

UNDERSTANDING THE FAN BACKLASH OF STAR WARS: THE LAST JEDI
IN TERMS OF COMMUNICATION THEORY



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Understanding the Fan Backlash of Star Wars: The Last Jedi in terms of Communication

Theory

Advisor : Assoc. Prof. Ratanasuda Punnahitanond, Ph. D.

ABSTRACT

The study began from wanting to understand if communication theory can be applied to interpret the backlash against Star Wars: The Last Jedi. A thematic analysis of 201 negative audience reviews and 5 report articles on the backlash was conducted. This generated two key themes – story reasons, and personal reasons - fans had for why they had a negative reaction towards the movie. Afterwards, three communication theories - priming, confirmation bias, and uses and gratification theory - were used to explain these two themes.

Story reasons against the movie include matters such as plot devices not making sense for them, and characters acting in confusing ways. Personal reasons involve expressions that Star Wars and its fans are being disrespectfully treated by its current owners and creators. All of these indicate that these are results from heavy discourse and misunderstanding between media/creator and the audience.

Keywords: Star Wars, The Last Jedi, fan, fandom, backlash, communication

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	ix
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background.....	1
A Brief History of Star Wars.....	2
The Walt Disney Company buys Star Wars.....	2
The Last Jedi's release.....	4
Rationale and problem statement.....	7
Scope of Study.....	9
Objectives of Study.....	10
Research Questions.....	11
Significance of the Study.....	11
Definition of Terms.....	12

TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

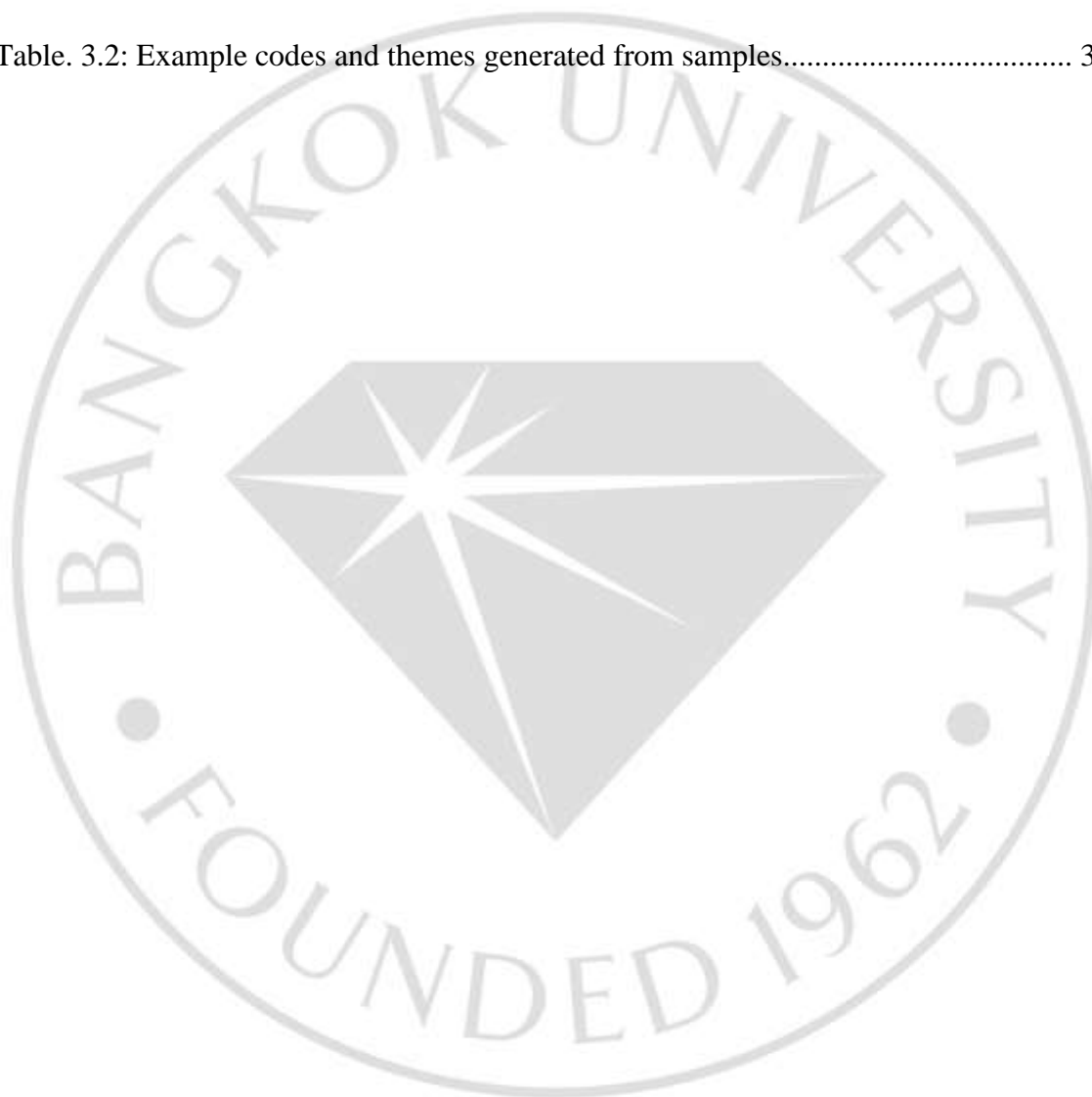
	Page
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	16
Related Literature.....	16
Film Studies.....	16
Star Wars: The Last Jedi.....	17
Fandom Studies.....	19
Online Discussions.....	20
Theoretical Framework.....	23
Summary.....	25
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY.....	27
Research Design.....	27
Population and Sample.....	28
Audience review samples.....	28
Report articles.....	31
Research Procedure and Data Coding	33
Reliability and Validity of Research.....	35

TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

	Page
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS.....	37
Key Themes.....	37
Story reasons.....	38
Personal reasons.....	45
Summary.....	49
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	50
Theoretical Implications.....	50
Results Summary.....	54
Discussion.....	56
Limitations.....	58
Implications.....	59
Recommendations for further research.....	60
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	61
BIODATA.....	73
LICENSE AGREEMENT.....	74

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table. 3.1: Summary of data samples.....	32
Table. 3.2: Example codes and themes generated from samples.....	34



LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure.1.1: Main series Star Wars movies in production order.....	6
Figure. 3.1: A sample review with a rating score of 0 on Metacritic for The Last Jedi...	31
Figure. 3.2: Qualitative Coding Process.....	33
Figure. 4.1: Review excerpt complaining about plot devices.	38
Figure. 4.2: Leia uses the power of the Force to flies back to safety from outer space....	39
Figure. 4.3: Young Rey cries while looking on as her parents leave her behind.....	40
Figure. 4.4: Review excerpt complaining about characterizations.....	42
Figure. 4.5: Luke activates his weapon as he is overwhelmed to kill his nephew.....	43
Figure. 4.6: Rey lifts up heavy debris using the Force.....	45
Figure. 4.8: Review excerpt expressing that Star Wars was mistreated.....	46
Figure. 4.8: Review excerpt expressing that fans were mistreated.....	48

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presented the background information regarding what a fandom is, Star Wars and its fandom, the rationale and problem statement, objectives of the paper, the scope of the paper, the research questions, the significance of the study, and the definitions of various key terms.

1.1 Background

Everyone is a fan of something. Believed to have originated from the word ‘fanatic’ (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), to be a fan can simply mean you like or enjoy a particular object, product, person, or concept.

However, to describe a fandom could be a bit trickier. The term ‘fandom’ is used in popular culture by groups of people who share enthusiastic support for something, whether it be a music group, a political party, a brand of food chains, a film franchise etc. These people form vast communities, especially on the Internet since the turn of the century, where they share thoughts, feelings, and enthusiasm for the collective support they share for a product, media, etc. (Romano, 2016).

1.1.1. A Brief History of Star Wars

Star Wars was a film media franchise that began in 1977 when George Lucas released the first film in the franchise, simply titled, “Star Wars” - It was renamed “Star Wars: Episode 4 - A New Hope” retroactively. Over four decades later, this science fiction franchise is still going strong, being one of the most popular movie franchises of all time and boasts a strong fandom support, both old and young (Swatman, 2015).

Lucasfilm, George Lucas’ film production company, made a total of six Star Wars movies. The original three films, called the Original Trilogy (wikiHow. 2019), includes –

- Star Wars: Episode 4 – A New Hope (1977),
- Star Wars: Episode 5 – The Empire Strikes Back (1980),
- Star Wars: Episode 6 – Return of the Jedi (1983),

Later on, Lucasfilm released a second trilogy of films, called the Prequel Trilogy (wikiHow. 2019). This set of movies told the story and events set before the Original Trilogy, and includes the films –

- Star Wars: Episode 1 – The Phantom Menace (1999),
- Star Wars: Episode 2 – Attack of the Clones (2002),
- Star Wars: Episode 3 – Revenge of the Sith (2005),

1.1.2. The Walt Disney Company buys Star Wars

In 2012, Lucasfilm was purchased by The Walt Disney Company at US\$ 4.05 billion, and Lucasfilm became a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Studios, the film media

segment of The Walt Disney Company (Burr, 2012). Star Wars was now owned by Disney, and a new era of Star Wars movies began.

In 2015, a direct sequel to 'Star Wars Episode 6', titled as 'Star Wars: Episode 7 – The Force Awakens' was released worldwide. Directed by J. J. Abrams, and written by Abrams, Lawrence Kasdan, and Michael Arndt, *the Force Awakens* achieved massive success, earning over US\$ 2 billion during its run while breaking multiple box office records, such as becoming the highest grossing installment in the franchise, and the fourth highest grossing film ever as of 2019 (McClintock, 2016). It was also praised by critics and fans alike, holding high to favorable ratings on popular review sites such as Rotten Tomatoes (2015), etc. *The Force Awakens* would be the seventh entry film in the main Star Wars movie series, and it would be the first entry in a new set of Star Wars trilogy, called the Sequel Trilogy (wikiHow, 2019) as it picks up the storyline at the end of the Original Trilogy.

In 2016, a standalone spin-off entry in the Star Wars film series called 'Rogue One: A Star Wars Story' was released. Rogue One is not part of the series of Star Wars trilogies, and it was part of Disney's plan to release one Star Wars movie every year (Alexander, 2015); it earned over US\$ 1 billion at the box office and received generally favorable ratings from critics and fans (IMDb, 2016).

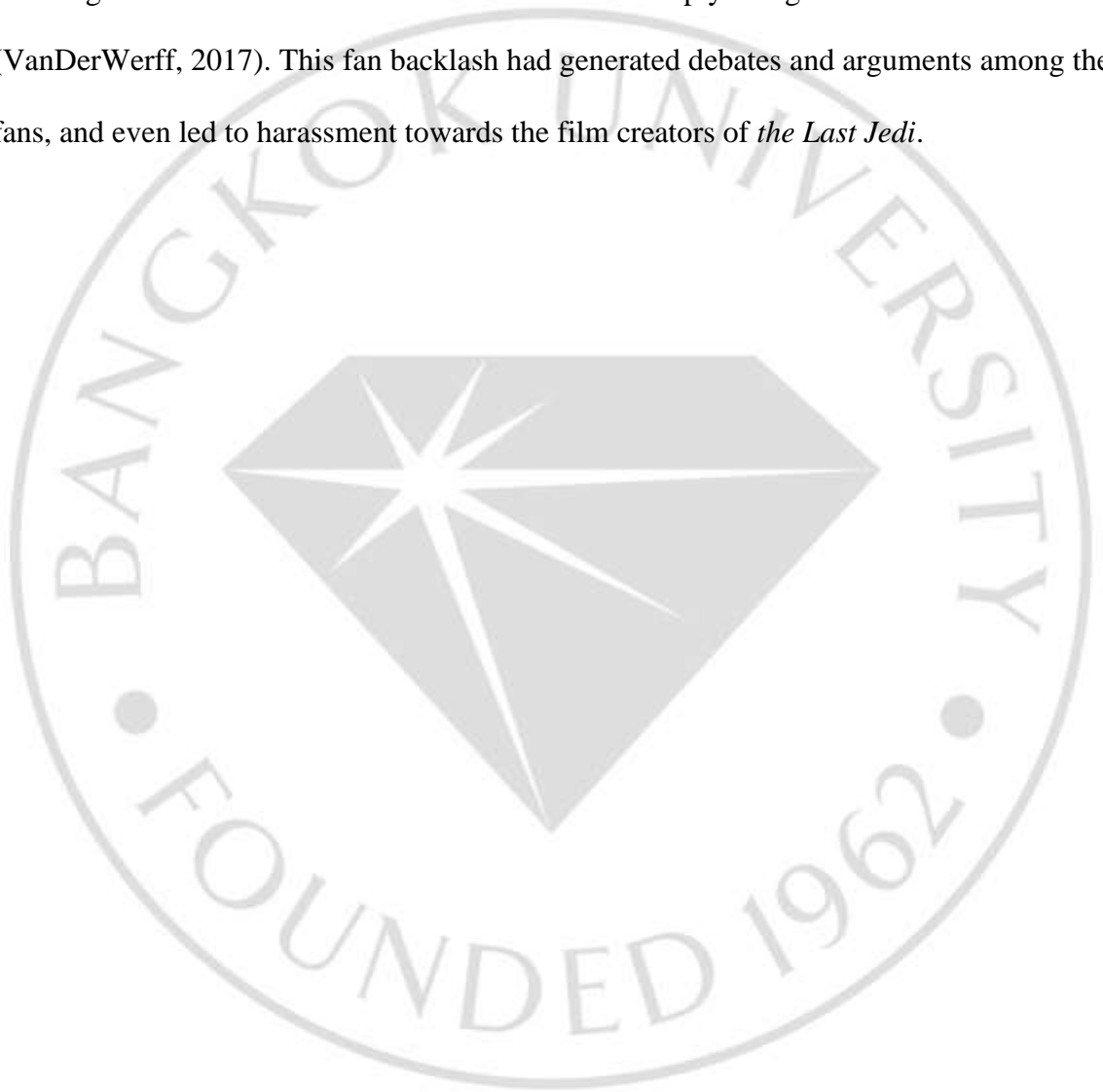
1.1.3. The Last Jedi's release

In December 2017, the Force Awakens' sequel, '*Star Wars: Episode 8 - the Last Jedi*' was released worldwide. Directed and written by Rian Johnson, it was the second entry in the new Star Wars 'Sequel Trilogy', with an estimated budget of US\$ 317 million according to IMDb (2017). By the end of its box office run, the film has earned US\$ 1.3 billion, becoming the highest grossing film of 2017, and the current ninth highest grossing film of all time (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). The film also enjoyed success among popular critical reviewers; it holds a 91% out of 100% certified fresh critical rating on Rotten Tomatoes (2017), while another popular review website, Metacritic (2017), has the film at the score of 84 out of 100, certifying it as 'universal acclaim'.

However, *the Last Jedi* had come to be widely recognized by several viewers and fans of the Star Wars franchise as one of the most divisive and controversial entries ever. On Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic, although *The Last Jedi* had been given high scores by critics, it had much lower scores in audience ratings. As of writing this paper, *The Last Jedi* had an audience score of 43% on Rotten Tomatoes (2017), and it was holding a user score of 4.3 on Metacritic (2017).

After *the Last Jedi*, two more Star Wars films were released in the following years. In 2018, *Solo: A Star Wars Story* was released as a standalone entry. In 2019, the direct sequel to *the Last Jedi*, *Star Wars: Episode 9 - The Rise of Skywalker* was released. Figure 1.1 lay outs the all the Star Wars films that had been released in production order.

Even after two more entries after *the Last Jedi*'s release, fans were still split between those who denounced it as the worst Star Wars movie and that it did not deserve the success it enjoyed, while there were others who loved the movie and defended it, claiming that the fans who denounced the movie as simply being trolls or toxic fans (VanDerWerff, 2017). This fan backlash had generated debates and arguments among the fans, and even led to harassment towards the film creators of *the Last Jedi*.



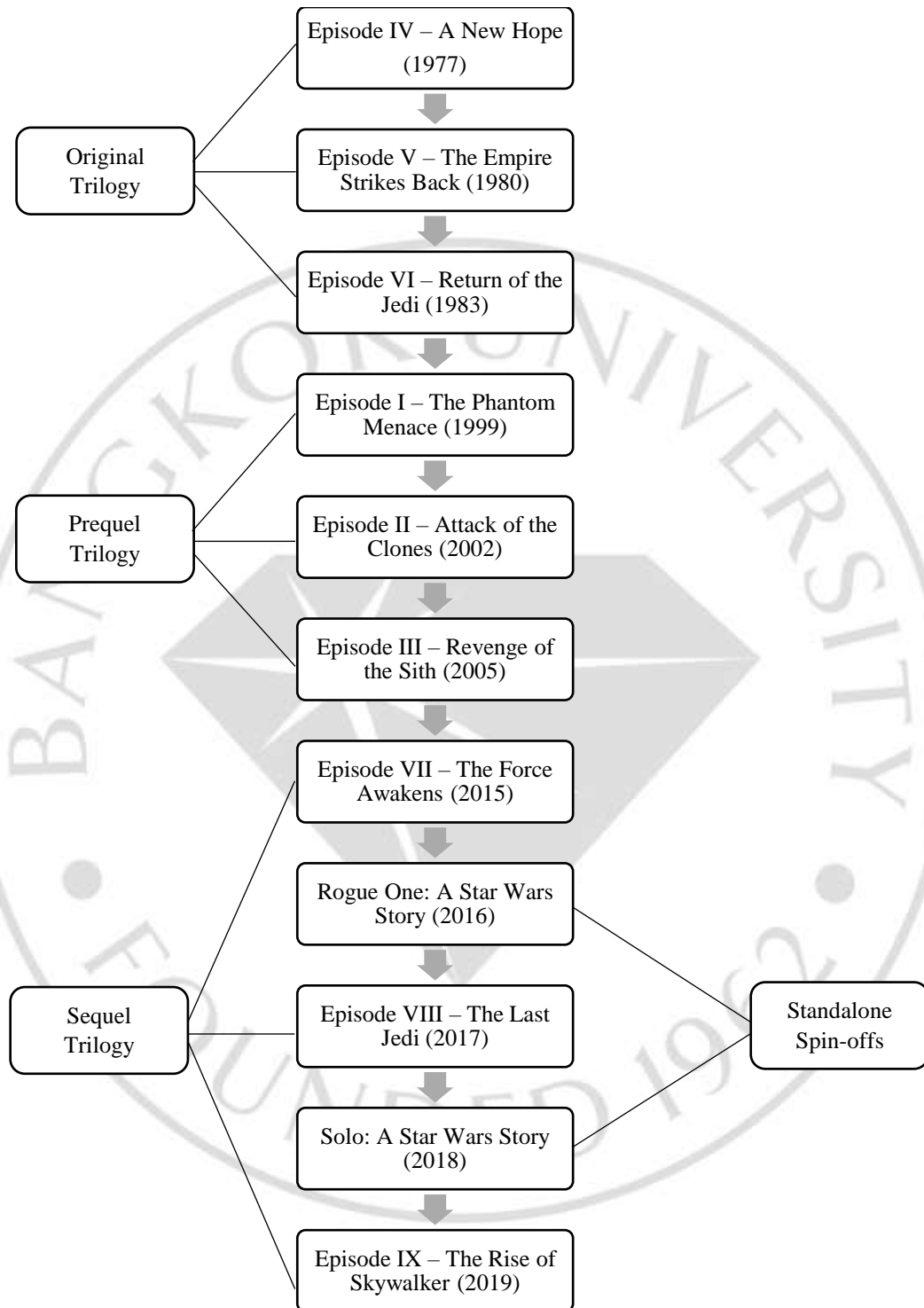


Figure.1.1: Main series Star Wars movies in production order

1.2. Rationale and Problem Statement

The Last Jedi was monetarily successful, but the controversy that occurred within the fandom may have created long-lasting negative effect on the franchise as a whole.

The next film entry after The Last Jedi, Solo: A Star Wars Story was a box office failure and became the lowest earning film in the entire franchise. At a budget of estimated US\$ 275 million, it only made back a world-wide gross of about US\$ 392 million (IMDb, 2018). By Star Wars standards, a franchise that frequently breaks the US\$ 1 billion, this was seen as an monetary failure.

Speculations and debates had been made whether disappointed fans boycotting Solo: A Star Wars Story was a significant factor in its box office failure (Kyriazis, 2018), and predictions were made whether it will have further repercussions on future entries (Mendelson, 2018).

The Last Jedi's direct sequel, The Rise of Skywalker, was similar in that it became monetarily profitable – earning over US\$ 1 billion - but suffered similar scrutiny from many fans, and held average-at-best critical reception from both critics and audience reviews (Metacritic, 2019). The effects The Last Jedi had on its successor were still discussed, whether or not The Last Jedi caused the repercussions on the later movies (Mooney, 2020).

The negative reception from The Last Jedi led to the financial failure of Solo and the lukewarm reception of The Rise of Skywalker. A data analysis had shown that Stars Wars, once an absolute critical and financially strongest franchise during the Original

Trilogy period, took a massive downfall when *The Last Jedi* was released, and the subsequent releases did not recover the level of success the franchise had maintained (Rincon, 2020).

This showcased that fan backlashes can lead to heavy negative consequences for the film creators. A sizeable amount of the Star fandom turned their backs on the franchise because of the movie that they wanted was not provided (VanDerWerff, 2017). This kind of backlash may cause a long-lasting loss of reputation on the film creators' side and can lead to less support from more fans, less monetary profit, and failure to gain trust for future products and endeavors.

There had been several articles and discussions written online about the controversy of *The Last Jedi*. There were many opinions on whether the film artistically succeeded or failed, whether the backlash was legitimate or not, and a study had even shown evidence that the controversy may have fueled by right-wing political activists (Bay, 2018).

However, among the many factors and angles that play into this situation, there was no academic study yet that used this particular case to gain an understanding how a fan backlash occurs, and if existing communication theories could explain this phenomenon. This kind of backlash, where highly fanatic audience turns their back on the franchise they supported, had not been academically studied enough, especially using relatively modern cases like *The Last Jedi*'s.

To simply explain, a fan backlash is when a product is rejected by its usual supporters, commonly in aggressive manners. Film creators generally will never desire a backlash to occur on their works as it could damage their reputation as not being able to satisfy their own supporters.

The Last Jedi's case in particular was very high-profile, and it made an interesting example to use to explore the nature of fan backlashes. If this paper can identify or theorize an explanation for The Last Jedi's fan backlash from a communications study point of view, the explanation postulated could be useful for further studies regarding the nature of fandom.

This paper postulated that the nature of fan backlashes had not been explored enough in terms of theories related to communication. This study was set out to understand how a fan backlash occurs by studying the case of Star Wars: The Last Jedi.

1.3 Scope of Study

This paper engaged in a qualitative study restricted to the Star War' fandom negative reactions towards Star Wars: The Last Jedi. Along the research, Star Wars: The Last Jedi was the main film that was discussed, although other Star Wars entries were referenced for comparative reasons.

The main set of data collected for this study was from the Internet. A collection of user reviews from the movie review website, Metacritic, were collected – a total of 201 reviews - and they were analyzed along with a select few online articles.

The theories and concepts that were used to explain the nature of fan backlashes were - confirmation bias theory, priming theory, and uses and gratification theory. These theories were used to examine and interpret the results collected.

1.4 Objectives of Study

This paper attempted to interpret the nature of fan backlash by studying the fandom controversy over Star Wars: The Last Jedi. The specific objectives were:

- a. To understand the reasons behind Star Wars fans' negative reaction towards *the Last Jedi*
- b. To test out how the fan backlash can be explained from a communications theory point of view
- c. To explore how a fan backlash could be avoided

1.5 Research Questions

This study proposes to provide answers for the following two research questions.

RQ1: What are the reasons fans give for their negative reaction towards The Last Jedi?

RQ2: How can the reasons fans give for their backlash be better understood?

1.6 Significance of Study

This paper presented an in-depth view of fan backlashes from a communication theoretical point of view by studying The Last Jedi's case. It would be beneficial to better understand how and why a fan backlash, and the findings could help to further study in preventing potential negative backlashes from occurring.

It is significant that researchers may further gain insight into fan backlashes, because better understanding fans can help film creators provide build a stronger relationship with their most enthusiastic supporter bases.

Finally, through this research, fans themselves could be able to better understand their own selves and their communities. This will help the fans be able to mitigate or prevent from unwanted negative consequences, such as the fan community becoming overly toxic towards other fellow fans or towards the film creators.

1.7 Definition of Terms

1.7.1 Backlash: The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defined a backlash as “a strong feeling among a group of people in reaction to a change or recent events in society or politics”. In the context of a fandom, a backlash was defined as when something occurs within the subject matter of a fandom and causes the fans to react in a particularly negative manner.

1.7.2 Controversy: Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defined a controversy as “a disagreement, often a public one, that involves different ideas or opinions about something”.

1.7.3 Fan: A fan was defined by Merriam-Webster (n.d.) as “an enthusiastic devotee (as of a sport or a performing art) usually as a spectator” or “an ardent admirer or enthusiast (as of a celebrity or a pursuit)”.

However, the nature of being a fan can be wide and indefinite. What makes a person a fan of something or someone is subjective – defining it was objectively difficult and may not be accepted by fans themselves.

A person may enjoy a work of art immensely, but may not necessarily identify as a fan. To be a fan is not necessarily limited by the amount of consumption or time either; a person could have seen a movie only once in their life and identify themselves as a fan of the movie.

For the purpose of this paper, a fan was described as someone who loves and appreciate a product or franchise and had devoted plenty of time and energy towards it.

1.7.4 Fandom: A fandom was defined in the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) as “a group of fans of someone or something, especially very enthusiastic ones”. For this paper, a fandom was understood as the collective culture of fans across different ages with unique preferences.

1.7.5 Film Creator: A film creator is any entity, person, or organization responsible for creating, producing, and publishing films to be consumed by the general public. Under this definition, people with creative occupations and roles such as director, writer, actor/actress, crew member etc., as well as production studios and companies such as Lucas Films and The Walt Disney Company etc. were placed under the term ‘film creator’.

1.7.6 Film Critic: Critics are professional entities who judges the quality of a movie through objective lens. Unlike being a fan, film critics generally are not emotionally or personally attached to the property. A critic’s review or assessment is generally expected to be unbiased. However, a person can be a critic and a fan of a movie at the same time. In addition, fans could be able to judge a movie at the level or style of a critic. In several cases, the line of a critic and a fan can be blurry. For this research, a critic meant someone who objectively examined a movie and was paid in return for their review.

1.7.7 Lore: Defined by the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) as the “traditional knowledge and stories about a subject”, lore in a story is basically all the background information and explanation concerning a subject matter.

1.7.8 Platform: A platform, as commonly used in this research, referred to online platforms in particular. An online platform is commonly used to refer to “a range of services available on the Internet including marketplaces, search engines, social media, creative content outlets, app stores, communications services, payment systems” (OECD, 2019).

1.7.9 Plot: A plot, often used interchangeably used with ‘story’, is a “fictional(ized) series of events that have some connection. The quality of a plot is often judged by how convincing that connection is established along the criteria of

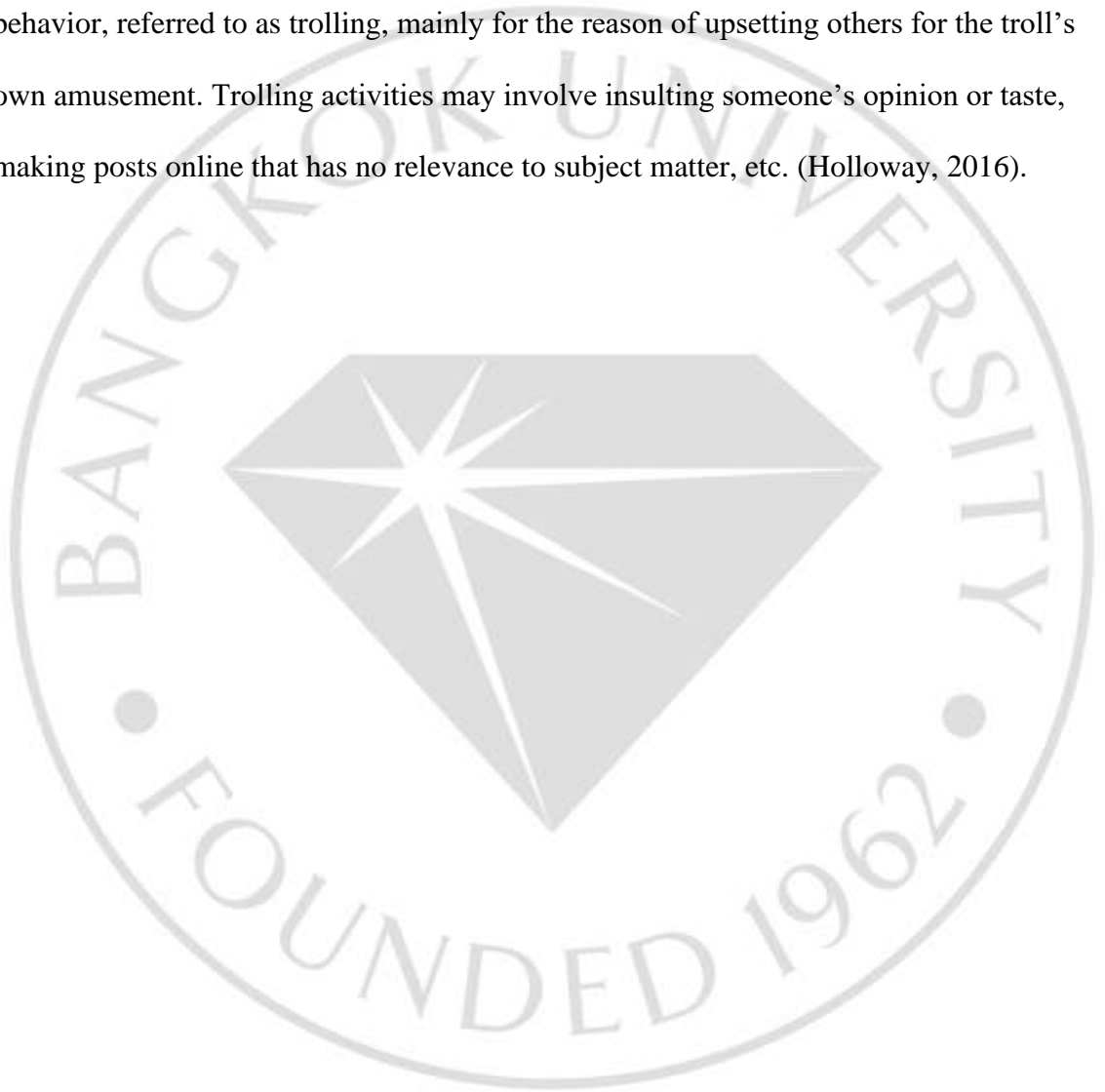
- *cause and effect* (physics),
- *emotional motivation* (psychology) and
- *reason* (logic and ethics).” (TV Tropes, n.d.).

1.7.10 Plot device: TV Tropes (n.d.) described a plot device as “an object or character in the story whose purpose is purely to drive the plot, maintain its flow, or resolve situations within it”.

1.7.11 The Force: The official Star Wars website (n.d.) defined that “The Force is a mysterious energy field created by life that binds the galaxy together. Harnessing the power of the Force gives the Jedi, the Sith, and others sensitive to this spiritual energy extraordinary abilities, such as levitating objects, tricking minds, and seeing things before they happen. While the Force can grant users powerful abilities, it also directs their actions. And it has a will of its own, which both scholars and mystics have spent

millennia seeking to understand”. In simpler terms, the Force is a fictional power in the Star Wars series that characters can access to gain various supernatural abilities.

1.7.12 Troll: Trolls were people online who engage in harassment or inflammatory behavior, referred to as trolling, mainly for the reason of upsetting others for the troll’s own amusement. Trolling activities may involve insulting someone’s opinion or taste, making posts online that has no relevance to subject matter, etc. (Holloway, 2016).



CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviewed varying related literature regarding film studies, Star Wars: The Last Jedi, fans and fandoms, online discussions about The Last Jedi, the theoretical framework of this research including the three main communication theories that were used.

2.1 Related Literature

2.1.1 Film Studies

The medium and study of film had existed for over a century since the development and creation of motion pictures. Film study in general meant looking at film as an artistic medium, and included other curriculum such as history of film, theories of filmmaking, and film production methods (What is Film Studies?, 2014). It is a thriving area of study that is prevalent among scholars, film enthusiasts, and students of film.

The topic of film studies involves a wide variety of topics, perspectives, and debates concerning the nature and relations concerning films. On the particular topic of this research paper, the related topic involved in the discussion was what makes a film good or bad. This was because this research involves people accusing a film of being bad and reacting negatively towards it.

What makes a film good is a question that is difficult to answer or define, and is up to debate; films as art is subjective to each viewer, and different people tend to have different criteria of what makes a film good or bad for them.

When it came to the discussion of *the Last Jedi* under the lens of film study, there can be many interpretations depending on what type of subjective quality a reviewer was looking for, which was heavily affected by their own biases.

This research paper was not actually concerned with measuring the objective positive or negative qualities of *the Last Jedi*. Its purpose was not to determine the film's quality itself, but to examine the audience's reactions and their reasonings and feelings. However, while examining the voice and opinions of the audience, several of them had bring up factors or elements related to film study, for example, the concept of plot, characters, stories etc.

2.1.2 Star Wars: The Last Jedi

The Star Wars franchise had been around for over forty years as of the time this paper is been written. It was a major part of popular cultural identity and a massive cultural icon (McCarron, 2015). As a longstanding franchise, Star Wars has had many books, studies, and articles published related to it.

However, the focus of this paper was mainly on Star Wars: The Last Jedi released in December 2017 and this paper's writing began in 2019. As was the case, there were very few academic research papers related to the movie that were published at the time this paper was being written.

Koushik and Abigail (2018) in their paper on ‘Disney’s Commodification of Feminism’, discussed while using Star Wars: The Last Jedi and Beauty and the Beast as examples about how Hollywood and corporations utilized social movements such as the feminist movement in order to gain favor with the public. Their paper extensively discussed about how feminism was used in The Last Jedi by going into details on how the female lead of the movie, Rey, and the other characters in the story were portrayed, and how this was an unhelpful attempt by the film studio to generate more capital and nothing more.

Koushik and Abigail did not discuss in detail about how the fandom itself relates to the topic of their study, but rather kept their focus on how feminism was fed into the profit of Disney and film corporations.

Differently, in a research paper done by Bay (2018) explored and discussed much more not only on why the fandom reacted negatively to The Last Jedi, but also expanded on whether the entire controversy had far deeper roots in weaponizing pop culture for political purposes through the use of social media. The paper investigated into how Twitter was used by Russian bots and trolls to feed into the negative narrative against The Last Jedi and that how there was much political ploy being played behind the curtains. From the findings of Bay’s research, it indicated that a significant amount of the backlash The Last Jedi received may be due to political reasons. However, this study had been called out as not true with Bay exaggerating the results in his paper. Bay himself had admitted that the amount of data that proved that Russian bots were attacking The Last Jedi was negligible (Bunch, 2018).

The main takeaway from these studies was that *The Last Jedi* indicate certain problematic trends and signs such as corporate virtue signaling, or potential political interference. However, there was a definite lack of studying from a communications theoretical angle into the backlash against *The Last Jedi* by the fans.

2.1.3 Fandom Studies

There had been several studies and interpretations on the history and inner processes of being a fan and the developments of fan communities. Being a fan is a concept that is very old, as long as people existed. The historical development of the terminology ‘fan’ and ‘fandom’ as well their conceptual beginnings had been explored. The terms are believed to have begun to be used in the 19th century, but it could even be argued that the nature of fandom began in the 15th century with the invention of the printing press – an invention that enabled sharing of knowledge through books much more easily. In the modern period, the concept of fandom evolved over time with science fiction enthusiasts at the turn of the 20th century (Medkut., 2016). By the 2010s, fandoms developed into mainstream attention and the various effects this growth has brought on, e.g. fandoms advocating for creators to be more representative of minorities in their works (Romano, 2019).

Apart from their historical development, fandoms had been explored in how they affect people, the social and psychological affects being a fan has on the participants in the fandoms. In the book “Fandom: Identities and communities in a mediated world” by Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2017), the nature of fandom is extensively discussed,

and provides extensive theories and studies related to fandoms, especially with a focus on what a fan identity or a fandom community mean. In relation to the discussion the nature of backlashes, the chapter “Fantagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Constitutive Hegemonies of Fandom” describes the formation of factions due to rivalry, enmity, disagreement and discourse emerges between fans within fandoms, between two or more fandoms, and between a fandom and creators of the subject the fandom is based on (Johnson, 2017).

On a different angle, a paper published by Dean (2017) provided a research into how fandoms related into political issues. The research illustrated how the agency and capacity that fans have can affect political matters, and the nature and elements of a politicized fandom can display.

These studies were very comprehensive and approach the subject of fandom from multiple angles. The information and discussions available in these studies were used to understand The Last Jedi’s fan backlash better.

2.1.4. Online Discussions

Since the turn of the 21st century, the availability and wide use of the Internet had allowed fans a much wider and open reach for sharing discussions, opinions, debates, and criticisms of all kinds. Especially, the rise of easy-to-access social media platforms had allowed fandoms to project their voices louder than ever. This freedom of information and opinions had gradually turned out to have both positive and negative consequences (Sindhu, 2019).

For the case of *The Last Jedi*, online fan reactions played a large role in the backlash. Fans who enjoyed and hated alike voiced their opinions on different social media platform such as Twitter (Bay, 2018), but also on forum websites such as Reddit. Just on the weekend *The Last Jedi* was released, it was reported that there were over 4 million social media posts about the movie on Twitter and Facebook (Wicked Local, 2017). Interestingly, most of the immediate reception from these social media posts showed highly positive reception from fans (Weiss, 2018). However, fans' reception soon began to split and the backlash against the film grew into a highly chaotic event (VanDerWerff, 2017). There were online campaigns to reject *The Last Jedi* from being recognized as an actual *Star Wars* entry (Burton, 2017) or to entirely remake the movie from scratch (Burton, 2018).

The backlash took a turn when fans began to personally threaten and harass the creators of the film. Most noticeably, director Rian Johnson revealed that he had received death threats from angry fans (Foster, 2018), and actress Kelly Marie Tran was subjected to a high amount of harassment that, five months after *The Last Jedi*'s release, she altogether left behind social media. Kelly Marie Tran played the character, Rose Tico, a major supporting character in *The Last Jedi*, and she is recognized as the first woman-of-color to play a lead role in *Star Wars*. The online harassment towards her contained racist and sexist comments that may not have much concern with how good *The Last Jedi* was (Rubin, 2018).

The situation itself was very chaotic as the backlash may contain a variety of reasons of its occurrence, both preceded and unprecedented. Perhaps some fans

disliked *The Last Jedi* from an objective study of a film, while some fans hate it for racist or sexist reasons that had very little to do with the objective quality of the movie. All of those were mixed together, and most of them were posted on social media and online forum websites – places where posted contents are disorganized, and Internet trolling may be present.

There were also several online articles, mostly news reports and opinion pieces, written to give easy explanations to readers and provide more general information about the Star War films and its fans. Most of these articles were not academically published or peer reviewed, and may not prove to hold up to the standard of academic papers. However, compared to social media posts and commentaries, these online articles were much more objectively written and display better writing quality.

Many of these articles were reviews of *The Last Jedi*, split between critics and writers who liked (Bradshaw, 2017) and disliked (Dawson, 2017) the *Last Jedi*. Their reasons came across mostly from the point of view of film experts or viewers of different kinds. However, there were articles that also acknowledge and reported on the fans' distaste of the film (Yee, 2017) while some reported that polls showed that it was only a vocal minority that was creating the negative backlash against the film (Taylor, 2017).

In general, the sources available online were in plentiful and in disarray, and with possibilities that many of them were perhaps written with significant bias. Information and opinion posted by most fans on forums and social media, while displaying their direct thoughts, may contain several inflammatory qualities and heavy bias. On the other

hand, review articles and reports of the film, while much less inflammatory, can still contain bias in addition not be the direct representation of the fan backlash that occurred.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

The study of communication theories covers a wide and varied academic area, linked to studies of people, trends, psychology, business practices, and more, simply due to the fact that communication is a process that is involved in every sector of life. Communication theory, in the most basic sense, is the study of this process as the transmission of information from one party to another. (Novak, 2019).

The purpose of this paper was to understand The Last Jedi's fan backlash from the perspective of communication theory. However, under the scope of communication theory, there were several models and distinct theories that focused on different areas and provided unique explanations. For this paper, the scope of these communication theories had been narrowed down to three theories. These three theories were -

2.2.1 Priming

Priming is based on the notion that ideas can be planted into a person's mind. By feeding prior information to people, the media can determine how new information is interpreted or received. The media provide certain information within the audience's mind, and that preceding information will directly influence how people react to subsequent information. With a limited set of references that people have, the more likely

that they will only rely on said references to judge the new information. For example, after being exposed to rock music videos containing portrayals of men dominating women, the audience becomes more likely to perceive the same notion even when viewing a video where there is no portrayal of dominance between men and women at all (Roskos-Ewoldsen, Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Carpentier, 2002).

2.2.2 Confirmation Bias

Confirmation Bias dictates that it is the way in which people view the world selectively. It says that if a person has a certain worldview, a certain notion, or a certain predestined tendency to believe or follow a certain knowledge, they will continue to do so even in the face of contradictory evidence. The theory explains that this happens because people tend to cling to a certain value that they already hold, and being challenged for that value is uneasy for them. For example, if person A tries to make phone call to person B, and person B does not pick up the phone, person A may become more inclined to believe that person B is avoiding person A on purpose, even if there is evidence that being not the case (Heshmat, 2015).

2.2.3 Uses and Gratification Theory

Dating back its development to the 1940s, this theory suggests that people will determine what media they want to consume based on their own personal needs. This theory provides more free-will and choice into the hands of the audience. Individuals decide what media they want to consume and what effects the media may have (Vinney, 2019).

There are basically five types of needs that audience will actively seek out in the media to consume:

- Cognitive – need for factual information
- Affective – need for emotions
- Personal integrative, - need for self-esteem
- Social integrative – need for social relations
- Tension release – need for escapism from reality (Vinney, 2019).

The reason these three theories were selected was because they focus on the nature and relationships between audience and media. Out of the three theories, Priming theory suggests that media dictates how the audience reacts, while the other two, Confirmation Bias and Uses and Gratification Theory, assumes more that the audience have more choice in what media they want to consume. The relationship between these two component, media and audience, were extrapolated as being similar to the relationship that fandoms and creators have.

2.3 Summary

To shortly summarize, there were some academically published papers on The Last Jedi that may provide insight and interpretive information for the fandom's backlash. There were also some researches that have studied the general nature of fans and fandoms that may be useful in for this research paper. Also, plenty of online sources and discussions about The Last Jedi's fan backlash including the fans' opinions were

publicly available through social media and forum websites. By using these materials and the theoretical framework, this paper investigated and tried to answer its' research questions.



CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter discussed the research design, population and sample selection, and research procedure involved in detail. In addition, data coding was also explained.

3.1 Research Design

The research applied thematic analysis to study the fan backlash of The Last Jedi. Thematic analysis is a research method that is used to analyze data qualitatively. It involves examining the data samples such as bodies of text and then identifying and pulling out common themes – recurring ideas, topics, or information within the data. This generation of themes is called coding. After the initial coding process, the generated codes are further condensed and combined until a few key themes remain.

This research paper used the qualitative approach. This paper was a case study, analyzing the situation of fan backlash towards Star Wars and it was exploratory by nature.

The data collected for this paper were secondary – the data were not directly collected first-hand by the researcher of this paper but will be used for analysis. Two main types of secondary data were gathered – audience review posts, and report articles. These data were all collected from online platforms.

The methodology selected for this paper were chosen because they were deemed the most suitable for understanding the nature of fan backlash. The case of The Last Jedi controversy was chosen mainly because – it was one of the most popular media franchises in the world and had a high level of influence on its audience, it occurred in the very recent past compared to the time this paper was being written and there was very little academic attention given to it so far, and the controversy itself was not completely black and white in who was right or wrong, which led to very heated debate. These reasons made the topic an interesting case to analyze. In addition, thematic analysis was conducted because the nature of the topic dealt with subjects which were difficult to define such as opinions and feelings, and when discussing art and fans, most of them were basing on emotions, opinions, and their personal experiences.

3.2 Population & Sample

The target population of this research paper were audience film reviews of The Last Jedi. They were collected from the Internet, specifically from the popular movie review website Metacritic. In addition, to gain a wider sample size, the researcher also collected data from various online report articles.

3.2.1 Audience review samples

The first set of sample data collected came from online user review posts from the movie review website, Metacritic. As explained, a lot of fans showed their dissent

towards *The Last Jedi* by voicing their thoughts online, most of them on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

However, because of the sheer amount of content, and the lack of content moderation on social media websites like Twitter, the task of collecting actual sample data from those platforms would be very difficult. In addition, there was no proper metric on these social media websites designed to identify what types of content a post contains. The quality of review content on social media posts can also vary too much as there can be posts that were unrelated to the movie, or posts that provide no valuable insight into the research topic of this paper. And lastly, social media posts on those websites usually involved comment chains – users will talk back and forth, and arguments can break out, or the topic of conversation can become derailed.

In order to get better quality opinion pieces, potential sources for sample data collection were narrowed down to movie review websites. There were several movie review websites online, and out of them, Metacritic was selected as the place where the data sample will be collected from. Metacritic was recommended as having a balanced rating system and showcasing full audience reviews along with critic reviews (Stegner, 2018). The interface of Metacritic also included different sorting systems, e.g. sorting data by date, or by score, which made data collection much easier.

Metacritic featured both critic reviews and audience reviews of films. Along with the review, users would submit a review score from 0 to 10 - 0-3 as negative, 4-5 as average, and 7-10 as positive - to determine how the user rate a particular film. Metacritic

then aggregated the average of the total amount scores and provided the average rating score for the film.

As this paper would like to examine the negative backlash, only reviews with rating score 0 to 3 were considered for sampling. There were about 4,500 reviews in total during this paper's data sampling process. In order to narrow further to get the most negative of the sample size, only reviews with score 0 and 1 were selected. That came down to about 2,000 reviews.

From this point, a few reviews were checked and several of them were not of good quality to be effectively used for a research. For example, some of them were very short, containing only a sentence worth of words, and some of them were just expletive words. In order to remove those low-quality samples, a limitation was applied that reviews need to at least contain 10 sentences of proper display of thoughts and feelings on the film.

Afterwards, the sample size came down to 402 reviews. Due to limitation of time available to analyze the data, the sample size was further reduced by applying the random sampling method. The reviews were assigned random numbers, and half of them were randomly selected from the total pool. By the end, the final data sample came down to 201 reviews.

This review contains spoilers. The movie is seriously flawed and the worst episode in the series. It is too long, has a weak plot, tries to hard to introduce humor and completely trashes everything from the original series. Kathleen Kennedy needs to be replaced for green lighting this trash. Where should I begin with this...

- Luke is completely off base from the original character. It's almost like Rian Johnson never actually saw one of the original movies. A disappointing end of the signature character from the OT
- they drop the ball on Rey's parents, Snoke, and any cliffhanger from the first movie. They don't seem to matter at all which is very unsatisfying - The film trashes everything from the original series in order to be new and different and bold. They problem is it replaces those aspects with nothing. The plot is thin and full of deviations that go nowhere (casinos chase on animals, random holocall to Max Kanata just to throw her in the mix for no real reason
- there are no hooks for the last movie. No Han Solo frozen in carbonite or other things that leave you waiting for more. - the movie tries to preach that "the force is for everyone not just the jedi". Great but that's not a movie plot! The original series was about the hero's journey, good vs. evil, the redemption of Anakin Skywalker. This one is just some bland message of inclusiveness that anyone can be a hero. Really? Sounds like a plot developed by a committee It seems that either Disney has influenced all the "critics" who are reviewing the film or these people are too scared to say anything bad about about the movie for fear of losing access to films from a company that controls 40% of releases now that they own 21st Century Fox. These people are like the stock market analysts who say everything is a "buy" even if the company is garbage. Rotten tomatoes is really suspect given the different between their critic ratings (93) and audience ratings (57) are so large. Not a surprise since they are owned by Fandango who sells online tickets. Bit of a conflict of interest perhaps?? I'm sure no one will investigate that though. **Collapse ▲**

Figure. 3.1: A sample review with a rating score of 0 on Metacritic for The Last Jedi

Source: Metacritic. (n.d.). <https://www.metacritic.com/movie/star-wars-episode-viii-the-last-jedi/user-reviews?dist=negative>.

3.2.2 Report articles

In addition to data gathered from user reviews directly, the research also wanted to collected data from online articles written more elaborately, published on more renowned platforms.

The articles that were collected were not review articles of the film. Review articles are pieces of writing containing the writer's subjective or objective criticism of the film. Those articles would be considered a critic's review judging the quality of the

film itself, which is not within the scope of this study. Instead, the researcher looked into articles that reported, explained or summarized the fan backlash. After reading through several online articles, five report articles were selected, each of them written by different authors on five different websites. These report articles were:

- The 8 Biggest Complaints Angry Star Wars Fans Seem To Have About The Last Jedi (Wood, 2017).
- ‘The Last Jedi’: An Explanation for Some Fans’ Disappointment and Ire (Parker, 2017).
- Why ‘Star Wars: The Last Jedi’ Really Pissed Off Fans (Singer, 2019).
- Four Reasons Why ‘Star Wars: The Last Jedi’ Isn’t One for the Ages (Gleiberman, 2017).
- The “backlash” against Star Wars: The Last Jedi, explained (VanDerWerff, 2017).

Table. 3.1: Summary of data samples.

Type of Data	Sources	Amount	Timeframe of reviews	Review score from 0-10
Audience Reviews	Metacritic	201	Dec 2017 – Dec 2019	0-1
Report Articles	CinemaBlend, The Hollywood Reporter, ScreenCrush, Variety, Vox	5	Dec 2017 – Dec 2019	N/A

3.3 Research Procedure and Data Coding

After the data samples were collected, the next step was to analyze the data thematically. This research applied an inductive and latent approach to the analysis.

The first step done was to familiarize the sample materials by reading through them. The researcher was a student in the area of creative storytelling and is familiar Star Wars movies and, through reading the excerpts, was able to recognize general themes and concepts within. Once a general idea of the materials had been received, the next step done was to code the data samples.

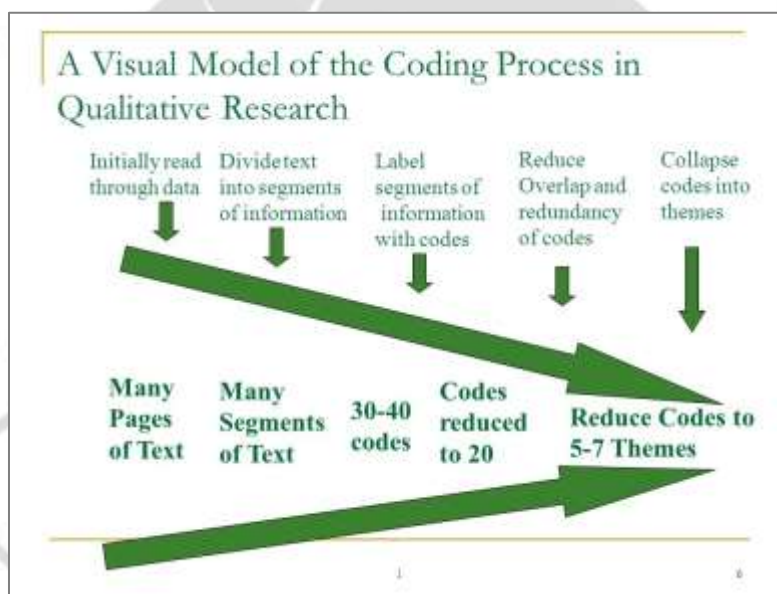


Figure. 3.2: Qualitative Coding Process

Source: Bauer, B. (n.d.). *Qualitative Data Analysis and Interpretation* Dr. Bill Bauer -

ppt download. Retrieved from <http://slideplayer.com/slide/6413295/>.

The coding process began with simple highlighting and memoing as the researcher went through the data samples one by one. The process took some time, and throughout the coding, several repeated thematic constructs began to emerge. While there were variations in details and phrasing of the words, the reviews from the fans contain very similar themes that voice why they viewed *The Last Jedi* negatively.

After the initial list of codes had been collected, the second round of grouping the codes together by similarity began. This process was repeated until the codes were generated into a number of key themes.

Table. 3.2: Example codes and themes generated from samples.

Sample	Codes	Themes
“Poorly timed jokes”	Dislike of plot device	Problem with plot
“Leia in space was jarring”	Confusing plot device	
“Disney only cares about money”	Distrust in studio	Problem with creator
“Rhian Johnson did a horrible job”	Unsatisfaction with creator	

3.4 Reliability and Validity of Research

To achieve reliability for this research, a second coder with the same coding scheme used by the key researcher was tasked with coding 60 out of the total 201 review excerpts. The inter-coder reliability of this study was 90 percent.

This study's research questions wanted to investigate into better understanding the fans' negative reaction towards The Last Jedi. To ensure the validity of this study, careful measures were taken on planning out the method and samples.

The main sample data source was directly taken from user reviews on a well-known review website. This ensured the data come directly viewers who watched and had their own opinions about The Last Jedi. The review website, Metacritic, was specifically chosen because of its reputation as a trusted source of online movie ratings, and that user reviews made on Metacritic will include direct voices of the audience while also being more organized compared to social media platforms.

The method applied in this study was to thematically analyze the data samples. The themes that emerged during the coding process were directly and carefully generated from the audience review samples. This ensured that by going through the coding process for the data collected, the resulting findings would be as accurate as possible. The emerging themes directly related to and displayed what the audience felt or thought about The Last Jedi.

The themes were also validated in the way that they were present in other studies as well. Concepts such as plot elements, characterizations, discourse between audience

and creators are present throughout past studies. In addition, the themes were also related to the theories selected within the theoretical framework as the themes displayed a strong level of relationship and effects between the creator/media and the audience, and the selected theories were designed to explain those types of relations.



CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter presented the finding results from the thematic analysis of the user reviews and report articles of Star Wars: The Last Jedi. Three key themes reflecting why the fans disliked the film were generated, each of them having two categories.

Applying thematic analysis to the sample data – 201 user reviews and 5 report articles - involved coding the data by generating common ideas and concepts within the texts. Those collected codes were then combined into themes. These themes were essentially the condensed information describing how fans felt towards The Last Jedi.

4.1 Key Themes

A total of two key themes that reflected the audience's underlying feelings within the text were generated.

- Story reasons
- Personal reasons

These two key themes fed into a single overarching theme that described what the dissatisfied fans of Star Wars, a disconnection from it. These fans internalized that The Last Jedi had several elements in it that was disconnected from the series they had known and loved, and those elements created the feelings of alienation with these fans.

4.1.1 Story reasons

There were several complaints and negative reactions that are related to how the story in The Last Jedi was made. This was the main theme that was most repeated in the data samples on why fans disliked the movie. The story reasons were placed into two different categories.

4.1.1.1 Category - Plot problems

This movie is not a Star Wars story, because it gives middle fingers to plot points from the original movies that started the franchise.

If all someone has to do is fly a starship into an enemy at lightspeed, why the hell did the rebels sacrifice most of their best pilots in a new hope on a million to one chance that someone could drop a photon torpedo down the thermal exhaust port?

Light-speed through the death star...problem solved with one death. Luke Skywalker wasn't needed. At all.

Figure. 4.1: Review excerpt complaining about plot devices.

Source: Metacritic. (n.d.). <https://www.metacritic.com/movie/star-wars-episode-viii---the-last-jedi/user-reviews?dist=negative>.

As shown in Figure. 4.1, there were confusion towards plot devices. For example, an excess of humor that the reviewers felt were unfitting for Star Wars, complaints about plot devices that ultimately did not pay off, and missed opportunities for good plot development that the movie never really made use of.

For example, the Fig. 4.2 showed a scene where the character Leia Organa used the power of the Force – a mystical power that certain characters can use in Star Wars - to fly back into safety after getting thrown into outer space.



Figure. 4.2: Leia uses the power of the Force to flies back to safety from outer space.

Source: Johnson, R. (Director). (2017). *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* [Film]. Lucasfilm Ltd.

This scene, as an example, was mentioned several times as jarring to watch by reviewers. Many felt that, instead of the moment being beautiful and awe-inspiring, it was cheesy and ridiculous; the reviewers did not expect Leia to be able to accomplish this feat and that watching it happen caught them off guard. It was established in the previous movie entries that Leia has strong potential to be able to use the Force – she came from a family with very powerful Force users, but it was never clearly established on-screen that

she could actually use the Force. Because it was not clearly established, suddenly showing her using the Force's powers to save her life came across as a cheap surprise.

Some felt that this plot point was a waste of opportunity to let Leia's character die. This was because, in real life, actress Carrie Fisher who plays Leia Organa had recently passed away before *The Last Jedi's* release, and that scene could have been a sendoff for the character. Instead, the character stayed alive while her actress had passed away, leaving certain viewers confused at the character's survival.



Figure. 4.3: Young Rey cries while looking on as her parents leave her behind.

Source: Abrams, J. J. (Director). (2015). *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* [Film]. Lucasfilm Ltd.

The previous example of Leia was a self-contained scene within The Last Jedi's story. In addition to unsatisfactory plot devices that were self-contained, many viewers complained about how plot devices that were set up in the previous main entry, Star Wars: The Force Awakens, were left unanswered or answered unsatisfactorily.

The Figure. 4.3 showed a scene from The Force Awakens, where Rey, the main protagonist of the Sequels, was left behind as a child by her parents. This was one of the main intriguing points surrounding the character – the identity of her parents. Many fans had discussed and wondered and waited for Rey's parents' identity to be revealed as part of Rey's own mysterious past.

In the Last Jedi, Rey's parents' identity were revealed to her as being nobodies and insignificant. This left several fans unsatisfied as many expected Rey's parents to be important people in Star Wars, or have some other form of significance, and led the fans to complain that a major plot set-up from the previous film was wasted or misused.

4.1.1.2 Category - Character problems

"Out with the old, in with the new" is not supposed to be done like this... The new characters are absolutely awful and robotic, Rey is a mary sue perfectionist for no reason, she has not earned any of the traits she currently possesses and automatically excels at everything she does, Kylo is a gigantic man child and has no evil appeal to him anymore seeing as he lost to Rey in Episode 7 who has no training whatsoever, Finn had opportunities to develop but it went nowhere, Admiral Gander Wars served no purpose other than to emasculate Poe and conjure up the worst escape plan of all time, and Rose Tico contributed nothing to the story and had a sub plot take up a large chunk of the run time, and that also contributed nothing to the plot.

Old and beloved characters... Luke is the complete opposite of what made him one of the most beloved film characters of all time, instead of instilling hope and overcoming the darkness, he wants the Jedi to end and be left to die after contemplating the murder of his own nephew?!? What?!?! Leia, also a beloved character from the original, is a shell of herself and floated out into the vacuum of space without dying and force-flew (breaking narratives) back into the ship?!? Again, What?!?! Carrie Fisher, tragically passed away during the filming of the movie, and you could not even send her out with an ending she deserved... Rest in peace Carrie. Chewbacca, just eats the toys Disney wants you to buy... Admiral Ackbar just goes away, hard to remember his role in the movie because it was non-existent. Leave puppet Yoda alone please.

Figure. 4.4: Review excerpt complaining about characterizations.

Source: Metacritic. (n.d.). <https://www.metacritic.com/movie/star-wars-episode-viii---the-last-jedi/user-reviews?dist=negative>.

As the example shown in Figure. 4.4, fans had particularly negative reactions towards how *The Last Jedi* portrayed certain characters within the story. These reactions stemmed from actions a character take, the way a character is acting, a character's personality etc. There were two sub-categories within character problems – portrayal of old characters, and portrayal of new characters.

Portrayal of old characters meant how the film portrayed established characters from the older entries, especially from the Original Trilogy. Particularly, the way the

characterization of Luke Skywalker in *The Last Jedi* was a major factor towards the fans' backlash.

Luke Skywalker, played by actor Mark Hamill, was the main protagonist of the Original Trilogy. This character had a huge legacy as the most recognizable heroic character within *Star Wars*. One of Luke's greatest accomplishments was how he redeemed his father, Darth Vader, from evil by not giving up on him, holding onto the slightest hope that there was some good left in his father.



Figure. 4.5: Luke activates his weapon as he is overwhelmed to kill his nephew.

Source: Johnson, R. (Director). (2017). *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* [Film]. Lucasfilm Ltd.

However, in *The Last Jedi*, it showed Luke Skywalker as an old cynical hermit who had secluded himself and is living a decrepit life. The movie basically showed Luke

acting rudely and grumpily towards others, having given up hope, and drowning in depression. The Figure. 4.5 showed a scene that explained how Luke became the way he was. This scene showed Luke momentarily drawing out his weapon to kill his sleeping nephew due to Luke suspecting that his nephew was unknowingly turning evil.

This moment in particular, and the other surrounding portrayal of Luke, was unacceptable by the fans. They expressed that this portrayal of Luke Skywalker was fundamentally against what the character had always embodied and went against everything they admired about Luke Skywalker's character.

On a different note, the Sequels had a huge list of new and young characters that were introduced beginning in *The Force Awakens*. However, by *The Last Jedi*, many fans had become disgruntled with several of the new characters and the way they were portrayed or the roles they had in the story. A repeated example that was often mentioned was of Rey, the main protagonist of the Sequels.

Rey was often accused by fans of being too perfect or powerful, and accomplishing achievements that should not be possible. The complaint was that Rey, without having spent the appropriate amount of time training her powers, was able to achieve feats and displayed abilities that the fans thought should not be possible.

For example, the Figure. 4.6 showed a scene where Rey lifts up several heavy rocks using the power of the Force. Fans had pointed out that, at that point in time, Rey had barely learned and trained herself in the Force and should not have the power to do this kind of task.



Figure. 4.6: Rey lifts up heavy debris using the Force.

Source: Johnson, R. (Director). (2017). *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* [Film]. Lucasfilm Ltd.

4.1.2 Personal reasons

Star Wars as a property that had existed for a long time had long-standing fans. And these fans were very personally attached to Star Wars. They identified strongly with it, and took it very personally when The Last Jedi did not turn out the way they expected it to have.

The example of Luke Skywalker as given in the previous section can be used again here. Some fans just saw Luke's characterization as inconsistent to how he had been previously portrayed. However, some fans took great offense at that as they felt it violated everything that they liked about Luke.

These personal feelings were reflected in the reviews in the way of voicing that they have been put under mistreatment. The term ‘mistreatment’ may sound overly dramatic and exaggerated. However, it was an accurate term to summarize the collective feelings of many fans by the existence of The Last Jedi. These feelings of mistreatment can be split into two broad categories that often overlapped.

4.1.2.1 Category - Mistreatment towards Star Wars

The Last Jedi is a bad Star Wars movie. The plot doesn't make any sense, the characters' development throughout the OT was completely disregarded and ignored. The movie suffers from SJW nonsense and disregards what was the basis of Star Wars since the beginning of the series - the concept of the Hero's Journey. It hurts to see your childhood heroes end up like they did in this movie. Disney, just finish the trilogy and leave Star Wars alone to die in peace. You've made enough harm.

Figure. 4.8: Review excerpt expressing that Star Wars was mistreated.

Source: Metacritic. (n.d.). <https://www.metacritic.com/movie/star-wars-episode-viii---the-last-jedi/user-reviews?dist=negative>.

There were repeated complaints in the reviews concerning how much Star Wars has been ruined because The Last Jedi violated several established lore in the series. Various reasons and opinions were provided, and the creators of The Last Jedi were called out for allowing the film to come out the way it is.

The story reasons concerning the plot and character portrayals can be taken personally by a fan and attributed as a deliberate mistreatment towards Star Wars. In addition, some fans expressed that the deeper meanings and thematic embodiments of

Star Wars that they had always liked had been destroyed with the release of The Last Jedi. For example, Star Wars had a very strong theme of a greater struggle between good and evil. In the Last Jedi, it became much more cynical and moodier, where the divide between good and evil was blurred in a way that fans did not anticipate.

Another particular but very important thematic problem that was brought up in the reviews were complaints about how The Last Jedi was injected with political agenda. Many of the reviews blamed The Last Jedi for being too political, containing themes of feminism, communism etc. Several of the reviews note that the themes themselves were not the problem. However, they claimed that the integration of the themes was usually done at the expense of better character portrayal or story development. For example, the main protagonist, Rey, being able to access the power of the Force very easily within a very short amount of time was seen as a poor attempt at incorporating female empowerment. Moreover, reviewers suspected that the presence of political themes in the movie was a shallow attempt to display progression by creators without actual interest in implementing them well.

These feelings of dissent were pointed by the fans towards the creators of the series. The director, Rian Johnson, and the producer, Kathleen Kennedy, were blamed for not caring about the foundations of Star Wars. And fans ultimately blamed The Walt Disney Company who owned Star Wars for all the missteps of The Last Jedi.

4.1.2.2 Category - Mistreatment towards the fans

Forget telling a great story, it seems Disney only cares about the money. It has been dumbed down to cater for the younger generation at the expense of the older generation that grew up with Star Wars. Makes sense as a business point of view, after all they will out live us oldens.

Figure. 4.8: Review excerpt expressing that fans were mistreated.

Source: Metacritic. (n.d.). <https://www.metacritic.com/movie/star-wars-episode-viii---the-last-jedi/user-reviews?dist=negative>.

One step beyond fans feeling like the property they love being mistreated was that they felt they personally were being mistreated.

There were underlying anger and disappointment by the fans that they were no longer of concern from the creators. They saw Star Wars as no longer being made for them and this disconnection from the franchise in particular triggered this negative reaction. They felt that The Last Jedi had so many elements that made it unrecognizable as Star Wars, and going forward, it would continue down that kind of road.

Again, the responsibility for this direction Star Wars has taken was attributed towards the creators. Accusations were made that the creators did not put any care or thoughts into what the fans wanted out of a Star Wars movie. Disney was fine with anything regardless of the quality of the stories or what the fans actually wanted - as long as the Star Wars brand kept on going strong, it would keep making money.

4.2 Summary

In summary, this research found two key themes. First was ‘story reasons’ and second was ‘personal reasons.’ Each theme has two had two categories within it.

For ‘story reasons’, it included the categories, ‘problems with plot’, and ‘problems with characters.’ This reflected more on the confusion and disagreement fans felt towards the technical and storytelling content within the film itself.

For ‘personal reasons’, it included the categories, ‘mistreatment towards Star Wars’, and ‘mistreatment towards the fans.’ This reflected more on the general feelings of betrayal and dissatisfaction that fans were harboring at a personal level.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

This chapter discussed the practical as well as theoretical suggestions of the study as well as the limitations and suggestions for the future researches. Provided below were the qualitative answers for the research questions, as well as the researcher's thoughts on The Last Jedi's backlash.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

5.1.1 Priming

Priming theory describes that an audience is given preceding standards and frames of references by the media concerning a subject matter and the audience reacts accordingly to subsequent related stimuli.

In the case of The Last Jedi, fans of Star Wars had been exposed and familiarized with older themes and concepts that were previously established. For example, Luke Skywalker was a hopeful, heroic character. This was a standard that was primed by the previous media, the older Star Wars movies, and it was a frame of reference that is rooted very deeply into the minds of the fans. They had come to strongly associate the characters with certain qualities like optimism, idealism etc. However, a new medium, The Last Jedi, came along and presented Luke Skywalker as cynical and depressed while not providing a satisfying resolution on how this character turned out this way.

This new and radical portrayal did not fit in with the set of references that the audience already had, and this created a resistance in the audience to accept the new portrayal and the new medium.

The media primed the audience, but in this case, the media had changed. There was a distinction between pre-Disney media and Disney media for Star Wars. Perhaps Disney and the new Star Wars creators wanted to create new priming, provide new sets of standards for the audience, but they did not take into account of how much the audience were attached to previous standards for Star Wars, and maybe did not take as much caution as they should into setting the new primes within the audience, leading to this entire backlash.

Within the priming theory, the problems fans had against The Last Jedi can be attributed towards both story reasons and personal reasons. This was because they were previously familiarly with an existing frame of references – story devices or personal attachments- and the creators did not put enough effort or cared enough to prime the fans into the different directions that The Last Jedi was going into.

5.1.2 Confirmation Bias

Confirmation bias is the search for familiarity within a subject that supports what a person already believes in.

This theory would explain that the fans who viewed The Last Jedi, once they have come to recognized the movie as bad, they would choose to ignore contrary evidence. For example, Leia Organa being able to harness the Force is not actually a plot device that

contradicts existing lore about the character. However, the character actually using the Force had never been actually shown on screen before in the movies, and as such, the audience had no immediate awareness of this trait the character had. Therefore, when the scene of Leia using the Force to fly back to safety was shown, the viewers would have naturally gone along with their instinct that this feat should not be possible. And afterwards, if the contrary evidence that Leia using the Force did not contradict established lore is presented, they may still rather stick to their original opinion and feelings.

In simpler terms, many fans of Star Wars had strong bias towards themes, concepts, and lore that were present in the original movies. Those were the stories that came first, the ones they grew up with, and the content within the original films were what they naturally lean into to use as a standard to measure other Star Wars movies. When The Last Jedi did not display enough quality, respect, or catering to the established notions the fans had built up through the original movies, they developed a negative attitude towards The Last Jedi, even if they were presented with counter evidence that went against their bias.

The Last Jedi may or may not be not as bad as the fans made out to be, but their existing attachment to previous movies created biases against the plot, characters within The Last Jedi, and its creators, which the fans believe to be not up to the established standards.

5.1.3 Uses and gratification theory

Uses and gratification theory describes that the audience themselves choose and seek out which media to consume based off of their own wants and needs. There are five types of needs – cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative, tension release.

In the case of Star Wars fans, as a popular media franchise, the fans would be watching these movies for affective, personal integrative, and tension release reasons. Affective reasons included for the audience to feel emotionally stimulated, through entertainment such as Star Wars. Personal integrative reasons would be for the audience to identify themselves and be validated by observing characters in the movies. Tension release would be for escapism from reality; Star Wars fans would turn to the series to take a break from the reality and enter into a fictional story where stories and characters may be simpler, more hopeful, more dramatic etc.

The Last Jedi, for the fans, failed to provide the satisfaction towards these needs. Through its plot elements, character actions, and thematic choices, fans were neither emotionally stimulated or personally integrated the way they expected. Things were too confusing or nonsensical for fans to care or engage, thus their needs were not satisfied. From the escapism point of view, many felt that The Last Jedi was too cynical compared to the older movies, and this would prevent the sense of escapism from real life where things are difficult and complicated. And particularly, the integration of real-world political agendas in The Last Jedi would also prevent fans, who wanted to take a break

from real life political complications, from satisfying their escapist needs, especially if they felt that the political themes were implemented poorly for shallow and dishonest reasons.

5.2 Results Summary

A thematic analysis was conducted on 201 user reviews and 5 report articles. Two key themes were generated from the codes and they were explained using three communication theories. The findings provided simple explanations into why the backlash against The Last Jedi occurred.

RQ1: What are the reasons fans give for their negative reaction towards The Last Jedi?

The reasons fans gave for their negative reactions towards The Last Jedi were summarized as the two key themes. They were unsatisfied with the story and direction it went, and felt that their personal attachment towards Star Wars has been destroyed.

The plot did not make sense or hold up to the quality the fans expected from a Star Wars movie. The character portrayals were unlikeable or not identifiable based on what the fans expected the characters to be like. Both of these reasons were attributed to the carelessness of the creators, and they believe that the creators may be willing to forgo the qualities the fans love in the Star Wars series. Ultimately, fans felt disconnected from The Last Jedi and were concerned Star Wars may no longer be how they wanted it.

RQ2: How can the reasons fans give for their backlash be better understood?

The three communication theories interpreted the nature of why fans had this much strong negative feelings.

The priming theory provided that the fans had been already primed with an existing set of references and expectations from the previous movies. The direction The Last Jedi went towards is different from these existing set of references, and it did not do well enough to properly set up new priming to replace the old ones.

The confirmation bias theory explained that because these fans had a strong set of pre-determined standards and opinions on Star Wars that once they viewed The Last Jedi as violating those standards, they were not willing to let go of the negative perception even if they were presented with contrary evidence.

The uses and gratification theory suggested that the fans were largely unsatisfied with their needs from The Last Jedi that they hoped would have been fulfilled from watching a Star Wars movie. They felt emotionally unengaged, they did not personally identify with the characters, and they did not get the escape from reality they wanted, resulting in this negative reaction.

5.3 Discussion

As already mentioned, all of the issues and problems fans were finding in The Last Jedi can ultimately be described as leading into fans feeling disconnected from the franchise. The fans cannot connect themselves to The Last Jedi as a Star Wars entry. The fans who disliked The Last Jedi expressed a lot of comparison with the older movies, especially the Original Trilogy. Star Wars as they knew it and desired was not only not delivered to them, they felt it was destroyed. It does not matter for them whether The Last Jedi was a good movie on its own – for their standards, it was unacceptable.

This study wanted to analyze this case of backlash from the perspective of communication theory. Communication theory involves the sending of messages between the sender, the media in which the message is transmitted, and the audience. In this study, the sender, which would be the role taken by the creators, and the media, the movie itself, and the fans being audience. However, the roles of the sender and the media were combined together into a singular role. This was because, as far as the fans are concerned, the media comes from the sender, and they were often just collectively referred to as the media. For the fans, they were on one side of a line against The Last Jedi where the movie itself and its creators stand.

The three theories used in this study points to a situation where a great communication breakdown happened between the media and the audience, therefore it was a breakdown between the creators and the fans. There was a heavy emphasis on the failure by the creators to properly understand the needs and wants of the fans. However,

despite perhaps legitimate criticism, fans showcased that they may not exactly be reasonable or were too zealous about the situation at hand.

The findings in this research were relatively aligned with or can be applied to other related studies on the topic of fandoms as well. This study's findings can be extrapolated at a general level and applied to specific cases or point of views. For example, the paper by Koushik and Abigail (2018) on Disney's commodification of feminism can be inspected in a similar way; the activities of the creators' side did not match with the desires of the audience. For another example, the study by Bay (2018) on whether Twitter was weaponized by trolls could be explained that there were certain entities that were trying to manipulate the relationship between creator and audience in order to push for certain agendas.

The findings in this study also met the researcher's own expectations. The selected communication theories were able to define and interpret the backlash of The Last Jedi, and provide insight into how the relation between audience and media can be applied to the relation between fans and creators. Within the parameters set for the study, the results were satisfactory.

5.4 Limitations

The main limitations of this study came down to three factors.

The first factor was the scope of data collected. Due to time limitations, most of the data for user reviews were collected from Metacritic. Metacritic was selected for practical reasons such as providing a systemic collection of user reviews, but perhaps there could be wider varying opinions and voices in other places, offline and online. In addition, this paper only analyzed the fan backlash through the lens of the negative opinion providers, and did not take into account of what fans who enjoyed *The Last Jedi*, or the creators themselves think about the fan backlash.

The second factor was that certain themes may not have been deeply explained, for example, political themes. During the data collection process, there were several objections by fans that point out the political presence in the movie as the main reason why it was bad. The researcher decided to place such opinions under other themes rather than separate them into their own themes. Some readers of the paper may feel that certain themes should be extrapolated into independent categories and explored more deeply.

The third factor was the limitation of the number of theories used in the study. Priming, confirmation bias, and uses and gratification theory were selected to applied, but more theories may exist that are not tested yet and are not known yet to be able to better explain a fan backlash like that against of *The Last Jedi*.

5.5 Implications

5.5.1 Implications for the scholars

For other researchers, the results in this paper may be a good starting point or a specific reference point that can be used to study areas regarding fandoms and how communication plays a role. Each fandom has its unique quality and different strengths and challenges, and the results provided in this paper can be applied to other instances of fan backlashes or different forms of communication breakdowns in those communities.

5.5.2 Implications for the industry

On the side of the industry and different creative entities, this research paper had provided some insight into the feelings of the fans and the reasons why there was a huge backlash. It would be wiser for creators to satisfy a fanbase as much as possible as they have the strongest attachment and support, especially if it concerns a series that has been going on for a long time. It would be advisable for the creators to properly understand why fans support a franchise, what are the foundations of the story, and what direction would be the most mutually beneficial for creators and fans alike.

5.5.3 Implications for the audience

On the side of the audience, specifically for fans, the level of attachment they put onto the older entries played a lot into how much they felt against The Last Jedi. This may portray a very strong sense of entitlement these fans have, the belief that Star Wars is something that belongs to them, as well as these fans' unwillingness to accept changes

in the direction a story can go. Perhaps fans can learn to control their anger and other negative feelings, or learn to be more accepting to changes in themes and portrayals in the series.

5.6 Recommendations for further research

The data and findings presented within this study would be preliminary as its scope was very narrow. Other tangential areas related to the topic will involve questions of what fans who did enjoy *The Last Jedi* thought of this backlash, and how creators of *The Last Jedi* viewed this backlash. Examining those perspectives could give a better understanding of the situation from multiple angles and not just from the negative voices.

Further recommendation would be to study other recent fandom backlashes and look into their similarities and differences. For example, the television show, *Game of Thrones*, has been one of the most successful television shows in the 2010s. However, a huge backlash occurred with the release of the last season, Season 8, in 2019, and fans and critics had almost unanimously panned the show because of the way the last season's story turned out. *Game of Thrones* fans had said that after seeing the finale season, it had ruined their love of the show to the point that they could not go back and watch the earlier seasons. This showed a level of backlash even more extreme than that of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. Further studies on these kinds of backlashes may bring more opportunities for creators to avoid having backlashes occur in future endeavors.

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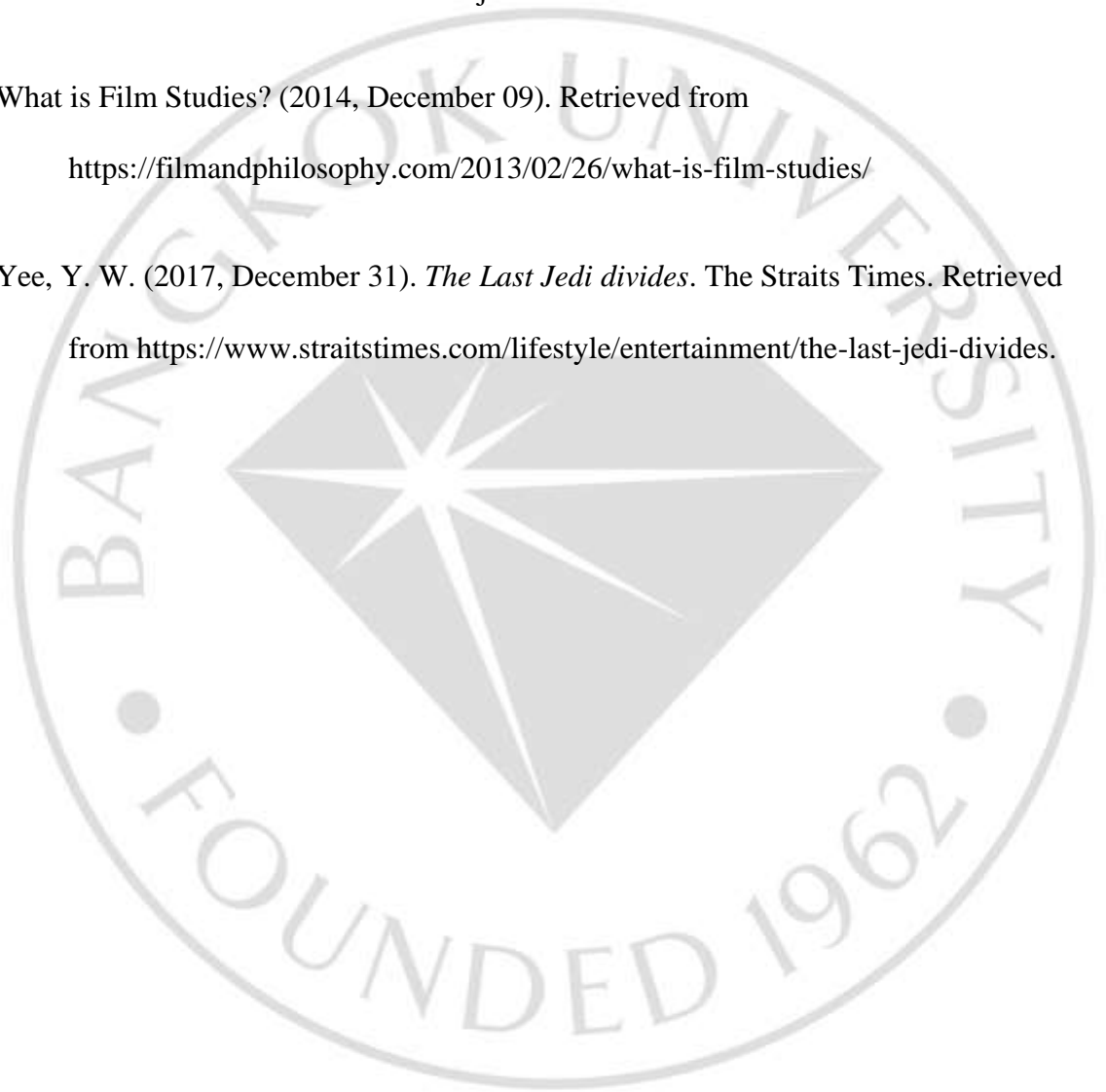
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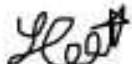
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