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STAR WARS, Expanded Universe, Legend, Canon? « I thought he was a myth! »

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“Fan Girls Going Rogue”

The Reception of *The Force Awakens* and *Rogue One* with Female Fans

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Abstract

In the last three years Disney has released four new instalments to the Star Wars franchise, three of which are led by female protagonists, Rey (*The Force Awakens*, *The Last Jedi*) and Jyn Erso (*Rogue One*). Although Star Wars fandom has mostly been associated with a rather poor stereotype of the male fanboy, female fans have been taking inspiration from the female characters of the series. Princess Leia aka General Leia Organa in the new instalments was one of the many faces on placards under the motto “A Woman’s Place is in The Resistance” in the Women’s March that occurred in Washington in early 2017. There has been some resistance to the female leads in the new films with criticism that Disney is spouting feminist propaganda and even rumours (which turned out to be false) that *Rogue One* was being re-shot to be anti-Trump. This study of 330 participants discusses how female reception to the new instalments has differed from the “die-hard” male fans and why this has occurred. Information gathered in the online survey indicated that female Star Wars fans had a positive response to the new female lead characters that were introduced in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and *Star Wars: Rogue One*. However, it was also apparent that they perceived a negative response to the new female characters but also to themselves by male Star Wars fans. The study addresses a literature gap on reception with female fans to Star Wars.

Keywords: star wars, fan-studies, woman-studies, reception, fans

Introduction

On December 18th 2015 *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* had its opening night with Daisy Ridley playing the lead female character Rey. By the end of its theatrical run it had made \$2 billion at the box office and had thwarted fears that it would end up with the mixed audience and critic reception of the prequel trilogy (*The Phantom Menace*, 1999; *Attack of the Clones*, 2002; *Revenge of the Sith*, 2005). *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* followed a year later debuting December 16th 2016, acting as an immediate prequel to *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977). *Rogue One* made \$1 billion worldwide, making it the highest grossing Star Wars film after *The Force Awakens*. *Rogue One* also had a female lead in an ensemble cast with Felicity Jones playing Jyn Erso. The characters of Rey and Jyn are worthy of scholarly attention as they are not only new characters, but Rey was a lead character in the reviving of the Star Wars franchise. Rey's story begins on Jakku where she lives and works as a scavenger. She teams up primarily with Finn (played by John Boyega) to deliver robot, BB8, to the resistance. Many have seen this as a call back to Leia's intentions on delivering a map in *Star Wars: A New Hope*. Jyn is the daughter of a man who helped to design the Death Star but decides to join the resistance and steal the schematics. Rey and Jyn's characters can certainly be perceived as heroes in the Star Wars world.

Although the Star Wars franchise has always had a female among its lead actors, (Carrie Fisher playing Princess/General Leia Organa), a loud minority were unhappy with the casting choices in the newer instalments. This was not limited to the female leads but also to the casting of John Boyega as a Stormtrooper, where some fans questioned his ethnicity compared with existing Star Wars canon (Proctor, 2017). This problematic rhetoric was not simply reserved for the cast members but was also levied at female fans. This study was conducted because female fans have often been overlooked in academic fan studies (Pope, 2010: p. 471). In other fandoms, studies have shown that female fans are often accused of not being 'real' fans, and that often they are simply present due to romantic attachments (Esmonde, 2013). For example, some male fans resenting the presence of female *Twilight* fans at Comic Con, their misconception being the girls were only present because of their romantic attachment to characters in the books/actors in the films (Scott, 2011: p. 59; Busse, 2013: p. 73). In fan studies it has been noted that the prevailing stereotype of fans is gendered as male (Scott, 2013; Geraghty, 2014) and this may have contributed to why research on female fans of Star Wars has been sparse thus far. Although Will Brooker devotes a chapter to female fans in *Using the Force: Creativity*,

Community and 'Star Wars' Fans (2002), ethnographic studies are limited. Male fans were not considered in this piece of research as they have often been the overwhelming majority in other studies (Proctor, 2013; Brooker, 2002) and so it was prudent to conduct research on female fans only. This study has had two main research foci, whether female fans have been receptive to the new female characters and if they feel as female fans they have subordinated by male fans and by merchandisers.

Methodology

Data was collected and analysed in this study using the concept of Netnography as outlined by Kozinets (2010). Netnography is designed to be able to tackle ethnographic studies of online communities (Kozinets, 2010: p. 6). Netnography has been used in previous Star Wars research conducted by Proctor (2013). In Proctor's work (2013) he suggested that Netnography was appropriate for online study as his project aimed to 'capture affective reactions as close as possible to the 'fan-event' (Proctor, 2013: p. 205). At the time of conducting this research *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017), was to be imminently released, making data collection close to a fan event, ensuring that participation was at an elevated level. Netnography allows for the use of mixed methods (Kozinets, 2010: p. 60) which is appropriate for studying online communities as it allowed for the collection of both quantitative data (such as demographics) as well as qualitative data on fan experience.

An online survey was created and distributed via social media platforms. This study differs from Proctor's study (2013) as Proctor would be described as an 'aca-fan' and a 'map-maker' (Hills, 2002: p. 18). This study has been conducted by a researcher with no ties to Star Wars fandom. Ergo, this study has avoided a problem noted by Jenkins; some academics have felt 'too close' to the fandom they are studying due to their affinity with the community due to being fans themselves. Jenkins noted he felt a 'high degree of responsibility and accountability to the groups being discussed' (Jenkins, 1992: p. 7) in his research.

The inclusion criteria for those completing the survey was that respondents identified as a woman and that they considered themselves fans of any part of the Star Wars franchise. Distributing over social media can be problematic as it has been noted that online surveys can sometimes produce lower response rates than postal surveys (Tse, 1998). Bryman notes that 'certain kinds of populations are less adversely affected by coverage problems' (Bryman, 2012:

p. 674) and this is true of the Star Wars fandom which has a heavy online presence. Also, online surveys has been largely successful in other fandom research (Barker and Mathijs, 2008). Furthermore, Kozinets notes that surveys 'have been useful for providing an initial overview of the area of online communities, from which we have been able to discern large-scale patterns' (Kozinets, 2010: p. 43). By using an online survey, this research was able to discern some patterns from 330 responses filling a literature gap on female Star Wars fans.

The decision was made to focus questions on the most recent films in the franchise for three reasons. Firstly, the Expanded Universe is now considered non-canon. Secondly, an expectation that a higher proportion of respondents will have seen the most recent films compared to knowledge on expanded universe stories. Thirdly, the films are a fan event making data collection easier. The online survey asked 15 questions beginning with collecting demographic data of gender and age range. Due to the ethical challenges of collecting data from participants under the age of 18 this survey was not open to those under this age. To prohibit the collection of data from those under 18 the survey automatically closed if they selected the 'under 18' option for the question 'What is your age range?'. The second section of the survey collected information on merchandising as one of the main gripes found in preliminary research for this study was that female fans had felt left out when it came to the merchandise they could buy. They often cited the fact that the female characters in the films had little merchandise (action figures and the like) available to them for purchase compared to male fans, who they perceived as being catered for. The third section of the survey focused on the participants perceptions of the female leads in the new films, both what they liked and what they disliked about Rey and Jyn. These response boxes were open-ended, allowing respondents to write as much as they wanted, and thus provide rich textual comments for analysis (Smyth et al. 2009). In the concluding section of the survey participants were asked to rate statements on a Likert scale concerning whether they felt they were treated fairly by male fans in the Star Wars fandom and on how important having lead female characters is to them.

Analysis of qualitative data collected from the open-ended responses in the online survey was accomplished by the process of emotional coding. Emotional coding is useful 'particularly for those that explore intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences' and 'careful scrutiny of a person's emotions reveals not just the inner workings of an individual, but possibly the underlying mood or tone of a society' (Saldana, 2016: p. 125). Emotional coding could be

useful for conveying the mood within a fandom space (which can sometimes be seen as microcosms of society). Emotional coding is also compatible with the chosen methodology of Netnography:

Kozinets (2010) reinforces that we should attend to the “non-rational” and emotional lives of both participants and ourselves. Ethnographic accounts becoming richer by ‘keeping emotions in the foreground of field notes and cultural interactions, by not depriving feeling in favour of reason, and by not enforcing an orderly and ‘objective’ categorization scheme upon lived experience’ (Saldana, 2016: p. 125)

Studies on reception analyse the interpretation of meaning from each respondent making emotion at the forefront; you become a fan because you love something and feel an emotional connection to it. Barker and Mathijs noted in their research on fans that in qualitative data it is important to recognise the difference between adverbial modifiers (Barker and Mathijs, 2008: p. 152). ‘Nice’ compared to ‘amazing’ show differing levels of enjoyment and emotion so this must be noted in emotional coding. Lexical correspondence analysis was also used to identify frequently-used words and common themes present in the qualitative data (Barker and Mathijs, 2008: p. 231-233)

The conceptual framework that was used to analyse these answers was set out by Elizabeth Hills in her essay *From 'figurative males' to action heroines: further thoughts on active women in the cinema* (1999). Hills expressed the ‘limitations and consequences of discussing active heroines from within binaristic frameworks [...] which position active female characters as phallic or 'figuratively male'. (Hills, 1999: p. 40). This was employed as an appropriate framework as data collected within the study indicated that respondents did not perceive Rey or Jyn as specifically coded as feminine; several respondents stated that they liked Rey or Jyn because their characters could have been portrayed interchangeably as male or female¹:

1. It didn't seem as though she was 'written for a female'.
2. I thought Jyn didn't seem to be a ‘female character’ she could have easily been played by a man and they wouldn't have had to change the script once. It was actually nice because it meant she wasn't playing up to woman stereotypes that we see in other movies.

¹ Please note that each comment corresponds to a different respondent.

Hills noted that previous feminist film theory at the time positioned female vs. male movie characters in a binary which meant that 'active and aggressive women in the cinema can only be seen as phallic, unnatural or "figuratively male"' (Hills, 1999: p. 39). Examining the character of Ripley from the *Aliens* franchise (1979 – present) Hills noted that Ripley is only seen as a strong female character because she 'lacks' feminine traits and her positive traits of 'resourcefulness and aggression' are codified as masculine (Hills, 1999: p. 44). Hill's framework is useful in this way as comments in this study (when it comes to the resourcefulness of Rey and Jyn for example) did not associate these traits with being either masculine or feminine. Instead they often codified these examples as good characterization in general or the traits as 'strong independent female'; this makes Hill's framework more appropriate in this study. Furthermore, it gives more academic scope and freedom to discuss characteristics outside of a gender binary, and instead concentrate on how the female fans see the female characters first and foremost. Again, this makes Hill's framework more suitable than older feminist film frameworks such as the male gaze (Mulvey, 1992) which has been criticised for sometimes focusing on the weakness of female characters and their traits, forgetting to include their strengths seeing them as passive (Tasker, 1993: p. 16), and also neglecting the reception of female viewers (Tasker, 1993: p. 17).

Merchandising

Preliminary research for this study found that female fans of Star Wars, had sometimes felt disappointed with merchandise on offer to them compared to what was available to male fans. Duffett associates the accumulation of merchandise as a form of collecting and defines merchandise as 'mass-produced material associated with the original text, series, author or performer' (Duffett, 2013: p. 180). Duffett proposes that considering what merchandise fans collect can be 'useful to consider how they directly and indirectly use their pastime to narrate their self-identities' (Duffett, 2013: p. 181). It was found in this study that female fans were disappointed with the lack of female representation in the merchandised products as many associated the lack of Rey and Jyn dolls (for example) as evidence of systemic sexism, in that merchandisers did not believe women could be Star Wars fans. The idea that Star Wars is a male only fandom was found by Johnson describing the plight of a little girl called Katie who was bullied because she liked Star Wars, and according to her bullies, Star Wars is 'for boys' (Johnson, 2014: p. 895).

Stillerman has noted that merchandise is often coded as either masculine or feminine (Stillerman, 2015: p. 117). Ellen van Oosts proposed the theory of 'gender scripts' in technology products where cameras are made pink to appeal to the female market, as opposed to more practical features. Female fans also suffer from women being labelled as 'new consumers' rather than established fans (King, 2002), perpetuating the stereotype that women are only in the fandom to shop. In response to the question 'Do you think the needs of female fans were considered when it came to merchandise?', the data collected suggested that out of 316 responses a majority of 48.7% of female fans felt female fans were not considered compared to 26.9% who did and 24.4% who were unsure. This may be because when asked what merchandise they see for *The Force Awakens* and *Rogue One* only 7.3% out of 329 responses saw more merchandise featuring the female characters rather than males. It could be suggested that this may be because they did not care about the derived products but the qualitative data collected suggested otherwise:

3. I think the Star Wars Fandom is pretty accepting of women but merchandisers don't realize that. No Rey in TFA Monopoly?!? She was the MAIN character.
4. I am most frustrated at the lack of Princess Leia merchandise. She is still in the recent films, so it's relevant to have her character represented. She's mine and my daughter's favourite, and I struggle to find the same quantity and availability of merchandise for Leia as for the other classic characters. MORE LEIA!
5. There has been Star Wars merch made for women, but it is hard to find in stores and low quality. It has been frustrating. I either shop the men's section or have to buy online at Her Universe. Also, there is no merch for baby or toddler girls. I haven't been able to buy merch for my daughter until she got older and could fit the girl's size clothes.

A regular occurrence in the qualitative data was the use of all capital letters when the respondents wished to emphasise their opinion. Often, (as with respondent 3 and 4) the capital letters were to emphasis frustration. Female respondents in this study cared enormously that they did not see female characters represented and this viewpoint has validity when it is taken into consideration that this is not the first time that merchandisers have omitted female characters. Fans of Gamora, a character from *The Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise (2014 –

present) lamented that not only did she have a lack of merchandise on the shelves but was often omitted from group shots of the Guardians. Black Widow from *Avenger’s* franchise (2012 – present) also seemed to be erased from group merchandising compared to the male characters. One respondent described her feelings about trying to get the female characters (specifically Rey) into merchandise:

6. I felt like it took a lot of backlash from female fans after TFA to get more Rey merchandise onto the shelves; when it first came out, Rey was really pushed to the background.

This comment may be alluding to the Twitter campaign directed at Disney and Hasbro under the hashtags #wheresrey and #whereisrey. Rey’s omission from the monopoly set was considered particularly heinous due to Hasbro’s response being that they did not include her to ‘avoid revealing a key plotline’. This response seemed out of touch as Rey had appeared heavily in early promotional material already. Despite this out of 329 responses in this study, 66% of respondents had gone on to buy *The Force Awakens* or *Rogue One* Merchandise and the website *HerUniverse* was mentioned at multiple points as a ‘go-to’ for Star Wars merchandise. For Johnson the success of *HerUniverse* is the fact that it is directed by Ashley Eckstein who voices character Ahsoka Tano in animated series *The Clone Wars* (2008 – 2014):

Eckstein draws her industrial authority from a female fan identity that grants her the ability to speak for the needs of female consumers. Eckstein markets her store by claiming to know what female fans want, with her entrepreneurial femininity giving her natural insight into that market (Johnson, 2014: p. 900)

When it came to what merchandise had been bought (out of 211 responses) ‘POP! Funko’ figurines were popular with 32 respondents buying assorted characters, 10 buying specifically Jyn and 17 buying specific Rey figures. When it came to unspecified general items 45 respondents stated they had bought merchandise specifically containing Rey and 21 respondents had bought assorted merchandise featuring Jyn. It is also important to note that it was not just female characters that respondents in this study were interested in buying. Another very common merchandised character which has been bought by 40 different respondents was BB8 and 12 respondents specifically bought merchandise relating to Kylo Ren portrayed by Adam Driver, both from *The Force Awakens*.

These results are interesting as they are similar to those found by Pope (2010) when studying female football fans. She found that ‘some female football fans seemed to exhibit characteristics of “traditional” fans but were also overt “consumers”’ (Pope, 2010: p. 483). This goes against traditional views of merchandisers that women do not buy fan merchandise and makes their omitting of female characters from merchandise due to fears that they will not sell more suspect. It should be noted that in this study 88.4% of respondents were over the age of 25 and so may have had more expendable income than female fans under this age. This is another reason for why Johnson credits *HerUniverse* with merchandising success, they have realised that fan-women are the consumers not fan-girls:

Unsurprisingly, soft purples dominate the HerUniverse interface, with the curved fonts of the shop logo perhaps suggesting more softness than some science fiction aesthetics, but overall the feminized look of the site is fairly understated. More important to the fan subjectivity under construction, however, is the visual privilege accorded adult women, not girls, as customers of the site (Johnson, 2014: p. 901)

A high proportion of female fans in this study have bought merchandise and many would have bought more, if they had been able to find the Rey and Jyn related merchandise. An interesting trend that could be explored is that in this study women are active consumers of Star Wars merchandise; future research could examine this on a larger scale and also investigate whether it is sexism which is stopping Star Wars merchandisers such as Disney from catering to this demographic.

Mary Sue’s and Female Fans

There was some backlash on Twitter when it was announced that *Rogue One* would feature a female lead. In a now well-cited tweet *New York Post* columnist and editor of the *Weekly Standard*, John Podhoretz, tweeted ‘Imagine a future in which a ‘Star Wars’ movie has a male protagonist. Go ahead, imagine it. You’re not going to get one’. Articles published on website ‘Return of Kings’ labelled the films as feminist propaganda, *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) also being accused of this (Proctor, 2018). The article proclaimed:

From the casting, which puts minorities and women incessantly and ridiculously in your face to make a **political point** (not tell a story), to the laziest of all space battles, the

problems with the Episode 7 are more than numerous. (*Return of Kings* – Brown, 2015)

Brown's article uses aggressive language to state that he believes that *over-representation* (in his mind) of women and POC made *The Force Awakens* a bad movie. As well as this, Jack Posobiec erroneously claimed that *Rogue One* was being re-shot to include Anti-Trump scenes (Proctor, 2018). Other work by Proctor (2013; 2017) has shown that it can be very difficult to research these incidents. Often it is not immediately clear whether these complaints are coming from fans or trolls or whether these incidents of sometimes distressing speech are being sensationalised/over-reported by media outlets.

In Proctor's work on #BlackStormTrooper, which was reported as being a racist Twitter hashtag lambasting actor John Boyega for being black and playing a Stormtrooper, he found that it was quite the opposite. Many of the tweets queried the established canon before *The Force Awakens* that stormtroopers were clones of Jango Fett, played by a Polynesian actor (Proctor, 2017). Despite this, main stream media reported that the vast majority of these tweets were anti-women, racist or anti-feminist, this led to some female Star Wars fans anxious that they may also be attacked simply for being women. In this study when rating the statement 'I feel female fans are treated fairly in the Star Wars Fandom' only 2.8% of respondents strongly agreed and 23.7% agreed. This is compared to 40.1% of respondents who disagreed and 7.6% who strongly disagreed. One respondent felt strongly when it came to female representation in Star Wars:

7. Star Wars still suffers from the idea that if you have ONE female character, it's enough. So we see one woman surrounded by five or six dynamic male characters and the male fans are STILL angry there's a girl involved. Meanwhile what I liked about Force Awakens is there were other female characters besides Rey. In *Rogue One* the lack of women was distracting. There were scenes with hundreds of extras playing rebels... and I saw TWO women in that sea of extras. They didn't even let women be extras in that film!

Once again, a respondent has just all capitals to emphasis their frustration. In this study respondents found having a female lead character in Star Wars important to them, 76% of respondents strongly agreed that it was important. One of the contentions brought up in this study was that when they were presented with strong female representation in the form of Rey and Jyn (and Princess Leia) these characters were sometimes dismissed by male fans as 'Mary

Sue's'. For the character of Rey in particular there were discussions after the film premiered with Daisy Ridley defending her character from this accusation on the 'Happy, Sad, Confused' MTV podcast hosted by Nick Nolte (MTV News, 2016). Mary Sue is a term used to describe a character that is too perfect to be realistic (Verba, 2003). Female fans have instead counter-acted these accusations:

8. They made her well rounded and very skilled. A lot of people complain she's a Mary Sue because she's able to do so much (she can fight, pilot stuff, she's a skilled mechanic, etc.) but it makes sense for her characterization; she was left on Jakku when she was so young and having grown up by herself she's needed to learn this kind of stuff for survival. It's nice seeing a female character who can do all these things.
9. I liked Rey, she's a rounded enough character unfairly cast as a Mary Sue by several male critics because of her competence that for me, was grounded within the narrative.

Many detractors of female fans have often used the argument that women are not 'real fans' however this study has shown that many respondents are performing fan practices which are found in Busse's geek hierarchy (2013). As noted by Proctor (2017) a major fan practice when it comes to fan cultural capital is canon fidelity, arguing over canon displays their fan knowledge. Data in this study displays female fans showing a similar concern for canon fidelity.

Interestingly female fans in this study were almost split completely down the middle when it came to whether female characters had been perceived negatively by male fans. Out of 317 responses to the question 'Do you think female characters were perceived negatively by male fans?' 41% selected yes and 38.2% selected no. This may be influenced by the fact that in the data collected many respondents stated that they felt that accusations of the female lead characters being Mary Sue's was from a 'loud minority' rather than male fans at large.

Although there is currently no academic literature in which to draw from online commentators often argued that Rey was being labelled as Mary Sue when in fact she was often displaying comparable behaviour to male counterparts. In this study it was found that many female fans did not consider Rey a Mary Sue and that her actions were reasonable for the storyline but further study could investigate whether they still think this with the release of *The Last Jedi*.

A Woman's Place is in the Resistance

On January 21st 2017 a worldwide protest took place known as Women's March, where thousands of women marched to protest policy which they perceived to be anti-women. Loughrey noted that a popular figurehead in these marches was none other than Princess Leia aka General Leia Organa portrayed by Carrie Fisher (The Independent -Loughrey, C., 2017).

Fisher's Leia cropped up in marches all across the globe, with a common poster design - originally by artist Hayley Gilmore - portraying the character alongside the slogan, "A Woman's Place is in the Resistance". Others dressed as Leia, or created their own signs in tribute to Fisher's legacy. (The Independent -Loughrey, C., 2017)

Traits that were poached from the Leia iconology were often her face with her iconic buns and if it was a full body image her gun would be visible. Leia is a leading member of the resistance so it is unsurprisingly that fans have poached this to use in real life protesting and this would not be the first time that there has been evidence of fans co-opting manners of resistance from media texts. Sandoe noted in her work on *The Hunger Games* (2012 – 2015) that 'fans potentially learn about civic engagement and activism from this dystopian, fantasy narrative, which also features women in leadership positions with political and revolutionary power.' (Sandoe, 2017: p. 3). The three-fingered salute used in *The Hunger Games* (2012), a show of defiance against the capital, was used in a similar show of defiance by protestors in Thailand (New York Times - Mydans, 2014). Princess Leia has been well received by female fans and this study showed similar findings with Rey and Jyn. The main theme was present in the data collected was that Rey and Jyn were positively received due to their perceived deviation from 'typical female lead' film tropes. One respondent wrote about Rey:

10. She has so many characteristics that are uncommon for a female lead; no clear love interest (or interest in having a love interest), self-sufficient and not immediately trusting of those she doesn't know, capable of showing vulnerability without falling apart. We get just enough information about her to be interested in learning more for the following films.

In 298 responses concerning what they liked about Rey as a character the word 'Strong/strength' was mentioned 105 times. This is similar to the way that Rowe describes 'the unruly woman' stock character. According to Rowe, the unruly woman character has appeared in many different guises from Roseanne to Miss Piggy (Rowe, 1995: p. 50) and she 'lays claim

to her own desire' (Rowe, 1995: p. 31). By portraying Rey as a strong character who is active in this story rather than passively being led through the narrative by men, she encompasses this unruly woman character. Rey also avoided a stereotype noted by Tasker that often the 'independent heroine' is portrayed as 'sexually free' and 'these representations were exploitative, and were for male rather than female audiences' (Tasker, 1993: p. 19). Rey (and Jyn) avoid this by not having a romantic story-line. For one respondent:

11. I felt like a lot of my male friends with daughters loved Rey in particular because of how their daughters felt about her. They liked her, too, but I think they were able to actually SEE how important Rey was by looking at their daughters' reactions to her.

In Barker and Mathijs's study on Lord of the Rings fans, their methodology section noted that some word 'associations are quite predictable' (Barker and Mathijs, 2008: p. 234) and it was predicted that 'strength/strong' would be a common theme in the qualitative data. In this study 269 participants responded to the question 'What do you dislike about Rey?' with the most common answer being 'nothing!' (96 responses). Only 4 answers specifically called Rey a Mary Sue as respondents blamed canon for why they disliked Rey. The top answer for why they disliked Rey was that she seemed too experienced with the Force after such little training (with 54 respondents citing this):

12. I didn't feel like she had a chance to grow in *The Force Awakens*. She suddenly is able to use the Force and a lightsaber without having to learn or train. I hope the next film gives her more depth.
13. Her turning into a Force user was so quick, to the point of being abrupt.

Another common complaint was that many felt it was irrational that she was so unwillingly to leave her home planet of Jakku (which was mentioned by 16 respondents):

14. There's not much to dislike about her character and that might be my issue. Her draw back in the film is that she doesn't want to leave Jakku. When faced with leaving it potentially forever in favour of finding Luke it doesn't even phase her.
15. Her irrational attachment to a family that left her behind when she was three.

16. Not enough reason for why she sat on that planet for years and then wanted to go back. If your family left you there 15 years ago... give it up.

It could be suggested that these respondents felt that portraying Rey as a woman who had a desperate need for a family was at odds with other aspects of Rey's characterization. Terms such as irritational and 'give it up' clearly show disappointment in the respondents. Desperation for a family suggests a sexist trope found in some film analysis that female characters cannot survive without family members to help them. This is noted by Frankel as one of the feminist failures when it comes to the female characters in *Smallville* (2001-2011). She argued that in certain episodes the female characters such as Lana and Chloe are often defined via their relationship to Clark rather than their own personality (Frankel, 2014: p. 59-75).

However, having 'undesirable' traits was seen as a positive characteristic when it came to *Rogue One*. For Jyn, many respondents noted that, counterintuitively, that she was quite unlikeable for a character and that is the reason why they *did* like her:

17. I actually liked how unlikeable she was...she was just kind of grumpy, annoyed, taciturn, and harsh, and overall different from how women heroes are usually portrayed.
18. That she was allowed to be stoic, hard-edged, and scathing. Traits that are rare for female characters.
19. I liked her snark and her edge that she wasn't a perfect person, and it took time for her to be convinced to do the right thing.

It could be inferred that Jyn is a similar incarceration to the character of Ripley, who as noted by Hills possessed these 'harsh' characteristics. It is similar to the way that Hills describes modern female action heroes as often having a mix of masculine and feminine traits:

Female action heroes confound binaristic logic in a number of ways, for they access a range of emotions, skills and abilities which have traditionally been defined as either 'masculine' or 'feminine'. As female characters who take up the central spaces in the traditionally 'masculine' genre of action cinema, they derive their power from their ability to think and live creatively, their physical courage and their strategic uses of technology. (Hills, 1999: p. 39)

Out of 269 comments about what female fans in this study liked about Jyn the word flaw/flawed

was present 60 times and 15 responses specifically used the words bad-ass to describe her. Much like female fans perception of Rey, when asked what they disliked about Jyn the most common answer was 'nothing' and the second most common being that 'she died'. For those who elaborated on this out of 262 comments female fans disliked Jyn because, as we only saw her for one film, her character development and story arc was not enough for some.

What was an interesting trend across both characters when it came to their reception by female fans was that respondents liked that Rey and Jyn resisted the trope of 'falling in love' with the male lead. For Rey:

20. She's strong and independent, has managed without men and can handle herself...She's not some damsel in distress.

21. That she didn't have a romantic subplot, that she wouldn't let Finn lead her.

And for Jyn:

22. Independent, brave, daring, passionate, and that she did not kiss Cassian at the end

23. She was determined, independent, and strong. She DIDN'T kiss the male lead at the end.

And some respondents were worried that romance could be shoe-horned in for Rey in later films in the franchise:

24. There are hints about her being romantically involved with other characters. I wish she could just be happy being single and badass. She already has a lot of stuff to accomplish.

25. Not so much about Rey but the movie: why did they have to setup a suggestion of romance between Rey and Finn?

The qualitative data suggested a trend that being a 'strong independent woman who doesn't need a man' goes down well with female Star Wars fans. The decision not to have Jyn or Rey (at this time) romantically linked to any of the male characters has meant that these characters seem more active in these stories, rather than passive players. Heinecken noted there has been 'a media trend of women who defy conventional notions of female passivity' when researching Chyna, a wrestler/character from WWF (Heinecken, 2004: p. 182), and this has certainly been

the reception of the characters from the comments in this study. The perception that neither Rey nor Jyn were heavily sexualised was also well received. This is important because other 'strong' female characters have often fallen into this trap, Lara Croft for instance, despite being a smart and capable woman is 'a sex symbol and openly exploited as such' (Herbst, 2004: p. 25).

Conclusion

This study was small and so no generalisations can be made from the data, however some interesting trends that could be studied further did appear. It can be suggested that female fans did not feel that they were catered to when it came to merchandise. In this short study female fans found it hard to find Rey merchandise even though she was one of the main characters in *The Force Awakens*. When discussing female comic book fans Scott noted the possibility that 'female comic book fans' recent efforts to make themselves visible as a market segment suggests a similar desire to legitimate their identities as comic book fans' (Scott, 2013). It can be suggested that there are currently similarities when it came to female Star Wars fans campaigning to get Rey merchandise on the shelves.

Although Disney has seemingly done well at portraying strong female characters in Rey and Jyn there is still a distinct lack of diversity in the Star Wars universe. This is not anything new as this was lamented in the 2004 book *Action Chicks: New Images of Tough Women in Popular Culture* which notes that often (female action heroes) are 'predominantly white, upper or middle class, attractive, feminine, and heterosexually appealing (Inness, 2004: p. 8). When asked 'Is there anything you would like to add?' out of 117 comments, 20 different responses lamented that not only were both Rey and Jyn white, but also conventionally attractive, slim, both had brown hair and dark eyes. As this article was being written, *The Last Jedi* premiered in which a new POC character called Rose Tico portrayed by Kelly Marie Tran was introduced. It would be interesting to see how female fans have received this character in a future study.

In this study it can be suggested that there could be a trend of conflict between female and a minority of male fans. This has led to some of the respondents in this study enjoying the actual fandom participation less with 40.1% of fans disagreeing with the statement 'I feel female fans are treating fairly in the Star Wars fandom'. Further study should be conducted on female fans of Star Wars to pinpoint the reasons for why this is. In conclusion, the reception of female fans to the new Star Wars instalments were positive when it came to the characters but there was a

more negative sentiment when it came to their thoughts on their treatment by merchandisers and a minority of male fans.

Notes

1. Due to a technological error the participant information sheet was not included in the survey for the first 12 respondents. Therefore, as consent and understanding could not be assured for these participants, their responses were not used and were erased. The survey was re-released with the correct information and had 330 participants.

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