan witch-hunting” especially at Salem also led to the association of Puritanism with being a zealot (Gould 59).

It is likely that both the term *puriteen* and the associated behavior are associated more with “purity culture” rather than puritanism in the sense of early English Protestants. Natarajan et al. describe “purity culture” as “a popular subculture” within modern evangelical Christianity that “takes a strict biblical stance on sexual purity, teaching abstinence or chastity prior to heterosexual marriage” (316). This has been on the rise in the 2010s with “a surge in public attention to the culture of chastity, including purity balls, chastity clubs, and other public declarations of abstinence” (Fahs 116) which could have been something anti-shippers were confronted with in their lives.

Several *Tumblr* users have discussed how “puriteens” parallel the user’s own experience in fundamental Christian movements by considering the enjoyment of the “wrong” kind of media as the first step towards sin which required collective disapproval as a response. There are also some echoes of “abstinence only” education in the way fans demand that no one should see or think about potentially harmful relationships such as Reylo, even if tagged in a way that seeing it could be avoided. Evangelical Christians reject comprehensive sex education as it may encourage teenagers’ interest in sex or even “deviant sexuality” (Fahs 119). Similarly, fans knowing “problematic” content exists may lead them to become interested in it (according to anti-shippers).

Regarding purity culture, the clearest parallels are between anti-shippers and the doctrine of the Mormon or LDS (Latter Day Saints) church whose teachings on purity culture are in some ways more specific than broader Evangelical movements (Brady 24) – although these parallels remain limited to the question of thinking about sexuality in ways deemed immoral by the community. The LDS teachings emphasize the power of thoughts particularly strongly – compared to the focus on abstinence in Evangelical purity culture. As Brady writes, LDS purity culture also expects ““moral” purity such as pure thoughts, gendered marital roles, and modesty in dress, concepts that are not inherently sexual concepts themselves but often

become sexualized in purity frameworks” (12). The very similar idea of women needing to be protected from abuse by keeping their thoughts pure is prevalent in anti-shipping.

Notably, the parallel remains limited to the concept of pure thoughts while anti-shippers would be likely to reject such traditional marital gender roles: LDS marriages often expect women to be submissive to their husbands (Brady 34) and young women often marry older men (Brady 26) – ideas very much rejected by “puriteens” who are in favor of female empowerment and wary of problematic age gaps. As “the early 2000s” saw a rise of LDS (and Evangelical churches) purity culture with “a proliferation of new forms of highly accessible and easily circulated media to do so and with a particular focus towards young women” (Brady 121) in online spaces, it is likely that anti-shippers may have picked up such arguments on social media or been exposed to them in their daily life. The exposure of many Anglophone fans to American Evangelical / LDS “purity culture” merged with the secular sexual liberalism in fandoms, especially *Tumblr*, may encourage a new understanding not of all sexuality – as would be the case in “Purity culture” – but of sexuality, including merely romantic relationships, which deviates from the fan-cultural feminist norm, as harmful.

Silencing Strategies

Finally, ways of engagement commonly associated with reactionary online movements (such as the alt-right or Gamergate, Comicsgate, “Marysuegate” and other reactionary fan backlashes) can be found in anti-shipping. Such behaviors thus may evoke associations with these groups. Both reactionary movements and anti-shippers tend to employ “silencing strategies” to remove unwanted voices from online discourse, be it that of feminist video gaming fans or that of Reylo shippers. I have already given examples of Reylos being mocked – such as by the fanfiction described initially – or being threatened, declaring their potential deaths funny. Symbolic violence enacted against female fans through mocking and threats is often found in misogynist online movements – from *Twilight* anti-shippers (Strong) to

#Gamergate (K. Gray et al.) as it “helps to reproduce power relations between men and women” (Strong 3) – but interestingly, in women-dominated conflicts as well. As a consequence of the arguments leveled against shippers outlined above, anti-Reylo posts can go as far as to claim shippers deserve to die and often ridicule their behaviors or send death threats to shippers. As Lumsden and Morgan observe in their study of online trolling, “‘Silencing strategies’ attempt to remove the individual from participation in (online) public space (such as on social media sites), or dissuade them from engaging in further public debate” (2). In the case studies of Lumsden and Morgan, trolling works as a “a form of gendered and ‘symbolic violence’”, enacted by men against women in response to perceived threats to hegemonic patriarchal structures – however, in the case of shipping conflicts, it is likely that many perpetrators are women. Nevertheless, the association with online misogyny adds to anti-shippers being perceived as reactionary.

Silencing strategies that attempt to remove shippers from fan discourse may include not just explicit threats and harassment, but also ridicule of shippers’ posts by dedicated accounts. Similarly, Larsen observed that *Voltron* anti-shippers often employ “[v]iolent language [...] combined with humour” (59). Such threatening mockery poses a very effective silencing strategy as shippers risk gaining wider publicity and ridicule if their posts are shared on such blogs meant to mock them. Such behavior naturally results in shippers feeling unwelcome in fan spaces and thus becoming less visible contributors to the fan discourse. In the way threats against Reylos are couched in jokes, they also follow a similar strategy as the alt-right do: Alt-right extremist views “are marginalized through jokes, thereby rendering extreme right views as harmless” (Lamerichs et al. 182). This allows reasonable deniability that one does not truly espouse the views of one’s joke (Lamerichs et al. 182). As Greene observed, this “widened the “Overton window” of acceptable political discourse” (36). Similarly, these jokes about shippers

allow fan communities to shift the window of what views are acceptable and deny any real wish to cause harm when expressing jokes such as wanting to kill all Reylos.

Additionally, shared jokes strengthen the community among those laughing and increase the distance towards the objects of their mockery (Greene 41). However, while the behavior and purpose of the use of trolling as a silencing strategy is similar to misogynist movements, I did not encounter many similarities in content. Anti-Reylo jokes did usually not threaten rape or rely on sexism, racism, homophobia, or fat-shaming – unlike the jokes by reactionary fans in chapter 3. Most insulting jokes relied on their perceived lack of media literacy. Such silencing strategies as a gatekeeping strategy may primarily work to affirm and demonstrate anti-shippers' identity as a good fan– whereby they are good both in the moral sense, performing the values of progressive transformational fandom well, and in their level of media analysis skills, having presumably decoded the “problematic” aspects of the source material missed by shippers. While reactionary fandoms may value performances of “geek masculinity” (Massanari, *Participatory*), anti-shipping seems to value a form of what could be called “geek feminism”.

Although anti-shipping is not common in more anti-feminist or anti-“woke” spaces, they can overlap when it coincides with their agenda. The past has, for example, seen men join the *Twilight* anti-fandom, claiming “*Twilight* ruined Comic-Con” (Sheffield and Merlo 207). Sheffield and Merlo see this as “emblematic of a troubling gendered tendency to represent the (mostly) female *Twilight* fandom as unworthy of entry to traditional fan spaces” (207). Similarly, participants in reactionary fan backlashes discussed in chapter 3 as well as from broader anti-woke circles have been documented to use the anti-Reylo discourse to harass shippers (K.M.M.). K. M. M. in her blog post on “Systemic Hatred of Women Online” discusses how anti-shipping accusations about Reylo shippers engaging in racist harassment against John Boyega might have been used as an excuse by “anti-woke” fans to harass Reylo

shippers in fandom. She offers countless screenshots in which “alt-right accounts [...] began to frequently frame Reylos as mental cases”. She argues that particularly after the racist interactions of shippers with “Boyega’s Instagram”, “antis and alt-right circles [began] to attack Reylos on NSFW fanfiction and fanart written and drawn for and by women” under the guise of anti-racist activism. This fits with my observations of being in *Star Wars* fan spaces in 2018, although in my impression only a minority of anti-shipping posts overall originate from alt-right accounts. Nevertheless, it demonstrates how overlap in rhetoric can offer fertile ground for collaborations with anti-woke fans.

However, being publicly ridiculed is once again not a new phenomenon in fan spaces. Such silencing strategies using mockery or trolling seem to be more of a convergent development than borrowed from the alt-right. Fans used to engage in “MSTing” in the 1990s and early 2000s: The writing of a fanfiction with the sole intention to ridicule badly written texts or fanfiction (“MSTing”). As *Fanlore* summarizes this pastime that has since fallen out of favor in fan communities, those engaging in it used to “defend [MSTing] as helpful to people who want to improve their writing”. Those at the receiving end of it may not have felt like it was helping them, although the ire was with the writing, not the content or the morals of the author. Additionally, blogs were dedicated to identifying badly written “Mary Sues” (cf. also chapter 2; “The Mary Sue Report”): Once again, the mocking – even if it may be mean-spirited in nature – was about characters perceived as annoying and badly written stories. Contrast this with “a reylo fic” described in the introduction: It does not make fun of a specific piece of bad writing but a specific relationship that should not be supported, being thus more about the ideology of a text or fan practice. This illustrates that certain forms of anti-fan activism have not been brought into fandom by assumed “conservative intruders” but have merely evolved, in this case to become more politicized.

Additionally, shippers are silenced by creating negative associations with them, such as by associating them with taboos or disgust. This is also considered more reactionary leaning, although the “buzzwords” used differ significantly in most cases. In #Gamergate communities, reoccurring terms that are specific to the community “might serve as a kind of linguistic gatekeeping tool for communities” (Massanari and Chess 528). Similarly, in chapter 3 I have pointed out how reactionary YouTubers tend to use buzzwords such as “woke”, “feminism”, or “grooming” without further explanations as they are understood by their target audience. Aburime goes even further and argues that “[u]sing loaded language (e.g., “pedophilia”, “incest”) as reactionary buzzwords” as well as “rejecting critical thinking; using narratives of us versus them; only encouraging “pure,” unproblematic thoughts, as designated by the group” (“The Cult” 3) are examples of cult-like thought control enacted by anti-shippers, aligning them with fundamentalist religious groups. However, in Reylo anti-shipping there are recurring buzzwords which are either from the progressive political spectrum, such as racism, abuse or triggering, or draw from taboos shared across the political spectrum, such as incest and pedophilia. Thus, while the rhetorical strategy overlaps with reactionaries, the buzzwords draw from different ideologies.

One commonly used rhetorical strategy by anti-shippers is to attribute the behavior of individual users to the group as a whole. This is most extensively used for Reylos perceived to act racist – notably not a common taboo within reactionary communities. While this may resemble an ad hominem argument as well as guilt by association, it is generally not rooted in reactionary ideals but rather the social justice values of *Tumblr* fan cultures (discussed further in 4.5). Many users in call-out posts detail racist instances by individual Reylos, e.g. in a list of screenshots as proof. Additionally, many anti-shippers highlight harassment of the competing “Finnrey shippers” who would rather see Rey with fellow protagonist Finn as an example of all Reylo shippers being racist. Consequently, many posts use “Reylo is racist” as

a shorthand to argue for their opposition. However, the racist actions of individual users are frequently being conflated with the appeal of the ship generally when describing the relationship itself as inherently racist.

As racism is common in fan communities (Pande, “Get out”), this argument is only used as an additional supporting element why the relationship is bad. It is often linked to the question of why users would prefer what is perceived to be an abusive relationship (Reylo) over one that users assume would be healthy (Finnrey). Some users for example theorize that Reylos are attracted to an abusive relationship because of their “internalized racism”. While racism is likely to contribute to a preference for shipping white people in fan communities (Fazekas), it is an uncharitable reading that does not consider the things that are actually appealing to shippers discussed previously in 4.1 as if the poster cannot imagine that relationships with power imbalances are widely popular. Additionally, linking anti-shipping to anti-racist activism frequently leads to real concerns about racism being ignored, as “critiques of systemic racism” in fan culture become conflated with anti-shipping “even if fans making them do not follow the modes of anti behavior”. This leads to anti-racist fans being framed as “an existential threat” to fan culture (Pande, “Get out” 115). This thus delegitimizes discussions of racist behaviors in fandom by tying it into a ship war. Yet using racism as a shorthand to show the perceived immorality of shippers allows anti-shippers to frame shippers as outsiders by referring to the shared progressive values of transformational fan culture as well as to performatively enact progressive anti-fan activism.

Furthermore, anti-shippers often center their own negative emotions, particularly disgust and being reminded of trauma, to create negative associations with shippers. They position Reylo as a potential trigger as another appeal to the social justice ethos common to transformational fandoms. Creating a safe space is important to progressive and transformational fan cultures. Appeals to being “triggered” was the main pattern of criticism

in *Voltron: Legendary Defender (VLD)* shipping conflicts observed by Larsen in their titular thesis “It makes me, a minor, uncomfortable” (emphasis mine). Similarly, some blogs document how seeing Reylo reminds them of their own experiences of abuse and even triggers their PTSD. This is once again similar to the *VLD* anti-shipping observed by Larsen who quotes one anti-shipper explaining that “survivors of pedophilia have the right to tell you that doing that is extremely disrespectful and disgusting” (51). Similarly, one anti-shipper writes about the kiss scene in *TROS* telling survivors the harmful message that their abuse was romantic and that it was their job to redeem a bad person with their love – despite the two characters not being in a romantic relationship. The association between personal hurt and disgust to morality bears some resemblance to reactionary argumentation. For example, in earlier debates on homosexuality feelings of disgust were frequently used as a justification for why it was considered immoral (Caswell and Sackett-Fox). Thus, especially in queer-friendly fan communities, argumentations based in disgust may seem threatening and reactionary.

Another strategy of appealing to feelings of disgust and drawing on not just progressive values but widespread cultural taboos are references to pedophilia (as discussed under *Protecting Children*) and incest (as also pointed out by Aburime). At first glance, the incest argument’s initial popularity does not seem far-fetched: Rey’s heritage is initially unknown and, given the movies’ strong focus on the Skywalker family, a potential familial connection was a reasonable fan theory widely discussed. To give just one example, *CinemaBlend* states shortly before the release of *The Last Jedi* that the “single most obvious and strongest theory is that Rey is the daughter of Luke Skywalker” (Wood). However, anti-shippers often took this fan theory for granted and used it as the quickest argument to explain why Reylo was bad: The abuse aspect was, as illustrated previously, often detailed, while that incest was bad was just a given that needed no further explanations. Notably, unlike the already discussed pedophilia taboo, incest is not a common reactionary buzzword.

Additionally, little evidence of incest arguments exists anymore as several blogs and posts were taken down. We can even look to the previously discussed fanfiction “a reylo fic” by treezie which according to both *Fanlore* (“Reylo”) and my own archived version of this (Wurst, “Every Generation”) once included the hashtag “#U kno this is a bad ship bc of the #Incest #and general badstuff right”. It does not include this any longer. As the account only has a single fanfiction uploaded, it is likely a so-called “burner account” created only for single use. Still, the author went to the effort of logging back into this account only created for this specific parody fanfiction to delete the tags. Similarly, many *Tumblr* users deleted their posts or whole blogs that based their arguments on this incest theory. This suggests they might have felt a sense of embarrassment and may have honestly believed in an incestuous relation between the two characters and not wanted to spread false accusations. In any case, Reylo is not an isolated example of anti-shipping using incest-accusations. Once again, we can find strong similarities with *VLD* in which participants talked about how anti-shippers deemed that “[i]f characters are “like siblings” it’s suddenly exactly as bad as incest.” (Drouin 62) which meant everyone who liked the relationship in question and even the researcher herself were “labelled [...] a pedophile or a supporter of incest” (Drouin 43). This suggests that the disgust likely predates the perceived taboo and that a taboo needs to be found to encourage others to share the anti-shippers’ disgust, even if there are not any actual taboos, such as incest, being broken.

4.4: “Abuse Apologists Who Support Rape”: Anti-Shippers Draw From Rising Socio-Cultural Tensions In The #MeToo-Era

I have so far outlined (and to a degree deconstructed) parallels between the Reylo anti-shippers and reactionary movements. I will now argue why it is heavily influenced by progressive ideals, both from larger culture and *Tumblr* fan activism. Starting with the larger feminist cultural

context, *The Force Awakens* being released in late 2015 and other notorious anti-shipping conflicts, such as the previously mentioned *Voltron: Legendary Defender* which was released in 2016, rising to popularity in the late 2010s, suggest that this is likely tied to broader social movements. I argue in chapter 2 that fan conflicts happen when socio-political disruptions can be mapped well onto a textual disruption. Reylo seems to offer a similar projection space, this time not for its disruptions but rather for embodying established elements of patriarchal and fan culture. Reylo is a new popular ship with elements that have become highly salient in the 2010s with its rise of popular feminism (see chapter 2), particularly to feminist fans (as are commonly found on *Tumblr* as I will discuss in 4.5; cf. Hannell), such as rape culture, toxic masculinity, and dealing with trauma. It thus lends itself to feminist negotiations.

Rape Culture and Toxic Masculinity

Anti-shipping debates are frequently concerned with male sexual violence against women. Gilkeson in her analysis of Reylo discussions in the *Star Wars* messaging board *Jedi Council Forums*, for example, found that arguments such as the idea of Rey being “mind raped” (158) in the interrogation with Kylo Ren regularly come up. In this scene, Rey is tied to a chair and Kylo Ren tries to extract information from her mind using the Force. He tells her that he can take whatever he wants from her. While some fans “perceived [...] sexual tension between the two characters” in this scene, “others read the scene as being coded as a sexual assault” with even director J.J. Abrams having “similarly characterized what Kylo Ren does to Rey as a telepathic rape” (166). Consequently, this scene is also prevalent in many of my archived posts that explain why Reylo is abusive.

Anti-shippers are both worried about fans misreading this scene as romantic and not recognizing the “villainous toxic masculinity” displayed by Kylo Ren (Gilkeson 162), implying shippers to be naive in regard to understanding recent conversations about consent and gender roles. Anti-Reylos in *Tumblr* discourse commonly refer to this specific scene, often aligning it

with a lack of critical media literacy, thereby implying a causal relationship between being unable to decode abusive behavior on screen and suffering sexual assault in real life: Shippers are frequently warned that without proper education they may end up being (sexually) abused – once again weaponizing a purportedly pedagogical intent. This need for an education is often supported using authorial intent, given the Abrams statement quoted above, as supporting evidence to read the interrogation scene as rape and thus to frame the shippers as unable to decode the scene in question. Both the user asserting that shippers need to “get an education” and the feigned concern for shippers potentially being raped as they may be unable to recognize warning signs of an “abusive relationship” strongly imply that shippers are only interested in the relationship because they do not understand it and are unable to recognize what is being shown on screen as sexual abuse.

Notably, no distinction between actual rape and metaphorical “mind rape” is being made, rather treating a metaphor as identical to the situation it is depicting. Anti-shippers recognize the metaphor but do not engage with the difference between fiction and reality despite their claims to superior media literacy. At the same time, I want to highlight that ultimately Rey ends up invading Kylo Ren’s mind, albeit in a form of self-defense, complicating the reading of her being simply a victim which is left out of all discussions of the scene I have seen. These observations fit with Aburime’s argument that anti-shippers often cherry-pick the aspects they are worried will impact audiences. Additionally, the source text and what shippers imagine are frequently conflated. Many anti-shippers link the enjoyment of a potential future relationship between the two characters with the idea of wanting abuse to happen to Rey, based on a scene from the source text, not actual shippers’ fantasies.

The anti-Reylo discourse is likely to have been fueled by an increased awareness of feminist issues such as rape culture and toxic masculinity to which several posts refer. The 2010s also saw a re-evaluation of the classic romances whose pattern Reylo fits. As Gilkeson

discusses in her thesis, “through a modern lens of gender equality Discourse and the Conversation about rape culture, it is difficult to ignore the issue of lack of consent in [stories such as *Beauty and the Beast*]” (132) that were previously consumed uncritically. Given that I surveyed *Tumblr* posts and Gilkeson wrote about message board posts, discussions of “rape culture” are widespread in anti-Reylo discourse, even across platforms. “Rape culture” describes “cultural practices that reproduce and justify the perpetration of sexual violence” (Rentschler 67) and was already introduced in 1975 (66), yet only gained prominence through online culture such as *Tumblr*, with social media “serv[ing] as a key source of feminist education and activist terminology beyond the classroom” (67) since the 2010s. While Rentschler points out how activist social media users were using this term in 2013, it only gained mainstream recognition later. It is hard to define a moment when “rape culture” and “toxic masculinity” entered mainstream discourse, but *Google Trends* in fig. 23 provides a rough indication:

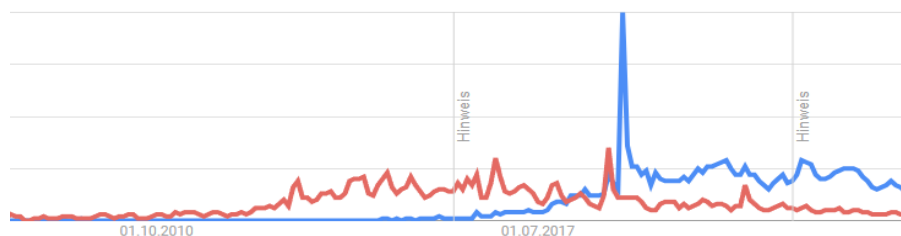


Fig. 23. *Google Trends* results for “toxic masculinity” (blue) and “rape culture” (red) with the peaks between late 2018 and early 2019

(Transformational) fandom has often consisted of “early adopters”, particularly of digital technologies, and been considered “pioneers in use of the Internet” (Fiesler 736). This similarly applies to social issues. Particularly fanfiction writers often challenge taboos and issues of gender or sexuality long before mainstream literature or political discourse engage with these, something that “used to be the job of the avant garde” (Grossman). This is well illustrated by fanfiction-turned-bestseller *Fifty Shades Of Grey* helping BDSM and erotica literature become a topic of mainstream conversation (Deller and Smith), as well as its

problematic depictions thereof (which I will discuss later). Consequently, it is likely that segments of fandom were highly aware of and discussing issues of rape culture and toxic masculinity in 2016 before they entered mainstream discussion in 2018.

Additionally, there was the spread of hashtag movement #MeToo in October 2017 which “encouraged members of the public to join in to showcase the magnitude of the problem of sexual violence” and “was used 12 million times in the first 24 hours alone” (Mendes et al. 236). Such engagement levels demonstrate both the widespread public acceptance of addressing these issues and may have brought these to even more people’s attention. Reylo discourse can be placed firmly between the beginning of “rape culture” discussions starting in 2013 and its mainstreaming between 2017 and 2018 (see fig. 23). This supports anti-shipping, arising in the mid-2010s, to be a result of growing social tensions and feminist awareness.

This heightened awareness of rape culture as a part of online discourse likely contributed to anti-shippers reacting particularly negatively to the notion that shippers may “support rape” and has given fan activism a new direction to go in. At the same time, this heightened awareness of countering “rape culture” as a feminist issue may have supported further polarization of the conflict, with shippers who are themselves opposed to rape culture reacting offended to the notion that they are “abuse apologists” who support rape. This may have incentivized painting anti-shippers as a dangerous “intruder” to fandom. Some shippers have argued that arguments by anti-shippers feel like a personal attack, particularly considering many have experienced abuse themselves and would thus never condone it. Such shippers’ accounts demonstrate an openness to talk about their own experiences with sexual abuse just as many users in the #MeToo hashtag did. Such online-activist feminist movements are likely to have contributed to the importance of discussing sexual abuse which is also displayed in (anti-)Reylo discourse.

Trauma and Trigger Warnings

Many shippers being open about their own traumatic experiences is in line with another contemporary development likely to have shaped anti-shipping conflicts: The broader importance of dealing with trauma. It is not uncommon for fans on sites such as *Tumblr* to have an earlier awareness of issues of social justice than mainstream public discourse as the site is strongly tied to activist culture and has coined or popularized several terms and ideas, such as “trigger warnings”: Lothian argues “trigger warnings” originated in fanfiction culture and later were popularized by the “flowering of social justice discourse on Tumblr” (744). From there, they found their way to college campuses, schools, and other educational settings. “Campus trigger warnings are statements cautioning individuals that they are about to be exposed to content in readings, classes, films or speeches they may find upsetting”, potentially due to past trauma, although many studies found that “trigger warnings had trivial effects” (Nietzel). Nevertheless, the development and spread of trigger warnings highlights the increased awareness of accommodating those with trauma in the 2010s which encouraged a line of thinking that potentially triggering content should be avoided at all costs, as anti-shippers are trying to enforce.

Additionally, in line with the awareness for those with traumatic experiences, many posts mention one exception to when Reylo shipping would be acceptable: as a coping mechanism. Several anti-Reylo blogs also prominently feature this exception in their headers. This attention to potential exceptions aligns with an increasing awareness of trauma in modern feminism and the idea of safe spaces for marginalized communities, but also with the rise of performative activism and its trend towards call-out culture. Lothian observes a rise in discussions about trigger warnings at universities and argues that “trigger warnings became a stand-in for the rise of a student-activist generation whose emphasis on sensitivity seemed to exemplify the neoliberal individualization and depoliticization endemic to contemporary capitalism” (743) in their article from 2016. With this argument, Lothian refers to a blog post

by queer theorist Jack Halberstam who is highly critical of “LGBT youth becom[ing] hypersensitive to all signs and evidence of the abuse about which they have learned” due to an activist culture focused on safe spaces and trigger warnings above dismantling systems of oppression (Halberstam). Halberstam observed an increasing tendency of activists to “call each other out” and police the use of problematic language in 2014, instead of trying to tackle the origins of oppression. The rise of anti-Reylo anti-fan activism fits perfectly within this social shift and with the rise of “call out culture” on *Tumblr* (Nagle 11; McCracken et al. 64). Anti-shipping, on the one hand, embodies the rise of (performative) call-out culture in activist spaces and the policing of what can be said (or written or read in this case) in lieu of engaging for systemic change. On the other hand, it embodies the increasing activist efforts of accommodating survivors of trauma – in this case, not by offering trigger warnings but by making exceptions for users who may have experienced abuse themselves. Anti-shipping may thus be an expression of acknowledging societal problems but lacking adequate means to dismantle them.

Additionally, the willingness to condone Reylo shipping if it is done by abuse victims can also be tied to the rise of the #ownvoices movement of the late 2010s, thus reflecting a shift in activist attitudes towards not only what should (not) be represented in entertainment but also placing greater emphasis on “by whom”. The *Twitter* hashtag #OwnVoices was created in September 2015 and in the words of its creator it “is for recommending books with characters from a marginalised group written by an author from that same marginalised group” (Jo). Although, as Schey points out, “it has been useful for disrupting white, cis het publishing norms” (5), the movement has been criticized for a number of problems, among them forcing “queer authors, trans authors, disabled authors, and authors who are survivors of sexual violence” to be “compelled to reveal one’s identity and other personal information” to prove for example if they are indeed queer themselves (5).

Similarly, accepting previous abuse as an excuse to enjoy Reylo can potentially force shippers into revealing private information: When blogs make exceptions only for “survivors” who need a “coping mechanism”, this leads users to having to discuss their own experience with sexual abuse. Many users complain about how it forces them to make their experiences public to avoid harassment. Similarly, for *Voltron* fans, Drouin’s survey revealed that in the case of *VLD*, “survivors of child sexual assault” felt like “their traumas are being used in ways that harm them instead of protect them” by anti-shippers using this argument (65). Such forced outings as victims of abuse work in opposition to the safe space that anti-shipping and “coping exceptions” want to achieve.

Furthermore, this form of activism is frequently perceived as patronizing, with many shippers stating that they want to see an abusive person becoming redeemed. Consequently, there is a second conflict going on beneath the question of what media can be morally consumed: Who gets to speak for a marginalized community? Many Reylo shippers, particularly after *TROS*, engaged in their own activism: With hashtags such as #BenSoloDeservedBetter, many popular tweets emphasized the importance of Kylo Ren being able to live as a redeemed version, using his birth name Ben Solo again, after he sacrificed his own life to save Rey, in order to give hope to abuse victims. Descriptions like “abuse victim” refer to the fact that Kylo Ren is frequently read by fans of his character as someone with a traumatic childhood: He was separated from his parents at a young age to train with Luke Skywalker who broke his trust by thinking about killing his nephew to prevent him from turning to the dark side. As Dorsi explains, Kylo Ren shows “symptoms such as depression, anxiety, loss of interest in activities, extreme emotional reactions, irritability, anger, violence, and inability to cope with stressful situations” typical for someone with trauma. His master Snoke also mistreats him, demonstrating that he “doesn’t actually care about him” by “often us[ing] harsh words and the Force to belittle Kylo” (Dorsi).

Most notably, Snoke already seduced Kylo to the dark side when he was a young child, thus making him relatable as a metaphorical victim of “grooming” to many fans. Many fans feel like his family failed to protect him adequately and that it is wrong to blame a child for the abuse it has suffered. This argumentation is frequently made by shippers, for example, in a petition with 26k supporters asking for a continuation of Kylo Ren’s / Ben Solo’s story (Alexis H.) linking the relationship and message, arguing that Kylo Ren / Ben Solo “was a victim of abuse, manipulation and deserved a happy ending” as well as “to make a balance with Rey and be with her as they are each other's happiness”. Such associations between his death and the Reylo ship imply that a happy ending would have sent the message that people can change for the better, with survivors seeing this as a particularly important message for abuse victims.

As a result, exposure to the Reylo conflict, both the arguments by anti-shippers as well as defenses by shippers, strengthens the credo common to modern fan spaces within the last decade that representation of marginalized experiences should only be created (or in this case: consumed) by those who visibly belong to that group, implicitly enforcing a policy to reveal sensitive personal information (or lie about it) in order to participate in the discourse. In this regard, anti-shipping follows contemporary patterns of progressive movements developing in unproductive directions, such as with the #OwnVoices movement: Both movements try to enact systemic changes by focusing on individual’s habits of text production and consumption, trying to control who gets to speak / write and what can ethically be consumed – which is comparatively easy to do via “call out culture” but can easily backfire (as the examples show).

4.5. “Pros of Reylo: None”: Anti-Shipping Draws from the Values and Language of Social Justice Activism on *Tumblr*

Given the previous chapters, one could have assumed that opposition to Reylo and its mostly female fans (as shipping is typically associated with women’s fandom, cf. Mueller 56) may

mostly originate from men or “anti-woke” fans. The Reylo conflict, however, illustrates that being part of progressive fan communities does not mean that there is no conflict among these fans. Anti-Reylo discourse is prevalent on *Tumblr* and among transformational fans on *Twitter*. Transformational fans – which tend to skew female and progressive (Lothian et al.) – may often learn feminist ideals (Hannell) and open-mindedness regarding different expressions of sexuality (Meggers) from participating in shipping. Particularly transformational fandom on *Tumblr*, although some authors acknowledge that there is hateful content on the platform “alongside progressive activism”, is generally portrayed as “a space that facilitates ‘social justice’ and works toward the acceptance (however fraught) of minority identities and communities” (Hoch 77). Consequently, *Tumblr* fan communities are usually regarded as an example of “beautiful” fandom. At the same time, they may learn how to legitimize cyberbullying as a form of social activism from anti-shipping (Drouin 60), complicating the idea of a progressive transformational fandom as a space where fans learn about “social justice” in ways that should be encouraged. Anti-shippers, however, embody many of the ideals of *Tumblr* culture and do not typically appear as outsiders with conflicting ideologies.

Tumblr and Identity Politics

Social justice activism online is closely tied to the popularity of *Tumblr* and its fan communities. *Tumblr* is a so-called micro-blogging platform that is particularly popular with fans (McCracken et al.) as well as marginalized groups, such as the “youth, LGBTQ+ and nonbinary persons, people of color, progressives and activists, feminist and queer fans” (2). The platform allows for long text posts as well as many other types of media that are often combined into a multimodal form of communication, which allows for more in-depth conversations than *Twitter*. *Tumblr* is well-known for being central to transformational fan communities – the app’s official slogan in the Apple and Play Store as of 2023 being “Fandom, Art, Chaos” – as well as its social activism. McCracken et al. describe it as a “space for the

development of, for example, Black feminist theory, LGBTQ+/nonbinary identity formation, disability and chronic pain collectivities, critical media culture, and alternative body erotics and porn” (3) in the introduction to their edited collection on *Tumblr* as a platform and its culture. Their collection explains why *Tumblr* has been “defined by many of its users and the media as the “social justice” platform” (9) – a huge part of which were closely tied to “[m]edia fandom and fan practices” (10).

Nagle in her exploration of the alt-right also highlights the fundamental role of *Tumblr* in shaping online culture but also promoting forms of mostly performative activism. She argues that the alt-right grew “in popularity in response to the expanding identity politics of more feminine spaces like Tumblr” (21). *Tumblr* users are often seen by the (alt-)right as “Social Justice Warriors” and “snowflakes” (62), who are too focused on safe spaces and the “recognition of multiple varieties of intersecting marginalizations and oppressions” (62). This *Tumblr* activism is characterized by “its own vocabulary and style” which often focuses on “[s]ymbolic representative diversity” (62). One central aspect of “identity politics” as enacted on *Tumblr* is that fans’ own identities become political. Similarly, their fan identities also need to express “identity political” values, i.e. what one ships is what one endorses.

The influence of *Tumblr* and its brand of “social justice activism” can be seen in several anti-shipping posts. As I have discussed in 4.2, anti-shippers are often perceived and described by other fans as conservatives. However, many clearly display *Tumblr*-style progressive values that could even be called “woke” in the sense of displaying the kind of overzealous and judgmental progressive activism that fans in my other chapters claimed to be opposed to. While reactionary fans in chapters 2 and 3 felt like their fan experiences were threatened by the existence of content they dislike, many anti-shippers indeed want to exclude those they disagree with from the fan space. It is important to acknowledge that a person may hold conflicting values, such as being more liberal when it comes to feminism and LGBTQ issues

and more conservative regarding pornography. Furthermore, it is likely that there are conservative fans on both sides of the shipping war, particularly as Reylo is not a queer relationship but, as discussed previously, one following patterns of popular mainstream heterosexual romances. Thus, it is unlikely to only appeal to progressive shippers.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that anti-Reylos are generally progressive to “woke” in the sense of overly focused on identity politics: They advocate for social change to make society more equal and improve the lives of people of marginalized identities, often addressing issues of social justice in their explanations of why they oppose the relationship. One highly popular *Tumblr* post with over 42k interactions discusses the pros and cons of different relationships possible in the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy:



Fig. 24. A *Tumblr* post by Lesbianmichelmishina contrasting the ships of “Finnrey”, “Stormpilot” and “Reylo”. Due to the popularity, uncontroversial nature, and specific wording of this post, it has not been anonymized.

Notably, the arguments in fig. 24 emphasize not much about the characters themselves but rather focus on the political significance of these couples potentially becoming “canon”, i.e. being depicted in a relationship on screen. This argument very much follows the idea of “identity politics” (as discussed in the introduction) mattering more to social justice-oriented fans than a good narrative – the very accusations held by “anti-woke” fans in chapter 3: Positive aspects include anti-racism and upsetting “racist fanboy”s, an inversion of gender roles, and

good gay representation that includes gay people who do “not die”, referring to the over 125 years old trope of queer characters being more likely to die than experience a happy ending (Hulan 6).

I highlight this post not only for its wide support by *Tumblr* users but also because it does the opposite of the “anti-woke” videos discussed in the previous chapter, whose creators were opposed to diverse representation understood as more women, people of Color and queer people on screen. Rather, it is likely that the “racist fanboys” mentioned in this post refers to such popular social media personalities as the YouTubers from chapter 3, which this user paints as the enemy that should have a reason to be “screaming”. They clearly do not want to be associated with or identify as “anti-woke”. Rather, they highlight “identity political” arguments. While Reylo is not actively discouraged here, it is notably seen as having “no” pros due to it being a heteronormative relationship between two white people. Such posts highlight the importance of ships to be politically significant in transformational fan communities as found on *Tumblr*. Over 42k reactions suggest that there is indeed a high rate of resonance within the *Tumblr* fan community. Thus, the Reylo case study demonstrates that not all fan conflicts happen along left vs. right lines and that we should not think of transformational fandom as a cohesive and progressive utopian fan community where all antagonistic fans are “anti-woke” reactionaries²⁵.

Activist and Academic Language

In addition to anti-Reylo posts often being associated with progressive political ideology and issues, they also use terms and concepts more associated with academic leftist discourse: for example, discussing concepts of internalized misogyny, white feminism or more generally the power of popular culture to influence us. In a post mocking the idea that Reylo

²⁵ This notion has of course also been called into question because of the widespread racism in progressive fandom which is not as central to this case study. (e.g. Pande, “Get out”)

anti-shippers are “anti-feminist”, one user for example refers to concepts from progressive activism such as being against homophobia. Specifically, this user aligns themselves as an anti-Reylo within a feminist debate by mocking that shippers unfairly perceive anti-Reylos as “anti-feminist” by using the term in scare quotes. They further align anti-shippers with not only opposition to racism or homophobia but also to “transparent white feminism”. The distinction between intersectional and white feminism suggests that the user not only has an advanced understanding of feminism but also expects the importance of intersectional feminism to be something other users will agree upon, naming it as one of many obvious reasons to oppose Reylo. This is in line with *Tumblr*’s aforementioned strong focus on intersectionality and feminist awareness among its userbase.

The post also does not explain the activist keywords it uses and how they relate to Reylo. The terms thus seem to function as an argument of their own similar to the representation benefits of the post I previously discussed. Additionally, the use of such key terms may be about signaling their belonging in the “social justice” fan space of *Tumblr*. As Barnes argues, online participation in political discourse can be a “tool of identity performance” (69) where users say things they think are expected of someone with their political alignment in order to “feel, or imagine, [themselves] as part of a collective of other like-minded people” (38). This further supports my earlier point on shipping becoming politicized as what one ships is being considered identical to what one endorses. Barnes further argues that in such identity performance, “dislike is a powerful expression of identity” as well as a way to establish “an ‘us’ and a ‘them’” (66). Particularly newer fans may see signaling their membership through such anti-shipping activist posts where they distance themselves from “them” (the “bad” shippers) as a way to establish that they are part of the in-group, the pre-existing social justice-oriented fan community on *Tumblr* and in other transformational fan

spaces. Thus, performance of identity through anti-shipping signals belonging rather than intentional disruption of the fan community as some scholars have argued.

Additionally, the central concept of conflict, the question whether or not Reylo is “romanticization” or “normalization” of abuse draws heavily from Media and Cultural Studies, both in language and concepts. As I discussed in the introduction, these fields focus on how representation on screen is shaped by hegemonic structures and in turn can reinforce them. Particularly anti-shippers draw from academic language and theory to support their stance and potentially dissuade shippers from their reading by educating them. Many anti-shippers in their posts on why Reylo is “problematic” display elements of academic critical media analysis, complete with references. They, for example, describe anecdotes and reference studies that demonstrated tangible effects of media consumption on society, such as that TV show *13 Reasons Why* led to increasing suicide rates, thus appealing to academic expertise. They also detail scenes in the sequel trilogy that qualify as abusive behavior with the intention to raise awareness of how fiction can normalize abusive behavior so that it becomes seen as normal or romantic – much in the same way critical analyses in the humanities highlight the cultural work a text does and how it may contribute to normalizing certain aspects of society.

Weaponized Pedagogy

Even posts that do not provide analyses of the source text regularly use words such as “normalization”, “romanticization” or “glorification”, such as when referring to behavior by shippers specifically – often with the argument that anti-shippers fear the normalization of abusive relationships. Shipping is frequently argued to not just condone but even glorify abuse. The lack of further explanations of how it achieves that highlights the self-explanatory value placed on these terms. This type of argument positions the anti-shippers as epistemic authorities and is much more in line with the leftist video essays discussed in chapter 3 than typical reactionary anti-fan discourse. Notably, no distinction is made whether shippers want to see

the relationship on screen or merely in fanfiction or whether they imagine an abusive relationship with power imbalances or one in which Kylo Ren has returned to the light side of the Force and made amends for his crimes – all different ways shippers may engage with the relationship. Shippers often veer away from the source material, e.g. when they write same-sex romances between heterosexual characters. Despite the limited relevance of canon, i.e. the source text, to shipping, many arguments are based solely on textual analyses of the movies. The idea of a “glorification of abuse” suggests that the mere act of imagining someone who has committed abuse to be in a romantic relationship is equivalent to portraying those acts in a positive light. Using sophisticated sounding language such as “glorification” instead of explaining how shipping would contribute to shippers experiencing abuse themselves allows anti-shippers to position themselves as speaking from authority without having to present a strong argument themselves. The language and academic approach used by some anti-Reylo posts does not fit the idea of anti-shippers as uneducated in the ways of platform culture, but rather as people who have at least some superficial if not potentially in-depth knowledge of – potentially even acquired informally on *Tumblr* – critical theories and liberation movements.

In line with their seemingly educated status regarding social justice activism, anti-shipping posts frequently imply that shippers are in need of an education. Many anti-Reylo arguments assume that shippers lack media literacy – which may for example be needed to recognize abusive behavior and realize that it is wrong, as discussed in the previous paragraph. A need to educate shippers is often given as legitimation of ridiculing them – something that can be described as “weaponized pedagogy”. Some posts about shippers lacking “the most basic understanding” of media analysis received unusually high interaction rates of over 120.000 interactions. This suggests that many users on *Tumblr* agree with the sentiment. In such argumentation, anti-shippers are generally framed as superior in analysis while shippers are presented needing “an education” or as people who should have paid more attention to their

English teachers. Consequently, performing seemingly superior analytical skills and media literacy knowledge is used as a fan-policing strategy.

However, particularly the superficial appeals to academic concepts make anti-shippers appear like people who do not fully grasp the concepts they are using. This suggests the importance of appearing educated and versed in critical cultural analysis skill for anti-shipping even if only by the use of buzzwords. This is more typical for left-leaning activism. As discussed in chapter 3, reactionary fans tend to reject academic frameworks. Nevertheless, the argument that better media literacy would mean Reylo shippers would not exist is of course completely wrong – as discussed in 4.1., Reylo shippers justify the relationship specifically by drawing from thematic analyses, written down in meta essays similar to academic analysis. This could be attributed to a lack of engaging with Reylo shippers. Still, treating metaphors such as “mind rape” (see 4.3) and potential fantasies shippers might have as akin to real depictions of abuse that will influence audiences just as much as mental health or LGBTQ representation in TV shows does, does not suggest a sophisticated understanding of how media works – it does however suggest understanding the cultural impact of media, in line with contemporary social justice activism.

Representation Matters

Given the generally social justice-aware *Tumblr* user base and anti-Reylo community, it is not surprising that anti-shipping concerned with the prevention of abuse has become popular specifically on *Tumblr*: “Representation matters” is a central credo of fan activism (Fisher 155) on the platform, often encouraging fans to create fanart of characters of Color or re-imagine them as queer (Klink et al.). Fan activism has for example rallied for shows to include more queer characters, particularly those that are happy and alive (Bourdaa), or for casting more actors of color with the racebending movement (Lopez 440). Central to all of this is the belief that “healthy human development” includes “the need to see oneself represented

in the larger culture” (N. Collier et al. 582). “The absence of such ‘mirroring’ of the self [in fiction] can lead to low self-esteem and shame, particularly within minority populations” who share a similar identity (582). This credo has even been picked up for marketing strategies, for example in “Netflix’s succinctly named Representation Matters Collection” (Jackson 18). Thus, fans on *Tumblr* frequently learn that it is important to pay attention to the way fiction can impact reality and to rally around this.

Notably, the anti-fan activism displayed in anti-shipping is a logical reversal of the “representation matters” credo: Instead of advocating for the inclusion of queer characters or characters of Color, they advocate for the exclusion of content they deem harmful. This, anti-shippers frequently argue, will prevent people from thinking that abusive relationships are normal and acceptable. This is often directly linked to the positive impact of representation. One anti-shipper, in an essay on why Reylo is abusive, for example, argues that the TV show *Will and Grace* as well as the musical *Rent* changed Americans’ attitudes towards same-sex relationships because of their LGBTQ characters and plots. These texts illustrate why representation has a considerable impact. Thus, the reverse must also be true for “bad” representation – which they also support with examples such as *13 Reasons Why* impacting suicide rates or *Fifty Shades of Grey* abuse rates.

The anti-Reylo conflict on whether liking this relationship could lead to fans condoning or experiencing abusive behavior centers a central dilemma in fan activism: The limits to which fiction can influence reality. While “social justice” and fan activist culture emphasize that media, especially representation, has an impact, the line of argumentation that seeing something on screen will result in an imitation of that behavior has been criticized as following the “hypodermic needle” theory (see 4.3). However, as transformational fan practices such as shipping and fanfiction demonstrate, fans frequently dismiss the intended reading of a text and rather make it conform to their own interests and purposes (obsession_inc). One should assume

(transformational) fans are thus highly aware that the relationship between fiction and reality is much more complex than “monkey see, monkey do”.

However, in anti-shipping, argumentation often seems to follow a “hypodermic needle” logic. In relation to *Twilight*, which has faced similar criticisms as Reylo, Strong describes it as “a suggestion of an unproblematic cause and effect relationship, whereby teenage girls who like [the text] will uncritically take on board ‘the message’” (8) and want a boyfriend like *Twilight*’s Edward Cullen. Similarly, such a discourse is also found beyond feminist fandom, for example when, despite the “current state of evidence, violent video games cannot be said to cause aggressive behavior” after over three decades of research, the media, law and even psychologists still “continue to blame video games for violence” (Gallar and Ferguson 198). In the same vein, many anti-shippers express worries that seeing Reylo shipping will make people think abusive relationships are normal – which follows a similar logic of “uncritically taking on the message”. This makes anti-shipper logic appear outdated.

However, Strong’s argument that anti-shippers assume a direct “cause and effect relationship” (8) implies that anti-shippers hold a naive understanding of media texts and their effects on audiences. That is at odds with the references to academic studies and media analysis frameworks frequently used in arguments. Additionally, anti-shipping is meant to police a relationship that only exists in fan spaces and not on screen – particularly during the beginning of Reylo shipping before *TLJ*. What was “romanticizing abuse” was not what was shown on – screen, but what happened in Reylo shipping communities which very few people participate in, compared to *Star Wars*’ massive global audience. This suggests that there is more to anti-shipping than naivety about the true impact of Reylo. Although anti-shipping conflicts extend discussions of appropriate representation into areas they are not traditionally applied to (e.g. not source text- and not queer activism-related), the driving belief of “antis” that a text is more than mere entertainment and that “representation matters”, is the same core belief at the heart

of lauded progressive fan activist movements. Thus, anti-shipping appears more as a performative exaggeration of activist fandom in line with *Tumblr*'s social justice culture.

4.6: “Worse than Twilight”: The Evolution of “Anti-Reylo” in the History of Fan Activism

Anti-shipping has not simply arisen from *Tumblr* culture but also draws specifically from a long history of fan activist engagements. In an author's note on “a reylo fanfic”, author treezie states that “rey is a lesbian” in addition to the ship sucking. This may seem unrelated given anti-shippers previous focus on abuse, but it underlines an activist dimension to the satire, implying a queer reading of Rey to be superior – fitting with a general tendency of shipping and (queer) activism to be closely related in fan culture. As I will discuss in this sub-chapter, in addition to being shaped by the fan-activist “social justice” culture of *Tumblr*, anti-shipping is likely also a natural evolution of shipping-specific fan activism which has policed what should (not) be shipped for a long time, drawing on contemporary socio-political discourses. Anti-abuse activism (starting most prominently with *Twilight*) seems to be replacing the previous focus on slash fiction as shipping's activist focus. The Reylo conflict suggests a need for a (purportedly) oppressive other and fan policing in transformational fan communities that has shifted shapes but needs to be maintained even if the object of anti-shipping shifts.

Anti-Shipping in Early Online Fandom

Anti-shipping is not an entirely new phenomenon, although it was initially not tied to activism. One type of shipping that was often policed and forced into invisibility was slash, i.e. same-sex, ships. Opposition to slash shipping was generally legitimized by the need to ensure that fanfiction writing communities would not suffer legal consequences, either by those holding the rights to the source text or by message board or webspace providers. Sharing depictions of homosexuality was still considered disrespectful towards authors, show creators

and particularly the actors portrayed in such relationships. Additionally, it was seen as inappropriate for minors. These ideas of queering characters as offensive and of homosexuality being a topic that children should not be exposed to reflected the homophobic tendencies of the time. In pre-Internet times after a crackdown on “works that violated the ‘family values’ of the original [Star Wars] films”, ultimately “adult-oriented stories went underground” (Brooker 165) – which included even sex-scene-less queer romances. Even later, slash fanfiction stories were under constant threat of censorship by moderators in many fandoms, with fans often using disclaimers in the hope of not being banned from posting (“Don’t Like”). Anti-shipping thus did not require moral justifications for hating a relationship and was more likely to be based on personal dislike and legal safeguarding. This is vastly different from modern anti-shipping as exemplified by Reylo where fans act from feminist motivations and would rather enforce banned subjects themselves than those being enforced top-down.

Slash Shipping Activism

More recently, around the late 2000s to early 2010s, shipping culture entered a new era where it became more activist, particularly when it came towards slash shipping and queer activism. This is an important shift in which shipping conflicts no longer centered around preserving conservative fan culture (against for example queer readings), but in which shipping activism came to be directed against what fans perceived as a “too conservative” other, i.e. those who did not support slash. Around 2010, slash fanfiction became more widely accepted. Same-sex relationships were becoming more accepted in the US, with 2015 marking the legalization of same-sex marriage in the US after over a decade of smaller advances towards marriage equality (“The Journey”). Due to the growing acceptance of same-sex relationships in society in general, strict censorship of such content increasingly would have been perceived as discriminatory.

Fandom after around 2010 was characterized by antagonistic relationships between slash-shipping fans and creators and a politicization of slash shipping. This was on one hand due to removals of legal restrictions, both concerning fanfiction more generally but fanfiction with more mature themes specifically, and on the other hand due to an increasing acceptance of same-sex relationships and wider accessibility: *Archive Of Our Own* opened in 2009 with almost no content restrictions, unlike previous sites. Consequently, slash went from being “a very small part of fanfic“ (Pugh 91) to about half of all works on fanfiction site *Archive Of Our Own*. Of about 12 million works uploaded in late 2023, 5,3 million are tagged M/M (featuring a romantic or sexual relationship between two male characters) and 1 million F/F (featuring a relationship between two female characters). Consequently, there was a shift from anti-fan activism targeting slash shippers as “perverts” (due to the associations with inappropriate content made available to minors) who could only share their stories in secret among the like-minded, to slash becoming intertwined with fan activism: Slash fandom came to be seen as offering valid criticism of the state of the media in the 2010s.

As the number of queer characters on screen increased, fans became more outspoken in their demands for better on-screen representation, no longer feeling like it was shameful and unrealistic to hope for depictions of queer romances but addressing writers and producers directly with their demands. This era is characterized by campaigns such as #LGBTFansDeserveBetter (Navar-Gill and Stanfill) or #GiveElsaAGirlfriend, an uptick in articles discussing the “Bury Your Gays” trope and accusations of “queerbaiting” in media such as *Sherlock* fans writing angry letters to the BBC over a lack of romantic resolution in the series finale (Hofmann). Stanfill notably points out that, although queer activist campaigns are generally considered examples of “beautiful” fandom, some of them have, despite being “campaign[s] against exclusion, run by marginalized people, [...] substantially the same contours as other vitriolic campaigns” by reactionary fans (*Fandom Is Ugly* 82).

Feminist Anti-Abuse Activism

TFA being released in 2015 aligns it with the end of this slash activist phase when LGBTQ representation and ships had become more normalized. It is thus not surprising that *TFA*'s slash shipping "Finnpoe" fans were well accepted at large by those involved in the franchise and portrayed sympathetically by the press (e.g. Vary, "Star Wars"). Transformational fans thus had little to fight against – neither fellow fans nor producers – in an area previously heavily contested. This suggests that shipping-related fan activism might have been in need of a new target. Indeed, the sequel trilogy also aligns perfectly with another development of the 2010s: The rise of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser) and feminist awareness online – and with it an increasing justification of acceptable and unacceptable relationships in relation to feminism, particularly in regard to *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Furthermore, these shipping conflicts also featured, in line with the politicization of shipping that arose out of *Tumblr* culture (see 4.5) and slash fan activism, rhetoric which uses words, phrases and lines of argumentation drawn from social justice activism.

Reylo anti-shipping clearly follows patterns first established by *Twilight* anti-fandom and then developed further by *Fifty Shades of Grey* anti-fandom. What these novels' central relationships have in common with *Star Wars* is a big fandom rooting for potentially problematic relationships: All three stories feature men in positions of power - be they a user of the magic "Force" (Kylo Ren, *The Force Awakens*), a millionaire and the protagonist's boss (Christian Grey, *Fifty Shades of Grey*) or an ancient, almost indestructible vampire (Edward Cullen, *Twilight*). All three have violent tendencies – whether they lash out against subordinates and enemies (Kylo Ren), engage in BDSM to deal with their traumatic past (Christian Grey) or fight an urge to kill for blood (Edward Cullen). All three want to control the female protagonist – albeit two out of obsessive love (Edward Cullen and Christian Grey) and one because she is the enemy (Kylo Ren).

Given this very short recap, it is not surprising that *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* are mostly perceived as anti-feminist, both by scholars and activists. Analyses point out the female character(s)²⁶ follow the “damsel in distress” (Welch 43) trope and are “regressive in regard to feminist ideology” (Eddo-Lodge), as they are “unapologetically patriarchal” (Silver 122) and feature “controlling and stalker-like behavior” by the romantic interest (137). However, some scholars such as Łuksza for example caution that, although “[s]exual norms in *Twilight* stay in accordance with the neo-conservative ideology” (431), women’s enjoyment of such stories should not be dismissed as merely “sexism in disguise” (441) – similar to the empowerment Romance readers have found in their novels in Radway’s studies.

Additionally, the more sexually explicit and BDSM-promoting *Fifty Shades of Grey* was described as “re-[energizing] the feminist debate on pornography and sexuality” (Case and Coventry 638). Downing points out the novel’s use of “titillating ‘wrongness’ of power exchange sex and BDSM” (92) which, similarly to *Twilight* promoting patriarchy, is a “faux transgressive trilogy” (98) that, despite its sexual content, reproduces hegemonic ideas of sexuality. However, despite concerns that inexperienced people may view “[interpersonal violence] as simply ‘kinky sex’ which could normalize unhealthy relationships”, Case and Coventry caution that according to their survey generally “this fiction does not translate into acceptability of these behaviors in their real life” (645).

Given the controversial content often perceived as anti-feminist outlined above, it is little wonder that both *Twilight*, published in 2008, and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, following in 2011, inspired huge anti-fandoms in feminist-leaning fan spaces such as *Tumblr* (cf. Hannell), as well as direct comparisons between them. As I discuss in chapter 2, the 2010s were also characterized by the rise of popular feminism (cf. Banet-Weiser) which brought with it both an

²⁶ As *Fifty Shades of Grey*’s Anastasia Steele is based upon *Twilight*’s Bella Swan, one could argue they are basically the same character.

increasing awareness and interest in feminism and increasing popular misogyny (cf. Banet-Weiser) in response to this – to summarize: a peak in anti/feminist tensions. These two earlier shipping conflicts mostly followed similar patterns to the Reylo anti-fandom outlined above: Appeals to the logic of dangerous representation and appeals to fans’ feminist sensibilities (despite initially eschewing “the term feminist”, cf. Summers 320), as well as silencing strategies, mainly through ridicule. Other scholars observed more aggressive interactions that were meant to silence those of dissenting opinion. Sheffield and Merlo analyzed typical strategies of anti-fans of these novels and found they were mostly mocking fans (210), often while trying to assert their status as “superior” fans that realized how bad the novels actually were (218) and also trying to prevent “silly girls” from the dangerous messages of the novels (220) – similar to the lines of argumentation discussed in 4.2. The association between *Twilight*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and Reylo is so common that it can be found in several posts in my case study, with users for example pointing to *Fifty Shades*’ mainstream popularization of BDSM as one way fiction inspires dangerous real-life behavior. Another fairly popular blog post also puts these three works of fiction in a direct line and argues that all three relationships are popular because the patriarchy makes women believe that abuse is how men show their love.

Reylo-anti-shipping seems to be a continuation of such earlier anti-fan activism that has become more broadly applied. Anti-shippers seem to have constructed their own “problematic fans” as an imagined other to fight against to continue previous trends. Defenses of Reylo by shippers often defend the relationship by pointing out that *Star Wars* does not depict an established relationship. Thus, there is not any canonical depiction of a “problematic” romantic relationship to criticize as in *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades*. Interestingly, despite Rey and Kylo Ren not being a canonical couple, anti-shipping is frequently focused on the source text itself (e.g. depictions of “mind rape” therein), yet anti-shippers direct their anger against the shippers, not the creators of the source text. This may seem counterintuitive, but it follows the logic

established by these previous two anti-fandoms: The main problem are the presumably silly and naive fans that are assumed to not understand the problems of the text they are enjoying.

As discussed in 4.1, it is additionally fairly uncommon for Reylo shippers to be attracted to the idea of these characters entering a relationship with power imbalances and abusive behaviors present and to portray the characters this way in fanfiction, thus abusive dynamics are also rarely found in fan works. On the other hand, fans of *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* who enjoy romance as depicted in the source text with all its “problematic” aspects exist. These real persons who are perceived as “bad fans” seem to have been replaced with imagined “bad fans” who are assumed to enjoy seeing abuse in *Star Wars*. This may be driven by a desire to continue anti-fan activism in the name of feminism in new fandoms. Given fan culture’s history of social justice-driven antagonism for the sake of slash shipping activism, and previous cases of feminism-driven harassment in *Twilight* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* anti-fandom, Reylo and other anti-ships have clearly evolved from earlier fan culture and are not an unexpected shift due to newcomers in fandom. The Reylo case study illustrates how anti-shipping has evolved away from gatekeeping shipping to protect the fan community towards textual criticism of toxic romances portrayed on screen (in “canon”) towards policing other fans for plots they might potentially imagine. This development of feminist anti-shipping activism in the early 2010s coincides in time both with the rise of feminist awareness (discussed in chapter 2 and 4.4) and with the “loss” of slash activism as a central activist cause for fans in the mid-2010s. Consequently, anti-shipping and fan policing may have risen to fill the activist “void” of activist fan culture on *Tumblr* and create a new target for fan activism to be directed against.

4.7: “You’d Rather Tell Reylos to Unalive Themselves”: From Informal Activist Education to Transverse Coalitions?

As the Reylo case study illustrates, progressive and transformational (two aspects that strongly overlap) fan culture is having its own ideological negotiations concerned with the kind of media content that fans should enjoy or produce, namely the relationships fans can ship. While, at the moment, anti-shippers have not achieved the same mainstream visibility or impact that the alt-right or even #Gamergate have and just appear as a bubble of overzealous young people with niche interests, the rise of the alt-right and #Gamergate ideas and strategies demonstrate that this might change in the future and anti-shippers’ influence on online discourse may grow.

All in all, the anti/shipping conflict illustrates similar mechanisms to the anti/feminist conflict of the earlier chapters in that when socio-political tensions rise, polarized ideological negotiations in fandom take place where alignments of the source text’s narrative and fan behavior with the relevant issue arise. Anti-shippers only partially fit Hill’s theory that anti-movements occur in times of crisis or disruption when orthodoxy becomes heterodoxy (“An Extended Foreword” 107) and those in power aim to keep their privileged position. In his example of #Gamergate, those in power are the cause of conflict – just as the anti-woke *Star Wars* fans previously discussed, who do not want to accept that they are no longer privileged fans to whom franchises exclusively cater, and thus they retaliate about what they perceive to be “outside intruders”, such as women. In the Reylo case study, however, anti-shippers are often younger fans, yet they are the ones actively questioning the established doxa of “ship and let ship”, trying to educate both new and old fans about different values. At the same time, the way they seem to over-perform values of established fan culture would rather signal that they are trying to fit in.

Reylo shippers behave in accordance with long-established shipping culture and yet did not instigate a backlash against anti-shippers and are not the ones dominating the conflict in

the way men are in the “gates” (see chapter 2). Despite these differences, there is significant similarity: Shippers generally frame anti-shippers as “outside intruders” which echoes the dynamic of the “gates”. Just as women have always been part of geek fandom and are only constructed to be “outside intruders” in fan conflicts such as #Gamergate or “Marysuegate”, anti-shippers are drawing from ideas and values pre-existing in transformational fandoms while being misrepresented as “outside intruders”.

I have particularly focused on *Tumblr* which has been a central platform for informal feminist education in a typical affinity space (Gee). Numerous scholarly studies have analyzed its impact to the point of describing *Tumblr* as creating its own “Tumblr Feminism” (Keller; Felts). This has primarily been framed as a positive aspect of participating in such spaces. Particularly Hannell highlights the close connection between fandom and feminism – however, if we understand “feminist fandom as a fruitful site for feminist identity work” (160), this anti-shiping case study suggests that this does not always lead to positive outcomes. Rather, fans may become entrenched in fan activist culture but then be unable to find a productive way to express their concerns. Especially if they are still young and potentially marginalized or traumatized, they may have few ways to engage besides online discourse. At the same time, they seem to be agitated by the current state of the world for women, such as the prevalence of sexual abuse and rising anti/feminist tensions. Anti-shiping reflects topics that online discourse has likely made fans highly aware of, such as toxic masculinity, #MeToo, calls for safe spaces and trigger warnings, and discussions of the potential of romances to harm women. Consequently, they may turn towards fan policing and harassment of those they deem a threat to the fan community as a way to experience and enact agency in a world otherwise out of their control.

As I have discussed, Reylo-anti shipping seems to be deeply rooted in progressive and fan-activist *Tumblr* culture and only displays surface similarities to current reactionary

movements. As many fans are being socialized in a culture that is often pushing “purity culture” on them and conveying to them that the danger of “groomers” may be right around the corner, it is not surprising that such conservative attitudes are eventually mixed into progressive-minded activism. Reylo anti-shippers seem to perform an exaggerated version of enacting the social justice ideals of *Tumblr* and transformational fan culture. Rather than distancing themselves from anti-shippers, fan communities need to face the “demons” of their own making and find better ways to support fans that want to enact change in the world.

If, however, anti-shippers are constantly characterized as “conservative intruders”, progressive fan communities can distance themselves from them and treat them as their oppressor despite both shippers and anti-shippers often coming from the same marginalized groups, for example being young women with past experiences of abuse. As one *Tumblr* user wrote, this type of “cancel culture” in fandom makes vulnerable fans likely to harass members of their own fan community just to feel like they have some influence over a world that seems out of control to them. Other users added to that discussion that it may make these fans vulnerable to radicalization by extremist ideologies. There is no proof of that happening beyond the anecdotes of some users who argue that anti-shippers may turn towards fascism more readily as they already have a similar ideology in some ways. It is not hard to imagine that already sharing some ways of activist engagement and goals with radical right-wing groups may make fans susceptible to the rhetoric of the far right, just as it has been observed that some “journalists and media personalities who once were at home on the far left”, particularly those who eschewed politeness in their tactics, i.e. the “dirtbag left”, “has formed a niche but influential political subculture that encourages leftists to abandon leftism for the populist right” (Aleem).

Both the past and recent political developments suggest that shared arguments or goals can breed coalitions despite heavily differing ideologies: Be it the satanic panic or more

recently Trans-Exclusionary Feminism / Gender-Critical movements. In the past, when “the reeling political left also began to use [the satanic panic] to their advantage to stay politically relevant throughout the period” (T. Brooks 47), it allowed “Satanic conspiracists to latch onto” (T. Brooks 46) the discourse. Recently, some feminists and queer activists unite with right-wing populists in their shared opposition to trans rights and “gender ideology” (e.g. Darakchi). As Schotten writes, Trans-Exclusionary Feminism “has found new allies in right-wing Catholic and Evangelical researchers, scholars, activists, and figureheads, reinventing itself as ‘gender critical’ feminism that casts doubt on ‘gender ideology’” (334). Similarly, Billard points out the “seemingly unlikely alignment between Anglo-American ‘feminists’ and the U.S. Christian Right in both ideology and strategy” (236) as well as UK organizations such as the LGB Alliance (327) that engages in joint disinformation campaigns with conservative political advocacy organizations “with the clear and express intention of justifying anti-trans-gender policies” (237).

While not much has been published yet on these recent anti-trans coalitions, drawing from observations on conspiracist movements can validate shippers’ concerns about anti-shippers. In regard to recent opposition to vaccine mandates in German-speaking regions, it has been observed that demonstrators formed “a new Querfront (trans-verse front)” which “unites the extreme right with members of the moderate left” (Butter, “Covid” 215). Such protests were “contrary to what was often claimed in the media at that time [...] not at all carried by people from the right and extreme right” with at least 40% being on the leftwing spectrum according to one survey (214). Scholars have observed a tendency of these protests to originate on the left but then become more right-leaning in their goals (215). Similar dynamics likely also apply to the less-researched coalitions of trans-exclusionary “gender-critical” feminists and trans-exclusionary queer movements.

Indeed, there are some similarities in ideology that anti-shippers seem to share with both trans-exclusionary feminists and anti-LGBTQ Evangelical activists: Their discomfort with someone's expression of gender / fan work consumption and production behaviors trumps other people's right to decide what is right for them, often coupled with the fundamentally anti-pluralistic belief that there is only one correct norm for gender expression / fan work consumption and production. Anti-shippers do not want to see a Rey/Kylo-Ren relationship and thus no one else should. Consequently, anti-shippers often support bans of sexual content on social media (often pushed by Evangelical groups), as they share concerns that minors may see content deemed inappropriate. All three groups also tend to support harassment against people perceived to be "groomers" harming minors. Consequently, wariness towards anti-shipping and a potential move of "antis" from the left to the right is not completely unfounded.

However, framing anti-shippers as conservative intruders or uneducated youths who do not understand fan culture is, as I have argued, not an adequate understanding of their values and primary functions to place the blame for fan conflicts between shippers and anti-shippers outside established progressive fan culture. Nevertheless, I have also illustrated how their rhetoric, argumentative strategies, and goals have similarities with reactionary online-movements, conservative anti-LGBTQ movements or religious fundamentalist purity culture. As the past and recent political movements demonstrate, a coalition of a "transverse front" between anti-shippers and for example those calling for anti-LGBTQ media censorship due to their shared focus on seemingly protecting children from inappropriate depictions of sexuality arising in the future seems possible – especially if anti-shippers keep being grouped together with conservative groups who would likely welcome them.

However, by having asked whether anti-shippers are indeed "young conservative intruders" and pointing out that they are not at the moment but could eventually lean towards reactionary alliances, I have followed the same line of thinking as many shippers and scholars:

That threats to fan communities must be located on the right – yet anti-shippers demonstrate that online harassment and polarization can also arise from progressive ideology and that merely teaching online users about feminism will not automatically produce fan communities without conflicts. They do not need to move to the far-right to be a problem to fan communities.

This suggests that media literacy efforts must extend beyond simply promoting progressive values; they must also address how such values are performed, policed, and instrumentalized in ways that can replicate the very dynamics of control and exclusion they claim to oppose. What audiences may need, rather than simply media literacy or the language and ideals of social justice, may be a higher tolerance for ambiguity rather than a wish to divide the world into immoral shippers and virtuous anti-shippers, infallible progressives²⁷ and threatening reactionaries, people who entirely distance themselves from abuse and people who uncritically support it. It may be necessary to teach fans when and how fiction affects reality – because an awareness of “representation matters” gained in fandom and fears of threats to children and women gained from the media and culture fans are entrenched in may just mix into a belief that any and all kinds of immoral behavior need to be censored. One first step might be to disentangle consumption from identity and activism and to not conflate what someone watches or reads with the political views they endorse or the morality they may hold.

While anti-shippers do not engage in fan populism which offers simplistic “common sense” solutions (Mede and Schäfer 481) to complex societal problems, they nevertheless have established a similar approach from the opposite direction: With a rhetorical strategy of “weaponized pedagogy”, they present themselves as having all the – scientifically-supported and morally-justified – answers to the complex issue of representation. This prevalent and harmful tendency in fandom to simplify issues by means of shipping-identity is, for example,

²⁷ For another often ignored problem within progressive fan communities, see racism in fandom, e.g. Pande “Get out”.

encapsulated in the popular joke that the British Queen was problematic for shipping Reylo and thus it makes sense that people are celebrating her death (fig. 25). Even though it is an obvious joke, it encapsulates well how shipping an (according to fan cultural norms) problematic relationship has become a shorthand for being a bad person while being completely disengaged from issues of real-world harm and activism.

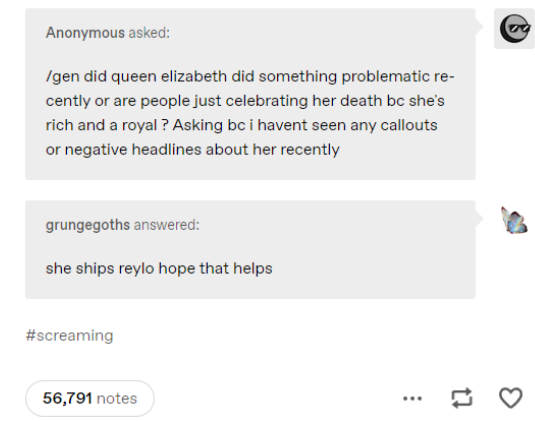


Fig. 25. Users joking that people celebrate the death of Queen Elizabeth due to her being a Reylo shipper (Grungegoths)

Such shorthands simplify complex issues in a complex world – but they are unlikely to lead to the progress towards a safer world for women and young people that anti-shippers are hoping for.

Chapter 5:

Conclusion: The Fandom Is (Still) Political: *The Acolyte* and the Loss of Certainty

“In a dark place we find ourselves and a little more knowledge lights our way”

— Yoda in the script of *Revenge of the Sith* (Lucas)

When I started writing this dissertation in 2019, I was worried that by the time I finished it, no one would care about the topics discussed anymore: What if the Internet moved on so quickly that everything described would already be a phenomenon of the past? Luckily (for me) and sadly (for everyone else) that is not the case: The same and similar fan conflicts are still raging on the web, even if the media texts and platforms may change.

I wanted to demonstrate how anti-fans are not trivial and should be paid attention to – sadly, a lesson that Hollywood seems to have learned. Several interviewees told *Variety* in an October 2024 article that “the best defense is to avoid provoking fandoms in the first place” and thus “studios will assemble a specialized cluster of superfans to assess possible marketing materials for a major franchise project”, just to be told: “If you do that, fans are going to retaliate.” (Vary, “Toxic Fandom”). Even though the article in its reporting of fan backlashes and with its banner image featuring people of Color, women, and a same-sex kiss acknowledges that anti-fans mostly retaliate towards anything that is not a straight white masculine man, it does not invite a discussion of the dangers of such “superfan focus groups”. Social media users on *X*, however, widely point out that such an approach will homogenize what stories can be told. One hugely successful post with over 82k likes that was shared over 6700 times on *X* reads: “big shoutout to whoever made this collage of queer women and POC to represent ‘things fans hate’” (@Focusfronting), with another popular post more sarcastically

summarizing the issue as: “Assembling a panel to see if *checks graphic* women, POC, and gay people should be allowed in media is actually not the hot new idea you think it is, studios.” (@Baddestmamajama). Given the huge impact anti/fan conflicts could potentially have in the future, it is all the more important to understand how they work.

As this thesis has shown, anti/fan conflicts are about more than disagreements between fans about which *Star Wars* installment or character they like best. They are used to negotiate ideologies, both in fan spaces and broader political discourse, which often relate to (anti-)feminism, anti-“wokeness” and social justice. They allow (anti-)fans to voice political opinions they may not otherwise be able to voice or find an audience for, they allow them to garner a large following and share political ideas even with otherwise less politically inclined audiences by attaching their arguments to their fan identity, and they allow fans to enact what they perceive as activism for a better world through fan policing of other fans’ identities.

Fan conflicts may often arise in response to political and related fan-cultural disruptions and then increasingly become instrumentalized as a political platform to share far-right views through fanization of political discourse (chapter 2). Fans may claim to be apolitical but nevertheless engage in reactionary fan-populist rhetoric when engaging in anti-fan activism against the recent *Star Wars* installments and Kathleen Kennedy (chapter 3). Fans may appear to be reactionary but engage in anti-fan-activism against the Reylo relationship that heavily draws from progressive fan activist culture and values (chapter 4). In all cases, participants are motivated not just by negative affect, but also by the mechanics of the visibility economy, trying to use platform affordances and communication strategies to gain support for their political ideology or money or try to make invisible what they consider a threat to the fan community.

The Acolyte

Such fan conflicts are still omnipresent on social media: On the 4th of June 2024, the newest *Star Wars* show *The Acolyte (TA)* premiered on Disney+. It is set before the prequel trilogy during the so-called era of the High Republic and follows Jedi trying to solve a series of crimes. It is largely the story of Osha, a young woman who was taken from her family by the Jedi and believed to have lost her twin sister – who turns out to have been killing the very Jedi responsible for their separation.

I had not even seen a single episode yet when I was inundated by algorithmic recommendations on *X*, *YouTube*, and my *Google* news feed with headlines about how wokeness has finally ruined *Star Wars* or occasionally posts ridiculing such reactionary fans' claims. Particularly, I was shocked by the numbers and thus reach of some posts and videos. For example, a lightsaber fight was being discussed with over 160k reactions supporting a comment calling it extremely “retarded” – one of the most popular posts in my case study collection despite being quite trivial in topic. Very few posts from chapters 2 to 4 reached such numbers — despite *X* being considered a platform in decline (Ingram).

At the same time, such posts seem to suggest an almost tame conflict that is merely focused on textual disagreements, such as whether concepts from the Extended Universe or George Lucas' original vision were the correct way to depict lightsaber battles. This suggests an even stronger tendency towards seemingly apolitical proxy debates than discussed in chapters 2 and 3. *TA* may have polarized the fandom in a way no previous *Star Wars* installment did – and managed to do so before its first episode was even released. This proxy battle being fought over *TA*'s quality is a stand-in for many issues: Among them white men's fears of having become obsolete in an increasingly diverse society and fan culture (as was already fundamental to chapters 2 and 3) and consequently even more pronounced fears about the loss of a world that offers certainty and fixed truths.

Consequently, my final case study will both support arguments from my previous chapters as well as highlight emerging new trends: In 5.1, I highlight the important role of paratexts priming fans to read the show as feminist and thus controversial by looking at the way the show was discussed and already heavily criticized as “anti-men” before its release. In 5.2., I discuss a new aspect of the fan-populist style: The rhetoric role references to “lore” infractions play in this fan conflict as an “overflowing signifier” that is frequently evoked to still maintain the appearance of objective criticism (as discussed in chapter 3). In 5.3, I contextualize *TA* anti-fans’ disproportionate focus on queerness within both pre-existing narratives of a “war on (male) fans” as well as more recently growing anti-LGBTQ sentiments in the US. Finally, in 5.4, I reflect on the role being able to deal with (moral) ambiguity ultimately plays in fan conflicts and present lessons for the role of fandom as a space of education we can learn from these case studies.

5.1: “*TA* Is Not For (White) Men”: The Impact of Paratextual Framing

The discourse regarding *TA* is highly visible and polarized, speaking to a not just continuing but growing importance of fan discourse to online “culture war” narratives. Additionally, fan discourse seems to be more and more mainstream and no longer part of niche Internet spheres, as evidenced by the wide reach of posts and high journalistic resonance of debates around *TA* and its “wokeness” – a continuation of a trend already outlined in chapter 2.

Earlier on in chapter 2, I argued that fans were predominantly fighting an “imagined sexist other” with few popular negative posts to be found on *X*. This suggested that it was particularly fans’ disproportional reactions to anti-fans that fueled these conflicts. However, *TA* has record-breaking negative reactions: From *X* posts with over 100k likes to being the most and worst reviewed *Star Wars* installment on *IMDB* (Tassi, “In Three Weeks”) to the *YouTube* trailer having over 750k dislikes (“YouTube Dislike Viewer”) to negative *YouTube* reviews

with over 3 million views (Jordan, “The Acolyte Episode 3”). It is safe to say that *TA* seems to be the most (publicly) hated and controversial *Star Wars* installment to date and its anti-fans are far from a handful of loud voices. At the same time, despite having the worst reviews on IMDB and similar sites, *TA* is also the second most successful *Star Wars* show to date (Kraljik), suggesting popularity with viewers. There is clearly a strong divergence between its negative reception online and its reception by mainstream audiences, yet even if the anti-fans are a minority, they are by now far from an “imagined” antagonist.

This new visibility of anti-fans, particularly on *X*, may of course align with the platform’s recent shift towards right-wing extremism with many experts considering that “*X* is becoming one of the largest hate sites in the world” (Wilson). It may be that within the new norms of the platform, users are more open to express their politicized anti-fandom. However, neither *X* as a platform alone nor trolls and bots (i.e. accounts automatically liking or posting content) can be the sole explanation for the increasing polarization given the numbers. This is likely also an outcome to the mainstreaming of anti-fan activist discourse discussed in 2.

Feminist paratextual framing of *TA* may have further increased backlash to the series. Particularly when it comes to review-bombing, i.e. the intentional down-voting of *TA* – which had received about 200.000 likes and over 750.000 downvotes at the time of writing (“YouTube Dislike Viewer”), the backlash against *TA* follows established patterns also seen with *Captain Marvel* or other movies considered “feminist”. Budirská’s study of *IMDB* reviews regarding perceived “Forced Feminist Agenda”s in 2021 already observed that reviews seemed to be used to “express their political leaning by boosting or tanking the ratings of a film that is claimed to be feminist by mainstream media” (47). It was particularly noticeable that such movies rarely received middle ratings, rather many reviews gave 10 or 1 stars. Particularly low reviews tended to be very short (32), suggesting that users may not put in the effort to honestly review the movies.

What such parallels to other review-bombed movies highlight is the role of progressive paratextual elements for such polarization: *Captain Marvel* was review-bombed before it even premiered (Vejvoda, “Rotten”) and *TA* also received negative coverage before it was even released. YouTubers and *X* users were also making negative predictions about the show before its release. It seems likely this is due to paratextual elements: *TA* was discussed as having a feminist director and being intentionally “female-centric” and thus framed as “man-hating”. On *Bounding Into Comics*, a website geared towards reactionary fandom (Eaton), one actress is reported on as “ma[king] the outlandish claim that ‘Star Wars is very like patriarchal.’” (Trent). The use of “outlandish” implies that this statement is untrue and even enraging to the author. The same report quotes showrunner Headland saying that even though the “show is technically [...] ‘female centric’, meaning it centers around a female protagonist” that does not “exclude[] men from that space” (Trent), yet also accuses her of forcing her radical feminist ideology on *Star Wars* (Trent) – this signals to the readers to doubt whether her words are believable. Similarly, Larson, before *Captain Marvel* was released, framed the movie as a feminist text just by being an activist “for bigger racial and gender diversity in film criticism” (Budirská 3) and discussing another movie in a way that made people think she hated white men and thus that “Captain Marvel was not made for them either” (3), leading to a polarized reception. This underlines a potential connection between pre-release backlash and reporting on the perceived feminist activism of those involved with a show or movie.

The paratextual progressive framing of *TA* was connected to familiar themes of purportedly hating male fans early on: For example, *The Pink News* claimed in March 2024 that *TA* is “already a smash hit – when it comes to LGBTQ+ representation, at least” (Mitchell). Consequently, based on such positive reporting regarding representation, niche reactionary news sites and YouTubers began to report on *TA* being “a woke disaster waiting to happen” (BlazeTV Staff) in a ragebait-like fashion. This led to users on *X* claiming that showrunner

Headland was intentionally trying to get rid of her “problematic” male viewers by featuring queer representation and a female lead.

Furthermore, those involved in the production took a less apologetic stance towards backlash than in previous years: *TROS* seemed to be rewritten in accordance with *TLJ*'s backlash (see chapter 2) and creators emphasized that *Star Wars* was for everyone. *TA* creators and cast, however, were not trying to appease their anti-fans. Besides interviews before the release taken out of context discussed before, even harmless messages about not all fans being welcome seemed to be interpreted as radically “woke” statements: *Breitbart* writes that “[t]he creator of the new Disney+ series *The Acolyte* has issued a stern warning to *Star Wars* fanboys who engage in wrongthink, saying anyone who engages in what she calls ‘bigotry, racism, or hate speech’ isn’t a real fan” (Ng). Calling bigotry, racism, and hate speech “wrongthink” and implying that Headland’s gatekeeping towards such fans is wrong seems to endorse these attitudes and behaviors as legitimate and perhaps even part of *Star Wars* fandom. It feeds into the narrative that Headland wants to intentionally get rid of “problematic” parts of her audience.

Additionally – one might say “to make matters worse” in the eyes of some fans threatened by diversity in *Star Wars* (see chapter 3) – *TA* notably features a diverse crew on screen and behind the scenes, particularly in regard to race and gender. The promo picture on Disney+ showcases how there are no white men to be found among the main cast and can thus be perceived as signaling that white men are not welcome. There is, for example, Amandla Stenberg, a Black non-binary person and noted LGBTQ activist in two main roles: Osha and her twin sister Mae. Most other prominent roles are People of Color or women as well, as for example visible in the promo image on Disney+ (fig. 26):



Fig. 26. The promo image on Disney+ showing the main characters of *TA*. Screenshot by author.

The show features Korean actor Lee Jung-jae as Jedi master Sol (top center), biracial Black actor Charlie Barnett as Yord Fandar (to the right), and Black actress Jodie Turner-Smith as Mother Aniseya (foreground).

Additionally, the show is strongly associated with queerness by virtue of its cast. It is headed by Leslye Headland, who is a white lesbian woman in a same-sex relationship (Soloski) and Stenberg who I have just discussed. It also features trans actress, leftist activist, and successful YouTuber Abigail Thorn in a very minor role that is on screen for less than five minutes. Despite this being mostly unrelated to the plot of the show, particularly far-right outlets saw these queer identities as negative omens. *Breitbart*, for example, discussed *TA* “casting male-to-female transgender YouTube personality Abigail Thorn in a prominent supporting part” (Ng), overstating her role in order to highlight how “woke” the show is.

The hyperfocus on trans actors in *TA* also ties into broader contemporary transphobic narratives. Many enraged comments were created about “pronouns” in *TA* – meaning a single scene in which in a blink-and-you-will-miss-it moment protagonist Osha is not sure what the gender of a non-human alien is and consequently asks: “Is he, or they, with us?”. Here, the paratextual element of *TA*’s trans actors’ identities aligns with a textual disruption (the inclusion of controversial pronouns), making both more salient. It is not surprising that many far-right news outlets as well as reactionary commentators saw this as proof of “wokeness”

despite it being a throwaway joke that one could even read as mocking “pronoun discourse” (Murray). This is of course a topic likely to spark controversy as “pronoun use” is even legally contested in the US in 2024 (S. Nolan) and widely mocked particularly by conservatives, especially singular “they” pronouns (Steinmetz) which are commonly associated with non-binary individuals such as Stenberg.

The combination of the paratexts, such as the show being promoted as catered towards women, and featuring actors and producers who are either women, queer, or People of Color, thus heavily framed the show as “not for (white) men” even before it aired. Consequently, many fans were primed to be enraged towards the show as the mere existence of people not being white men in unusually large numbers made the show heavily political in their eyes by this paratextual information alone (see also my introduction). It tied *TA* to contemporary controversial discourses around queerness, particularly transgender and non-binary identities – a hot-button issue of the 2020s to begin with as there is currently a “surge in anti-transgender legislation” as well as “increased instances of violence against the LGBTQ+ community” (Brightman et al. 251). In this way, *TA* offered a suitable projection space for cultural anxieties in the same vein *TFA* did.

5.2: “Won’t Somebody Think of The Lore”: Textual Dissatisfaction and the Overflowing Signifier of “Lore”

In addition to its cast and creator, the writing and particularly the lore are an important focus of criticism that have become even more central in this final case study. These criticisms frequently echo the “Mary Sue discourse” of chapter 2 but also emphasize the role of “lore” as a flexible, so-called “overflowing” signifier whose primary purpose is coalition building. Its flexibility as a concept allows different anxieties about fan-cultural and socio-political disruptions to join together. *TA* is, at the same time, frequently discussed as suffering from

“wokeness” and not being bad because of its politics, but rather simply because of its bad writing. I disagree with many news reports that argue that “[r]eviewers aren’t bigots, they just think *The Acolyte* is garbage” (Watercutter). Jordan (from chapter 3), for example, argues that there is “nonsensical and contradictory writing, the horrendous cinematography, the wooden acting and the terrible dialogue” (“The Acolyte Episode 3”, 07:51-07:58) – but that alone is not the primary reason why these anti-fans hate *TA*, they merely express themselves via textual dissatisfaction (as discussed in chapter 2).

As with *TLJ*, controversy may be best fueled by a mixture of consensus criticisms about writing flaws and a thematic reflection of contemporary polarizing political issues that can easily be projected onto such discussion of a movie’s narrative and writing. For *TLJ*, it was popular feminism, for *TA* it is intersectional queer-affirming feminism. *TA* is widely described as showing that *Star Wars* hates its fans (e.g. Buechler, “The Acolyte” or Nolte, “Acolyte”) and accused of being a “zombie franchise [...] a corpse that keeps getting defiled” (Buechler, “Everyone Hates” 07:29-07:33) – in line with the fan-populist arguments of a continued state of crisis outlined in chapter 3. This seems undeserved as *TA* is at its heart both refreshing in its concept and yet not straying too far from the *Star Wars* format. It does not rely on using pre-existing fan-favorite characters such as Boba Fett, Andor, Obi-Wan Kenobi, or Ahsoka, but rather tries to deliver an original story that is not built around nostalgic references as much as other Disney+ shows. It is a story about Jedi and Sith, and thus much closer in its core plot to the original *Star Wars* than the Western genre stories of *The Mandalorian* and *Book of Boba Fett* or the political spy thriller type-story of *Andor*. It also features elaborate lightsaber choreography praised by many viewers (Glazebrook) – exactly the kind of action-focused mindless entertainment fans opposed to “making *Star Wars* political” want to see (cf. chapter 2). All in all, in many ways it is the show many fans had been asking for, one that tells new

original stories while upholding the tone of the original movies, so it being rejected for being not innovative enough and also too different from what “true” fans want seems hollow.

The criticism of its female characters is more subtle than in the Mary Sue discourse of chapter 2, although it is clearly echoed in many fan responses. Jordan keeps referring to Osha as a “strong female character” throughout his review, refusing to use her name (“The Acolyte Episode 1”) – an interesting reversal of the Carano case of chapter 2 in which “strong female character” was briefly positively connotated, proving the flexibility of argumentation by reactionary fans. A devaluation of the type of fandom typically associated with women also continues – just as “Mary Sue” was a concept used to accuse the sequel trilogy of being too much like fanfiction, many negative reviews continue to insult the writing as “bad Tumblr fanfiction” (Endymiontv, “Star Wars Acolyte” 05:12-05:14) or “gay fanfic” (Nolte, “Woke”). Such associations imply fanfiction, which is usually written by women, to be bad quality writing, thus aligning women’s fandom with the show’s perceived faults.

The fact that I keep using both fans on *X* and *YouTube* and far-right news outlets as examples for the same observations also highlights the continued and increased fanization, the merging of fan discourse with the arguments used by (in this case far-right) political commentators and news sites that I suggested in chapter 2. While *Breitbart* was already leaning into fan discourse in chapter 2 as well as during #Gamergate, there are now also articles on *National Review* – which chapter 2 praised as a right-wing site that provided fair criticism of *TLJ* – and *Fox News* – which reaches a more mainstream right-wing audience – that strongly echo reactionary anti-fans, demonstrating the continued success of fanization as a rhetorical strategy. One article considered Musk – not a political commentator per se but prominent public figure closely associated with the far-right and “extremist remarks” (Wilson) in 2024 – calling Kennedy a “Franchise Killer” newsworthy (Cuebas-Fantauzzi). This seems to assume this is the kind of content their audience is interested in, potentially trying to draw in reactionary fans.

Compared to earlier chapters, the amount of news sites who lean into arguments from fan discourse and imitate their “anti-woke” rhetoric has grown as well. *National Review*, for example, — whose *TLJ* reviews I discussed as nuanced in chapter 2 — seems to be even more extremist than *Breitbart* in its recent reviews, accusing *TA* of “using *Star Wars* ideas, figures, and lingo to replicate progressive pillars for environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance” and “[p]romoting ESG and DIE (diversity, inclusion, equity)” in order to “groom[] *Star Wars* fans to accept a new political order” (White, “The Acolyte”). This is even more explicitly an allusion to the conspiracy theory of Cultural Marxism than the YouTubers discussed in chapter 3 who only seemed to carefully hint at this. As described by conservative think tank *The Heritage Foundation*, Cultural Marxists use “environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) rules” in order “to take over the corporate world to advance their cause” (Gonzalez and Gorka 20), said cause of course being “the subjugation of the United States to a totalitarian, soul-destroying ideology” (1). Moreover, references to grooming also bring up associations with cultural Marxists’ plans to “groom[] young children to satisfy their own perverted urges” through the transgender agenda (29) and tie *TA* into the Disney grooming discourse (see chapter 3).

Having now discussed how the discourse around *TA* is explicit in its opposition to feminism and associated progressive concepts (or “agendas” in the words of many commentators), I argue that it is nevertheless predominantly implicit, especially when in fan discourse: It still relies on the argument of being objective writing criticism just as the Mary Sue discussions in chapter 2 did. It still follows patterns of pointing out plot holes discussed in chapter 3. The main strategy by reactionary fans of discussing “bad writing” and then blaming seemingly indisputable “objective” criticism on “wokeness” has remained the same since almost 10 years ago. Such a strategy allows for coalition building with those who agree about the flaws, potentially leading them towards blaming “wokeness” or “feminism” as well.

Most notably, “lore” seems to serve such a unifying function as an overflowing signifier, i.e. something that is not merely a “blank screen of projection”, but rather “overly abundant of specific meanings and investments, linked to traits and practices” of a person or concept (Ostiguy and Moffitt ch.3). Here, just as in chapter 3, it is helpful to draw from theories on populism: Ostiguy and Moffitt criticize the idea of leaders in populism to be empty signifiers in the sense of Laclau, meaning someone who is “a blank slate of sorts, on which “the people” invest their meanings and desires” (ch.3). They think “partisans of the *same* camp associated *many* meanings with the term, name, or leader” (ch.3, emphasis original) they rally behind – with a term or leader potentially meaning different things to different people.

The concept of the lore serves a similar function. Of course, the term has a fixed meaning in that it is “a body of traditions and knowledge on a subject or held by a particular group” (S. Jones) that in fantasy and science-fiction translates to knowledge of how a fictional world works, especially its magic system and history. Yet to fans, it can mean much more than just simple facts, for example by often being associated with their childhoods when they consumed certain materials (such as Extended Universe-tie in novels) and their identity as a fan (which for affirmational fans is often tied to extensive factual knowledge) and even (as I will address in 5.3) certainty about how the world works.

The lore as a synecdochical stand-in for the original trilogy and the experience of being its fan and nostalgia for a time in which society still had the “right” order almost functions as the kind of leader that is absent in fan populism: Fans do not rally around certain personalities as followers of populist parties do but rather around a text. The lore thus has, just as the leader according to Ostiguy and Moffitt, a “multiplicity of concrete, very different meanings” which are not “necessarily coherent amongst themselves” (ch.3). However, whatever the signifier stands for, it always “stands against” something – in this way it unites (fan-)populists.

Similarly, there are many things “breaking the lore” may mean to a fan – but most importantly it symbolizes antagonism around which all kinds of anti-fans can unite: Whatever “woke” showrunners are doing must be breaking it. The lore is contrasted to feminism-influenced new *Star Wars*, even in cases when changes do not contradict previously established facts about the fictional universe. Appeals to “the lore” can unite *Star Wars* fans independent of political background – it seems to pose an untouchable “truth” that fans can agree on, even if they may diverge, for example, on whether or not they dislike the existence of lesbians in media texts (see 5.3).

Much popular – highly liked and frequently repeated – criticism on *X* and *YouTube* centers on perceived logic and lore errors. This is often interpreted as proof of Kennedy and Headland being “fake fans” – something women are often accused of (Scott, *Fake*) – who do not understand *Star Wars* and thus get things wrong. This plays into the importance of an enemy figure symbolizing the threat of feminism as discussed in chapter 3. Such criticism can take absurd dimensions which *Forbes* calls “too absurd to be believed” (Tassi, “The Acolyte”): Tassi summarizes that each episode leads to “some sort of desperate search to see how it “breaks canon””, ie. established *Star Wars* lore, with even a “seemingly uncontroversial episode...f[inding] controversy all the same” – that controversy being the birthdate for a minor background character not corresponding to his biography from the Extended Universe tie in novels. When “Star Wars wiki site Wookieepedia updated Mundi’s page with the new information[, it] started receiving threats and harassment” (“The Acolytes”), illustrating fans’ discomfort with anything that threatens the sanctity of previous *Star Wars* lore.

Even in complaints explicitly about “wokeness”, finding “lore breaks” is often the dominant form of criticism and oftentimes presented as a direct result of “wokeness”. This echoes the perceived dichotomy between “political ideology” and “good entertainment” found in previous anti/fan conflicts (see chapter 2). Such lore breaks can range from changing a minor

background character's age ("The Acolytes") to light saber physics or to Anakin being potentially not the only force child (which will be discussed later on). Despite some of these perceived infractions to the established lore being wrong (as in the case of lightsaber-deflecting metal being established in the Extended Universe) or inconsequential (such as a background character's birthday being changed in a Fanwiki, see Tassi, "The Acolyte"), rallying behind such criticism lends the backlash an air of seemingly apolitical objectivity as well as true (and particularly masculine affirmational) fandom (as discussed in chapter 3) – even if the critics then place the blame for "lore breaks", explicitly or implicitly, on perceived feminist political agendas.

There are also parallels to contemporary political controversies about revisionist history to be found in this lore discourse, emphasizing how discussions of popular culture are outlets for broader political dissatisfaction: The lore can serve as a proxy-discussion about whether or not revising established history is ever acceptable. Parallels between lore breaking and revisionist history are rarely voiced explicitly although White for the *National Review* argues that *TA* works similar to "Nikole Hannah-Jones's 1619 Project and its 'alternate facts,' remaking historical legend into a politicized, re-gendered fantasy" ("The Acolyte"). Indeed, changes to the lore are likely to be highly controversial because they mirror changes to perceived historical facts which is an influential controversy frequently discussed in the 2020s. There is much discussion about attempts to restrict "the teaching of Black American history" due to fears about "Critical Race Theory" in schools (Sullivan). It is thus no surprise that White compares *TA* to the 1619 projects: As Leeds writes, the 1619 project with its "effort [...] to reframe American history around the legacy of slavery" (1) drew much engagement by Republicans. Such attempts at (in the eyes of its opponents) de-glorifying the American past have led to moral panics where the Project became a "folk devil that was brainwashing schoolchildren" (15). Quite similarly, *Star Wars* fans connect rewriting the "canon", i.e.

established facts about *Star Wars*, to a political agenda – even though in contrast to the history of the US and slavery, most perceived changes to the lore (such as birth dates) have little inherently political meaning. However, such changes may feel like a personal attack, as lore knowledge can be deeply tied to one’s (affirmational) fan identity – making it a powerful element of fan-populist rhetoric.

5.3: “Lesbian Space Witches”: Queerness as a Threat to Geek Masculinity

Fans often discuss “breaking” established lore together with breaking laws of physics or biology as severe infractions to the quality of a work of fantasy. This subtly suggests an essentialist worldview in which historical facts and social norms are immutable. Treating both infractions to the lore and the laws of physics or biology as similarly grave flaws also strengthens the untouchability of the lore despite it being made-up fiction. Furthermore, these themes often co-occur with discussions of a queerness which is perceived to be a strong textual and fan-cultural disruption to the franchise. Discussions of queer themes in *TA* strongly intersect with the crisis of geek masculinity discussed in chapters 2 and 3. This once-again highlights the continued relevance of socio-political disruptions which have shifted since 2015 and so has the fan conflict changed. At the same time, *TA* demonstrates how despite a strong focus on the “lore”, explicit connections to current political issues have gotten more explicitly and more hostilely expressed.

One may think pointing out illogical physics in fantasy is potentially nitpicky but not political – however, this line of argumentation continues the trend from chapter 2 that seemingly reasonable observations, such as about narrative flaws in *TLJ*, will be connected to a “feminist” or “woke” agenda. These associations vary in their degree of plausibility. While Rey being a Mary Sue due to feminism is to a degree a plausible narrative, when such arguments are connected to breaking the laws of nature, it is rarely a logical conclusion: Jordan,

for example, mockingly argues that “fire in *The Acolyte* doesn't need oxygen like in other shows because it no longer has the patriarchy holding it back, you go girl!” (“*The Acolyte* Episode 1” 01:54-02:01). Even though he is joking when attributing the blame for “logic-defying fire” to feminism, the high frequency of accusations of feminism being to blame for any faults in *TA* in reactionary critique is likely to be one of the most salient aspects a viewer may take away from such videos — irrespective of whether or not the *TA* anti-fans believe in a causal link.

In addition to the proxy discussions about *TA* being conducted similarly to the ones discussed in chapter 2, *TA* discourse also highlights the on-going centrality of the crisis of (geek) masculinity. Negative reactions to *TA*, especially on *YouTube*, are characterized both by homophobia and strong fears about the replacement of white men by (Black lesbian) women. My examples will also again demonstrate how appeals to the laws of nature are frequently connected to perceived (queer-)feminist agendas.

One of the most frequent criticisms to be found for *TA* is that it has lesbians (who reproduce). The argument is not even that the show in any way promotes homosexuality, the complaint is merely that they exist. While queer representation in *Star Wars* has so far been minor, this is not a completely new development: There was lesbian representation in *TROS* – the two background characters even kissed – and in *Andor*. Thus, it is not the novelty alone that can explain the negative reception which re-emphasizes the importance of paratextual framing as well as general narrative dissatisfaction for a backlash to happen.

It is important to point out that the quantity of mentions of lesbians in all criticism of *TA* is completely disproportionate to the screen time or narrative impact of said lesbians. In a flashback in episode 3, we see Osha’s two mothers who are leaders of a witch coven. They acknowledge that they created their children Mae and Osha together but do not show any form of romantic interaction. Paratexts – whose role I have already discussed above – of *Headland*

explicitly describing the show as the “gayest Star Wars to date” (Poe) likely primed viewers to perceive the lesbian characters as particularly salient to the narrative despite their minor roles and lack of romantic interactions. The New York Post, for example, described (reactionary) fan reactions claiming *TA* was “‘woke’ propaganda with ‘lesbian space witches’” (@nypost).

It makes sense that the existence of lesbians would be strongly associated with feminism and thus exacerbate anxieties about masculinity in contemporary society. Despite claims to provide objective criticism, the mere existence of queer people, specifically lesbians, is enough to make a text highly political in the eyes of many reactionary reviewers in fan conflicts. *TA* is not the first text for this to apply to: Budirská in her review of *Wonder Woman*, *Captain Marvel*, *Birds of Prey: The Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn*, and *Wonder Woman 1984* already noted frequent mentions of lesbianism despite none of these movies featuring lesbians at all. She observed that many reviewers associated feminism with “negative perceptions such as lesbianism” (19). Budirská found reviewers of *Wonder Woman* claiming the movie to feature “feminism and making men the bad guys” as well as promoting “lesbianism” (46) — despite featuring a heterosexual romance between its protagonist and having no queer characters²⁸. Of course, there is some historical truth to this association between feminism and lesbians as early radical feminism was, among other things, associated with “lesbian separatism”: In the 1970, some radical feminists believed “that every woman could be a lesbian” and that being one was important to “not support the [patriarchal] power system that oppresses them.” (Enszer 183). While it is most likely meant to be an insult to feminists when “promoting lesbianism” is used as a way to critique superhero movies and other pop cultural texts, the discourse around *TA* played into pre-existing associations between feminism and lesbianism. Consequently, its controversial reception was likely expected.

²⁸ While one could read the all-female Amazon society that the protagonist is from as a lesbian commune (famously joked about by an SNL sketch (Kristian)), there is no textual indication to do so.

Interestingly, despite a lack of white men, diversity is not even the main focus of “anti-woke” backlash for *TA* – unlike in chapter 3. Rather, lesbianism is the major element of much criticism — despite Osha’s mothers having minor roles. This highlights the fundamental role of a crisis of masculinity for this type of fan conflict: Lesbians symbolize the ultimate replacement of men – even more so when they do not even need men for pregnancy, as they do in *TA*. Consequently, this is what many reactions prominently focus on. For example, Jordan’s episode 3 review is the fourth most watched video featuring “The Acolyte” in its title in all of *YouTube* and prominently features Osha’s and Mae’s parents in its thumbnail to signal that it will discuss the purportedly grave problem of lesbians. EndymionTv explicitly links the couple with the show’s lack of (white) male heroes. He argues the show is narcissistic as “all the white guys are sidelined or weak” (“Star Wars The Acolyte” 02:22-02:23) while there are “a lot of lesbians in space” (02:05-02:06). He thus echoes the zero-sum game idea prevalent in other gates (as discussed in chapter 2) that ties more diverse representation to being a loss for white men.

This contemporary use of certain identities being represented as criticism is an interesting reversal of former fan activism, underlining that despite their differences discussed particularly in chapter 3, anti-fan activism and fan activism also share similar patterns. In past fan activism, the presence of characters of marginalized, especially queer, identities often led to recommendations of shows merely based on the representation alone (e.g. instances of the “Great Gay Migration”, see Deshler). This fan activism also focused on lobbying for the inclusion of gay characters (e.g. Tinoco). Yet in *TA* discourse, it is taken as a negative enough aspect of the show that it needs no further explanation – be it in EndymionTv’s video or the headline of the *New York Post*. This duality of representation being a draw for progressive fans on *Tumblr* and a stand-alone criticism for reactionary fans is best captured by a meme that came across my dash several times on *Tumblr* in which one person exclaims “I can’t wait to

go home and watch *The Acolyte*” while another replies “Peter, it has black lesbian space witches who use The Force to get pregnant” with a concerned look on his face. The punch line then follows: “Harry, I already told you I’m excited for it. You don’t need to sell it to me”. This meme “format has been used to express full support for controversial subjects by reinterpreting their perceived drawbacks as features” (“Harry, You Don't Need to Sell It To Me”). The difference of course being that queer-activist fans claim their activism to be political – even if it is sometimes routed merely in wanting to see a specific relationship happen (compare to chapter 4). Reactionary fans generally claim to want a story without political messaging and one that’s just good storytelling yet frequently highlight “lesbians in space” as a problem in *TA*. Clearly, queer existence is still considered inherently political – as it has been in the past and as it still is in debates about grooming and book banning in schools as discussed in chapter 3.

Furthermore, there is a strong emphasis by reactionary fans on the two characters’ ability to procreate which ties the perceived problem with lesbianism in *TA* back into “lore breaks” and contemporary fears that men have become obsolete. EndymionTv says that “two women cannot conceive a child using their DNA, biology and nature dictates that a man's sperm must be utilized in order to create life and this fundamental building block of the universe sickens the woke activists” (“Star Wars *The Acolyte*” 07:30-7:43). This statement implies that “woke activists” wish men were not needed for procreation, potentially so a society without men could exist. This also ties it back to appeals to the lore and laws of nature (even though the Force is a fantasy construct that contradicts the laws of nature to begin with) as well as the perceived woke agenda. Particularly the fact that this seemingly contradicts the established lore of prequel trilogy protagonist Anakin Skywalker led to much offense as it combines fears of men becoming obsolete with “lore breaks” that are deeply connected to the men of the original six movies. Osha and Mae being born without a father through the Force is said to “take away”

Anakin's special role as "the chosen one". This fits the sense of loss that men have experienced in recent years – in society as well as male-dominated fandoms, leading them to question what they are needed for. This aligns with beliefs of the "manosphere" which expresses that "traditional gender roles have given men purpose within social systems" (Copland, "The Online Manosphere" 109). However, feminism has (according to manosphere beliefs) led to "the point that men have little to no purpose at all except to be subservient to these women" (109) – a belief that is often echoed in fears that women now fill all the roles in fiction that men once had and men are left to be weak sidekicks. EndymionTv claims that "men are no longer needed to give birth to human beings within the Star Wars mythology" ("Star Wars Acolyte" 03:12-03:16) which leads him to ponder about society: "Dear viewer, you and I are seen as obsolete, we are the problem" (06:59-07:01). The statement is once again vague enough to be about many things – but due to his strong focus on the "gay agenda" of "lesbian witches [...] giving birth" (15:14-15:16) in the video, it is easy to read his frustration as being about the role of men, not just in *Star Wars* but society at large. He expresses a general anxiety about existing as a man in a world which seems to consider men bad and obsolete.

The manosphere and alt-right closely overlap, particularly in that they believe in a "range of injuries that have been inflicted upon them – including attacks on essential 'masculinity' [...]. The culprit of this injury, as described by men in the manosphere and the far-right, is a broad notion of feminism, the left, or 'social justice warriors' (SJWs)" which specifically harm men "primarily through feminising society to the point where masculinity is degraded and oppressed." (119). Thus, the discourse around Anakin's legacy having been stolen from him by lesbians – who literally do not need a man (to procreate) – both reflects and encourages the ideology of the far-right and manosphere.

Additionally, despite reactionary fans frequently accusing Disney of being groomers – mentioned above by White and discussed in chapter 3 – who are unnecessarily sexualizing

children, there also seems to be a disproportionate sexualization of lesbians' mere existence by reactionary fans. Several responses on all social media platforms allude to the lesbian sexual practice of "scissoring" – something that is stereotypically associated with lesbians even though it is mostly considered a myth perpetuated by pornography and not a common sexual act (Camp). Buechler, for example, argues Anakin was not special because "two women through the power of the scissor- I'm sorry the [Force] conceived twins" ("The Acolyte" 08:43-08:48), thus adding an unnecessary sexual image to a plotline devoid of any romantic or sexual interactions. Countless comments and videos discussing lesbians scissoring in relation to episode 3 imply that queerness is strongly associated with being inherently sexual – on top of inherently political as discussed before – even when there is no textual reason for it. It thus follows the patterns seen in grooming discourse discussed previously – with Buechler even joking that the lesbians perform a "groom- I'm sorry, the Ascension ceremony" ("The Acolyte" 07:13-07:16).

The hyper-sexualization of lesbians in *TA* may be either a result of the sexuality of the characters being overly salient to viewers due to pre-existing narratives about Disney "grooming" children (see chapter 3) or it may be intentionally emphasized by far-right news and reactionary fans' video essays in order to feed into the pre-existing narrative of Disney trying to "groom", i.e. sexualize children. The issue of sexual abuse is of course particularly prevalent in discussions of *TA* as showrunner Headland used to work for Harvey Weinstein (Bacon) who notably "represents the #MeToo epicenter" (Andreasen 2221) as "public accusations against him led to the #MeToo hashtag" (2221).

Headland's past is often pointed out in an act of performative faux-feminism to portray Headland as someone who is actually a hypocrite who is either not a real feminist or to imply that contemporary feminism does not serve women. This framing paints her critics as those who are truly on the side of women – similar to the Carano discourse of chapter 1. Buechler,

for example, calls her a “female activist showrunner who also happens to be the former personal assistant of Harvey Weinstein” (“Everyone Hates” 01:22-01:128), rhetorically structuring this statement as if those two things are direct contradictions. He goes on to wonder if she “could have alerted the world to what Harvey was doing but didn’t” (08:18-08:21), thus implying that he supports #MeToo while accusing Headland of being complicit in Weinstein’s crimes. Similarly, Nolte on *Breitbart* directly asks his readers: “Leslye Headland, she spent four years working as convicted rapist Harvey Weinstein’s personal assistant. You think she cares about women? You’re all dummies” (“Women”). While much criticism of reactionary *TA* anti-fans may be considered misogynistic, it is important that just as with the Mary Sue debate in chapter 2, these people see themselves as trying to help women – be it through asking for realistic role models (see chapter 2) or wanting showrunners that truly support women.

The Epstein associations are often interpreted as Headland supporting sexual abuse which may give a darker reading to Buechler’s humorous thumbnail (“The Acolyte”): It can be read to suggest that Headland intentionally put sexual content, represented by the scissors she is holding, into a show aimed at a presumably young audience²⁹. Such a framing of Headland is often mixed with Disney’s opposition to the “Don’t Say Gay Bill” (see chapter 3) to highlight the dangers of the company which has led to coverage on *Breitbart* describing Disney as a “Grooming Syndicate” (Nolte, “Woke”) that is “openly queering four-year-olds with pro-mutilation propaganda” (“Acolyte”) – referring to support for trans rights.

Taken together, these reactions show how queerness in *The Acolyte* is not treated as incidental representation but rather as emblematic of broader fears of masculine obsolescence: It is not simply the ‘lore’ (and biology) that is seen to be undermined, but the continued relevance of men in both fiction and society. Socio-political issues are rather aggressively

²⁹ While *Star Wars* is generally characterized by many as a “boy’s”, i.e. male child’s, franchise, it tends to be watched by older audiences than for example Marvel movies (Hamilton) which are largely over 30. *TA* also has a darker tone than many other *Star Wars* shows and is likely aimed at older audiences.

projected onto a text that does not align with it to a similarly high degree as the MSD of chapter 1. This suggests an increasing politicization of fan discourse, potentially fueled by the outrage (and thus visibility) discussions of “wokeness” can create in the 2020s.

5.4: “It’s really not about good or bad, it’s about... Ambiguity and Anxiety”: Final Thoughts on Fan Conflicts and Aversion Spaces

Finally, one new theme emerged with reactionary responses to *TA* that had not been as prevalent in any of my previous chapters: Many comments seemed to express a fear of truth and ideas of good and bad not being set in stone. If the lore can be rewritten (even if one may have just not been aware of the pre-existing lore) and if Jedi are not always the good guys and if men are not always the heroes (or biological fathers), then what in this world *is* reliable? That seems to be driving the anxiety behind fan backlash.

The show portrays the Jedi as fallible, in line with the prequel trilogy set after it. As one reviewer writes, *TA* “elegantly hints at the future collapse [of the Jedi Order] by focusing on individual failures that can gain traction over time, and blossom into much bigger problems with wide-reaching consequences” (Baver). Yet, reactionary fans interpreted this depiction of the Jedi negatively. Jordan claims there is a “real concerted effort by Disney to paint the Jedi in the worst possible light so that they can be replaced with something more modern” (“The Acolyte Episode 3” 05:42-05:50) – it is unclear what he means by more modern but based on his episode reviews, the answer might be “strong female characters” or “(Black) lesbians”³⁰. Buechler puts it more dramatically, claiming that “George Lucas’s timeless story was subverted and destroyed by a bunch of ideological, effeminate men and women” (“Everyone Hates”

³⁰ I have so far ignored the dimension of race almost completely in my analysis even though I am sure Osha, Mae and Mother Aniseya being Black plays into the backlash against them as well. However, if racism was expressed, it was mostly Sol or Qimir being described as “Squid Game guy”, “Filipino guy” and other similar refusals to use the names of actors of Color, similar to how Rose was often called “Asian chick” in *TLJ* criticism.

04:01-04:07) who claim that “Star Wars is not about good or bad” (04:14-04:16) and who rather think that “the best parts about Star Wars is there is no good or evil, it depends on what side you're standing” (04:16-04:20). This both calls back to blaming the weakness of “effeminate” men discussed in 5.3 and the struggle of reading a text that is morally ambiguous, as discussed in chapter 4. Overall, such statements imply that the fictional universe far, far away used to be and should be black and white with clear models of good and evil. It also implies those which reactionary fans consider “woke” to not want such a world, but rather one in which “goodness” is both out-dated and a matter of perspective. Perhaps lending to her negative reception as a man-hating “lesbian space witch”, Mother Aniseya encapsulates this idea when she says: “This isn't about good or bad. This is about power and who gets to use it” (*Star Wars: The Acolyte Episode 3* 23:58-24:03) a view more in line with a post-modern Foucauldian view of the world. Such ideas are, of course, commonly associated with the specter of “Cultural Marxism”. These fears about a postmodern world tie back into themes discussed earlier, such as transphobia. Conservative thinktank *The Heritage Foundation* tells readers that “Foucault’s thought represents [...] cultural Marxism” (Gonzales and Gorka 18) and helped establish “gender ideology”. This then (supposedly) led to the “development of gendered pronouns and the transgender phenomenon that is being imposed on students in schools and universities across the country today” (18), tying back into the earlier discussion of “pronouns” in *TA* being perceived as a sign of its progressive agenda.

The discomfort arising from Jedi not being universally good (and white men) any longer, but rather being occasionally also bad clearly expresses contemporary anxieties about society not being clear cut anymore, specifically in regard to gender. This is maybe most strongly expressed in contemporary opposition to “pronouns in the classroom”, “gender ideology” and trans people’s existence which are all viewed as threats to the natural order of things by far-right anti-feminism (Goetz and Mayer) as they threaten the idea of natural and

immutable gender roles and hierarchies. Such broader political discourses about traditional gender roles being threatened by “pronouns” and transgender individuals (and fictional reproducing same-sex couples) all strongly intersect with the fan discourse of *TA* that I have discussed so far. Fandom can be an important part of a fan’s identity and so it should not come as a surprise that if both one’s fandom and one’s stable sense of what constitutes social norms are seemingly taken away, fans will lash out. *TA* thus disrupts both fan cultural norms and reflects disruptions of socio-political norms and consequently provides an ideal space for projecting ideological negotiations onto fan discourse.

Learning and Lessons Learned

Given all I have previously discussed, it is apparent that participation in fandom, particularly anti-fan activism, can be a highly complex matter that intersects with various political issues and forms of engagement. In the introduction, I argued for the importance of understanding fandom as a space of learning by highlighting my own experiences as a fan. This is an attitude shared by many Fan Studies scholars, such as Booth who called fandom the “classroom of the future” to emphasize that fans do not merely passively consume but often creatively and critically engage with their favorite media text. Of course, the power of informal learning in such affinity spaces (Gee) – or as seems more appropriate in anti-fan activism: aversion spaces – is not limited to the skills and values one may want young people to develop. Consequently, in all my chapters I urge readers to be aware of the potential negative consequences of such fan conflicts which may educate fans involved about radical values and behaviors such as those associated with the alt-right or harassment of other fans.

When I set out to write this thesis, I assumed that if I understood the conflicts surrounding *Star Wars*, I might ultimately learn how to prevent online conflicts from happening. Having finished my analyses, I fear there are no easy answers. It does not matter if the lore infractions may be in line with pre-existing lore from the Extended Universe and it

does not matter that the lesbians merely exist for a few minutes on screen – pointing out the flawed logic and overreactions to diverse representation to anti-fans does not change their minds or behaviors. Debating and debunking them — which *TA* fans have done just as people defending Rey from Mary Sue accusations in chapter 2 have done — will not prevent or minimize fan backlashes, rather such defenses amplify them. When reactionary fans claim that they criticize the text, they are expressing — consciously or subconsciously — anxieties about broader sociopolitical disruptions, mapped upon a media text. They manufacture on-going crises, even if it means adapting their stance on “strong female characters” (cf. chapter 2) or creating a “too absurd to be believed” (Tassi, “The Acolyte”) controversy out of a background character’s birthdate. This cannot be debated away by discussing the text itself, just as the anti-shippers similarly care very little for what Reylo shippers actually like about the relationship and rather fight an imagined “abuse supporting” Other. In all anti/fan conflicts of this case study it is essential to create an immoral Other – the woke showrunners with their feminist agenda or the abuse-romanticizing shipper – that is harming the fandom to perform one’s political identity – reactionary or progressive – online, even if traits attributed to these scapegoats – such as supporting grooming (i.e. pedophilia) – are often widely exaggerated or freely constructed with no basis in reality. All my anti/fan conflicts are fueled by social media’s affordances and incentives to make certain voices and ideologies more visible and force others to become invisible, using various strategies – including fanization, fan-populist rhetoric, or weaponized pedagogy – to achieve their aims.

As more and more young people are highly active on social media, often for over 5 hours a day (Rothwell) and fandom is becoming more and more mainstream (J. Bay), it seems unavoidable that they will encounter such fan conflicts and need to be prepared to understand the underlying ideological negotiations in these discourses. Thus, my findings first and foremost underline the importance of a good media literacy education. This involves being able

to critically analyze media texts, such as *Star Wars*. Students should be aware that entertainment is not by default apolitical just because it reproduces hegemonic norms. Furthermore, they need to be able to understand and critically evaluate, for example, how gender roles are portrayed or whether a movie has a feminist message. While this is already discussed in schools, it is often applied to movies that are meant to “have a message” and are not merely “popcorn cinema”, such as *Star Wars*. However, textual criticism can easily be instrumentalized by online actors such as YouTubers to create a narrative of a “decline of cinema due to politics in entertainment” (or video games or comics or sci-fi, see chapter 2) in order to introduce ideas heavily aligned with the alt-right, as I detailed in chapter 3. Students should thus be able to understand that even *Star Wars* can be an object of media analysis.

As I argue in chapter 2, fan backlashes are particularly powerful when several factors such as a textual and fan cultural disruption align with a sociopolitical disruption. This explains why many white men who had previously dominated the *Star Wars* fandom but now feel like it no longer caters exclusively to them react profoundly negatively. Buechler describes the changes he sees: “Star Wars was a male brand everyone could enjoy [which] mutated into a female brand no one can enjoy” (“The Acolyte Is” 11:10-11:18), expressing both a sense of loss of gendered dominance but also of perceived narrative quality. This applies even more so to *TA* than previous installments with its association with intersectional feminism.

What has become apparent to me is that, even though the text needs to align with disruptions experienced by the anti-fan activists in order to become a projection space for their anxieties about broader political changes, the text itself is not the problem. The fan conflicts in all my case studies reflect discomfort one feels in contemporary society – often connected to one’s gender. Be it being a white man and feeling like the world does not need one anymore (ch. 2, 3 and 5) or being a young woman feeling threatened by toxic masculinity (ch. 4). Fandom offers one venue to project one’s negotiation with gender upon and to channel one’s

anxiety or even hatred into – be it by blaming “wokeness” or by blaming problematic shippers. It is little wonder that similar behaviors emerge as a solution to this sense of sociopolitical anxiety, leading anti-shippers to be perceived as conservative or reactionary due to behavioral similarities despite being driven largely by progressive values (ch. 4). It is the underlying anxiety that needs to be eased to reduce fan conflicts.

Both groups of anti-fan activists also seem to yearn for a world that is black and white: There are good Jedi and bad Sith, there is the established lore that can never be touched – there is good representation and correct expressions of sexuality and then there is bad representation that no one should ever consume. Furthermore, there was an illusory past when *Star Wars* was good and its fans united until “wokeness” in the form of feminist women arrived to ruin everything. This line of thinking is not limited to reactionary fans: As chapter 4 has shown, fans believe there was a time when shipping fandom was unproblematic and peaceful until “problematic” shippers or “toxic” anti-shippers (depending on one’s side) arrived as “conservative intruders” – despite shipping fandom in the past being often unwelcoming for queer fans or, to this day, to fans of Color.

If there is a lesson to be learned, it may be that as long as pop cultural texts reflect and offer a space for discussion of contemporary social anxieties – such as the perceived crisis of masculinity or conflicting messages in media and society about female sexuality – fan conflicts are likely to erupt. It may ultimately need a society that, for example, offers new concepts of masculinity or better models of feminist activism in case of anti/shipping conflicts; and most of all it may need a society that encourages openness to the ambiguity of the world to minimize such fan conflicts.

For a more immediately applicable approach, my findings heavily support what is already being taught in teacher education: A need to connect topics discussed in the classroom to the lived out-of-school experiences and everyday environment of students (Klafki), such as

pop culture they may consume or even be a fan of. Making students – be it of school- or university-age – aware of the political discourses they are surrounded by every day in seemingly apolitical environments may increase students’ interest in learning about related political topics and developing their media analysis skills. Particularly for school-age students, electoral politics and traditional news coverage may be perceived as something that does not affect and interest them – until fandom as their affinity / aversion space becomes their first introduction to it. *Tumblr* has been lauded as a “pedagogical space” because it often serves as precisely this introduction, especially for fans of marginalized identities (Kohnen). However, there is also the other “ugly” side of the coin: Fan conflicts may be where people not interested in politics are introduced to issues such as anti-feminism for the first time when they might personally feel affected by a bad video game or a *Star Wars* movie they did not enjoy and are in search of answers for why things they once loved feel unwelcoming to them. It is all the more important that they understand the ideologies they encounter.

Of course, there are many fandoms with very different conflicts, and many are often short-lived, as is the nature of the Internet. Consequently, it would not make sense to, for example, educate teachers about #Gamergate or *Star Wars* fan conflicts in order for them to teach it to their students. Some students may be gamers, others may be into music stars or sports and others may enjoy a variety of TV shows and movies — and some may not identify as a fan of anything in particular. Thus, it is necessary to invite students to bring their interests to the table and have them find examples of fan and political discourse they have seen, as well as provide them with the tools and knowledge to analyze rhetorical strategies or “dog whistles” they might encounter. Only then would they be able to connect recent political debates to conflicts in fandoms they might be interested in.

Additionally, my research highlights the importance of well-known competences such as critical thinking: It is important that fans question, particularly in polarized discussions,

whether one or both sides might be trying to influence their opinion by using, for example, false information, strawman arguments, or heavily biased framing. While students are often taught to be critical of information on political matters, they may be less likely to question whether influencers or “Big Name Fans” are lying or manipulating them – on the contrary, due to parasocial bonds they may perceive fellow fans as particularly trustworthy (cf. ch. 3). This, too, requires encouraging students to apply in-school learning content such as rhetorical analysis to their out-of-school experiences.

The same goes for empathy and conflict resolution competences: The problem with anti-shipping conflicts lies less in whether or not Reylo is a “problematic” relationship but rather what kind of treatment of others is acceptable. Fan policing may seem to anti-shippers like the only action fans can take to feel like they can affect the misogynist world they live in. It may be up to progressive fans to teach others in their fan communities productive ways to educate others about healthy relationships and to provide alternative outlets to harassment and gatekeeping as misguided forms of anti-fan activism that ultimately harms the fan community and the vulnerable fans it claims to protect.

Ultimately, fans and those using fan discourse for their purposes need to be aware that fandom is not a utopian space, but rather offers just as much potential for radicalization as for the positive learning opportunities outlined in the introduction. Fan discourse will in all likelihood continue to reflect, address, or lend fuel to political discourse, potentially even more so in the future than right now if the trends, such as fanization in political discourse and a fan-populist style by fandom influencers, sketched from *TFA* to *TA* in this thesis, continue. Anti/fan conflicts are one field in which fans negotiate their position on issues such as feminism, often in indirect ways through various ways of engaging with textual content. Fans need to be aware of the fact that fandom does not happen in an apolitical vacuum, even if it is used as an escapist practice to not engage with the real world — particularly due to the porous nature of social

media where boundaries between creator and audience and discussions of the personal, the political, and the pop cultural blur.

Additionally, the economy of attention and visibility on social media incentivizes polarization and call-out culture, thus encouraging polemic and intentionally provocative posts and even harassment. At the same time, anti-feminism and white supremacy are — albeit highly visible in online spaces — still extremist fringe positions that may result in less visibility and even bans from social media platforms, thus incentivizing veiled discussions that may use proxy topics such as the narrative quality of pop culture and a fan-populist style to convey their ideology in these spaces. The complex nature of these discourses may make it difficult for fans to understand when they are potentially being manipulated or exposed to biased information. I have mostly focused on the use of fan-populist strategies by YouTubers. Future research is needed to delve deeper into the strategies of anti-fan activism on other platforms, how such content is received by fans, as well as how politicians employ fanization.

Lacking alternative forms of education about political activism, fans may also follow the model of fan policing they encounter online due to lack of other modes of anti/fan activism being presented to them. Although such anti/fan conflicts are particularly visible when they originate with reactionary fans, the progressive roots of anti-shipping should not be mistaken for just another example of online reactionaries but explored further as its own complex form of ideological negotiations among feminist fans. “Ugly” progressive fan activism is a highly-under-researched yet culturally relevant avenue.

All in all, my case studies have shown the ways in which fan conflicts function as ideological negotiations of broader anxieties mapped upon a text that offers elements of alignment with fan-cultural and socio-political disruptions in fans’ lives. As fandom is oftentimes young people’s first conscious and voluntary experience of political education and ideological conflict, research on anti/fan conflicts and media literacy education addressing

fandom are essential for ensuring democratic online culture. Fandom is not merely a space “far, far away” in a niche “galaxy” of the Internet. Fan conflicts can have wide-reaching impacts on political discourse, the media industry, and fans’ everyday lives, as fandom channels fans’ passion for a media text into political engagement (Hinck). For this reason, anti/fan conflicts remind us of the importance of a media literacy education (be it formal or informal) that explicitly addresses fandom as a place where ideologies are affirmed, challenged, and negotiated.

Works Cited

- “Abduction Is Love.” *TV Tropes*, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AbductionIsLove>. Accessed 22 Aug. 2025.
- Aburime, Samantha. “Hate Narratives, Conditioned Language and Networked Harassment: A New Breed of Anti-shipper and Anti-fan–antis.” *Journal of Fandom Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2-3, pp. 135-55, doi:10.1386/jfs_00060_1.
- . “The Cult Structure of the American Anti.” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 36, 2021, doi:10.3983/twc.2021.2147.
- Aleem, Zeeshan. “How the Populist Left Has Become Vulnerable to the Populist Right.” *MSNBC*, 09 Jan. 2023, www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/left-right-populism-greenwald-taibbi-tulsi-rcna64256. Accessed 02 June 2024.
- Alexis H. “For Lucasfilm/Star Wars to Continue Ben Solo's Story.... - Petition.” *Change*, 18 Dec. 2019, www.change.org/p/lucasfilm-continue-ben-solo-s-story?recruiter=962989335&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=psf_combo_share_abi&recruited_by_id=c65e0ff0-7ac5-11e9-b353-e7b6cefc8ba5&share_bandit_exp=abi-19637339-en-US&share_bandit_var=v3. Accessed 01 May 2024.
- Althusser, Louis. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” *Literary Theory – An Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publishing, 1998, pp. 768-77.
- An-angels-fury. “A Little Message for All the Members of the ‘Puritan Community’ on Tumblr.” *Tumblr*, 08 Aug. 2022, www.an-angels-fury.tumblr.com/post/692057586601803776/a-little-message-for-all-the-members-of-the. Accessed 02 June 2024.
- Anders, Charlie Jane. “Please Stop Spreading This Nonsense That Rey from Star Wars Is a ‘Mary Sue’.” *Gizmodo*, 21 Dec. 2015, www.gizmodo.com/please-stop-spreading-

- this-nonsense-that-rey-from-star-1749134275. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Andreasen, Maja Brandt. "A Monster, a Pervert, and an Anti-Hero: The Discursive Construction of Harvey Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, and Louis CK in Humorous #MeToo Memes." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 23, no. 5, pp. 2218-34. doi:10.1080/14680777.2022.2047089.
- Another-anti-Reylo-blog. "Anti Reylo Extremism." *Tumblr*, www.tumblr.com/another-anti-reylo-blog/149469931222/anti-reylo-extremism?source=share. Accessed 01 May 2024.
- "Anti-shipper." *Fanlore*, <https://fanlore.org/wiki/Anti-shipper>. Accessed 30 Apr. 2024.
- Atkins, J. Spencer. "Defining Wokeness." *Social Epistemology*, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 321-38. doi:10.1080/02691728.2022.2145857.
- Austin, Ainsley G. "Contemporary Feminism as Portrayed in Popular Media." Summer Research, 2021. www.soundideas.pugetsound.edu/summer_research/413.
- Bacon, Thomas. "Why Is Leslye Headland, Star Wars' Next Showrunner, So Controversial?" *Screenrant*, 14 June 2024, <https://screenrant.com/star-wars-the-acolyte-leslye-headland-controversial/>. Accessed 10 July 2024.
- Bacon-Smith, Camille. *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*. U of Pennsylvania P, 1991.
- @Baddestmamajama. "Assembling a panel to see if *checks graphic* women, POC, and gay people should be allowed in media is actually not the hot new idea you think it is, studios." *X*, 04 Oct. 2024, 6:35 a.m., <https://x.com/baddestmamajama/status/1842060845666426968>.
- Banet-Weiser, Sarah. *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, Duke UP, 2018.
- , and Laura Portwood-Stacer. "The Traffic in Feminism: An Introduction to the

- Commentary and Criticism on Popular Feminism.” *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 17, no. 5, pp. 884-88. doi:10.1080/14680777.2017.1350517.
- Baptista, João P., and Anabela Gradim. “Who Believes in Fake News? Identification of Political (A)Symmetries.” *Social Sciences*, vol. 11, no. 10, pp. 60-72. doi:10.3390/socsci11100460.
- Barberá, Pablo. “Social Media, Echo Chambers, and Political Polarization.” *Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, Prospects for Reform*, edited by Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker. Cambridge UP, 2020.
- Barclay, Bridgitte. “‘Rebellions Are Built on Hope’: Women and Star Wars.” *Unbound: A Journal of Digital Scholarship*, vol. 1, no. 1. doi:10.12794/journals.ujds.v1i1.106.
- Barnes, Renee. *Fandom and Polarization in Online Political Discussion: From Pop Culture to Politics*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2022.
- Bates, Thomas R. “Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony.” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 351-66, doi:10.2307/2708933.
- Baver, Kristin. “How The Acolyte Challenges How We See Some Members of the Jedi.” *Star Wars*, 17 July 2024, www.starwars.com/news/the-acolyte-jedi-order. Accessed 20 Aug. 2024.
- Bay, Jessica. “Corporate Fandom: Re-creating Media Fans as a Public.” *Journal of Fandom Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 321-31. doi:10.1386/jfs_00027_1.
- Bay, Morten. “Weaponizing the Haters: The Last Jedi and the Strategic Politicization of Pop Culture Through Social Media Manipulation.” *First Monday*, vol. 23, no. 11, 2018, doi:10.5210/fm.v23i11.9388.
- Begg, Ian M., et al. “Dissociation of Processes in Belief: Source Recollection, Statement Familiarity, and the Illusion of Truth.” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, vol. 121, no. 4, pp. 446–58, doi:10.1037/0096-3445.121.4.446.

- Bell, Crystal. "'The Last Jedi' Is the Most Feminist 'Star Wars' Movie Yet." *MTV*, 19 Dec. 2017, www.mtv.com/news/i3r49u/star-wars-last-jedi-feminist. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Bennett, Lucy, and Paul Booth, editors. *Seeing Fans: Representations of Fandom in Media and Popular Culture*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2016.
- @BenShapiro. "No matter who wins tomorrow, let's all remember the most important thing: The Last Jedi is a terrible movie." *X*, 03 Nov. 2020, 12:37 a.m., <https://x.com/benshapiro/status/1323409047396229120?lang=de>.
- Bernstein, Mary. "Identity Politics." *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 31, pp. 47-74. doi:10.1146/annurev.soc.29.010202.100054.
- Bero, Tayo. "The Global Backlash Against The Little Mermaid Proves Why We Needed a Black Ariel." *The Guardian*, 09 June 2023, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jun/09/the-little-mermaid-global-backlash-black-ariel. Accessed 15 June 2024.
- Bezio, Kristin MS. "Ctrl-Alt-Del: GamerGate as a Precursor to the Rise of the Alt-right." *Leadership*, vol. 14, no. 5, pp. 556-66. doi:10.1177/1742715018793744.
- "Big Name Fan." *Fanlore*, https://fanlore.org/wiki/Big_Name_Fan. Accessed 12 Jan. 2024.
- Billard, Thomas J. "'Gender-Critical' Discourse as Disinformation: Unpacking TERF Strategies of Political Communication." *Women's Studies in Communication*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 235-43, doi:10.1080/07491409.2023.2193545.
- Black, Gregory D. "Hollywood Censored: The Production Code Administration and the Hollywood Film Industry, 1930-1940." *Film History*, vol. 3, pp. 167-89. www.jstor.org/stable/3814976.
- Blake, Khandis, et al. "'I Sexually Identify as an Attack Helicopter': Incels, Trolls, and Non-binary Gender Politics Online." *First Monday*, vol. 25, no. 9. doi:10.5210/fm.v25i9.10601.

- BlazeTV Staff. "New 'Star Wars' Show 'The Acolyte' Is Already a Woke Disaster Months Before Its Debut." *The Blaze*, 06 Mar. 2024, www.theblaze.com/shows/pseudo-intellectual/new-star-wars-show-the-acolyte-is-already-a-woke-disaster-months-before-its-debut. Accessed 20 Aug. 2024.
- Blistein, John. "John Boyega on Racist Fan Abuse, Marginalization That Marred 'Star Wars' Experience." *Rolling Stone*, 02 Sep. 2020, www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-news/john-boyega-star-wars-racism-marginalized-1054189/. Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.
- "Blue Hair." *Urban Dictionary*, www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Blue%20Hair. Accessed 12 Jan. 2024.
- Bobba, Giuliano. "Digital Populism: How the Web and Social Media Are Shaping Populism in Western Democracies." *Political Populism: Handbook of Concepts, Questions and Strategies of Research*, edited by Reinhard Heinisch, Christina Holtz-Bacha and Oscar Mazzoleni, Nomos, 2021, pp. 457-68.
- Booth, Paul J. "Fandom: The Classroom of the Future." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 19, 2015. doi:10.3983/twc.2015.0650.
- Borah, Porismita, et al. "Incidental News Exposure and COVID-19 Misperceptions: A Moderated-Mediation Model." *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 129, 2022, doi:10.1016/j.chb.2021.107173.
- Boseley, Henry. "Star Wars - How to Kill a Franchise." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Closer Look, 05 July 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywT7arOAnc4.
- Boucher, Ashley. "'Last Jedi' Stars Mark Hamill, John Boyega Rail Against 'De-Feminized' Cut With LOLs." *The Wrap*, 17 Jan. 2018, www.thewrap.com/stars-wars-the-last-jedi-mark-hamill-rian-johnson-john-boyega-de-feminized-cut-ha-ha/. Accessed 21 Aug. 2024.

- Bourdaa, Mélanie. “‘May We Meet Again’: Social Bonds, Activities, and Identities in the #Clexa Fandom.” *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, edited by Paul Booth, Wiley Blackwell, 2018, pp. 385-99.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. “The Forms of Capital.” Translated by Richard Nice, *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson, Greenwood Press, 1986, pp. 241-58.
- Boyd, Patricia R. “Paradoxes of Postfeminism: Coercion and Consent in Fifty Shades of Grey.” *Feminist Theory and Pop Culture*, edited by Adrienne Trier-Bieniek. SensePublishers, 2015, pp. 103-14.
- Bradley, Bill, and Matthew Jacobs. “Surprise, Surprise: The ‘Alt-Right’ Claims Credit for ‘Last Jedi’ Backlash.” *HuffPost*, 21 Dec. 2017, www.huffpost.com/entry/rotten-tomatoes-last-jedi-ratings-bots_n_5a38cb78e4b0860bf4aab5b1. Accessed 10 Oct. 2024.
- Bradley, Laura. “The Force Awakens Is the Movie Female Star Wars Fans Have Awaited for Years.” *Slate*, 21 Dec. 2015, www.slate.com/culture/2015/12/the-force-awakens-is-the-movie-female-star-wars-fans-deserve.html. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Brady, Reilly H. *‘Guard Your Virtue with Your Life’: Purity Expectations and Dynamics of Purity and Gender-Based Violence for Latter-day Saint (LDS) Girls and Women*. 2024. Washington U in St. Louis, Bachelor’s Thesis.
- Brett, Ingrid, and Sarah Maslen. “Stage Whispering: Tumblr Hashtags Beyond Categorization.” *Social Media + Society*, vol. 7, no. 3, doi:10.1177/20563051211032138.
- Breznican, Anthony. “The Reylo Connection: How Rey and Kylo Ren Make Each Other Stronger.” *VanityFair*, 3 Dec. 2019, www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/12/reylo. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024.

“Bridal Carry.” *TV Tropes*, www.tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BridalCarry.

Accessed 01 May 2024.

Bridwell, Brenna, et al. “Going to the ‘Dark Side’: Star Wars Symbolism and the Acceptance of Torture in the US Security Community.” *Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association*, 2016, Atlanta, GA.

Brightman, Sara, et al. “Anti-transgender Ideology, Laws, and Homicide: An Analysis of the Trifecta of Violence.” *Homicide Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 251-69.
doi:10.1177/1088767923120180.

Brooker, Will. *Using the Force: Creativity, Community and Star Wars Fans*. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003.

Brooks, Marcus A. “It’s Okay to be White: Laundering White Supremacy Through a Colorblind Victimized White Race-consciousness Raising Campaign.” *Sociological Spectrum*, vol. 40, no. 6, pp. 400-16. doi:10.1080/02732173.2020.1812456.

Brooks, Travis J. *The Devil Is in The Details: An Analysis of the Satanic Panic*. 2024. U of Memphis, Master’s Thesis.

Brough, Melissa M., and Sangita Shresthova. “Fandom Meets Activism: Rethinking Civic and Political Participation.” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 2012, vol. 10, doi:10.3983/twc.2012.0303.

Brown, Lee. “See Gina Carano’s Tweets and Posts that Got Her Fired from ‘The Mandalorian’.” *New York Post*, 11 Feb. 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/02/11/see-gina-caranos-tweets-and-posts-that-got-her-fired/>. Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.

Browne, Bill. “Woke Up Call: Australians’ Attitudes to and Perceptions of ‘Wokeness’.” *The Australia Institute*, August 2022.

Budirská, Alzbeta. *‘This Is a Forced Feminist Agenda’: IMDb Users and Their Understanding of Feminism Negotiated in the Reviews of Superheroine Films*. 2021.

Linnaeus U, Master's Thesis.

- Buechler, Gary. "Death by Mary Sue-icide." *YouTube*, uploaded by Nerdrotic, 07 Jan. 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=aSp82rw13gw.
- . "Doctor Who Is Dead | Murdered by the Message." *YouTube*, uploaded by Nerdrotic, 27 Nov. 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_QdVnOajWM.
- . "Everyone Hates The Acolyte, and That's a Good Thing - RIP Star Wars." *YouTube* uploaded by Nerdrotic, 22 Mar. 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xfu3AS7EeA8.
- . "George Lucas Hates Disney Star Wars | Welcome to the Fandom Menace." *YouTube*, uploaded by Nerdrotic, 24 Sept. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=1kN3xThRU6c.
- . "George Lucas Roasts Disney Star Wars and Destroys the Lucasfilm Narrative." *YouTube*, uploaded by Nerdrotic, 16 Mar. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hC_NVHYsCA.
- . "It's the End of Woke Hollywood as We Know It, and I Feel Fine." *YouTube* uploaded by Nerdrotic, 14 Sept. 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qll3J2ztPi4.
- . "Kathleen Kennedy Cancelled Star Wars Land | Female Star Wars Silenced?" *YouTube*, uploaded by Nerdrotic, 30 Apr. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=cstjbfDYiBM.
- . "South Park Destroys Disney and That's a Good Thing." *YouTube*, uploaded by Nerdrotic, 30 Oct. 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qCcf7IYXaE.
- . "The Acolyte Is Awful | This Is How Star Wars Dies, with Thunderous Cringe." *YouTube*, uploaded by Nerdrotic, 13 June 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=14lO0bAXvew.
- . "The Legendary ALEX JONES Interview! #FridayNightTights." *YouTube*, uploaded by Nerdrotic Daily, 14 Sept. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MujHXiG3q4.
- . "The Marvels Cringe! Gina Carano Nukes Lucasfilm! Hollywood's Endless Strike - The Real BBC." *YouTube*, uploaded by Nerdrotic, 31 Oct. 2023,

- www.youtube.com/watch?v=sM4kAncT2aU.
- . “The Marvels Is Awful | The MCU Is Dead.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Nerdrotic, 12 Nov. 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bDZ14UtMGI.
- . “The Rise of Skywalker Destroys George Lucas' Star Wars | Spoiler Review.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Nerdrotic, 24 Dec. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=nUJeuOAIKM0.
- . “The Witcher Is Dead | Netflix Panics!” *YouTube*, uploaded by Nerdrotic, 10 Jul. 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qcdl3T9X6As.
- . “Woke Marvel Exposed by Spider-Man No Way Home | Destroys Disney's Box Office Narrative.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Nerdrotic, 19 Dec. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdRuWDWtvPA.
- , and Pierry Chan. “Exposed! Kathleen Kennedy and Male Feminist Pulverized by Gina Carano!” *YouTube*, uploaded by Nerdrotic Daily, 01 Nov. 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qBXewFJyJU.
- Burnham, Bo. “Welcome to the Internet.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Rachel Gardner, 13 Feb. 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJ_Hdg845Pg.
- Burton, Julian T. D. *Making Space on the Digital Margin: Youth Fandom Communities on Tumblr as Spaces for Making the Self and Re-making Society*. 2017. Rutgers U - Camden Graduate School, PhD Dissertation.
- Busbridge, Rachel, et al. “Cultural Marxism: Far-right Conspiracy Theory in Australia’s Culture Wars.” *Social Identities*, vol. 26, no. 6, 2020, pp. 722-38.
- Busch, Caitlin. “Women's Stories Are More Prominent Than Ever in 'Star Wars: The Last Jedi'.” *Inverse*, 15 Dec. 2017, www.inverse.com/article/39434-star-wars-last-jedi-feminism-rey-leia-holdo-rose-tico. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Butter, Michael. “Conspiracy Theory after Trump.” *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, vol. 89, no. 3, pp. 787-809. doi:10.1353/sor.2022.0054.

- . “Conspiracy Theories as Populist Counter-Narratives.” *Subversive Semantics in Political and Cultural Discourse*, edited by Gesa Mackenthun and Jörn Dosch, transcript, 2023, pp. 21-45.
- . “Covid Conspiracy Theories in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.” *Covid Conspiracy Theories in Global Perspective*, edited by Michael Butter and Peter Knight, Routledge, 2023, pp. 208-20.
- . “‘This Beast in the Shape of a Man’: Right-Wing Populism, White Masculinity, and the Transnational Heroization of Donald Trump.” *Heroism as a Global Phenomenon in Contemporary Culture*, edited by Barbara Korte, Simon Wendt and Nicole Falkenhayner, Routledge, 2019, pp. 114-31.
- Caballero, Estrella Gualda. “Social Network Analysis, Social Big Data and Conspiracy Theories”. *The Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, edited by Michael Butter and Peter Knight, Routledge, 2020, pp. 135-148.
- CBS/AP. “Racist, Misogynistic Messages Show Dark Side of ‘Star Wars’ Fandom.” *CBS News*, 09 June 2018, www.cbsnews.com/news/star-wars-fandom-racist-misogynistic-messages-show-dark-side-abuse-kelly-marie-tran-2018-06-09/. Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.
- Clarke, Lucy L., and Benjamin Hine. “The Portrayal of Gender in Marvel and Star Wars Media Targeted Towards Children.” *Frontiers in Sociology*, vol. 9, doi:10.3389/fsoc.2024.1338914.
- Camp, Lilly. *Scissoring and Other Lies: The Importance of the Creator and the Audience in Queer Porn*. 2014. Rochester U. <http://writing.rochester.edu/celebrating/2014/LillyCamp.pdf>.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Vol. 17. New World Library, 2008.
- Campbell, Scott. “How the Vietnam War Directly Inspired ‘Star Wars’.” *Far Out Magazine*,

- 08 Feb. 2024, <https://faroutmagazine.co.uk/how-vietnam-war-directly-inspired-star-wars/>. Accessed 13 Aug. 2024.
- Carollo, Laura. Statistics for “Total Net Profit/Loss of Star Wars Movies Since Acquisition by Disney Worldwide as of April 2024.” *Statista*, 23 Apr. 2024, www.statista.com/statistics/1463183/star-wars-disney-movies-sequels-spinoffs-profit-loss-worldwide/. Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.
- Case, Patricia, and Barbara Thomas Coventry. “Fifty Shades of Feminism: An Analysis of Feminist Attitudes and ‘Grey Behaviors’.” *Sexuality & Culture*, vol. 22, 2018, pp. 632-50. doi:10.1007/s12119-017-9487-x.
- Casebourne, Imogen, et al. *Assessing the Accuracy and Quality of Wikipedia Entries Compared to Popular Online Encyclopaedias: A Comparative Preliminary Study Across Disciplines in English, Spanish and Arabic*. Epic, U of Oxford, 2012. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EPIC_Oxford_report.pdf.
- Castleberry, Garret. “From Dark Helmet to Kylo Ren - Charting the Tragic Trajectory of Fascistic Fans and Franchise Fascism.” *Unbound: A Journal of Digital Scholarship*, vol. 1, no. 1. doi:10.12794/journals.ujds.v1i1.107.
- Caswell, T. Andrew, and Kyrsten Sackett-Fox. “Gender-atypical Personality or Sexual Behavior: What is Disgusting About Male Homosexuality?” *The Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 158, no. 5, pp. 591-602. doi:10.1080/00224545.2018.1424111.
- Cavanaugh, Patrick. “Star Wars: Mark Hamill Pretended He Was Playing ‘Jake Skywalker’ in ‘The Last Jedi.’” *Comic Book*, 20 Dec. 2017, <https://comicbook.com/starwars/news/star-wars-the-last-jedi-mark-hamill-luke-skywalker-203231/>. Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.
- Centreoftheselights. “AO3 Ship Stats 2019 - 2017-2019 Top 100.” Fan meta. *ArchiveOfOurOwn*, 24 July 2019, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/19963579/>

chapters/47258407. Accessed 20 Aug. 2024.

Cheng, Merel, and Lisa Frommann. *Gillette 'We believe: the Best Men Can Be' – the Advertisement that Shaved Itself off the Market*. 2023. Jönköping U, Master's Thesis.

Chess, Shira, and Adrienne Shaw. "A Conspiracy of Fishes, or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying About #GamerGate and Embrace Hegemonic Masculinity." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 59, no.1, 2015, pp. 208-220, doi:10.3983/twc.2015.0650. Accessed 31 Aug 2021.

Cipriani, Casey. "Star Wars' Rey Is a New Feminist Hero." *Bustle*, 18 Dec. 2015, www.bustle.com/articles/130516-why-rey-in-the-force-awakens-is-the-feminist-hero-weve-all-been-waiting-for. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.

Cisneros, J. David. "Contaminated Communities: The Metaphor of 'Immigrant as Pollutant' in Media Representations of Immigration." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 569-601. doi:10.1353/rap.0.0068.

Click, Melissa A., editor. *Anti-fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age*. NYU P, 2019.

Cohen, Claire. "Star Wars: The Force Awakens Has 'Embraced Feminism' - But It's Our Fault It Didn't Happen Sooner." *The Telegraph*, 16 Dec. 2015, www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/star-wars-the-force-awakens-has-embraced-feminism---but-its-our/. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.

Cohen, Elizabeth L., et al. "Loving to Hate the Kardashians: Examining the Interaction of Character Liking and Hate-watching on the Social Influence of a Reality TV Show." *Psychology of Popular Media*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 136-48. doi:10.1037/ppm0000284.

Cohen, Noam. "The Breakfast Meeting: Lucas Hands Off to Disney, and a Storm's Online Power." *The New York Times*, 31 Oct. 2012, https://archive.nytimes.com/mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/31/the-breakfast-meeting-lucas-hands-off-to-disney-and-a-storms-online-power/. Accessed

18 June 2024.

- Collier, Jessica R. "Conservatives and Misinformation." *Conservative Political Communication: How Right-Wing Media and Messaging (Re)Made American Politics*, edited by Sharon E. Jarvis, Routledge, 2021, pp. 193-206.
- Collier, Noelle R., et al. "Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Xena: Warrior Princess: Reception of the Texts by a Sample of Lesbian Fans and Web Site Users." *Journal of Homosexuality*, vol. 56, no. 5, pp. 575-609. doi:10.1080/00918360903005253.
- Comella, Lynn. "Revisiting the Feminist Sex Wars." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 437-62. doi:10.15767/feministstudies.41.2.437.
- Condis, Megan, and Mel Stanfill. "Debating with Wertham's Ghost: Comic Books, Culture Wars, and Populist Moral Panics." *Cultural Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 1-28, doi:10.1080/09502386.2021.1946579.
- Conger, Kate. "By Rebranding Twitter as X, Elon Musk Creates Social Media Confusion." *The New York Times*, 03 Aug. 2023, www.nytimes.com/2023/08/03/technology/twitter-x-tweets-elon-musk.html. Accessed 01 June 2024.
- Copland, Simon. "The Online Manosphere and Misogyny in the Far-right: The Case of the #thotaudit." *Rise of the Far Right: Technologies of Recruitment and Mobilization*, edited by Melody Devries, Judith Bessant and Rob Watts, Rowman and Littlefield, 2021, pp. 107-25.
- . "Weak Men and the Feminisation of Society: Locating the Ideological Glue Between the Manosphere and the Far-Right." *Global Perspectives on Anti-Feminism: Far-Right and Religious Attacks on Equality and Diversity*, edited by Judith Goetz and Stephanie Mayer, Edinburgh UP, 2023, pp. 116-36.
- Coppa, Francesca. "A Brief History of Media Fandom," *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, edited by Karen Hellekson & Kristina Busse, MacFarland,

- 2006, p. 41-59.
- . “Fuck Yeah, Fandom is Beautiful.” *The Journal of Fandom Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2014, pp. 73-82. doi:10.1386/jfs.2.1.73_1.
- Coughlin, Tara Marie. *To Boldly Critique: Participatory Fan Practices in the Online Video Essay*. 2023. U of Texas at Austin, MA Thesis. dx.doi:10.26153/tsw/47410.
- Cox, Emily. *Girls on Fire: The Evolution of Female Characters in Young Adult Literature*. 2021. St. Catherine U, Honors Thesis.
- “Crack Ship.” *Fanlore*, https://fanlore.org/wiki/Crack_Ship. Accessed 30 Apr. 2024.
- Craig, Justin. “Review: ‘The Force Awakens’ Is Genuine, Classic ‘Star Wars’.” *Fox News*, 16 Dec. 2015, www.foxnews.com/entertainment/review-the-force-awakens-is-genuine-classic-star-wars. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- CRA Staff. “Primer: School Systems Are Corrupting Children with Pornography.” *America Renewing*, 14 Mar. 2022, www.americarenewing.com/primer-school-systems-are-corrupting-children-with-pornography/. Accessed 02 June 2024.
- “Crystallization and Recrystallization of Polymers.” *Linseis*, www.linseis.com/en/wiki-en/crystallization-and-recrystallization-of-polymers/. Accessed 21 Aug. 2024.
- Cuebas-Fantauzzi, Alba. “Elon Musk Says Lucasfilm President Is ‘More Deadly Than the Death Star’ for Handling of ‘Star Wars’ Franchise.” *Fox Business*, 25 June 2024, www.foxbusiness.com/media/elon-musk-says-lucasfilm-president-is-more-deadly-death-star-handling-star-wars-franchise.amp. Accessed 07 July 2024.
- Cullen, Dave. “Star Wars The Force Awakens: Feminist Propaganda.” *YouTube*, uploaded by The Dave Cullen Show, 04 Nov. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gO_fkalsbo.
- Daily Wire. “Shapiro: My Long-Awaited Review of ‘Star Wars: The Rise Of Skywalker’.” *Daily Wire*, 03 Jan. 2020, www.dailywire.com/news/shapiro-my-long-awaited-review-of-star-wars-the-rise-of-skywalker. Accessed 05 June 2024.

- Dannar, Anthony. *'We Ain't Playing F*cking Nice...': Reactionary Fandom, Playful Platforms, and the White Masculine Crusader Fan Identity*. 2023. Georgia State U, PhD Dissertation, doi:10.57709/36466101.
- Darakchi, Shaban. "Making Gender and Sexuality Studies Illegal: Heteronationalism, Anti-gender Mobilization, and the Neoliberal 'Utopian' Gaze in Bulgaria, 2018–2023." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 52, no. 1, pp. 189-207. doi:10.1353/wsq.2024.a924317.
- Dean, Jonathan. "Politicising Fandom." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 408-24. doi:10.1177/1369148117701754.
- , and Phoenix Andrews. "Celebrization from Below: Celebrity, Fandom, and Anti-fandom in British Politics." *New Political Science*, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 320-38. doi:10.1080/07393148.2021.1957602.
- Debruge, Peter. "Film Review: 'Star Wars: The Last Jedi'." *Variety*, 12 Dec. 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/film/reviews/star-wars-the-last-jedi-review-rian-johnson-1202635597/>. Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.
- de Coning, Alexis. "Recouping Masculinity: Men's Rights Activists' Responses to Mad Max: Fury Road." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 174-76. doi:10.1080/14680777.2016.1120491.
- della Cava, Marco R. "Lucasfilm's Kathleen Kennedy Has Produced Quite a Career." *USA Today*, 05 Jun. 2013, www.eu.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2013/06/05/kathleen-kennedy-innovators-and-icons-lucasfilm/2164285/. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Deller, Ruth A., and Clarissa Smith. "Reading the BDSM Romance: Reader Responses to Fifty Shades." *Sexualities*, vol. 16, no. 8, pp. 932-50. doi:10.1177/1363460713508882.
- Denham, Jess. "Star Wars: Men's Rights Activists Claim Boycott Cost The Force Awakens

- \$4.2m.” *Independent*, 4 Jan. 2016, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/star-wars-men-s-rights-activists-claim-boycott-cost-the-force-awakens-4-2m-a6796146.html. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Deshler, Kira M. *Not Another Dead Lesbian: the Bury Your Gays Trope, Queer Grief, and The 100*. 2017. Whitman College, Honors Thesis.
- Diaz, Jaelyn. “Florida’s Governor Signs Controversial Law Opponents Dubbed ‘Don’t Say Gay’.” *NPR*, 28 Mar. 2022, www.npr.org/2022/03/28/1089221657/dont-say-gay-florida-desantis. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Dickson, EJ. “Are Sex-Negative ‘Puriteens’ Actually Taking Over the Internet?” *RollingStone*, 14 Jun 2021, www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/puriteens-sex-negative-lgbtq-pride-tiktok-twitter-1180208/. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024.
- Dietsch, Drew. “If There Are No More ‘Star Wars Story’ Movies, Where Does the Franchise Go?” *Fandom*, 21 June 2018, www.fandom.com/articles/star-wars-story-movies-canceled. Accessed 13 Aug. 2024.
- Di Leo, Jeffrey R., and Sophia A. McClennen. *Left Theory and the Alt-Right*. 1st ed., Taylor & Francis, 2023.
- “Domestic Box Office For 2015.” *Box Office Mojo*, www.boxofficemojo.com/year/2015/?grossesOption=totalGrosses. Accessed 01 June 2024.
- Doody, Sean. *Mapping Discourse in the Intellectual Dark Web: A Critical Computational Sociology*. 2022. George Mason U, PhD Dissertation.
- Dorsch, Rita. “Star Wars’ Most Divisive Pairing Is (Somehow) Tumblr’s Top Ship of 2020.” *CBR*, 08 Dec. 2020, www.cbr.com/star-wars-reylo-tumblr-top-ship-2020/. Accessed 01 May 2024.
- Dorsi, Jenna. “More Than a Monster in a Mask, Kylo Ren Struggles to Cope With Childhood Abuse in Star Wars: The Last Jedi.” *The Mary Sue*, 24 Jan. 2018,

- www.themarysue.com/kylo-ren-childhood-abuse/. Accessed 20 Aug. 2024.
- Dosser, Maxwell A. *The Future that Never Was: Reactionary Fan Controversies and Affective Attachments to Speculative Fiction*. 2024. U of Pittsburgh, PhD Dissertation. <http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/45841/13/The%20Future%20That%20Never%20Was%20-%20Dosser%20Dissertation%202.pdf>
- Dowling, David O., et al. "Hijacking Journalism: Legitimacy and Metajournalistic Discourse in Right-wing Podcasts." *Media and Communication*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 17-27. doi:10.17645/mac.v10i3.5260.
- Downing, Lisa. "Safewording! Kinkphobia and Gender Normativity in Fifty Shades of Grey." *Psychology & Sexuality*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2013, pp. 92-102. doi:10.1080/19419899.2012.740067.
- Drakulich, Kevin, et al. "Race and Policing in the 2016 Presidential Election: Black Lives Matter, the Police, and Dog Whistle Politics." *Criminology*, vol. 58, no. 2, pp. 370-402. doi:10.1111/1745-9125.12239.
- Driessen, Simone. "'For the Greater Good?' Vigilantism in Online Pop Culture Fandoms." *Introducing Vigilant Audiences*, pp. 25-48. doi:10.11647/OBP.0200.02.
- , et al. "From Fan Citizenship to 'Fanspiracies': Politics and Participatory Cultures in Times of Crisis?." *Convergence*, vol. 20, no. 1, doi:10.1177/13548565241236005.
- Drouin, Renee Ann. *Fans Are Going to See It Any Way They Want': The Rhetorics of the Voltron: Legendary Defender Fandom*. 2021. Bowling Green State U, PhD Dissertation.
- "Dumpster Fire." *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dumpster-fire>. Accessed 14 Aug. 2024.
- Duncan, Craig. "LIVE - Matt Walsh vs. The Quartering & Triggernometry | Alt Media Merges with MSM | Nerdrotic's Lies." *YouTube*, uploaded by Fludded, 22 Feb. 2023,

www.youtube.com/watch?v=cTbvFm1GBT8.

Dye, April K. *Why Does Everyone Think I Hate Men? The Stigma of Feminism and Developing a Feminist Identity*. 2005. Miami U, Master's Thesis.

rave.ohiolink.edu/etdc/view?acc_num=miami1133535707.

Dym, Brianna, and Casey Fiesler. "Ethical and Privacy Considerations for Research Using Online Fandom Data." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 33, 2020, doi:10.3983/twc.2020.1733.

Earl, Jessie. "Baby Yoda: Tension Between Capitalism & Art." *YouTube*, uploaded by Jessie Gender, 06 Mar. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qn0hdjccTqo.

—. "The Decaying Monomyth of Star Wars." *YouTube*, uploaded by Jessie Gender, 16 Dec. 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=puXNbtHksb0.

—. "The Revolutionary Spirit of Star Wars Andor." *YouTube*, uploaded by Jessie Gender, 09 Dec. 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ytuq73QnDEs.

—. "What is a Mary Sue... And What Exactly Is Wrong with Them?" *YouTube*, uploaded by Jessie Gender, 03 May 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3nw9uNvt50.

Earl, Jessie. *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/@JessieGender1. Accessed 15 June 2024.

Eaton, Paige. "Fascism and Fantasy: How the Reaction to Diversity in Rings of Power Exposed Virulent White Nationalism in Tolkien's Audiences." *The Macksey Journal*, vol. 4, no. 26, <https://mackseyjournal.scholasticahq.com/api/v1/articles/94770-fascism-and-fantasy-how-the-reaction-to-diversity-in-rings-of-power-exposed-virulent-white-nationalism-in-tolkien-s-audiences.pdf>

Eco, Umberto. "Ur-fascism." *The New York Review of Books*, vol. 42, no. 2. pp. 1-9.

Eddo-Lodge, Reni. "The Anti-feminist Character of Bella Swan, or Why the Twilight Saga Is Regressive." *Kritikos*, vol. 10, Jan. 2013. www.intertheory.org/eddo-lodge.htm.

Edwards, Belen. "I Love Reylo Fanfiction — and So Does Publishing." *Mashable* 24 Nov.

- 2023, www.mashable.com/article/reylo-fanfiction-the-hurricane-wars. Accessed 01 May 2024.
- Edwards, Stassa. “Finally, Women Do More Than Give Birth & Die in Star Wars: The Force Awakens.” *Jezebel*, 21 Dec. 2015, www.jezebel.com/finally-women-do-more-than-give-birth-die-in-star-wa-1748930943. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Egido Lorente, Júlia. *Appreciation or Abomination? A Study of Fanfiction as Literature*. 2020. U of Barcelona, Bachelor’s Thesis, <http://hdl.handle.net/2445/170822>.
- Ekman, Mattias. “The Great Replacement: Strategic Mainstreaming of Far-Right Conspiracy Claims.” *Convergence*, vol. 28, no. 4, 2022, pp. 1127-43.
doi:10.1177/13548565221091983.
- Elliott, Michael A. “Fandom as Religion: A Social-scientific Assessment.” *Journal of Fandom Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 107-22. doi:10.1386/jfs_00036_1.
- Ellis, Lindsay. “The Ideology of the First Order.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Lindsay Ellis, 03 Jun. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAVeyXwy3BE.
- EndymionTV. *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/@EndymionTv. Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.
- . “Fans Demand Kathleen Kennedy Fired As Star Wars Fails + Woke Hollywood Hates Sound of Freedom.” *YouTube*, uploaded by EndymionTv, 09 Jul. 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4upcF1Fmbg.
- . “How Woke Ideology Is Ruining Star Wars and Can It Be Saved?” *YouTube*, uploaded by EndymionTv, 08 Apr. 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOJ3rJ1V1Uk.
- . “Star Wars Acolyte Episode 3 Has Destroyed the Franchise Forever Review + Critical Drinker Attacked.” *YouTube*, uploaded by EndymionTv, 12 June 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZtc6Szlynw.
- . “Star Wars The Acolyte Is Most Hated Disney Project Ever?! + Woke Creator Pushes Force Is Gay Agenda.” *YouTube*, uploaded by EndymionTV, 06 June 2024,

www.youtube.com/watch?v=lktmzMr--vA.

“Enemies to Lovers.” *Fanlore*, www.fanlore.org/wiki/Enemies_to_Lovers. Accessed 30 Apr. 2024.

Enli, Gunn, and Linda T. Rosenberg. “Trust in the Age of Social Media: Populist Politicians Seem More Authentic.” *Social Media + Society*, vol. 4, no. 1. doi:10.1177/2056305118764430.

Enszer, Julie R. “‘How to Stop Choking to Death’: Rethinking Lesbian Separatism as a Vibrant Political Theory and Feminist Practice.” *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 180-96. doi:10.1080/10894160.2015.1083815.

Entman, Robert M. “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm.” *Journal of Communication*, vol. 43, no. 4, pp. 51-8, doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x.

Esposito, Luigi. “The Alt-Right as a Revolt Against Neoliberalism and Political Correctness: the Role of Collective Action Frames.” *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, vol. 18, pp. 93-110. doi:10.1163/15691497-12341507.

Euteneuer, Jacob, and Josiah Meints. “It Was Just a Joke. Demagoguery, Humor, and Video Game Streaming.” *Gamevironments*, vol. 13, pp. 358-81. doi:10.26092/elib/410.

Evans, Adrienne, and Mafalda Stasi. “Desperately Seeking Methods: New Directions in Fan Studies Research.” *Participations: International Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 4-23.

Fahs, Breanne. “Daddy’s Little Girls: On the Perils of Chastity Clubs, Purity Balls, and Ritualized Abstinence.” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 116–42. doi:10.5250/fronjwomestud.31.3.0116.

Fairclough, Norman, and Ruth Wodak. “Critical Discourse Analysis.” *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction Volume Two*, edited by Teun A. van Dijk, Sage, pp. 258-84.

“Fandom.” *Cambridge Dictionary*,

www.dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fandom. Accessed 01 June 2024.

Fathallah, Judith. “Won't Somebody Please Think of the Children? Or, South Park Fanfic and the Political Realm.” *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 18, no. 10, pp. 1309-25.

doi:10.1080/13676261.2015.1039972.

Favreau, Jon, creator. *The Mandalorian*. Lucasfilm, Fairview Entertainment and Golem Creations, 2019.

Fazekas, Angela. *Queer and Unusual Space: White Supremacy in Slash Fanfiction*. 2014.

Kingston, Queen's U, Master's Thesis.

Felts, Kyrstin. *The Millennial Politics of Tumblr Feminism*. 2017. McGill U (Can.), Master's Thesis.

Fiesler, Casey. “Everything I Need to Know I Learned from Fandom: How Existing Social Norms Can Help Shape the Next Generation of User-generated Content.” *Vanderbilt Journal of Entertainment and Technology Law*, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 729-62.

https://cmci.colorado.edu/~cafi5706/jetl_fiesler.pdf.

Filmento. “The Last Jedi — How to Break a Fanbase | Anatomy of a Failure.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Filmento, 19 Mar. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=w2Jdi2NWq0w.

Finklea, Bruce W. “Media Effects: Comprehensive Theories.” *The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects*, edited by Patrick Rössler, Cynthia A. Hoffner and Liesbet van Zoonen, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2017.

Finlayson, Alan. “Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web.” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 38, no. 6, 2021. pp. 167-90. doi:10.1177/02632764211036731.

Fisher, Morgan. “Fandom Surgery.” *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, edited by Allison McCracken et al., U of Michigan P, pp. 154-57.

Fiske, John. “Culture, Ideology, Interpellation.” *Literary Theory - An Anthology*, edited by

- Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publishing, 1998, pp. 1268-73.
- . “The Cultural Economy of Fandom.” *The Adoring Audience*, edited by Lisa A. Lewis, Routledge, 2002. pp. 30-49.
- . *Understanding Popular Culture*. Routledge, 1989.
- Flegel, Monica, and Judith Leggatt. *Superhero Culture Wars: Politics, Marketing, and Social Justice in Marvel Comics*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2021.
- Fletcher, Rosie. “How Star Wars: The Last Jedi Is the First Truly Feminist Star Wars Film.” *Digital Spy*, 20 Dec. 2017, www.digitalspy.com/movies/a845869/star-wars-the-last-jedi-feminist-feminism/. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Flew, Terry, and Petros Iosifidis. “Populism, Globalisation and Social Media.” *International Communication Gazette*, vol. 82, no. 1, pp. 7-25. doi:10.1177/1748048519880721.
- @Focusfronting. “big shoutout to whoever made this collage of queer women and POC to represent “things fans hate”.” X, 05 Oct. 2024, 12:51 a.m., <https://x.com/focusfronting/status/1842336732408115551>.
- “Foe Yay Shipping.” *TV Tropes*, www.tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/FoeYayShipping. Accessed 01 May 2024.
- Ford, Sarah Ellen. *Politics? What Politics? Digital Fandom and Sociopolitical Belief*. 2023. Bowling Green State University, PhD Dissertation.
- Forest, James J.F. *Digital Influence Warfare in the Age of Social Media*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2021.
- Framke, Caroline. “What Is a Mary Sue, and Does Star Wars: The Force Awakens Have One?” *Vox*, 28 Dec. 2015, www.vox.com/2015/12/28/10672628/star-wars-force-awakens-rey-mary-sue. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Franzeska. “Your Vagina Is a Bigot; My Vagina Is a Saint.” Fan meta. *ArchiveofOurOwn*, 25. Apr. 2016, www.archiveofourown.org/works/6652984/chapters/15217063, [Not

- accessible for non-AO3 users]. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024.
- Freedden, Michael. "Ideology." *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, doi:10.4324/9780415249126-S030-1.
- Frim, Daniel J. "Pseudo-Satire and Evasion of Ideological Meaning in 'South Park'." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2014, pp. 149-71.
- Fuchs, Christian. *Digital Ethics - Media, Communication and Society Volume Five*. Routledge, 2022.
- Gallaher, Carolyn. "Mainstreaming White Supremacy: a Twitter Analysis of the American 'Alt-Right'." *Gender, Place & Culture*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 224-52, doi:10.1080/0966369X.2019.1710472.
- Gallar, Jonathan Zachariah, and Christopher J. Ferguson. "Violent Video Games Do Not Contribute to Societal Violence and Crime." *The Oxford Handbook of Digital Technology and Mental Health*, edited by Marc N. Potenza, Kyle A. Faust, and David Faust, Oxford Academic, 2020, pp. 188-201.
- Garber, Megan. "Star Wars: The Feminism Awakens." *The Atlantic*, 19 Dec. 2015, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/12/star-wars-the-feminism-awakens/420843/. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Gee, James Paul. "Affinity Spaces and 21st Century Learning." *Educational Technology*, 2017, pp. 27-31. www.jstor.org/stable/44430520.
- "George Lucas Reveals How Star Wars Was Influenced By the Vietnam War." *AMC*, 09 May 2018, www.amc.com/blogs/george-lucas-reveals-how-star-wars-was-influenced-by-the-vietnam-war--1005548. Accessed 01 June 2024.
- Gilkeson, Shanna R. *Fanning While Female: Gatekeeping, Boundary Policing, and the Harassment of Women in the Star Wars Fandom*. 2023. Bowling Green State U. PhD Dissertation. https://etd.ohiolink.edu/acprod/odb_etd/ws/send_file/send?

accession=bgsu1688549429042622&disposition=inline.

Gilmore, Hayley. *A Woman's Place Is in the Resistance*. 2017, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

—. “Women’s March on Washington.” *HayleyGilmore*, 2017, www.hayleygilmore.com/work#/womensmarch/. Accessed 01 June 2024.

@GinaCarano. “We need to clean up the election process so we are not left feeling the way we do today. Put laws in place that protect us against voter fraud. Investigate every state. Film the counting. Flush out the fake votes. Require ID. Make Voter Fraud end in 2020. Fix the system.” *X*, 05 Nov. 2020, 05:18 p.m., <https://x.com/ginacarano/status/1324385598539399168>.

“Girlboss.” *Merriam-Webster*, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/girlboss. Accessed 02 June 2024.

Glazebrook, Lewis. “The Acolyte Episode 5 Had the Best Lightsaber Fights I've Seen Since Revenge of The Sith.” *Screenrant*, 26 June 2024, <https://screenrant.com/star-wars-the-acolyte-episode-5-lightsaber-fights-revenge-of-the-sith/>. Accessed 07 July 2024.

Goetz, Judith, and Stefanie Mayer. “With God and Nature Against Equality - Ideology and Rhetorical Strategies of Right-Wing Anti-Feminism in Austria.” *The Gendered Politics of Crises and De-Democratization: Opposition to Gender Equality*, edited by Bianka Vida, ECPR Press, 2022, pp. 93-112.

Gonzalez, Mike, and Katharine Gorka. *How Cultural Marxism Threatens the United States—and How Americans Can Fight It*. The Heritage Foundation - Special Report, 2022.

Gonzales, Yvonne. “How Omegaverse Came to Dominate Fanfiction, and Why That Might Not Be Such a Bad Thing.” *Henry Jenkins*, 22 Mar. 2023. <https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2023/3/20/how-omegaverse-came-to-dominate->

- fanfiction-and-why-that-might-not-be-such-a-bad-thing. Accessed 20 Aug. 2024.
- Goode, Erich, and Nachman Ben-Yehuda. *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*. Wiley Blackwell, 2009.
- Gould, Philip. "New England Witch-hunting and the Politics of Reason in the Early Republic." *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 68, no. 1, pp 58-82. doi:10.2307/365965.
- Gray, Jonathan. *Dislike-Minded: Media, Audiences, and the Dynamics of Taste*. NYU P, 2021.
- . "New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-fans and Non-fans." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 6, no.1, pp. 64-81. doi:10.1177/1367877903006001004.
- Gray, Kishonna L., et al. "Blurring the Boundaries: Using Gamergate to Examine 'Real' and Symbolic Violence Against Women in Contemporary Gaming Culture." *Sociology Compass*, vol. 11, no. 3, doi:10.1111/soc4.12458.
- Green, Shoshanna, et al. "Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking." *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity*, edited by Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander, Hampton Press, 1998, pp. 153-78.
- Greene, Viveca S. "'Deplorable' Satire: Alt-right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies." *Studies in American Humor*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2019, pp. 31-69. doi:10.5325/studamerhumor.5.1.0031.
- Greig, James. "Moralising About Relationships Between Consenting Adults Has Dangerous Precedents." *The Guardian*, 19 Aug. 2020, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/19/big-age-gap-relationship-sex-consent-adults. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024.
- Grønning, Ingeborg, et al. "From Fatness to Badness: The Modern Morality of Obesity." *Health*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 266-283. doi:10.1177/1363459312447254.
- Grossberg, Lawrence. "Is There a Fan in the House?: The Affective Sensibility of Fandom." *The Adoring Audience*, edited by Lisa A. Lewis, Routledge, 1992, pp. 50-65.

Grossman, Lev. "Foreword." *Fic: Why Fanfiction is Taking Over the World*, edited by Anne Jamison, BenBella Books, Inc., 2013.

Grungegoths. "Elizabeth II and Reylo." *Tumblr*, 08 Sept. 2022, www.tumblr.com/grungegoths/694852263920943104/gen-did-queen-elizabeth-did-something-problematic?source=share. Accessed 02 June 2024.

Halaly, Alan. "Right-wing pundit Ben Shapiro condemns Hamas at sold-out talk in Gainesville." *The Gainesville Sun*, 19 Oct. 2023, eu.gainesville.com/story/news/local/2023/10/19/protesters-clash-outside-ben-shapiro-event-at-uf/71238238007/. Accessed 19 June 2024.

Halberstam, Jack. "You Are Triggering Me! The Neo-Liberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger and Trauma." *BullyBloggers*, 05 July 2014, www.bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/you-are-triggering-me-the-neo-liberal-rhetoric-of-harm-danger-and-trauma/. Accessed 02 June 2024.

Hall, Stuart. "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular'." *People's History and Socialist Theory*, edited by. Rapheal Samuel, Kegan Paul-Routledge, 1981, pp. 227-41.

Hall, Tegan. "Star Wars: 10 Reasons Why Reylo Should Be Canon." *Screenrant*, 18 Dec. 2019, www.screenrant.com/star-wars-reylo-canon/. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024.

Hambly, Jeremy D. *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/channel/UCfwE_ODI1YTbdjkzuSi1Nag. Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.

—. "Box Office TANKS Again & Star Wars Fans Blamed! The Rise of Skywalker Mess." *YouTube*, uploaded by TheQuartering, 04 Jan. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ke8xWOPsV1Q.

—. "George Lucas to Return & Kathleen Kennedy Out Of Star Wars?" *YouTube*, uploaded by The Quartering, 22 July 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMf3sYs96rM.

—. "Kathleen Kennedy Devestated & in Hiding! Gina Carano Fans Will Not Stop! Star Wars

- & The Mandalorian.” *YouTube*, uploaded by The Quartering, 18 Feb. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=kaejPY9jx8M.
- . “Kathleen Kennedy Finally Fired? Star Wars Saved? New Disney CEO Wants Her Out After Indiana Jones.” *YouTube*, uploaded by TheQuartering, 22 Nov. 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzhQHDKQWSQ.
- . “Massive Backfire! Disney Pushing Woke Agenda Has Employees & Families Quitting in Huge Numbers!” *YouTube*, uploaded by The Quartering, 31 Mar. 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxwF6LjmYys.
- . “Star Wars Director Blames Gamergate for His Failures.” *YouTube*, uploaded by The Quartering, 10 July 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUzvTrOJw1Y.
- . “Terrible News for Star Wars Fans..Disney Doubles Down On Kathleen Kennedy.” *YouTube*, uploaded by The Quartering, 14 Jan. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=DIQ3y3rvGx4.
- Hamilton, Christofer. “Star Wars Has an Older, More Male-Skewing Audience Than Marvel | Charts.” *Yahoo*, 11 June 2024, www.yahoo.com/entertainment/star-wars-older-more-male-170000506.html?guccounter=1. Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.
- Hannell, Briony. *Feminist Fandom: Media Fandom, Digital Feminisms, and Tumblr*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2023.
- “Harry, You Don't Need to Sell It To Me.” *Know Your Meme*, May 2023, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/harry-you-dont-need-to-sell-it-to-me>. Accessed 20 Aug. 2024.
- Harsin, Jayson. “Post-truth Populism: The French Anti-gender Theory Movement and Cross-cultural Similarities.” *Communication Culture & Critique*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 35-52. doi:10.1093/ccc/tcx017.
- Hartman, Andrew. *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*. U of

Chicago P, 2019

Hartmann, Douglas. "Rethorizing the Cultural Politics of Sport After a Decade of Activism, Populism, and Polarization." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 48, no. 1-2, pp. 26-50. doi:10.1177/01937235241249364.

Heckman, Meg. "Star Wars: The Force Awakens to Feminism - Column. - A Feminist Fairy Tale That Celebrates Nerdy-Girl Power." *USA Today*, www.eu.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2016/01/05/star-wars-force-awakens-feminism-column/78265780/. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.

Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Pantheon Books, 1988.

Hilck, Karin. "The Space Community and the Princess: Reworking the American Space Program's Public Image From 'Miss NASA' to Princess Leia". *A Galaxy Here and Now - Historical and Cultural Readings of Star Wars*, edited by Peter W. Lee, McFarland & Company, 2016, pp. 33-61.

Hills, Matt. "An Extended Foreword: From Fan Doxa to Toxic Fan Practices?," *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, May 2018, pp. 105-26. www.participations.org/15-01-07-hills.pdf.

—. "Toxic YouTubers 'Hated' by Doctor Who? Animating Multiphrenic Incarnations of Not My Doctor Anti-fandom." *Journal of Folklore and Popular Culture*, vol. 65, no. 2, 2021, doi:10.12775/11.2.2021.005.

Hime, Gracie. "Our Modern Day Icarus: Girlbossing a Little too Close to the Sun." *StudentLife*, 22 Sept. 2021, www.studlife.com/forum/2021/09/22/our-modern-day-icarus-girlbossing-a-little-too-close-to-the-sun. Accessed 02 June 2024.

Hinck, Ashley. *Politics for the Love of Fandom: Fan-based Citizenship in a Digital World*. LSU P, 2019.

- Hofmann, Melissa A. “Johnlock Meta and Authorial Intent in Sherlock Fandom: Affirmational or Transformational.” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 28, 2018, pp. 1-8. doi:10.3983/twc.2018.1465.
- Hofstadter, Richard. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. Harvard UP, 1996.
- Homolar, Alexandra, and Ronny Scholz. “The Power of Trump-speak: Populist Crisis Narratives and Ontological Security.” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2019, pp. 344-64, doi:10.1080/09557571.2019.1575796.
- Hosseinmardi, Homa, et al. “Examining the Consumption of Radical Content on YouTube.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 118, no. 32, 2021, doi:10.1073/pnas.2101967118.
- House Bill 1577: Parental Rights in Education*. The Florida Senate, Mar. 2022, www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/1557/BillText/er/PDF. Accessed 14 Aug. 2024.
- Howard, McKenzie A. *Ethics in Literature: A Case Study of Hades and Persephone*. 2024. Georgia Southern U, Master’s Thesis.
- Hu, Jane C. “Dangerous Minds.” *Slate*, 27 Dec. 2022, slate.com/technology/2022/12/teen-brains-neuroscience-justice-law-supreme-court.html. Accessed 02 June 2024.
- Hulan, Haley. “Bury Your Gays: History, Usage, and Context.” *McNair Scholars Journal*, vol. 21, no. 1, article 6.
- Hummel Mota, João P. *Transgender Rights and Policy Responsiveness: The Impact of Public Opinion on the Adoption of Transgender Policy in the United States*. 2024. Gothenburg U, Master’s Thesis.
- Ingram, David. “Fewer People Are Using Elon Musk’s X as the Platform Struggles to Attract and Keep Users, According to Analysts.” *NBC News*, 22 Mar. 2024, www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/fewer-people-using-elon-musks-x-struggles-

keep-users-rcna144115. Accessed 07 June 2024.

Jackson, Maghan Molloy. *Reading Too Much Into It: Excessive Reading, Queer Possibility, and Representation That Matters*. 2023. The Ohio State U. PhD Dissertation.

Jarbo, Matt. "Twitter vs Cara Dune (The Mandalorian)." *YouTube*, uploaded by 3BuckTheater, 30 Nov. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pjt4R9yODrw.

@JasonSCampbell. "Ben Shapiro complains about Star Wars having women heroes: 'Star Wars is, essentially, a little boy's property'." *X*, 29 July 2020, 2:25 a.m., <https://x.com/jasonscampbell/status/1288269258380673026>.

Jenkins, Henry. *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*. The MIT P, 2009.

—. "Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century (Part One)." *Henry Jenkins*, 19 Oct. 2006, https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2006/10/confronting_the_challenges_of.html. Accessed 13 Aug. 2024.

—. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. NYU P, 2006.

—. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. NYU P, 2006.

—. *Textual Poachers*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2012.

—, and Dan Hassler-Forest, "'I Have a Bad Feeling About This': A Conversation about Star Wars and the History of Transmedia." *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling*, edited by Sean Guynes and Dan Hassler-Forest, Amsterdam UP, 2018, pp. 15-34.

—, et al. *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism*. NYU P, 2016.

—, et al. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. NYU P, 2018.

—, et al., editors. *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*. Duke UP,

2003.

—, et al., editors. *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change*. NYU P, 2020.

Jensen, Joli. “Fandom as Pathology.” *The Adoring Audience*, edited by Lisa A. Lewis, Routledge, 1992, pp. 9-29.

Jo. “The Importance Of #OwnVoices: An Interview With Corinne Duyvis.” *OnceUponABookCase*, 12 May 2016, www.onceuponabookcase.co.uk/2016/05/importance-ownvoices-interview-corinne-duyvis.html. Accessed 02 June 2024.

Johnson, Derek. “Resistance and Empire: Star Wars and the Social Justice Reboot.” *Film Reboots*, edited by Daniel Herbert and Constantine Verevis, Edinburgh UP, 2020, pp. 127-42.

Johnson, Rian. Screenplay of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. *Scraps From the Loft*, <https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/movies/star-wars-the-last-jedi-transcript/>. Accessed 18 Oct. 2024.

Jones, Alex. “Alex Jones Floats the Idea that “Old Lizard” Carrie Fisher Was Murdered by Hollywood to Increase Star Wars: The Last Jedi Revenue.” *Media Matters for America*, 02 Jan 2018, www.mediamatters.org/alex-jones/alex-jones-floats-idea-old-lizard-carrie-fisher-was-murdered-hollywood-increase-star. [video originally uploaded to *Youtube* on 29 Dec. 2017]. Accessed 21 Aug. 2024.

—. “RWW News: Alex Jones Says Star Wars Is 'State-Funded' Propaganda.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Right Wing Watch, 19 Dec. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=VB3G8SREZUM.

Jones, Bethan. “#AskELJames, Ghostbusters, and#Gamergate: Digital Dislike and Damage Control.” *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, edited by Paul Booth, Wiley Blackwell, 2018, pp. 415-29.

- Jones, Simon K. "Lore, Exposition & World Building." *Medium*, 15 Mar. 2021, <https://medium.com/adventures-in-fiction/lore-exposition-world-building-c15dc747b36>. Accessed 07 July 2024.
- Jordan, Will. *YouTube*, www.youtube.com/@TheCriticalDrinker. Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.
- . "Admiral Holdo - A Toxic Leader." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Critical Drinker, 30 Sep. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qD8FHKOFgCg.
- . "Kathleen Kennedy 'Saves' Star Wars (Again)." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Critical Drinker, 27 Apr. 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVNDMuQtip0.
- . "Star Wars, and the Problem with Rey." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Critical Drinker, 19 Jan. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruxcT6LEVzk.
- . "The Acolyte Episode 1 - A Stunning and Brave Disaster." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Critical Drinker, 06 June 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGiXw4BjybM.
- . "The Acolyte Episode 3 - I'm Done and so Is Star Wars." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Critical Drinker, 13 June 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=yofjGi6LOVc.
- . "The Genius of The Last Jedi - Part 1." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Critical Drinker, 05 Mar. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUynRyx-qDg.
- . "The Last Jedi, and the Assassination of Luke Skywalker." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Critical Drinker, 09 July 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5A93glKqk.
- . "The Rise of Skywalker, and The Fall of Star Wars (Part 1)." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Critical Drinker, 21 Dec. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=jillx1EwJMk.
- . "The Rise of Skywalker, and The Fall of Star Wars (Part 2)." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Critical Drinker, 23 Dec. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5qh8wEa6mc.
- . "Was Anakin Really a Mary Sue?" *YouTube*, uploaded by The Critical Drinker, 23 July 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSj6wEm4zZY.
- Karami, Amir, et al. "Twitter and Research: A Systematic Literature Review Through Text

- Mining.” *IEEE Access* 8, pp. 67698-717. doi:10.1109/ACCESS.2020.2983656.
- Keller, Jessalynn. “‘Oh, She’s a Tumblr Feminist’: Exploring the Platform Vernacular of Girls’ Social Media Feminisms.” *Social Media + Society*, vol. 5, no. 3. doi:10.1177/2056305119867442.
- Kellner, Douglas, and Jeff Share. “Media Literacy in the US.” *MedienPädagogik: Zeitschrift für Theorie und Praxis der Medienbildung*, vol. 11, pp. 1-21. doi:10.21240/mpaed/11/2005.09.15.X.
- Kempshall, Chris. *The History and Politics of Star Wars: Death Stars and Democracy*. Routledge, 2022.
- Kersey, Paul. “#BoycottStarWarsVII Hits Social Justice ‘Warriors’ (Geeks And Nerds) Where They Live.” *VDare*, 20 Oct. 2015, www.vdare.com/posts/boycottstarwarsvii-hits-social-justice-warriors-geeks-and-nerds- where-they-live. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Kit, Borys. “‘Star Wars’ Chief Kathleen Kennedy’s Lucasfilm Deal Extended for Three Years (Exclusive).” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 28 Sept. 2018, www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/star-wars-chief-kathleen-kennedys-lucasfilm-deal-extended-three-years-1147653/. Accessed 01 June 2024.
- Klafki, Wolfgang. “Didactic Analysis as the Core of Preparation of Instruction (Didaktische Analyse als Kern der Unterrichtsvorbereitung).” *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 13-30. doi:10.1080/0022027950270103.
- Klink, Flourish, et al. “A Roundtable Discussion about the Cultures of Fandom on Tumblr.” *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*, edited by Allison McCracken, Alexander Cho, Louisa Stein and Indira Neill Hoch, U of Michigan P, 2020, pp. 167-80.
- K.M.M. “When Systemic Hatred of Women Online Goes Unnoticed, What Does it Say About Us?” *Medium*, 15 Jan. 2020, www.mythdemeanors.medium.com/when-systemic-hatred-of-women-online-goes-unnoticed-what-does-it-say-about-us-

930cccb683e0. Accessed 02 June 2024.

Knight, Peter. *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X-Files*. Routledge, 2000.

Knowles, Michael. "Gay Pigs Are Coming to Groom Your Kids | Ep. 1084." *YouTube*, uploaded by Michael Knowles, 09 Sept. 2022 www.youtube.com/watch?v=s5hNhpGo08U.

Kohnen, Melanie ES. "Tumblr Pedagogies." *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, edited by Paul Booth, Wiley Blackwell, 2018, pp. 349-67.

Kornhaber, Spencer. "The Fan Fiction That Predicted a Big Last Jedi Storyline." *The Atlantic*, 21 Dec. 2017, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/12/the-fan-fiction-that-predicted-a-major-last-jedi-storyline/548885/. Accessed 01 May 2024.

Kovach, Steve. "Meet the Woman in Charge of Making Sure the Next Star Wars Movie Doesn't Stink." *Business Insider*, 31 Oct. 2012, www.businessinsider.com/kathleen-kennedy-in-charge-at-lucasfilm-2012-10. Accessed 01 June 2024.

Kraljik, Valentina. "New Data Reveals That 'The Acolyte' Is Second Most Successful Star Wars Show of All Time – Outperforming Pretty Much Everything Else." *Comic Basics*, 02 July 2024, www.comicbasics.com/the-acolyte-second-most-popular-star-wars-show/. Accessed 20 Aug. 2024.

Krämer, Peter. "Fighting the Evil Empire: Star Wars, the Strategic Defense Initiative and the Politics of Science-Fiction." *Sex, Politics, and Religion in Star Wars: An Anthology*, edited by Douglas Brode and Leah Deneyka, Scarecrow Press, 2012, pp. 63-76.

Kreiter, Michael P. *There Will Be No Reconciliation: The Science Fiction Culture War of White Supremacist Puppies*. 2021. Kent State U, PhD Dissertation.

Kumkale, G. Tarcan, and Dolores Albarracín. "The Sleeper Effect in Persuasion: A Meta-Analytic Review." *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 130, no. 1, 2004, pp. 143-72. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.130.1.143.

- Kuznetsov, Dmitry, and Milan Ismangil. "YouTube as Praxis? On BreadTube and the Digital Propagation of Socialist Thought." *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2020, pp. 204-18. doi:10.31269/triplec.v18i1.1128.
- Lamerichs, Nicolle. "Stranger Than Fiction: Fan Identity in Cosplay." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 7, 2011. doi:10.3983/twc.2011.0246.
- , et al. "Elite Male Bodies: The Circulation of Alt-Right Memes and the Framing of Politicians on Social Media." *Participations: International Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 180-206
- Lane, Carly. "The Force Awakens Gives Us a Strong, Capable & Competent Female Character in Rey." *The Mary Sue*, 20 Dec. 2015, www.themarysue.com/the-force-awakens-rey-mary-sue/. Accessed 05 June 2024.
- Langmann, Brady. "J.J. Abrams Admits the Obvious: Disney Didn't Have a Real Plan When They Made the New Star Wars Trilogy." *Esquire*, 26 May 2021, www.esquire.com/entertainment/movies/a36545784/jj-abrams-star-wars-plan/. Accessed 01 June 2024.
- Larsen, Victor. *'It Makes Me, a Minor, Uncomfortable' - Media and Morality in Anti-Shippers' Policing of Online Fandom*. 2021. Ghent U, Master's thesis.
- Lawler, Kelly. "How the Women of 'The Last Jedi' Make 'Star Wars' a Force." *USA Today*, 14 Dec. 2017, https://eu.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2017/12/14/star-wars-last-jedi-feminist-women/943736001/. Accessed 09 Oct. 2024.
- Lazere, Donald. *Why Higher Education Should Have a Leftist Bias*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2013.
- Leeds, Tyler. "The 1619 Project Moral Panic: The Role of Cable News." *Social Problems*, 2024. doi:10.1093/socpro/spae026.
- Lesbianmichelmishina. "The Pros of Star Wars Ships." *Tumblr*, 02 May 2016,

- <https://www.tumblr.com/lesbianmichelmishina/143706413094/pros-of-finnrey-becoming-canon-canon-interracial>. Accessed 21 Oct. 2024.
- Lewis, Hilary. "J.J. Abrams on 'Star Wars' Secrecy: 'Don't Want to Ruin the Movie'." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 30 Nov. 2015, www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/jj-abrams-star-wars-secrecy-844168/. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Lewis, Rebecca. *Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube*. Data & Society, 2018.
- . "'This Is What the News Won't Show You': YouTube Creators and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-celebrity." *Television & New Media*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 201-17. doi:10.1177/1527476419879919.
- , et al. "'We Dissect Stupidity and Respond to It': Response Videos and Networked Harassment on YouTube." *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 65, no. 5, 2021, pp. 735-56.
- Libby, C. "Sympathy, Fear, Hate: Trans-exclusionary Radical Feminism and Evangelical Christianity." *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 425-42. doi:10.1215/23289252-9836078.
- Literature Devil. "Rings of Power: Galadriel Is 'Secretly' a Mary Sue and Here's Why." *YouTube*, uploaded by Literature Devil, 12 Oct. 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLDfSP3ONpo.
- . "Why Are So Many SJW Characters Mary Sues?" *YouTube*, uploaded by Literature Devil, 01 Sep. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=KcXVGli1m28.
- Loh, Jennifer, and Michael J. Walsh. "Social Media Context Collapse: The Consequential Differences Between Context Collusion Versus Context Collision." *Social Media + Society*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 1-15. doi:10.1177/20563051211041646.
- Lopez, Lori Kido. "Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in The Last Airbender."

- International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 15, no. 5, pp. 431-45.
doi:10.1177/1367877911422862.
- Lothian, Alexis. "Choose Not to Warn: Trigger Warnings and Content Notes from Fan Culture to Feminist Pedagogy." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2016, pp. 743-56.
doi:10.15767/feministstudies.42.3.0743.
- , et al. "'Yearning Void and Infinite Potential': Online Slash Fandom as Queer Female Space." *English Language Notes*, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 103-11. doi:10.1215/00138282-45.2.103.
- Lucas, George. Screenplay of *Star Wars Episode 3: Revenge of the Sith*. *IMSDB*, www.imsdb.com/scripts/Star-Wars-Revenge-of-the-Sith.html. Accessed 01 June 2024.
- Łuksza, Agata. "Sleeping with a Vampire: Empowerment, Submission, and Female Desire in Contemporary VampireF." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2015, pp. 429-43.
doi:10.1080/14680777.2014.945607.
- Lumsden, Karen, and Emily Harmer. *Online Othering: Exploring Digital Violence and Discrimination on the Web*. Palgrave, 2019
- , and Heather Morgan. "Media Framing of Trolling and Online Abuse: Silencing Strategies, Symbolic Violence, and Victim Blaming." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 17, no. 6, 2017, pp. 926-40. doi:10.1080/14680777.2017.1316755.
- Ma, Cindy. "Thinking for Themselves: Bootstraps Discourse and the Imagined Epistemology of Reactionary YouTube Audiences." *Political Communication*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2024, pp. 199-223, doi:10.1080/10584609.2023.2283703.
- MagooRobbie. "The Last Jedi: De-Feminized Fanedit (aka The Chauvinist Cut)." *Reddit*, 14 Jan. 2018, www.reddit.com/r/moviescirclejerk/comments/7qal59/the_last_jedi_defeminized_fanedit_aka_the/?rdt=42406. Accessed 21 Aug. 2024.

- Mamié, Robin, et al. “Are Anti-Feminist Communities Gateways to the Far Right? Evidence from Reddit and YouTube.” *Proceedings of the 13th ACM Web Science Conference* 2021, 2021. https://dlab.epfl.ch/people/west/pub/Mamie-HortaRibeiro-West_WebSci-21.pdf.
- Markey, Patrick M., and Christopher J. Ferguson. “Teaching Us to Fear: The Violent Video Game Moral Panic and The Politics of Game Research.” *American Journal of Play*, vol. 10, pp. 99-115.
- @MarkHamill. “#BestEpisode_EVER.” *X*, 07 Nov. 2020, 8:39 p.m., <https://x.com/MarkHamill/status/1325160954057773059>.
- Marks, Rachel, and Mel Stanfill. “Methodological Solutions for the Challenges of Studying Racist Communication on Social Media.” *Proceedings of the 41st ACM International Conference on Design of Communication*, 2023.
- Marwick, Alice E. “You May Know Me from Youtube: (Micro-) Celebrity in Social Media.” *A Companion to Celebrity*, edited by David Marshall and Sean Redmond, Wiley Blackwell, 2015, pp. 333-50.
- , and Rebecca Lewis. *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*. Data & Society Research Institute, 2017.
- , and William Clyde Partin. “Constructing Alternative Facts: Populist Expertise and the QAnon Conspiracy.” *New Media & Society*, vol. 26, no. 5, pp. 2535-55. doi:10.1177/14614448221090201.
- , et al. “Far-Right Online Radicalization: A Review of the Literature.” *The Bulletin of Technology and Public Life, Center for Information, Technology, and Public Life*, 2022. doi:10.21428/bfcb0bff.e9492a11.
- “Mary Sue.” *Fanlore*, www.fanlore.org/wiki/Mary_Sue. Accessed 05 June 2024.
- Massanari, Adrienne L. “Gamergate.” *The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and*

- Communication*, 2020, pp. 1-5. doi:10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc014.
- . “#Gamergate and The Fapping: How Reddit’s Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures.” *New Media & Society*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2017, pp. 329-46. doi:10.1177/1461444815608807.
- . *Participatory Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit*. Peter Lang, 2015.
- , and Shira Chess. “Attack of the 50-Foot Social Justice Warrior: The Discursive Construction of SJW Memes as the Monstrous Feminine.” *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 525-42. doi:10.1080/14680777.2018.1447333.
- Matamoros-Fernández, Ariadna, and Johan Farkas. “Racism, Hate Speech, and Social Media: A Systematic Review and Critique.” *Television & New Media*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2021, pp. 205-24. doi:10.1177/1527476420982230.
- “Matt Walsh.” *SPL Center*, www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/matt-walsh. Accessed 19 June 2024.
- @MattWalshBlog. “Theocratic fascist, bestselling children’s author, America’s highest legal authority.” *X*, Account Biography, <https://x.com/MattWalshBlog>. Accessed 19 June 2024.
- McCluskey, Megan. “Daisy Ridley Responds to ‘Sexist’ Criticism of Rey in Star Wars.” *Time*, 28 Oct. 2016, www.time.com/4549109/star-wars-daisy-ridley-rey-mary-sue-criticism/. Accessed 05 June 2024.
- McCracken, Allison, et al. *A Tumblr Book: Platform and Cultures*. U of Michigan P, 2020.
- McGloin, Matt. “The Captain Marvel Review.” *Cosmic Book News*, 08 Mar. 2019, <https://cosmicbook.news/captain-marvel-review>. Accessed 10 Oct. 2024.
- Mede, Niels G., and Mike S. Schäfer. “Science-related Populism: Conceptualizing Populist Demands Toward Science.” *Public Understanding of Science*, vol. 29, no. 5, pp. 473-91. doi:10.1177/0963662520924259.

- Meggers, Heather J. "Discovering the Authentic Sexual Self: The Role of Fandom in the Transformation of Fan's Sexual Attitudes." *Fan culture: Theory/Practice*, edited by Katherine Larsen, and Lynn Zubernis, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, pp. 57-80.
- Mendelson, Scott. "Box Office: 'Force Awakens' Was More Successful Than 'Star Wars' (From A Certain Point Of View)." *Forbes*, 20 July 2020, www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2020/07/20/box-office-disney-jj-abrams-force-awakens-bigger-than-fox-george-lucas-star-wars/. Accessed 21 Aug. 2024.
- Mendes, Kaitlynn, et al. "#MeToo and the Promise and Pitfalls of Challenging Rape Culture Through Digital Feminist Activism." *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 236-46. doi:10.1177/1350506818765318.
- Migdon, Brooke. "Missouri Lawmakers Consider Extending Proposed Ban on Gender-affirming Care to Adults." *The Hill*, 22 Apr. 2022, www.thehill.com/changing-america/respect/equality/3460403-missouri-lawmakers-consider-extending-proposed-ban-on-gender-affirming-care-to-adults/. Accessed 02 June 2024.
- Mitchell, Hilary. "Upcoming Star Wars TV Show The Acolyte Is Packed with LGBTQ+ Talent – and We're Already Obsessed." *The Pink News*, 20 Mar. 2024, www.thepinknews.com/2024/03/20/star-wars-the-acolyte/. Accessed 20 Aug. 2024.
- "Modest Declines in Positive Views of 'Socialism' and 'Capitalism' in U.S." *Pew Research Center*, 19 Sept. 2022, www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/09/19/modest-declines-in-positive-views-of-socialism-and-capitalism-in-u-s/. Accessed 15 June 2024.
- Moffitt, Benjamin. "Taking Account of the Visual Politics of Populism." *Polity*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2022, pp. 557-64. doi:10.1086/719829.
- . *The Global Rise of Populism: Performance, Political Style, and Representation*. E-book ed, Stanford UP, 2016.

- . “What Was the ‘Alt’ in Alt-right, Alt-lite, and Alt-left? on ‘Alt’ as a Political Modifier.” *Political Studies*, doi:00323217221150871.
- Mollet, Tracey. “‘Dream Big, Princess’: Disney’s Princess Fandom as a Transgenerational, Feminist Fan Space.” *Fan Phenomena: Disney*, edited by Sabrina Mittermeier, Intellect Books, 2022, pp. 37-47.
- Morger, Fabia H. “Populism in Internet Memes. An Investigation with Analytical Approaches from Discourse Analysis and Multimodality.” *Tekst i Dyskurs—Text und Diskurs*, vol. 16, 2022, pp. 277-301. doi:10.7311/tid.16.2022.14.
- Morjax. “How Many YouTube Creators Could Be ‘Full Time’?” *Medium*, 26 May 2017, www.medium.com/@Morjax/how-many-youtube-creators-could-be-full-time-6ecd1636bfc1. Accessed 15 June 2024.
- Morris, Lucy. “Star Wars’ Daisy Ridley Is Sick of Your ‘Sexist’ Rey Criticisms.” *Digital Spy*, 31 Oct. 2016, www.digitalspy.com/movies/a812660/star-wars-daisy-ridley-is-sick-of-your-sexist-rey-criticisms/. Accessed 21 Aug. 2024.
- “MSTing.” *Fanlore*, fanlore.org/wiki/MSTing. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024.
- Mudde, Cas, and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser. *Populism - A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2017.
- Mueller, Hannah. *The Politics of Fandom: Conflicts that Divide Communities*. McFarland, 2022.
- Munro, Ealasaid. “Feminism: A fourth wave?.” *Political Insight*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 22-5. doi:10.1111/2041-9066.12021.
- Murray, Connor. “‘The Acolyte’ Sparks Anti-‘Woke’ Criticism Over ‘Pronoun’ Scene — Drawing Rebuke From Writer.” *Forbes*, 19 June 2024, www.forbes.com/sites/conormurray/2024/06/19/the-acolyte-sparks-anti-woke-criticism-over-pronoun-scene---drawing-rebuke-from-writer/. Accessed 07 July 2024.

- Nadel, Alan. "The Empire Strikes Out: Star Wars (IV, V, and VI) and the Advent of Reaganism." *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War: A Critical Reassessment*, edited by Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam, U of Iowa P, 2012, pp. 187-208.
- Nagle, Angela. *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-right*. Zero Books, 2017.
- Natarajan, Madison, et al. "Decolonizing Purity Culture: Gendered Racism and White Idealization in Evangelical Christianity." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 3, pp. 316-36. doi:10.1177/03616843221091116.
- Navar-Gill, Annemarie, and Mel Stanfill. "'We Shouldn't Have to Trend to Make You Listen': Queer Fan Hashtag Campaigns as Production Interventions." *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 70, no. 3-4, pp. 85-100. doi:10.5406/jfilmvideo.70.3-4.0085.
- Neiman, Susan. *Left Is Not Woke*. Polity Books, 2023.
- Neiwert, David. *The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump*. Verso Books, 2017.
- "Nerdrotic". *Wikitubia*, <https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/Nerdrotic>. Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.
- "Nerdrotic Merchandise." *Mixed Tees*, <https://mixedtees.com/nerdrotic>. Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.
- Ng, David. "Disney's 'The Acolyte' Creator Scolds 'Star Wars' Fanboys: 'Anyone Who Engages in Bigotry, Racism or Hate Speech I Don't Consider a Fan'." *Breitbart*, 04 June 2024, www.breitbart.com/entertainment/2024/06/04/disneys-the-acolyte-creator-scolds-star-wars-fanboys-anyone-who-engages-in-bigotry-racism-or-hate-speech-i-dont-consider-a-fan/amp/. Accessed 07 July 2024.
- Nguyen, Terry. "The Video Essay Boom." *Vox*, 09 Mar. 2022, www.vox.com/the-goods/22967496/youtube-tiktok-creators. Accessed 15 June 2024.
- Nietzel, Michael T. "Colleges, Don't Be So Quick on The Trigger Warnings. They May

- Misfire.” *Forbes*, 22 Mar. 2019, www.forbes.com/sites/michaelnietzel/2019/03/22/colleges-dont-be-so-quick-on-the-trigger-warnings-they-may-misfire/. Accessed 20 Aug. 2024.
- Nolan, Sean. “US Federal Judge Blocks Florida Ban on Use of Personal Pronouns by Teachers.” *Jurist News*, 11 Apr. 2024, www.jurist.org/news/2024/04/us-federal-judge-blocks-florida-ban-on-use-of-personal-pronouns-by-teachers/. Accessed 07 July 2024.
- Nolan, Liam. “Rian Johnson Laughs Off Women-Free Cut of The Last Jedi.” *CBR*, 16 Jan. 2018, www.cbr.com/rian-johnson-women-free-last-jedi-reaction/. Accessed 10 Oct. 2024.
- Nolte, John. “11 Ways Kathleen Kennedy Killed the ‘Star Wars’ Golden Goose.” *Breitbart*, 02 Jan 2020, www.breitbart.com/entertainment/2020/01/02/nolte-11-ways-kathleen-kennedy-killed-the-star-wars-golden-goose/. Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.
- . “‘Acolyte’ Is the ‘Gayest Star Wars Yet’.” *Breitbart*, 05 June 2024, www.breitbart.com/entertainment/2024/06/04/nolte-acolyte-gayest-star-wars-yet/amp/. Accessed 07 July 2024.
- . “Go Woke, Go Broke: ‘Solo’ Crash Lands at Box Office.” *Breitbart*, 26 May 2018, www.breitbart.com/entertainment/2018/05/26/go-woke-go-broke-solo-crash-lands-at-box-office/. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- . “‘Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker’ Review: A Limp Apology for ‘Last Jedi’.” *Breitbart*, 20 Dec. 2019, www.breitbart.com/entertainment/2019/12/20/star-wars-the-rise-of-skywalker-review-a-limp-apology-for-last-jedi/. Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.
- . “Woke ‘Acolyte’ Crushed with Lowest Audience Score of All ‘Star Wars’ Series.” *Breitbart*, 11 June 2024, www.breitbart.com/entertainment/2024/06/11/nolte-woke-

- acolyte-crushed-lowest-audience-score-all-star-wars-series/amp/. Accessed 07 July 2024.
- . “Women Made 19% Less than Men Working on Disney’s ‘The Acolyte’.” *Breitbart*, 25 June 2024, <https://www.breitbart.com/politics/2024/06/25/nolte-women-made-19-less-than-men-working-on-disneys-the-acolyte/>. Accessed 24 Aug. 2025.
- Not Literally. “I Ship It.” *YouTube*, uploaded by notliterally, 20 Nov. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LCDgJiPBxfl.
- Nussbaum, Daniel. “J.J. Abrams: ‘Star Wars: The Last Jedi’ Critics Felt ‘Threatened’ by Women.” *Breitbart*, 18 Feb. 2018, www.breitbart.com/entertainment/2018/02/18/j-j-abrams-last-jedi-critics-felt-threatened-women/. Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.
- @NYPost. “Queer creator of ‘gayest’ Star Wars series claps back at haters who claim it’s ‘woke’ propaganda with ‘lesbian space witches’.” *X*, 23 June 2024, 3:24 p.m., <https://x.com/nypost/status/1804868246903886132>.
- O’ Brien, Nate. “How Much YouTubers Make for 1 Million Subscribers.” *Business Insider*, 3 Jul. 2023, www.businessinsider.com/how-much-youtube-pays-for-one-million-subscribers. Accessed 02 June 2024.
- Obsession_inc. “Affirmational Fandom vs. Transformational Fandom.” *Dreamwidth*, 01 June 2009, www.obsession-inc.dreamwidth.org/82589.html. Accessed 13 Jan. 2024.
- Ohtze. “Death and the Maiden: How ‘Reylo’ Will Be Canon (but not in the Way You’re Hoping).” *Tumblr*, 20 Jan. 2016, <https://ohtze.tumblr.com/post/137735730948/death-and-the-maiden>. Accessed 20 Aug. 2016.
- O’Keefe, Meghan. “The Force of Feminism: ‘Star Wars: The Force Awakens’ Caps Off a Year Of Badass Heroines.” *Decider*, 22 Dec. 2015, www.decider.com/2015/12/22/star-wars-the-force-awakens-rey-feminsim/. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.

- Ostiguy, Pierre, and Benjamin Moffitt. “Who Would Identify With an ‘Empty Signifier’?: The Relational, Performative Approach to Populism.” *Populism in Global Perspective*, edited by Pierre Ostiguy, Francisco Panizza, and Benjamin Moffitt, Routledge, 2020, pp. 47-72.
- Palumbo, Donald E. *The Monomyth in American Science Fiction Films: 28 Visions of the Hero's Journey*. McFarland, 2014.
- Pande, Rukmini. “‘Get Out of Here You Anti’ - Historizing the Operation of Structural Racism in Media Fandom.” *Feminist Media Histories*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 107-130. doi:10.1525/fmh.2024.10.1.107.
- . *Fandom, Now in Color - A Collection of Voices*. U of Iowa P, 2020.
- . *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*. U of Iowa P, 2018.
- . “Who Do You Mean by ‘Fan?’ Decolonizing Media Fandom Identity.” *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*, edited by Paul Booth, Wiley Blackwell, 2018, pp. 319-32.
- Parker, Kim, et al. “Americans’ Complex Views on Gender Identity and Transgender Issues.” *Pew Research Center*, 28 June 2022, www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/06/28/americans-complex-views-on-gender-identity-and-transgender-issues/. Accessed 15 June 2024.
- Parker, Trey. Script of *South Park: Joining the Panderverse*.
<https://transcripts.foreverdreaming.org/viewtopic.php?t=137946&sid=f9c1230aab8ac2a4bbb587e735c7b31d>. Accessed 18 Oct. 2024.
- Parry, Owen G. “‘Shipping’ (as) Fandom and Art Practice.” *Fandom As Methodology: A Sourcebook for Artists and Writers*, edited by Catherine Grant and Kate Random Love, MIT Goldsmiths P, 2019, pp. 127-46.
- “Party Affiliation of the Mayors of the 100 Largest Cities.” *Ballotpedia*, ballotpedia.org/

- Party_affiliation_of_the_mayors_of_the_100_largest_cities. Accessed 18 June 2024.
- Pasanen, Tero. *Beyond the Pale: Gaming Controversies and Moral Panics as Rites of Passage*. 2017. U of Jyväskylä, PhD Thesis.
- Pearce, Tim. "Gina Carano to Produce and Star in Upcoming Film for the Daily Wire." *Daily Wire*, 12 Feb. 2021, www.dailywire.com/news/gina-carano-to-produce-and-star-in-upcoming-film-for-the-daily-wire. Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.
- Peckford, Ashley. "Right Wing Extremism in a Video Game Community? A Qualitative Content Analysis Exploring the Discourse of the Reddit GamerGate Community r/KotakuInAction." *A Closer Look in Unusual Times: Criminological Perspectives from Crim*, vol. 862, 2020, pp. 65-81.
- Penney, Joel. *Pop Culture, Politics, and the News: Entertainment Journalism in the Polarized Media Landscape*. Oxford UP, 2022.
- . "Social Media and Citizen Participation in 'Official' and 'Unofficial' Electoral Promotion: A Structural Analysis of the 2016 Bernie Sanders Digital Campaign." *Journal of Communication*, vol. 67, no. 3, pp. 402–23. doi:10.1111/jcom.12300.
- Pérez-Escolar, Marta, and José Manuel Noguera-Vivo. "Introduction to the Dilemmas and Struggles of Participatory Society." *Hate Speech and Polarization in Participatory Society*, edited by Marta Pérez-Escolar and José Manuel Noguera-Vivo, Routledge, 2022, pp. 1-11.
- Peterka-Benton, Daniela, et al. "From Conspiracy to Normalcy: The Mainstreaming of QAnon in 'Disney grooming' Messages Online." *Crime, Media, Culture*, 2024, doi:10.1177/17416590241257862.
- Petersen, Line Nybro. *Mediatized Fan Play: Moods, Modes and Dark Play in Networked Communities*. Routledge, 2022.
- , et al. "New Territories for Fan Studies: The Insurrection, QAnon, Donald Trump and

- Fandom.” *Convergence*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 313-28. doi:10.1177/13548565231117.
- Petri, Alexandra. “Jedi Mind Meld, President Obama? Why it Matters.” *Washington Post*, 01 March 2013, www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/compost/wp/2013/03/01/jedi-mind-meld-president-obama-why-it-matters/. Accessed 01 June 2024.
- Phillips, Whitney. *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. MIT P, 2015.
- Podcast Now. “Captain Marvel - The Biggest Mary Sue in Movie History Exposed!” *YouTube*, uploaded by Podcast Now, 10 Mar. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=59W1KvmkuLE.
- Poe, Arthur S. “Leslye Headland Says ‘The Acolyte’ Is “Arguably the Gayest Star Wars” to Date.” *Comic Basics*, 05 June 2024, www.comicbasics.com/leslye-headland-says-the-acolyte-is-arguably-the-gayest-star-wars-to-date/. Accessed 20 Aug. 2024.
- Pollard, Tom. *Sex and Violence: The Hollywood Censorship Wars*. Routledge, 2015.
- “Portmanteau.” *Fanlore*, www.fanlore.org/wiki/Portmanteau. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024.
- Proctor, William. “‘I’ve Seen a Lot of Talk About the# blackstormtrooper Outrage, But Not a Single Example of Anyone Complaining’: The Force Awakens, Canonical Fidelity and Non-Toxic Fan Practices.” *Participations: International Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 160-79.
- , and Bridget Kies. “Editors’ Introduction: On Toxic Fan Practices and the New Culture Wars.” *Participations: International Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1, pp. 127-42. eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/30957/.
- “Puritanical.” *Collins Dictionary*, www.collinsdictionary.com/de/worterbuch/englisch/puritanical. Accessed 20 Aug. 2024.
- “Puriteen.” *Fanlore*, www.fanlore.org/wiki/Puriteen. Accessed 02 June 2024.
- Quandt, Thorsten, editor. “Dark Participation in Online Communication: The World of the

- Wicked Web.” *Media and Communication*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2021, pp. 84-216.
doi:10.17645/mac.i207.
- Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*.
Revised edition, U of North Carolina P, 1991.
- Rathje, Steve, Jay J. Van Bavel, and Sander Van Der Linden. “Out-group Animosity Drives
Engagement on Social Media.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol.
118, no. 26, 2021, doi:10.1073/pnas.2024292118.
- Reinhard, CarrieLynn D. *Fractured Fandoms: Contentious Communication in Fan
Communities*. Lexington Books, 2018.
- , et al. “Fans of Q: the Stakes of QAnon’s Functioning as Political Fandom.” *American
Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 66, no. 8, pp. 1152-72. doi:10.1177/00027642211042294.
- Rentschler, Carrie A. “Rape Culture and the Feminist Politics of Social Media.” *Girlhood
Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 65-82. doi:10.3167/ghs.2014.070106.
- Rewriting Ripley. “Twitter Analysis Shows YouTubers at Center of Racist Harassment
Against The Rings of Power Cast.” *Medium*, 22 Sep. 2022,
[https://rewritingripley.medium.com/twitter-analysis-shows-youtubers-at-center-of-
racist-harassment-against-the-rings-of-power-cast-a557354fcd2e](https://rewritingripley.medium.com/twitter-analysis-shows-youtubers-at-center-of-racist-harassment-against-the-rings-of-power-cast-a557354fcd2e). Accessed 17 Oct.
2024.
- Ribeiro, Manoel Horta, et al. “Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube.” *Proceedings
of the 2020 Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency*. 2020.
- . “The Evolution of the Manosphere Across the Web.” *Proceedings of the International
AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, vol. 15, 2021.
- Riley, Olivia Johnston. “Podfic: Cultural Accessibility Through Digital Community.”
Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies, vol. 20, no. 1.
- Roberts, David. “The Last Jedi Came Thrillingly Close to Upending Star Wars — But Lost

- Its Nerve.” *Vox*, 12 Jan. 2018, www.vox.com/culture/2018/1/12/16834684/the-last-jedi-lost-its-nerve. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Robinson, Joanna. “Star Wars: The Last Jedi Offers the Harsh Condemnation of Mansplaining We Need in 2017.” *Vanity Fair*, 15 Dec. 2017, www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/12/star-wars-last-jedi-laura-dern-admiral-holdo-listen-to-women. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Robinson, Sally. *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis*. Columbia UP, 2000.
- Robinson, Tasha. “With Star Wars' Rey, We've Reached Peak Strong Female Character/And There's Nothing Wrong With That.” *The Verge*, 19 Dec. 2015, www.theverge.com/2015/12/19/10626896/star-wars-the-force-awakens-rey-mary-sue-feminist. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Romain, Lindsey. “The Case for Reylo in Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker.” *Nerdist*, 12 Jun. 2019, www.nerdist.com/article/case-for-reylo-star-wars-the-rise-of-skywalker/. Accessed 24 Apr. 2024.
- . “Why Reylos Are A Bright Spot In The STAR WARS Fandom.” *Nerdist*, 10 Jan. 2020, www.nerdist.com/article/star-wars-reylos-bright-spot/. Accessed 01 May 2024.
- Romano, Aja. “Puritanism Took Over Online Fandom — and then Came for the Rest of the Internet.” *Vox*, 24 May 2023, www.vox.com/culture/23733213/fandom-purity-culture-what-is-proship-antiship-antifandom. Accessed 02 June 2024.
- Roth, Julia. “Right-Wing Populism and Gender in Digitized Culture Wars.” *Media, Populism and Corruption*, edited by Isabel Ferin Cunha, Liziane Guazina, Ana Cabrera and Carla Martins, ICNOVA, 2023, pp. 54-67.
- Rothwell, Jonathan. “Teens Spend Average of 4.8 Hours on Social Media Per Day.” *Gallup*, 13 Oct. 2023, www.news.gallup.com/poll/512576/teens-spend-average-hours-social-media-per-day.aspx. Accessed 01 June 2024.

- Rouse, Lauren, et al. "Making Fandom Great Again: Silencing Discussions of Racism in Reactionary and Transformative Fandoms." *Popular Communication*, 2024. pp. 1-13, doi:10.1080/15405702.2024.2336254.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Cheap Plot Tricks, Plot Holes, and Narrative Design." *Narrative*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2009, pp. 56-75. doi:10.1353/nar.0.0016.
- Saarela, Noah. *The Conquest of YouTube: Counter-Ideological Strategies in a New Digital Left*. 2020, Lund U, Master thesis, lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/record/9015408.
- Saliba, John A. *Social Science and the Cults: An Annotated Bibliography*. Routledge, 2019.
- Sally. "Why Rey from The Force Awakens Makes Me Cry." *The Mary Sue*, 28 Dec. 2015, www.themarysue.com/the-importance-of-rey/. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Salminen, Janne. "Crisis of Masculinity in Disney Era Star Wars Sequel Trilogy." *The Culture and Politics of Populist Masculinities*, edited by Outi Hakola et al., Lexington Books, 2021, pp. 205-22.
- Salter, Michael. "From Geek Masculinity to Gamergate: The Technological Rationality of Online Abuse." *Crime, Media, Culture*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2018, pp. 247-264. doi:10.1177/1741659017690893.
- Sandvoss, Cornel. "The Politics of Against." *Anti-fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age*, edited by Melissa A. Click, NYU P, 2019, pp. 125-46.
- Sarkeesian, Anita. *'I'll Make a Man Out of You': Strong Women in Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*. 2010. York U, Canada, Master's Thesis.
- Schey, Ryan. "'Is He Gay? That's Like, All I Want to Know': Curiosity, Authenticity, and Epistemology in a GSA Bookclub." *Curriculum Inquiry*, 2023, pp. 1-27. doi:10.1080/03626784.2023.2176159.
- Schotten, C. Heike. "TERFism, Zionism, and Right-wing Annihilationism: Toward an Internationalist Genealogy of Extinction Phobia." *Transgender Studies Quarterly*,

vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 334-64. doi:10.1215/23289252-9836022.

Schwarz, Karolin. *Hasskrieger: Der Neue Globale Rechtsextremismus*. Herder, 2020.

Scott, Suzanne. *Fake Geek Girls - Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry*.

E-book ed, NYU P, 2019.

—. “The Moral Economy of Crowdfunding and the Transformative Capacity of Fan-ancing.”

New Media & Society, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 167-82. doi:10.1177/1461444814558908.

Selvaraj, Adit R. *‘OK, Groomer’:(Post) Truth Rhetoric and Transphobia*. 2023. Nova

Southeastern U, Master’s Thesis.

Shapiro, Ben. “The Future of Entertainment with The Critical Drinker.” *YouTube*, uploaded

by Ben Shapiro, 29 Dec. 2023, www.youtube.com/watch?v=0wggKa5d66o.

—. “‘Star Wars: The Last Jedi’: The Full Shapiro Review.” *Daily Wire*, 17 Dec. 2017,

www.dailywire.com/news/star-wars-last-jedi-full-shapiro-review-ben-shapiro.

Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.

Sharf, Zack. “Adam Driver Says Kylo Ren’s Original ‘Star Wars’ Arc Got Overhauled: He

Was Supposed to Be the ‘Most Committed to the Dark Side’ by the End.” *Variety*, 13

Dec. 2023, [www.variety.com/2023/film/news/adam-driver-star-wars-changed-kylo-](http://www.variety.com/2023/film/news/adam-driver-star-wars-changed-kylo-ren-arc-redemption-1235836477/)

[ren-arc-redemption-1235836477/](http://www.variety.com/2023/film/news/adam-driver-star-wars-changed-kylo-ren-arc-redemption-1235836477/). Accessed 01 June 2024.

—. “Josh Gad Shares Regret Over Gay LeFou in ‘Beauty and the Beast’: ‘We Didn’t Go Far

Enough’.” *Variety*, 28 Feb. 2022, [www.variety.com/2022/film/news/josh-gad-regrets-](http://www.variety.com/2022/film/news/josh-gad-regrets-gay-lefou-beauty-and-the-beast-1235191876/)

[gay-lefou-beauty-and-the-beast-1235191876/](http://www.variety.com/2022/film/news/josh-gad-regrets-gay-lefou-beauty-and-the-beast-1235191876/). Accessed 15 June 2024.

—. “‘Star Wars’ Calls Out Racism Against Moses Ingram, Tells ‘Obi-Wan’ Viewers: ‘Don’t

Choose to Be Racist’.” *Variety*, 31 May 2022, [https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/star-](https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/star-wars-defends-moses-ingram-racist-obi-wan-fans-1235281388/)

[wars-defends-moses-ingram-racist-obi-wan-fans-1235281388/](https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/star-wars-defends-moses-ingram-racist-obi-wan-fans-1235281388/). Accessed 14 Oct.

2024.

Scharff, Christina. “Young Women’s Negotiations of Heterosexual Conventions: Theorizing

- Sexuality in Constructions of ‘the Feminist’.” *Sociology*, vol. 44, no. 5, pp. 827-42.
doi:10.1177/0038038510375736.
- Sheffield, Jessica, and Elyse Merlo. “Biting Back: Twilight Anti-fandom and the Rhetoric of Superiority.” *Bitten by Twilight: Youth Culture, Media, and the Vampire Franchise*, edited by Melissa A. Click, Jennifer Stevens, and Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz, Peter Lang Publishing, 2010, pp. 207-22.
- “Shipping.” *Fanlore*, <https://fanlore.org/wiki/Shipping>. Accessed 24 Sep. 2024.
- Shoard, Catherine. “Jar Jar Binks Actor 'Considered Suicide' After Star Wars Prequel Backlash.” *The Guardian*, 04 July 2018, www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jul/04/jar-jar-binks-actor-considered-suicide-after-star-wars-phantom-menace. Accessed 18 June 2024.
- Siapera, Eugenia. “Alt Tech and the Public Sphere: Exploring Bitchute as a Political Media Infrastructure.” *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 38, no. 5, pp. 446-65.
doi:10.1177/02673231231189041.
- Silver, Anna. “Twilight is Not Good for Maidens: Gender, Sexuality, and the Family in Stephenie Meyer’s ‘Twilight’ Series.” *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 42, no. 1 & 2, 2010, pp. 121-38. doi:10.1353/sdn.2010.0009.
- Smith, Kyle. “How to Fix Star Wars.” *National Review*, 19 Dec. 2017, www.nationalreview.com/2017/12/star-wars-failures-how-fix-franchise/. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Smith, Ryan E. “Canceling ‘Star Wars’ Carano Shows Force Is With Free Speech Opponents.” *Inside Sources*, 17 Feb. 2021, <https://insidesources.com/canceling-star-wars-carano-shows-force-is-with-free-speech-opponents/>. Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.
- Sneed, Tierney. “Pop Culture’s Place in the Oval Office.” *US News*, 02 Sept. 2013, www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/09/02/pop-cultures-place-in-the-oval-office.

Accessed 01 June 2024.

Snider, Mike. "Steve Bannon Learned to Harness Troll Army From 'World of Warcraft'."

USA Today, www.eu.usatoday.com/story/tech/talkingtech/2017/07/18/steve-bannon-learned-harness-troll-army-world-warcraft/489713001/. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.

Sobande, Francesca, et al. "The Hypervisibility and Discourses of 'Wokeness' in Digital Culture." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 44, no. 8, pp. 1576-87.

doi:10.1177/01634437221117490.

"Social Media." *Merriam-Webster*, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media.

Accessed 01 June 2024.

Soloski, Alexis. "Look Out! Playwright Leslye Headland Has Her Eye on You." *New York*

Times, 18 Aug. 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/theater/look-out-](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/theater/look-out-playwright-leslye-headland-has-her-eye-on-you.html?_r=0)

[playwright-leslye-headland-has-her-eye-on-you.html?_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/theater/look-out-playwright-leslye-headland-has-her-eye-on-you.html?_r=0). Accessed 07 June 2024.

Sparrow, Ben. *'Written and Directed by George Lucas': George Lucas's Lasting Impact and Canonical Practices in Disney-Era Star Wars*. 2022, Ball State U, Master thesis.

Sproull, Sara. "The Mary Sue." *The Feminist Force Awakens*,

<https://thefeministforceawakens.wordpress.com/the-mary-sue/>. Accessed 10 Oct.

2024.

Stanfill, Mel. *Fandom Is Ugly - Networked Harassment in Participatory Culture*. NYU P, 2024.

—. "Introduction: The Reactionary in the Fan and the Fan in the Reactionary." *Television & New Media*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2020, pp. 123-34. doi:10.1177/1527476419879912.

—, et al. "They Can't Play with Us: Pronoun Controversies and the Reinforcement of Heteronormativity in Games." *Proceedings of the 19th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*. 2024.

Stano, Simona. "The Internet and the Spread of Conspiracy Content". *The Routledge*

- Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, edited by Michael Butter and Peter Knight, Routledge, 2020, pp. 483-496.
- Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope*. Directed by George Lucas, Twentieth Century Fox, 1977.
- Star Wars: The Acolyte Episode 3*. Directed by Kogonada, Lucasfilm and Shoot to Midnight, 11 June 2024.
- Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. Directed by J. J. Abrams, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2015.
- Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. Directed by Rian Johnson, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2017.
- Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*. Directed by J. J. Abrams, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2019.
- Steinmetz, Katy. “This Is Why Singular ‘They’ Is Such a Controversial Subject.” *Time*, 13 Dec. 2019, <https://time.com/5748649/word-of-year-they-merriam-webster/>. Accessed 07 July 2024.
- Stolworthy, Jacob. “Star Wars 9: First Rise of Skywalker Reactions Say Sequel ‘Feels Like Apology for The Last Jedi’.” *Independent*, 17 Dec. 2019, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/star-wars-rise-of-skywalker-reviews-episode-9-premiere-twitter-reactions-jj-abrams-a9249496.html. Accessed 21 Aug. 2024.
- Strauß, Nadine, et al. “‘Yes, I Saw It – but Didn’t Read It...’ A Cross-country Study, Exploring Relationships Between Incidental News Exposure and News Use Across Platforms.” *Digital Journalism*, vol. 8, no. 9, pp. 1181-205. doi:10.1080/21670811.2020.1832130.
- Strick, Simon. “The Alternative Right, Masculinities, and Ordinary Affect.” *Right-Wing Populism and Gender: European Perspectives and Beyond*, edited by Gabriele Dietze

- and Julia Roth, Transcript Verlag, 2020, pp. 207-30.
- Strong, Catherine. "... It Sucked Because It Was Written for Teenage Girls': Twilight, Anti-fans and Symbolic Violence." *Annual Conference of the Australian Sociological Association*, 2009, Australian National U, Canberra, pp. 1-11.
- "Strong Female Character." *Fanlore*, www.fanlore.org/wiki/Strong_Female_Character, Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Suler, John. "The Online Disinhibition Effect." *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, vol.2, no. 2, pp. 184-88. doi:10.1089/1094931041291295.
- Sullivan, Shealagh. "Laws Banning 'Critical Race Theory' in Schools Will Persist. One of Its Originators Says It's Time to Address the Deeper Issue." *WGBH*, 31 July 2023, www.wgbh.org/news/local/2023-07-31/laws-banning-critical-race-theory-in-schools-will-persist-one-of-its-originators-says-its-time-to-address-the-deeper-issue. Accessed 20 Aug. 2024.
- Summers, Sarah. "'Twilight Is So Anti-feminist That I Want to Cry:' Twilight Fans Finding and Defining Feminism on the World Wide Web." *Computers and Composition*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2010. pp. 315-23. doi:10.1016/j.compcom.2010.09.006.
- Sylvia IV, J. J., and Kyle Moody. "BreadTube Rising: How Modern Creators Use Cultural Formats to Spread Countercultural Ideology." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2022, doi:10.7771/1481-4374.4291.
- Taggart, Paul. *Populism*. Open UP, 2000.
- . "Populism and 'Unpolitics'." *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy Volume 1*, edited by Gregor Fitz, Juergen Mackert and Bryan Turner, Routledge, 2018, pp. 79-87.
- Tandoc Jr., Edson C. "Tell Me Who Your Sources Are: Perceptions of News Credibility on Social Media." *Journalism Practice*, vol. 13, no. 2, doi:10.1080/17512786.2017.1423237.

- Tassi, Paul. “In Three Weeks ‘The Acolyte’ Has More Audience Reviews Than Three Seasons of ‘The Mandalorian’.” *Forbes*, 24 June 2024, www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2024/06/24/in-three-weeks-the-acolyte-has-more-audience-reviews-than-three-seasons-of-the-mandalorian/. Accessed 07 July 2024.
- . “‘The Acolyte’ Episode 4 Controversy Is Too Absurd to Be Believed.” *Forbes*, 20 June 2024, www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2024/06/20/the-acolytes-episode-4-controversy-is-too-absurd-to-be-believed/. Accessed 07 July 2024.
- Tatar, Maria. *The Heroine with 1001 Faces*. Liveright, 2001.
- @TedCruz. “Um, Disney is announcing they don’t want any men (or boys, presumably) to go to the next Star Wars?? Have they ever actually met a Star Wars fan? #GoWokeGoBroke” *X*, 04 Jan. 2024, 10:57 p.m., <https://x.com/tedcruz/status/1743028802010194314>.
- . “Texan Gina Carano broke barriers in the Star Wars universe: not a princess, not a victim, not some emotionally tortured Jedi. She played a woman who kicked ass & who girls looked up to. She was instrumental in making Star Wars fun again. Of course Disney canceled her.” *X*, 11 Feb. 2021, 5:40 p.m., <https://x.com/tedcruz/status/1359905219451183109>.
- Terry, Christopher, and Jeff Cain. “The Emerging Issue of Digital Empathy.” *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, vol. 80, no. 4. doi:10.5688/ajpe80458.
- Thalman, Katharina. *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory Since the 1950s: ‘A Plot to Make Us Look Foolish’*. Routledge, 2019.
- “The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2021.” *Common Sense Media*, 09 March 2022, www.common sense media.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens-2021. Accessed 01 June 2024.
- “The Fandom Menace.” *Rational Wiki*, https://rationalwiki.org/wiki/The_Fandom_Menace.

Accessed 14 Aug. 2024.

“The Journey to Marriage Equality in the United States.” *Human Rights Campaign*,
www.hrc.org/our-work/stories/the-journey-to-marriage-equality-in-the-united-states.

Accessed 20 Aug. 2024.

“The Mary Sue Report.” *Fanlore*, www.fanlore.org/wiki/The_Mary_Sue_Report. Accessed
24 Apr. 2024.

“The Quartering.” *Wikitubia*, <https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/TheQuartering>. Accessed 22
Aug. 2024.

The Skywalker Legacy. Directed by Debs Paterson, Lucasfilm, 2020.

Thomson, Irene Taviss. *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas*. U of Michigan P,
2010.

Thorn, Abigail. “HBO's Chernobyl & Personal Responsibility | Philosophy Tube.” *YouTube*,
28 Sept. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=oENI8NnTx0w.

Tinoco, Francisca. “A Very Queer Riddle: Breaking Down Hollywood’s Queerbaiting
Problem.” *Avanca Cinema International Conference*, 21 Sep. 2022, Avanca, Portugal,
[doi:10.37390/avancacinema.2022.a422](https://doi.org/10.37390/avancacinema.2022.a422).

Toastystats (destinationtoast). “[Fandom Stats] Biggest Fandoms, Ships, and Characters on
AO3: Looking Back at 2022.” *ArchiveOfOurOwn*, 19 Feb. 2023,
www.archiveofourown.org/works/45184681. Accessed 01 June 2024.

Travis_Adams. Comment on “The Legendary Alex Jones Interview! #FridayNightTights.”
YouTube, Sep. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MujHXiG3q4.

Treezie. “A Reylo Fic” *ArchiveOfOurOwn*, 19 Dec. 2015,
www.archiveofourown.org/works/5457191. Accessed 30 Apr. 2024.

Trekspertise. “Is Michael Burnham A Mary Sue?” *YouTube*, uploaded by Trekspertise, 11
Apr. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-iux27wT8A.

- Trent, John F. "'The Acolyte' Actress Jodie Turner-Smith Claims 'Star Wars Is Very Like Patriarchal'." *Bounding Into Comics*, 11 Apr. 2023, <https://boundingintocomics.com/2023/04/11/the-acolyte-actress-jodie-turner-smith-claims-star-wars-is-very-like-patriarchal/>. Accessed 07 July 2024.
- Trice, Michael, and Liza Potts. "Building Dark Patterns Into Platforms: How GamerGate Perturbed Twitter's User Experience." *Present Tense: A Journal of Rhetoric in Society*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2018.
- Tufekci, Zeynep. "Big Questions for Social Media Big Data: Representativeness, Validity and Other Methodological Pitfalls." *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2014, pp. 505-14, www.ojs.aaai.org/index.php/ICWSM/article/download/14517/14366. Accessed 01 June 2024.
- Undeadhousewife. "Puritanism." *Tumblr*, 09 Feb. 2022, www.undeadhousewife.tumblr.com/post/675737484146212864/haha-nooooo-dont-recreate-puritanism-under-the. Accessed 02 June 2024.
- Urbańczyk, Agnieszka. "Finding a Dead Dove in the Refrigerator. The Anti-shippers' Call for Exclusion of Sensitive Content as a Means of Establishing Position in the Field of Fan Production." *Przegląd Kulturoznawczy*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2022, pp. 404-20. doi:10.4467/20843860PK.22.027.16616.
- Vail, Erin. "Reylo's 7 Best Moments in STAR WARS." *Nerdist*, 01 Aug. 2018, www.nerdist.com/article/reylos-7-best-moments-in-star-wars/. Accessed 01 May 2024.
- Van Horn, Nicholas M., et al. "Attention Ecology: Trend Circulation and the Virality Threshold." *DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 4.
- Varda, Scott J., and Leslie A. Hahner. "Black Panther and the Alt-right: Networks of Racial

- Ideology.”” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 133-47, doi:10.1080/15295036.2020.1737327.
- Varis, Tapio. “Understanding Media Literacy.” *Children and Youth in the Digital Media Culture from Nordic Horizon*, edited by Ulla Carlson, The International Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media, Nordicom, pp. 75-84.
- Vary, Adam B. “‘Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker’: Finn and Poe Aren’t Boyfriends, but J.J. Abrams Hints at LGBTQ Representation.” *Variety*, 03 Dec. 2019, www.variety.com/2019/film/news/star-wars-finn-poe-not-boyfriends-lgbtq-representation-1203423286/. Accessed 01 June 2024.
- . “Toxic Fandom: How Hollywood Is Battling Fans Who Are ‘Just Out for Blood’ — From Social Media Boot Camps to Superfan Focus Groups.” *Variety*, 03 Oct. 2024, <https://variety.com/2024/tv/news/star-wars-lord-of-the-rings-bridgerton-toxic-fans-hollywood-response-1236166736/>. Accessed 14 Oct. 2024.
- Veale, Kevin “Exploring the Overlap Between Hatemobs and ARGs.” *Gaming the Dynamics of Online Harassment*, edited by Kevin Veale, Springer International Publishing, 2020, pp. 49-85.
- Vejvoda, Jim. “Rotten Tomatoes Explains Why It Removed Thousands of Audience Reviews on Captain Marvel’s Opening Day.” *IGN*, 16 May 2019, www.ign.com/articles/2019/03/09/rotten-tomatoes-explains-why-it-removed-thousands-of-audience-reviews-on-captain-marvels-opening-day. Accessed 07 July 2024.
- . “Star Wars: The Last Jedi CinemaScore Revealed.” *IGN*, 21 Dec. 2019, www.ign.com/articles/2017/12/16/star-wars-the-last-jedi-cinemascore-revealed. Accessed 10 Oct. 2024.
- Vogels, Emily A., and Risa Gelles-Watnick. “Teens and Social Media: Key Findings from Pew Research Center Surveys.” *Pew Research Center*, 24 Apr. 2023,

- www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/04/24/teens-and-social-media-key-findings-from-pew-research-center-surveys/. Accessed 01 June 2024.
- Walker, Cynthia W. "A Conversation with Paula Smith." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 6, doi:10.3983/twc.2011.0243.
- Walker, Peter. "Recasting Male Heroes as Women Risks Driving Boys to Crime, Claims Tory MP." *The Guardian*, 25 Nov. 2021, www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/nov/25/bond-doctor-who-casting-women-risks-driving-boys-to-crime-mp. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Wanzo, Rebecca. "African American Acafandom and Other Strangers: New Genealogies of Fan Studies." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, vol. 20, 2015. doi:10.3983/twc.2015.0699.
- Warmbrodt, Zachary. "Warren: I'm Leia, not Vader." *Politico*, 17 Mar. 2016, www.politico.com/story/2016/03/elizabeth-warren-not-darth-vader-blaine-luetkemeyer-220941. Accessed 17 Oct. 2024.
- Watercutter, Angela. "The Acolyte and the Long-Awaited Death of Review-Bombing." *Wired*, 28 June 2024, www.wired.com/story/the-acolyte-and-the-long-awaited-death-of-review-bombing/?utm_source=twitter&mbid=social_twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_social-type=owned&utm_brand=wired. Accessed 07 July 2024.
- Weigel, Moira. "Hating Theory: 'Cultural Marxism', 'CRT', and the Power of Media Affects." *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 17, pp. 6504-24.
- Weiss, Gilbert, and Ruth Wodak. *Critical Discourse Analysis - Theory and Interdisciplinarity*. Palgrave, 2003.
- Welch, Elizabeth Francesca. *Media Literacy Education Applications: 'Twilight' and 'Grey's Anatomy' as Anti-feminist Media*. 2009. Oklahoma State U, Master's Thesis.
- White, Armond. "Fishy Political Fantasies." *National Review*, 15 Dec. 2017,

- www.nationalreview.com/2017/12/last-jedi-shape-water-juvenile-political-fantasies/. Accessed 10 Oct. 2024.
- . “Star Wars Demystified.” *National Review*, 18 Dec. 2015, www.nationalreview.com/2015/12/star-wars-demystified/. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- . “The Acolyte Bastardizes Star Wars.” *National Review*, 12 June 2024, www.nationalreview.com/2024/06/the-acolyte-bastardizes-star-wars/. Accessed 07 July 2024.
- White, Mark H., and Matthew Baldwin. “The Force Is too Strong with This One? Sexism, Star Wars, and Female Heroes.” *Sociological Spectrum*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 299-334.
- Wilson, Jason. “Rightwing Personalities Use X to Bring Antisemitic Theories to Light in US.” *The Guardian*, 21 Nov. 2023, www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/nov/21/great-replacement-theory-antisemitism-racism-rightwing-mainstream. Accessed 07 July 2024.
- Windolf, Jim. “Keys to the Kingdom.” *Vanity Fair*, 02 Jan. 2008, www.vanityfair.com/news/2008/02/indianajones200802. Accessed 01 June 2024.
- Wodak, Ruth. *The Politics of Fear: The Shameless Normalization of Far-Right Discourse*. 2nd ed., Sage, 2020.
- , and Michael Meyer. *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*. 3rd ed., Sage, 2015.
- Woerner, Meredith. “The Women of ‘Star Wars’ Speak Out About Their New Empire.” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 Dec. 2015, www.latimes.com/entertainment/herocomplex/la-ca-hc-the-women-of-star-wars-the-force-awakens-20151206-htmlstory.html. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- “Woke.” *Urban Dictionary*, www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Woke. Accessed 29 Apr. 2024.
- Wood, Matt. “All the Major Theories About Rey’s Parents.” *Cinemablend*, 12 Dec. 2017,

www.cinemablend.com/news/1739020/all-the-major-theories-about-reys-parents.

Accessed 2 Apr. 2024.

WorldClassBullshitters. "The Media Fires Back at Marvel's Feminist Agenda." *YouTube*, uploaded by WorldClassBullshitters, 10 June 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEWby7DhMcQ.

Wurst, Christina. "Bread and Plots: Conspiracy Theories and the Rhetorical Style of Political Influencer Communities on YouTube." *Media and Communication*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2022, pp. 213-23. doi:10.17645/mac.v10i4.5807.

—. "Dildoshops, Gritty, and Bernie's Mittens: The Framing of American Politics Through Pop Cultural Memes." *New Horizons in English Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 111-29. doi:10.17951/nh.2021.6.111-129.

—. *Every Generation Has A Story: Corrective Star Wars Fanfiction*. 2018. Universität Tübingen, Master's Thesis. Unpublished.

"You Mustn't Do That! - Hays Code of Hollywood" *The Australian Woman's Mirror*, vol. 13, no. 15, 09 Mar. 1937, p. 12 + p. 34.

"YouTube Dislike Viewer." *Jabrek*, <https://jabrek.net/dislike-en/?url=https://youtu.be/BtytYWhg2mc>. Accessed 07 July 2024.

Zimmerman, Tegan. "# Intersectionality: The Fourth Wave Feminist Twitter Community." *Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture & Social Justice*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 54-70.