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Rey-ifying a New Heroine: Interrogating the Curriculum of Femininity in Star Wars Films

Rebekah S. Morgan

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REY-IFYING A NEW HEROINE: INTERROGATING THE CURRICULUM OF
FEMININITY IN *STAR WARS* FILMS

by

REBEKAH MORGAN

(Under the Direction of Sabrina Ross)

ABSTRACT

The *Star Wars* film trilogies are a cross-generational phenomenon. Due to its powerful and pervasive nature, the messages within *Star Wars*'s films must be problematized. As a cultural artifact, *Star Wars* was used to explore the representations of women across time and three generations. Using a conceptual framework based on cultural curriculum studies and feminist theory, this study explored the significance of *Star Wars* as gender text by interrogating the representations of women in the *Star Wars* film saga and what these representations teach about gender and femininity. By focusing on the themes of agency, empowerment, and identity, this work investigated the (un)reached potential of the representations of women in *Star Wars* films to serve as a tool for social change. It shows how *Star Wars* films hold significance for the identity formation of young women, broader goals for social justice, cultural curriculum studies, and the field of education. Our current state of education and broader society is implicated by this research as they must be willing to embrace the changing perceptions and understandings of gender norms and femininity.

INDEX WORDS: Feminism, Feminist, Femininity, Feminist media studies, Films, Popular culture, Cultural study, Cultural curriculum studies, Public pedagogy, Textual analysis, Discourse analysis, Identity formation, Star Wars

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FEMININITY IN *STAR WARS* FILMS

by

REBEKAH MORGAN

B.S., Valdosta State University, 2005

M.Ed., Troy University, 2006

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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Major Professor: Sabrina Ross
Committee: Antonio Gutierrez de Blume
Julie Garlen
John Weaver

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DEDICATION

To Tread and Estee. I love you both more than you will ever know. You are the spark that lights up my whole world.

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I am blessed to have a spouse who has embraced all the ways in which I have grown and changed throughout this journey. Thank you, Rance, for supporting me at every turn. Your patience and encouragement has helped me to realize this dream of mine. You willingly kept the household going while I was locked away for weeks writing. You endured those lonely days without a single complaint. Thank you, for all that you have given me. You are the rock upon which we have built our beautiful life together. You keep me grounded and steady. I love you.

Mama, words fail me. There is no word, no way, no act that could accurately reflect my love and appreciation for you. You give me faithful instruction and unconditional love. Your selflessness has made this (and everything else in my life) possible. “Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all” (Prov. 31). I pray daily that I can live up to the example you have set before me.

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playing nerf wars, and having lightsaber battles. You are now helping foster their inner ‘nerds’ and I am proud.

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May the force be with you all, always.

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EPISODE I

EVERY GENERATION HAS A LEGEND

Dialogue from the film, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, 2015. The scene takes place as Finn and Rey, who have just met, are running from Stormtroopers on Jakku.

Finn (FN-2187): “Come on. Come on, BB-8”

Rey: “Let go of me!”

Finn (FN-2187): Come on, we gotta move!”

Rey: “I know how to run without you holding my hand!”

(Abrams et al, & Abrams, 2015)

It is Friday, April 12th, 2019 and 65,000 fans have gathered at McCormick Place, the largest convention center in North America, for *Star Wars Celebration Chicago 2019* (LaSalata, 2019; Whitten, 2019). A standing room only crowd is anxiously waiting for the first screening of a teaser trailer for the final film in the third *Star Wars* trilogy: *The Rise of Skywalker*. Video footage of the event displays the film screen where the teaser trailer will be projected and live fan reactions from multiple camera angles. Though many men and women are visible in the crowd, the camera angles are focused only on the males. In the video, a panel discussion with actors and the director of the last *Star Wars* trilogy concludes and the words “*Star Wars* Episode IX” are projected on to the film screen. As the panel files off the stage, smiling and waving, members of the crowd become visibly more excited. One man in the crowd seems ready to bubble over with anticipation. Swaying a bit from side to side, he offers up a happy “Who!” before clasping his hands together and placing them briefly over his mouth with nervous energy. He says, “Oh, here we go!” and then places both hands on the shoulders of the man in front of him, giving the shoulders a quick squeeze and gleefully repeating “Here we go!” Next, he claps

his hands and briefly clasps them together, seeming unable to decide what to do with them. He shifts his clasped hands and interlaces his fingers while giving another “Whooh!,” softer this time. Then he stands with his mouth open, clasping and unclasping his hands.

“*Star Wars Episode IX*” disappears from the screen and the crowd becomes very quiet. All eyes from the crowd are trained on the screen. Suddenly, “LucasFilm, Ltd” appears on the screen and the man (along with most others in the crowd) begins making excited utterances. Briefly, he looks directly at the camera and displays a blissful, child-like grin. He crosses his hands over his chest, continuing to watch the screen. When Rey appears on the screen against a desert backdrop, she is staring intently and clothed in white with a lightsaber at her side. At the sight of Rey, the man in the crowd brings a fist to his mouth and bounces up and down. On the screen, a voice over from the character Luke Skywalker says to Rey: “We’ve passed on all we know.” The man in the crowd lets out a surprised “Ooooh!” He clasps his hands behind his head in amazement and then brings them forward, covering his mouth, first with his left fist and then replacing it with his right. On the screen, the voice over continues. Rey extends her lightsaber. The man in the crowd places his left fist, once again over his mouth in anticipation. As the man in the crowd notices a distant vehicle coming towards Rey on the screen, his eyes widen; he jumps up and down and lets out another excited utterance.

On screen, the voice over of Luke Skywalker continues talking to Rey: “A thousand generations live in you now. But this is your fight.” The screen fades to black and the words “Every Generation Has a Legend” appears in white letters. Then the desert scene appears on screen again. A TIE fighter zooms by and Rey draws her lightsaber and assumes a ready stance. She glances back at the TIE fighter and begins running. As the vehicle is about to overtake her, she leaps up into the air and does a backward summersault over the speeder. At the sight of

Rey's daring acrobatics, the man in the crowd, raises both hands over his head and jumps up and down letting out an exuberant "Whooooo!" As he does so, the rest of the tightly packed crowd join him in expressing joy and excitement over Rey's heroics. The sounds of clapping and cheering fill the room.

Perhaps most striking, are the overwhelming responses of the crowd to Rey and her display of heroics, responses that might traditionally be reserved for male characters. The enthusiasm expressed by the crowd for Rey underscores the character's enormous popularity. This popularity became very apparent when Disney failed to include Rey in their merchandising line upon the 2015 release of *Episode VII: The Force Awakens*. Consumers quickly began to protest on social media with the #Where's Rey movement demanding Rey products. This activism challenged one of the most powerful media corporations to abandon the gendered status quo and ultimately resulted in an increase in Rey merchandise (Brown, 2018). Arguably, one reason for Rey's pop cultural appeal can be found in her defiance of normative and socially constructed gender roles – a defiance that was emphasized in the teaser trailer.

Popular culture is crucial to how people understand the world (Zeisler, 2008). Popular culture's power lies not only with its vast reach, but also in its ability to guise itself as entertainment. Giroux (2011) writes, "films do more than entertain; they offer up subject positions, mobilize desires, influence us unconsciously and help to construct the landscape of our culture" (p. 687). Relevant to this study, popular culture images of women help to maintain "established beliefs about the nature of the feminine and the masculine and the proper roles to be played by women and men" (Gledhill and Ball, 2015, p. 352). These popular images facilitate social constructions of femininity and masculinity that maintain systems of cultural domination (hooks, 1996). Importantly, popular culture representations are not static. Instead, it is within

these representations that understandings of reality are contested. Guy (2007) writes, “popular culture can be a powerful mechanism for shaping us, it can also be a vehicle for challenging structured inequalities and social injustices” (p. 15).

Rey, with powers equal to a Jedi, appears to be a dramatic shift from other *Star Wars* leading female characters in that she is represented as the hero and the one who saves rather than the damsel in distress (Zeisler, 2008). In this way, Rey’s representation of gender may be understood as a counterhegemonic text (Pinar, 1996) that challenges the standard curriculum of femininity (Kidd, 2016), or the socially constructed representations of normative femininity that shape understandings of what it means to be female. Since first introduced in *Star Wars Episode VII*, the character of Rey has been clouded in mystery and suggestive of possibility. Rey, the scavenger turned Force user, with an unknown past and an uncharted future, leaves audiences guessing who she is and what her ultimate place in the *Star Wars* galaxy may be. All that is known is that she is courageous, daring, compassionate, and in search of belonging. To the extent that Rey challenges the traditional curriculum of femininity (Kidd, 2016), the character can also serve a powerful symbolic function (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2015) for young girls, representing a possible self that they might become (Gledhill & Ball, 2013) outside of stereotypical gender norms.

“Crazy thing is, it’s true. The Force, the Jedi, all of it” – Star Wars as a Cultural Phenomenon

Star Wars is a cultural phenomenon. When the first *Star Wars* film (later renamed *Episode IV: A New Hope*) was released in 1977, it was immensely popular. It earned seven Academy Awards and generated \$461 million domestically and nearly \$800 million globally in box office sales (Casey, 2015). Within a year of its release, at least two novels expounding on the

characters and storylines were published. Since that time over 300 novels, countless comics, video games, and children's books have been published contributing to the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe (Casey, 2015). By the time Disney purchased the rights to everything *Star Wars* in 2012, the franchise had generated more than \$40 billion in box office sales, merchandising, and licensing combined (Taylor, 2015).

Star Wars's cultural influence reaches beyond the audience of its three film trilogies. The original films have inspired the creation of an entire universe of fictional works and cultural artifacts. *Star Wars* fans have their own signifiers, their own language, and their own vocabulary (Casey 2015). Terms such as Jedi, Sith, the Force, Stormtroopers, TIE fighters, and X-Wings are all part of *Star Wars* vernacular. Tatooine, Jakku, Ahch-to, Endor, and Mustafar are all recognizable places within the *Star Wars* galaxy, and the Millinneum Falcon can be used to get you there.

Currently, the *Star Wars* official canon can be explored through the three film trilogies, two anthology films, and one animated film. Additionally, in the official *Star Wars* canon, there are now over 40 novels, more than 25 comics, three animated series, four video games, and (soon to be) at least three live action series. The extensive lists of contributions to the *Star Wars* galaxy has created a vast collection of works that offers insight into characters, backgrounds, and storylines. Of these works, only the first six films were written by the creator of *Star Wars*, George Lucas. All other works were inspired by Lucas' films, but were created by fans of the *Star Wars* galaxy. This vast collection of artifacts effectively gives fans multiple access points through which they can engage with the franchise (Casey, 2015). *Star Wars* matters to those engaged with it; it influences its consumers in both obvious and inconspicuous ways. It has inspired loyal fans to author innumerable works of fiction set within the *Star Wars* galaxy. Along

with the fictional texts, there exists a wide array of literature about the *Star Wars* galaxy. These fan-authored works are aimed at helping fans learn about characters and places, decipher the signals, and better understand the *Star Wars* universe and its teachings.

Notable among these fan works are several influential texts that helped with the conceptualization of this study. Hidalgo and Reynold's (2018) influential resource guide chronicles every visible element in *Star Wars*. It proved to be a useful companion when watching and analyzing the films. Its attention to the minutiae helped me make sense of the characters, places, and the contextual elements within the films that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Additionally, the work of Casey (2015) and the work of Taylor (2015) present detailed history and commentary about the *Star Wars*'s universe. These provide insight into Lucas' motivation and decisions concerning character development.

Fan Phenomena: Star Wars (2013) provides a collection of essays, edited by Mika Elovaara, aimed at showing the various ways that fans have interpreted and negotiated different aspects of the *Star Wars* galaxy including representations of gender. Female fans actively sought greater representation of women within the *Star Wars* galaxy and they succeeded in transforming its landscape. There are now more female characters within the saga, including female Jedi (Scott, 2013). This type of power that fans have to influence the franchise speaks to the contested nature of popular culture. In response to fans' demands, gendered representation and voice were renegotiated within the *Star Wars* franchise. Finally, Lindenmuth's (2016) exploration into the realm of a hero provided helpful guidelines for the character analyses undertaken in this study. He analyzes the role of Anakin and Luke Skywalker in regards to universal notions of a hero. Traditional ideals of a hero are relevant within this study. Interrogating the place and role that Rey occupies within those notions is a key aspect of this study.

Beyond the countless (and still growing) fan base and seemingly unending profits, there are qualities that cannot be quantified which make *Star Wars* an important popular culture text. Its merchandise invades our toy chests with Legos, action figures, dolls, and dress up costumes. Its collector's items occupy space on our display shelves, as well as space in the Smithsonian. Its pithy t-shirts can be found in all major department stores. *Star Wars* memes circulate the internet and social media. And tattoos of *Star Wars* symbols, quotes, characters, and space ships commonly etched into the skins *Star Wars* fans. This popular culture phenomenon has inspired everything from R2D2 salt shakers to an actual Jedi religion (Trout, 2013). So, while the story may be fiction, the connection *Star Wars* fans feel to the saga is real. It gives fans an enjoyable experience while also speaking to them through its contexts, its imagery, its dialogue, and its characters.

Star Wars has also left its mark on academic fields like Philosophy. For example, *In The Ultimate Star Wars Philosophy: You Must Unlearn What You have Learned* (Eberl & Decker, 2016) examines the philosophical significance of *Star Wars* in our culture. Philosophical questions are also brought forth in Camosy's (2015) contribution to *The Ultimate Star Wars Philosophy*. His work offers an oppositional stance to traditionally accepted notions of good versus evil as they are portrayed in the *Star Wars* films. He challenges "the dominant cultural lens through which most of us look at the world and asks critical questions of our own side" (Camosy, 2015). Camosy's (2015) work encourages the critical reading of cultural texts and a critical analysis of the characters within them. Taken together, these examples underscore the significance of *Star Wars* as an object of cultural study.

“I know how to run without you holding my hand” – Rey as a Counterhegemonic Text

This inquiry is largely inspired by the character Rey from the most recent *Star Wars* films, *Episode VII - The Force Awakens* (2015) and *Episode VIII - The Last Jedi* (2017). Nearly 40 years after the original film was released, Disney released the seventh and eighth installments of the *Star Wars* film saga. In *Episode VII, The Force Awakens* (2015), *Star Wars* introduced a new female heroine, Rey. As the lead role in one of the most widely viewed and consumed movies of all time, Rey's power lies not only with *the Force* but also with her ability to help define our place in society. Little girls will play dress up to Rey; she is the one they will mimic in play time; she is the one around whom they will create their imaginary worlds. The messages that Rey's character communicates to young girls helps form their identity. Her portrayal in the films will teach them lessons about who they are and what they can become. Her representation holds significant influence over their socially constructed ideals of gender and femininity.

Rey is the central character in the newest episodes of the *Star Wars* saga; however, she defies the traditional gender stereotypes so often seen in popular culture films. On the contrary, Rey is strong, complex, and brave. She does not need a masculine figure to save her from danger; she is capable of escaping harm on her own. Her independence as a female character, especially in a Sci-Fi/action film, sets her apart from previous representations found in most popular culture media. Rey asserts herself as a capable woman from the beginning of the film. When she and Finn (FN-2187) first meet, the two are forced to run from Stormtroopers. Finn, instinctively grabs her hand in a masculine attempt to guide Rey to safety. Rey is quick to respond, she yells at Finn, “I know how to run without you holding my hand!” Her statement carries weight for an entire generation of female viewers who have watched film after film depicting otherwise.

“You must unlearn what you have learned” - *Star Wars* as Pedagogical Text

Teaching and learning occur in and among diverse venues; each one of the various spaces shapes who we are and who we become (Schubert, 2010). Popular culture is pedagogical (Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015; Zeisler, 2008), teaching us about ourselves and others. As a pop culture phenomenon that has cemented itself into the cultural imagination, *Star Wars* operates as powerful pedagogy. The images in *Star Wars*, the dialogue, the screen time, and the visual all work to form society’s ideas of what it means to be a female in today’s culture. It is vital that we examine the messages that these films intentionally and unintentionally send to their audiences.

Through a careful study of popular culture representations, structured inequality can be challenged (Guy, 2007). Guised as entertainment, *Star Wars*’ influence is far reaching. The films’ contribution to our culturally constructed beliefs should be examined. Investigating representations of Rey and other leading female characters in *Star Wars* can reveal whether these cultural and gendered texts are sites of resistance or reinforcement of the curriculum of femininity.

“I felt a great disturbance in the Force” – Statement of the Problem

With recent feminist movements, such as Equal Pay for Equal Work, Pro-choice movement, #metoo and #TimesUp, and Power to the Polls, calling more attention to gender disparity in pay, harassment of women in the workplace, women’s reproductive rights, and the need for more women in leadership, it is clear that feminists’ work is not yet complete. There is still a conversation to be had and changes to be made regarding equal treatment of women in our society. The modern issues facing women, gender, and sexuality often find their ways into the cultural products and into our cultural texts. Broader social changes can be informed by and inform popular culture. The images and dialogue we see in film, the stereotypes so prevalent

within our cultural texts, are the result of societal beliefs. These stereotypes, concerning gender and sexuality continue to circulate in policy, laws, and in popular culture, often causing great effects on women's place and identity (Wanzo, 2016).

Given this context, popular cultural representations of Rey and other *Star Wars* heroines are worthy of study. These representations can either support or resist normative constructions of gender. Petridis (2016) explains "Apart from the films, there are comics, novels, television series, and a plethora of merchandising products that interact with our everyday life. So, the gender representation in this filmic universe matters because it unknowingly influences hundreds of thousands of people by establishing or breaking stereotypes" (p. 1). How women are represented on the big screen, in a galaxy far, far, away, still works to define our place in here and now.

"There has been an awakening. Have you felt it?" – Significance and Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this inquiry is to examine the *Star Wars* saga in order to deconstruct and interrogate the curriculum of femininity being taught within these films. It explores the ways in which the *Star Wars* films reinforce and/or challenge socially constructed inequalities concerning women, gender roles, and identity, referred to collectively in this study as a curriculum of femininity (Kidd, 2016). As Wanzo (2016) explains, recent cultural productions have sought to rectify hegemonic ideals by providing alternative representations of women in contemporary cultural works. My research is important because it critically examines the messages that females receive when viewing female representations in *Star Wars*. The representations they see teach them about their identity and place in our society.

Kovala (2002) writes that "texts are sensitive barometers of social progress, movement, and diversity, and textual analysis can provide particularly good indicators of social change" (p.

4). We can examine the meanings gathered from *Star Wars* and understand them in terms of the “broader political and social context” (Dimitriadis, 2015, p. 139). In my study, I explore how recent popular culture representations seen in the *Star Wars* films are (re)constructing femininity. In doing so, social change can be evaluated in terms of our understandings of gender and identity formation.

Feeling “unbalanced” - Researcher Positionality

As a teenager, I experienced the original *Star Wars* trilogy (*Episodes IV-VI*) for the first time. The prequel trilogy, starting with *Episode I - The Phantom Menace* (1999), was about to be released in theaters. Fans were excited to see the new films and I wanted in on the excitement. Over the course of the next two nights, my friend and I watched the entire first trilogy. From then on, I was hooked on *Star Wars*. What began as an attempt for me to understand what all of the *Star Wars* “hype” was about, quickly became personal. I was now fan. I watched the prequel trilogy (*Episodes I-III*) in theaters as they were released. Then, I waited anxiously for ten years for a new *Star Wars* movie to be released.

I was elated when I heard the most recent trilogy (*Episodes VII-IX*) was finally on its way. In preparation for the next installment of the *Star Wars* saga, I re-watched all the previous episodes. However, my viewing experience this time felt different. This time, I was no longer a teenager. I was an adult with two children, one boy and one girl. I was a student in a doctoral program...a program which has challenged me to critically evaluate and examine cultural texts more closely, to unearth socially constructed ideals. My eyes had been opened to the power that popular culture media has on our identity formation.

As I watched the first two trilogies of the *Star Wars* saga as an adult, I noticed the ways in which females were represented. I began critically evaluating the films that I have always

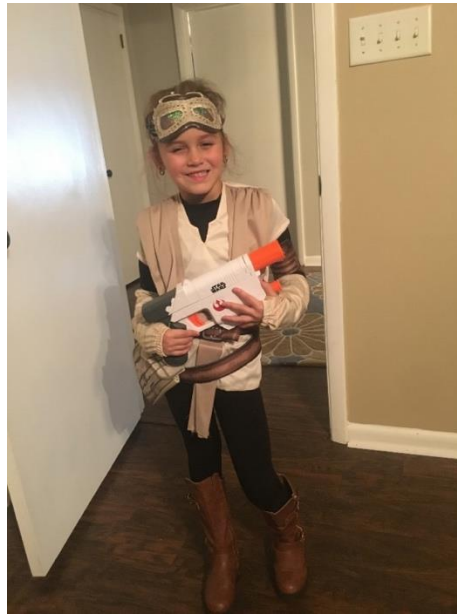
loved. As I watched Princess Leia being objectified in the famous golden bikini scene, my inner reaction was different. As I watched Padme Amidala transform on film from being a strong Senator to a weak love-struck female, who literally lost the will and the strength to live when Anakin Skywalker turned to the dark side, I was disappointed. The stereotypical ways in which women were portrayed in the first two trilogies left me feeling *unbalanced*. In a film saga where a galaxy was created to look much different than our own, it was, in fact, not very different at all. It seemed that women had very little place in such a big galaxy.

I did not want to find such a tragic flaw that could end my love for *Star Wars*. However, it was not long before I was able to reconcile my critique and my fandom. I remembered that to be a true *Star Wars* fan, you must hate *Star Wars*. In an article that has become celebrated among *Star Wars* fans, Andrey Summers (2007) explains, “to be a *Star Wars* fan...one must possess the ability to see a million different failures and downfalls and then somehow assemble that into a greater picture of perfection.” So, like most other fans, my ability to critique the *Star Wars* films does not negate my fandom, it actually solidifies it. Summers (2007) continues, “Every true *Star Wars* fan is a Luke Skywalker, looking at his twisted evil father and somehow seeing good.” I hated the failed potential that I was noticing among the female characters in *Star Wars* but I still loved the movies.

In 2015, when *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens* (2015) was finally released in theaters, my husband and I took our two children to see the film. This time, I was not disappointed. Balance had been restored to the force. The female lead, Rey, defied traditional female stereotypes typically seen in *Star Wars* films. Rey was strong, independent, brave, intelligent, and capable. She was in no way objectified. She was a new, more progressive,

heroine. In her, I saw a representation of femininity that today's women can be proud of and identify with.

With the approach of *Star Wars: Episode VIII - The Last Jedi* (2017), I wondered if this phenomenon of a strong female lead would continue. The film did not disappoint. Again, female characters were given depth, complexity, power, intelligence, strength, and dialogue within the film. This time, the number of strong, complex, women increased. Rey, General Organa, Rose Tico, and Vice Admiral Holdo all served as examples of the new progressive females. To make their success as characters even more impressive is that they exist in a Sci-Fi/Action series, a genre typically dominated by males. I was once again excited about the films. My young daughter loved Rey too. She wanted her costume, her blaster, her lightsaber. She modeled her build-a-bear after Rey. When Halloween came around, she wanted to be Rey. This was the first



My daughter, Estee, as Rey. Halloween 2017

time my daughter wanted to dress up like anyone other than a Disney princess. She sees the possibility of a world where her worth is not determined by beauty, perfect make-up, a long shimmering dress, and a handsome prince by her side. She imagines herself to be like Rey:

strong, brave, and capable, and, in Estee's words, "a warrior." Nothing brings out my inner feminist as much as my daughter. When I think of the ways in which she sees herself, her limitations, and her possibilities, I want her to continually imagine a world where her *place* is not predetermined by her gender.

My daughter and I exist within the larger world of the deeply religious South. I was born from a long line of fundamentalist ministers. My great-grandfather, my grandfather, and my father were all ministers of fundamentalist, Pentecostal, protestant churches. I grew up in various small towns scattered across southern Georgia, following my dad's ministry. As an adult, I made a decision to keep my family in this area.

Raising my children in rural South Georgia allows us to be close to family, close to the people in our small community, and close to our roots. However, with the many benefits this brings, there are also costs involved when it comes to forming my daughter's identity and place. As she grows up in the South, a region that uses tradition and religion to subjugate women, her worth may not be fully appreciated. Her voice may be stifled and her agency may be subverted.

I fear my daughter's future will be one of inequality. A path of subjugation is already mapped out for her. If her experiences mirror my own, her independent spirit will be suppressed as she will not be allowed to decide her own truths. She will be told, as I have been, that her place in the church is one of servitude, not leadership. These lessons influence every area of our lives: home, school, work, and community. Her *place* perpetually exists below the men's. My wish is for my daughter to realize her *worth* instead of her *place* as I have known mine.

I find myself feeling a responsibility to imagine a more *just* future for my daughter, and all girls, who are raised in the South. Fine, Tuck Yang (2014) assert, "Our obligation then, today, as theorists, researchers, activists, educators...is that we must be vigilant on critique, design

spaces to cultivate inquiry, resistance, and radical imagination, and circulate images of what could be, beyond resistance” (p. 56). So, while I love the place in which I have grown up and in which I raise my daughter, I must critique it. I must find ways to show my daughter what *could be*, not what *is*.

The implicit (and sometimes explicit) messages she learns from the South and from our church are not empowering. Therefore, in other spaces, she needs to see images of resistance. I recognize that the messages she receives through popular culture films will continually work to shape her identity. I want these messages to be ones of female empowerment and female leadership. For this reason, I am hoping that the new progressive heroines seen in the *Star Wars* films are indicative of a cultural shift where we start to see stronger representations of femininity throughout all popular culture texts from now and into a future *far, far, away*.

“Oh, R2, what are we doing here?” - Key Research Issue

This inquiry explores the extent to which *Star Wars* female characters Princess Leia, Padme Amidala, and Rey support or resist a curriculum of femininity.

“What did you have in mind for your next move?” - Organization of Dissertation

Chapter one discusses the cultural context of the *Star Wars* trilogies and their significance as public pedagogy. In this first chapter, I present the cultural significance of *Star Wars*, the purpose of my study, the topic of my inquiry and my personal justification. Chapter two provides an overview of conceptual foundations that are relevant to my research, including cultural curriculum studies and popular culture. Chapter two also reviews the history and key themes associated with feminist theory, feminist media studies, and reviews relevant literature related to feminist media studies of pop culture heroines.

Chapter three presents my research design and methodology which is a cultural studies analysis of popular female lead characters from the *Star Wars* films. This chapter explains the methods of discourse analysis and textual analysis that I used to conduct my study. I provide an explanation of these methods and how they guided my investigation. I also offer a review of exemplary works in Feminist Media Studies that inform my methodology. Chapter four will present my data analysis. I offer up information concerning patterns and/or trends found when conducting my textual analysis of the *Star Wars* films. Chapter five concludes my dissertation. I discuss my findings, the significance of the study for education and/or the field of curriculum studies, and I also discuss implications for curriculum, future research, and broader social contexts.

EPISODE II

A LITTLE MORE KNOWLEDGE LIGHTS THE WAY

My research builds upon concepts in cultural curriculum studies, popular culture, and feminist theory that relate to the educational significance of cultural representations of gender. Using feminist media studies as an analytical framework, the purpose of my study is to illustrate the ways in which representations of gender and femininity in recent *Star Wars* films operate as public pedagogy to shape the identities of young girls. In the sections that follow, I articulate connections among the following areas of scholarship: cultural curriculum studies, popular culture, public pedagogy, feminist theory, and feminist media studies. I first provide an overview of cultural curriculum studies and then discuss popular culture as a specific area of study within cultural curriculum studies. Following this, I discuss the educational significance of exploring popular cultural through a cultural curriculum studies lens. The next section of this chapter reviews concepts of agency, femininity, and representation through feminist theory. Remaining sections provide an overview of feminist media studies and discuss feminist media analyses of *Star Wars* and its female characters.

Understanding the Force(s) through Curriculum Studies

John A. Weaver (2005) explains, “Since the advent of the term ‘western civilization,’ there has been an attempt to distinguish between the culture of those with power and those without it” (p. 1). Weaver (2005) writes that those with power “knew the right books to read, the proper ways to interact at social gatherings, the proper form of dress, the holiest way to worship a god, the correct modes of speech, and the proper culinary tastes (p.1). These privileged codes were considered ‘culture’ and worthy enough to define a society and worthy enough to be studied formally.

Previously, a study of culture would include only the works and traditions of the elite (high culture), deliberately ignoring the 'low-culture' of the commoners. However, from the onset of cultural studies, the way of life of the non-elite gained equal considerations for studying, learning, and understanding. Sparks (1996) writes, "The dominant tradition was openly and unashamedly and profoundly anti-democratic; cultural studies, from its inception, was a champion of democracy" (p. 15). Sparks (1996) explains that this "rejection of a particular dominant notion of culture" birthed the field of cultural studies. In its new sense, 'culture' was not only concerned with the ideas/ideals of the elite, it also came to refer to the more common social practices of a society. Out of the notion that 'culture' includes 'ordinary behavior,' the actions of the populace, emerged cultural studies.

Understanding that cultural studies aims to examine 'all that has been thought and said' not just the 'best of what has been thought and said' is vital in understanding the field of cultural studies. All social practices are considered and their implications examined. The cultural texts, including popular culture films, coming from any historical moment can be interpreted in different ways by different groups, classes, genders, races, etc. The job of cultural studies is to analyze "how the interactions between these practices and patterns are lived and experienced as a whole, in any particular period" (Hall, 1996, p. 34). The meanings given to a social practice or cultural text are influenced by the politics of that historical moment. Nelson (1991) writes, "To do cultural studies is to take a place within that history" (p. 32). So, cultural studies itself, unfolds and evolves alongside changes in politics and history, further complicating the discipline.

In the 1970s, curriculum theorists began to call for a more intellectual, as opposed to practical, approach towards education and curriculum development. Pinar (1997) pushed for "a

fundamental reconceptualization of what curriculum is, how it functions, and how it might function in emancipatory ways” (p. 126). Pinar (1997) urged the field of curriculum studies to “strive for synthesis, for a series of perspectives on curriculum that are at once empirical, interpretive, critical, emancipatory” (p. 127). For curriculum studies, this meant recognizing the relationship between cultural studies and curriculum studies. Weaver et al. (2006) explains

over the past decade or so, cultural studies perspectives have had a major impact on both the curriculum field and the ‘foundations’ of education, and in some powerful ways have begun to rupture the borders that separate diverse forms of critical and progressive-minded research and scholarship in education (p. 4).

Realizing that cultural studies and curriculum studies have much to offer each other, William Reynolds (2006) called for cultural studies and curriculum studies to collaborate with the other (p. 46). Reynolds (2006) explains that the multidisciplinary approach of cultural curriculum studies serves as a field where both disciplines can inspire each other (p. 46). Reynolds (2006) writes, “in the case of cultural curriculum studies there are passages or lines of flight among the work done in both cultural studies and curriculum studies, which could encourage work in both to cross the borders of each” (p. 44). Studying culture is also studying society’s curriculum.

The idea that education is a result of culture, ideology, power, and historical context stems directly from cultural studies frameworks. Instead of being focused on the practical aspect of education, such as certification, lesson planning, and schooling, cultural curriculum studies allows itself to focus on understanding the impact of social practices and cultural texts on educating youth. Therefore, curriculum studies have been able to borrow and share perspectives with the field of cultural studies. Giroux (1994) asserts, “Such borrowing requires us to think

outside the limits of our fields, encouraging us to read widely and draw upon what is available” (p. 4).

Pinar (2004) explains that the point of curriculum is understanding (p. 187). He asserts that school curriculum should result in “understanding relations among academic knowledge, the state of society, the processes of self-formation, and the character of the historical moment in which we live, in which others have lived, and in which our descendant will someday live” (Pinar, 2004, p. 187). In order to achieve the purpose of education, which, according to Pinar, is understanding, cultural studies are used by educators as a “theoretical framework for addressing the shifting attitudes, representations, and desires of this new generation of youth being produced within the current historical, economic, and cultural juncture” (Giroux, 1994, p. 298). The meanings that are produced from cultural artifacts are continually the subject of reinterpretation and renegotiation. As our historical, economic, and cultural context/time change, so will the focus of cultural studies research.

Cultural curriculum studies provide a way for curriculum theorists to analyze the politics of power and ideology and its influence over the knowledge/education of a particular class, race, gender, or ethnicity. Giroux (1994) explains that cultural studies allows curriculum studies to become more “focused on interdisciplinary issues, such as textuality and representation refracted through the dynamics of gender, sexuality, subordinated youth, national identity, colonialism, race, ethnicity, and popular culture” (p. 280). Curriculum, then, is recognized as all the things, both visible and hidden, that teach us our identity, our place, and our ideology.

Cultural curriculum studies allow us to analyze cultural texts within our society and act in ways to provide a better, more just, education for all groups. The meanings of these texts are constantly changing with each historical moment. Pinar (2004) explains that “curriculum

changes as we engage in it, reflect on it, and act in response to it (p. 187). Learning takes place within textbooks, within our homes and communities, and within popular culture texts. The meanings of these texts vary from person to person and group to group.

“The truths we cling to depend on our point of view” - Popular Culture and Curriculum Studies

Storey (1996) explains that “Although cultural studies cannot (or should not) be reduced to the study of popular culture, it is certainly the case that the study of popular culture is central to the project of cultural studies” (p. 1). We can learn about our culture by studying the popular texts of the time. Cultural curriculum studies use popular culture texts to understand the social constructs within a specific historical and political context.

Cultural studies evaluate popular culture texts as a “key site for the production and reproduction of hegemony” (Storey, 2010, p. 3). This analysis is conducted largely through the examination of popular culture texts. The politics of gender, race, and identity is a key concern for cultural studies analysis. Storey (2010) explains, “Popular culture is one of the principal sites where these divisions are established and contested” (p. 3). Our cultural conceptions of gender, race, and identity are formed and performed in popular culture. Popular Culture can be viewed in several different ways. Each perspective has validity but also serves to be problematic in some ways. For example, Storey (2015) explains that some may refer to popular culture as “simply culture that is favored or well-liked by many people” (p. 5). This definition holds true. However, it also poses a problem of what quantifies ‘many.’ Others may define popular culture as “the culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture” (Storey, 2015, p.5). The complication with this perspective lies in the implication that popular culture is ‘inferior culture.’ Another complication is that this system of deciding what is real/high culture versus what is

popular/low culture would also require a test consisting of “value judgements” (Storey, 2015, p. 6).

While some scholars view popular culture as the culture of the masses or as culture that originates by the people and for the people, there are still flaws with these ideas. Viewing popular culture as mass culture focuses solely on its commercial nature, implying that consumers are mindless. Paraphrasing this limited view of popular culture, Storey (2015) writes: “Its audience is a mass of non-discriminating consumers...it is a culture that is consumed with brain-numbed and brain-numbing passivity” (p. 8). On the other hand, considering popular culture to be the culture created by the people for the people, ignores entirely the influence of “the commercial nature of much of the resources from which popular culture is made...people do not spontaneously produce culture from raw materials of their own making” (Storey, 2015, p. 9). While each of those definitions of popular culture are partly accurate, they fail to consider the significance of hegemonic forces within a society. Attention must be paid to the approach to popular culture which draws from the concept of hegemony developed by Antonio Gramsci (Storey, 2015, p. 10).

John Fiske (1996) explains, “Originally, hegemony referred to the way that one nation could exert ideological and social, rather than military or coercive, power over another” (p. 120). This social power was “maintained through institutions of culture such as schools and mass media” (Weaver, 2005, p. 39). When considering hegemony through a cultural studies lens, hegemony looks at the ways in which a dominant class can ensure the willing subordination of the lower classes. However, Fiske (1996) emphasizes the contested and uncertain nature of consent when he writes: “This consent must be constantly won and rewon, for the people’s material social experience constantly reminds them of the disadvantages of subordination and

thus poses a constant threat to the dominant class” (p. 121). Those with *privileged access* promote beliefs and interests from which they benefit (Fiske, 2016). Conversely, people with *less* access use popular culture to maintain their social identity and control over their immediate spaces and social lives (Fiske, 2016). Thus, popular culture is a means through which this consent is both won and contested. Considering the implications of hegemony and popular culture, means recognizing that popular culture is both structure and agency.

Storey (2014) explains that popular culture is “compromise equilibrium between the contradicting mix of forces from ‘below’ and ‘above,’ both ‘commercial’ and ‘authentic’” (p. 12). While pinpointing an exact definition, or explanation of its purpose, which concisely defines and describes popular culture proves to be problematic, Maudlin and Sandlin (2015) explain that “at its most basic level, however, popular culture can be understood as a broad range of texts that constitute the cultural landscape of a particular time and/or place, as well as the ways in which consumers engage with those texts and thus become producers of new negotiated meanings” (p. 369). Popular culture texts, such as films, reflect societal beliefs and practices of a specific time. Ideologies are played out in popular culture texts as entertainment and politics are combined for millions of viewers to engage with them and learn from them. Through popular culture texts we learn about our world, our place, and ourselves within it.

Curriculum studies use of popular culture attests to its’ scholars’ willingness to recognize that all knowledge holds value, whether it is a result of a classroom text or a popular culture text. This type of cultural analysis allows for curriculum studies to be both theoretical and practical as it provides a site for scholars to “understand educational experience both in and outside the school” (Pinar, 2006, p. 56). Instead of simply focusing of academic knowledge, curriculum

studies use cultural studies analysis to investigate the relationship between popular culture, subjectivity, and knowledge.

“Be mindful of your thoughts” - Popular Culture as Public Pedagogy

The intellectual approach to curriculum studies, through cultural studies analysis, provides a way for educators to understand education as something more than academic subject-matter knowledge. As popular culture remains essential to cultural studies analysis, it has also created interest within educational theory and curriculum studies. Dimitriadis (2015) writes, “work in cultural studies sparked something of an explosion of academic interest in popular culture” (p. 139). Cultural curriculum studies find value in investigating the relationship between popular culture and education.

Giroux (2004) tells us “pedagogy is not simply about the social construction of knowledge, values, and experiences; it is also a performative practiced embodied in the lived interactions among educators, audiences, texts, and institutional formations (p. 61). Giroux offers a prolific contribution of writings about power and pedagogy to the field of curriculum studies; however, consideration of his history with feminism is necessary within this study. Giroux’s (1991) responses to Ellsworth’s (1989) critiques of critical pedagogy proved problematic for his reputation. His attack of Ellsworth’s writings and on her reputation as a practitioner was deemed petty and largely antifeminist (Ladwig, 1996). Later, Giroux edited a feminist book, *Modernism, Postmodernism, and Feminism* (1991). Although Giroux’s early brushes with feminism cannot be overlooked, his writings on popular culture pedagogy remain valuable to this research endeavor. Giroux (2004) explains that pedagogy is more than the academic texts being presented in schools. Pedagogy also exists within the experiences, cultures, and interactions of the students and the teachers.

We are constantly exposed to images and representations which have great influence over our perspectives and our identities. Maudlin & Chapman (2015) write “Our lives are immersed in media, which act as a contemporary curriculum both in and out of school. We may not be cognizant of the ways it influences the relationships we form with each other and our understandings of the world” (p. 147). Though we may not be fully aware of just how powerful popular culture representations are in our lives, they still work to form our informal curriculum.

Popular culture films are specifically pedagogical. Giroux (2011) writes, “Films both entertain and educate” (p. 687). He explains, the power of films is “mobilized through their use of images, sounds, gestures, talk and spectacles in order to create the possibilities for people to be educated about how to act, speak, think, feel, desire, and behave” (Giroux, 2011, p. 687). As we watch films with our undivided attention, we are being taught about ourselves and about others. Through them we learn about the values and ideologies dominant within our culture

Through television, movies, music, social media, advertisements, and magazines, we are educated. Smith (2000) writes, “Various forms of popular culture become absorbed, unquestioned pedagogy” (p. 185). We absorb the messages conveyed through popular culture media. These messages become a significant part of our informal education. As part of our lived experience, popular culture forms meanings for us. We carry its lessons with us in our daily activities. Maudlin & Sandlin (2015) explain that “the study of popular culture helps us understand and perhaps intervene in how we, through our interactions with popular culture, produce, reproduce, and reimagine social life and everyday social practices and relations” (p. 369). Thus, when we analyze popular culture, we are investigating the hidden, the informal, education and its role in social and cultural reproduction (Giroux, 2004). So, as we study

stereotypes found in popular culture, we can work to dismantle and challenge the messages that are continually produced within popular culture texts.

Popular cultural texts serve as means of public pedagogy. Public pedagogy is an interdisciplinary approach to educational scholarship which draws from a wide variety of cultural texts and artifacts to explore forms of learning that are radically different from those found in formal schooling (Sandlin et al., 2010, p. xxi). The meanings it produces are contextual. As learners, we each experience different meanings from popular cultural texts. These meanings are a result of the political, social, and historical landscapes in which we are located. As our society changes, politically and culturally, so shall the meanings that the public produces and consumes through/with popular culture.

Deconstructing and analyzing popular culture is vital to achieving an understanding of the curriculum and education. Giroux (1994) writes, "...the power of mass media, with its massive apparatuses of representation and its regulation of meaning, is central to understanding how the dynamics of power, privilege, and social desire structure the daily life of a society (p.299). In order to understand how students are being educated, popular culture is taken into consideration. Giroux (1994) explains that students are both recipients of culture and active participants in its construction (p. 279). An examination of popular culture allows for an exploration into the texts that help form the education and identity of students.

Films are perhaps the most influential mediums of popular culture. As Giroux (2011) writes, "Films do more than entertain; they offer up subject positions, mobilize desires, influence us unconsciously and help to construct the landscape of our culture" (p. 687). He continues by explaining that "film produces images, ideas, and ideologies that shape both individual and

national identities” (Giroux, 2011, p. 689). While being entertained by films, we are also being educated by them.

A primary assumption in this study is that *Star Wars* films are pedagogical. As we watch the *Star Wars* films, quote the movies line-by-line, move closer to the edge of our seats when a lightsaber battle ensues, and learn the ways of the Jedi, we are also learning the ways of our own culture. We can examine how women are represented within this popular culture phenomenon in order to understand how our culture views females and femininity. Films, such as the *Star Wars* trilogies, are artifacts of our public memory. They offer a snapshot of how women are viewed by the three generations for which they were released. They are cultural texts that can be examined for further understanding of society and the people within it.

Identity, according to Ehlers (2016), is used within feminism to “refer to a woman’s conscience sense of herself--a sense of who she is” (p. 347). Popular culture texts serve as a medium for informing and forming the identities of women. They inform women of who we are and tell us what it means to be a woman. They form the conscience sense of what it means to be feminine. In other words, gender and identity are not biological expressions, instead they are constructed by and within cultural contexts (Ehlers, 2016). This study aims to discover the ways in which *Star Wars*, as a cultural text, contributes to the conscience sense of women’s identities.

“I am with the Resistance” - The Feminist Lens

Feminist theory can take on many forms and is viewed more as a multifaceted project than as a bounded field (Hawkesworth and Disch, 2016, p. 1). Hence, providing a concise definition to describe feminist theory proves to be a difficult task. For as many texts as there are written on the theoretical framework, there are just as many definitions. In response to such a dilemma, hooks (1984) developed a clear definition aimed at uniting “the experiences and social

predicaments of women who bear the brunt of sexist oppression as a way to understand the collective social status of women in the United States” (p. 31).

Tong (2014) explains “feminist thought resists categorization into tidy schools of thought...labels help mark the number of approaches, perspectives, and frameworks that a variety of feminists have used to shape both their explanations for women’s oppression and their proposed solution for its elimination” (p. 1). There are several different approaches to feminist theory, among which are liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist and socialist feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, existentialist and postmodern feminism, ecofeminism, and multicultural feminism. These labels work to identify the diverse strands of thought within feminist theory. Each perspective offers its own conceptualization of sexist oppression and its own remedy. Hence, the main intention of feminist studies is to understand the underlying causes of specific forms of discrimination and injustice in order to inspire social, political, and cultural change (Dorer and Hipfl, 2013).

Hawkesworth and Disch (2016) explain that among the various approaches to feminist research, they generally share some defining features: that the belief in the naturalness of gender identity, heterosexuality, and sexed embodiment is mistaken and that sexuality and gender are political and social constructs. Instead, gender, sexuality, and sex are cultural and political constructs rather than natural or biological givens. This inquiry examines the notions of femininity and the identity of women as they are constructed in the films. Specific themes within feminist theory that apply directly to my study are agency, empowerment, and representation.

Agency refers to one’s ability to make choices and act on these choices. McNay (2016) explains “Agency is commonly understood as the capacity of a person (or other living material entities) to intervene in the world in a manner that is deemed...to be independent or relatively

autonomous” (p. 40). Feminist theorists argue that traditionally, women have had little agency due to the hegemonic patriarchy within our culture. “Patriarchy has construed women as being largely incapable of autonomous action, and, by implication...inherently fragile, volatile, and generally inferior” (McNay, 2016, p. 41). As such, women act in unreflexive, habitual, and instinctual ways which are seemingly automatic responses to the external structure (McNay, 2016). Therefore, one goal of feminist theory and activism is to encourage individuals to “interrogate the limits of what appears to be natural and inevitable in present forms of identity and attempt to go beyond them” (McNay, 2016, p. 45).

The concept of agency is closely related to empowerment. Within feminist theory, empowerment is a term given to describe a situation when an individual or group that was once not powerful, was given the power to act and given choice (Kabeer, 1999). Feminist theorists examine ways in which individuals and groups have been traditionally disempowered. Specifically, they investigate the ways in which sex, gender, sexuality, and race are used to suppress the agency and power of certain groups and individuals. Identity categories (gender, sexuality, race, sex) are both cultural and political categories. They are and have been used to “determine citizenship rights, education and employment opportunities, levels of income and wealth, and access to prestige and power” (Hawkesworth and Disch, 2016, p. 8). Therefore, the subjugation and disempowerment come in the form of political, cultural, financial, and social oppression.

The notion of representation was introduced during the second wave of feminism. “Beginning in the 1970s, feminist activists mobilized to fight for increased representation of women in government and in the private sector and against sexualized representation of women in popular culture” (Disch, 2016, p. 781). Representation, then, refers to both aesthetic

representation as well as political representation. Aesthetic representation of women is a concept that refers to ways in which women are pictured and characterized materially. Political representation refers to one having a voice or power in the policy making. This voice exists in terms of having someone who advocates and speaks on behalf of another's cause.

The material representation of women, such as that seen in film, influences the way society views women. Gender stereotyping, the sexualization of women, and creating weak/vulnerable characterizations of women have been commonplace within film and popular culture texts. Feminist scholars argue that "gender role stereotyping in television and film normalize the dominant cultural values and customs that legitimate male domination over women (Watkins and Emerson, 2000, p. 152). This type of programming works to shape assumptions and beliefs about the identities of women. Feminist theorists believe it is crucial that the aesthetic and material representations of females should work to empower women and inspire them to examine and question gender constraints (Shapiro, 2017, p. 45)

Disch (2016) explains that depictions of women have political consequences; they can constrain their political action, equal rights, and general empowerment (p. 781). When women are continually portrayed as weak, ineffectual, and objects existing only to be desired by men, the political consequences can be detrimental. Therefore, representation of women is not limited to the depictions on screen. Representation of women also exists in the political realm. By insisting that dominant ideals of politics and government be challenged, feminist scholars and activists have aimed to create new forms of democracy that increases the political representation of women. "Political representation of women would lead to a change in politics, which would take greater account of women's interests...and place gender issues on the political agenda and influence social politics" (Hobson, Lewis, & Siim, 2002, p. 175; 181). In other words,

representation for women within the governmental sphere results in women having a voice (agency and empowerment) to achieve change. For feminists, increasing political representation and changing the traditional stereotypical representations is necessary to end subjugation and oppression based on social constructs of sex, sexuality, gender, and race.

Steiner (2014) explains “depictions of women (and girls) result from, reflect, and reproduce dominant ideologies. Portrayals prescribe and perpetuate roles (p. 361). Feminists claim that because of the stereotypical and oppressive representations continually perpetuated in media, women “internalize a highly constrained sense of their possibilities and options” (Steiner, 2014, p. 361). Hence, the agency that women possess becomes limited. Feminist media studies investigate these claims by evaluating the ways in which women are represented over time and throughout various forms of media.

Media texts reflect current dimensions of power; their meanings are construed by both the producers and the consumers (Steiner, 2014, p. 361). As culture, beliefs, and values change over time, so does the ways in which individuals and groups are depicted/represented. An example of this includes the ideas of masculinity and femininity. Our beliefs concerning masculinity and femininity have changed over time, and so has the ways in which they are represented in media context (Steiner, 2014, p. 366). Traditionally, hegemonic masculinity is seen as the “most honored way” to be a man. (Steiner, 2014, 366). Men are supposed to be provider, protector, savior, and sexual aggressor. They should display strength, violence, independence, and little emotion. These traditional expectations for “normative” male/masculine behavior have enabled and encouraged the dominance of men over women (Steiner, 2014, p. 367).

In direct opposition to masculinity, are the spaces women are supposed to inhabit – the stereotypical/traditional realm of femininity. Women are supposed to be caregiver, homemaker, consumer, the object of sexual desire, and the damsel in distress. They should display weakness, fear, dependence, and emotions. These roles also work to perpetuate the subjugation of women. However, differing ideals of what it means to be masculine and what it means to be feminine have developed over time. For example, the metrosexual as seen in cinema and other forms of media contests versions of traditional masculinity (Steiner, 2014, p. 367). Along with our changing perceptions of masculinity and femininity, also comes changes in the way men and women are portrayed. This is because patterns of masculinity and femininity are socially constructed and defined. Media plays an important role in those constructions and definitions. The ways in which these characteristics are represented in popular culture media influences how we see ourselves, our roles, our identity, and “normative” ways to perform our gender. Popular media provokes us to perform gender in a certain way and provides us with normative ideals for how others should act.

Because gender, masculinity, and femininity are all social constructs and their portrayal in popular culture texts help form our values and identities, media studies have become central to issues interrogated by feminist theorists (Steiner, 2014, p. 359). As a result, “significant changes in media representations of women, many pushed by or produced in response to feminism” have occurred. The traditionally masculine and feminine spaces are being negotiated with and through media. More progressive representations of women protagonists are being produced. The result, hopefully, is that as the progressive portrayal of heroines are consumed, women began to also consider and imagine themselves with more agency and become empowered to make conscious

choices – and not simply behave automatically due to the circumstances and hierarchical structure by which they are surrounded.

The idea of a more progressive heroine is an area of contention within feminist theory and feminist media studies. The more recent interrogation of “progressive representations” have sparked debate within the feminist community. The questions arise of whether the representations are truly progressive, or whether the representations are merely a disguised version of traditional sexism, or whether the representation is actually altogether anti-feminist (Steiner, 2014, p. 360). This debate is certainly prevalent in the literature concerning my study of the female protagonists in *Star Wars* films. The differing ways to read and interpret the female representations depicted through Princess Leia, Padme Amidala, and Rey are part of the key discussions concerning the feminist readings of *Star Wars* films as text. While this, as well as the examination of other female protagonists in films, ignites some academic controversy, the end result is positive. It encourages the reader/audience to interrogate and challenge “naturalized” systems of gender, masculinity, and femininity.

While feminist theorists, activists, and media scholars have sought for more positive, progressive and realistic representations of women, the truth is media forms cannot mirror reality and accurately reflect women (Steiner, 2014, p. 361). Any portrayal will ultimately be problematic because the definition of an ideal portrayal of gender, sex, masculinity, and femininity vary among individuals and groups. Keeping this in mind as I review the relevant literature concerning representations of women in *Star Wars* films, I examine the ways feminist media scholars interpreted the agency and empowerment possessed by the female heroines.

Using a feminist perspective to conduct my research enhances, and also restricts, my vision while viewing the films. Feminist theory informs my inquiry by narrowing the scope and

perspective through which I examine *Star Wars* as a popular culture text. As I analyze each scene and dissect the dialogue and images, I focus specifically on the ways in which they form and perform female identity over time. While relying on feminist theory to guide my research, I recognize that my inquiry and the results it yields will not, and cannot, speak for the differing histories and varying identities and diverse experiences of all women. Interpretations of any cultural text can yield complex feminist perspectives. Keeping this in mind, my study can serve to create discourse and magnify the ways in which the *Star Wars* trilogies have communicated femininity and gender identity across generations.

“I need someone to show me my place in all this” – Using Feminist Media Studies to Interrogate Representations

Feminist media studies embody the beliefs of feminist theorists and use these values to guide inquiries into the issues of power and agency as portrayed in media texts. The concepts of agency, empowerment, and representation are investigated within Feminist Media Studies. Patterns of representation are seen as a factor that structures our identity and experiences (Steiner, 2014). By examining popular culture media texts, feminist media scholars are able to better understand how gender, race, sex, and sexuality are formed and performed by cultural texts. This field interrogates the portrayal of women in film. It seeks to discover how these portrayals are understood and valued.

“Here’s where the fun begins” - History of Feminist Media Studies

Feminist media studies are a specific type of cultural curriculum study that can be traced back to the 1960s when Betty Friedan, in *The Feminist Mystique* (1963), used images in women’s magazines and advertisements as fodder for analyzing the representation of women in media. She examined the impact that those media images had on women’s collective

consciousness and their sense of place/self. In her work, Friedan's (1963) term, "the happy housewife heroine" referred to the ideal forms of femininity that were being re-presented continually in magazines and other media. She explains women were depicted "kissing their husbands goodbye in front of the picture window, depositing their stationwagonsful of children at school, and smiling as they ran the new electric waxer over the spotless kitchen floor." The media helped to create and sustain the traditional notions of femininity as being ones of homemaker, caretaker, and nurturer.

Friedan's (1963) work exposed the myth that these images perpetuated --that 'sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love' would bring about fulfillment for women. Her critical analysis of media texts helped sparked not only the Women's Liberation Movement, but it also ignited an interest in feminist media studies (Thornham, 2007). From there, feminist media studies "continued to develop this analysis of femininity, its representations, and women's complex relationship to them" (Thornham, 2007). Watkins and Emerson (2000) explain that 1960s and 1970s brought about an increasing number of attacks on popular culture media texts due to prevalent gender inequalities within them. They write "feminists charged, for instance, that gender role stereotyping in television and film normalized the dominant cultural values and customs that legitimate male domination of women" (Watkins and Emerson, 2000, p. 152). Women were seen primarily in domestic spheres, purchasing household products, and in subordinate roles (Watkins and Emerson, 2000, p. 152).

The 1970s and 80s produced many feminist scholars who aimed at critiquing popular culture media texts. Perhaps the most influential of these was Laura Mulvey (1975) who coined the term "male gaze." Mulvey's work drew attention to the ways in which film and print media

represent women from the male perspective and frames women as an object intended for the pleasure of the male viewer. Mulvey (1975) writes

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to striptease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. Mainstream film neatly combined spectacle and narrative (p. 4).

Mulvey (1975) continues by explaining that man is in control of the film fantasy; he holds the power as the creator of the sexual look and as the spectator of it. As such, the women are not only the object of sexual desire for the characters in the film, she also becomes that object for the male spectators (Mulvey, 1975, p. 5). Mulvey's work became a catalyst for other feminist scholars wishing to deconstruct the subjectivity and the ways in which media represents and stereotypes and objectifies women.

Another pivotal work concerned with the social construction of femininity came with Angela McRobbie's *Jackie: An Ideology of Adolescent Femininity* (1978). McRobbie (1978) conducted a textual analysis of a teen magazine. Her work was significant in regards to feminist understandings of identity formation in young girls. Her analysis revealed pervasive messages of femininity. To be feminine, girls must live in a life defined by jealousy, competition, and devotion; girls must fight for a man and never trust another woman (McRobbie, 1978). McRobbie's (1978) work on the "ideology of femininity" was important to feminist research and

the field of cultural studies. She challenged the concept of the naturalness of femininity by deconstructing the magazine's narrative.

In 1983, Ann Kaplan, in *Women in Film*, examines an emerging idea of the female gaze. In this work, she discusses films in which women have assumed the masculine or 'hero' position. Kaplan (1983) is able to see beyond the male gaze and recognize there are films, whose narratives and images are controlled by the desires of women. While she admits to and explores the position of the female gaze, she also reveals that in instances when women step into the roles traditionally occupied by men, such as the 'female hero,' these women lose their traditional characteristics of femininity. Kaplan (1983) writes

when the man steps out of his traditional role as the one who controls the whole action, and when he is set up as sex object, the woman then takes on the "masculine" role as bearer of the gaze and initiator of the action. She nearly always loses her traditionally feminine characteristics in so doing – not those of attractiveness, but rather of kindness, humaneness, motherliness. She is now often cold, driving, ambitious, manipulating, just like the men whose position she has usurped (p. 29).

Traditionally, it has been unlikely that films have found ways to resolve this dilemma. Portraying a female character who can occupy both masculine and feminine spaces was something media producers consistently failed to do. Nevertheless, feminist media studies continue to further examine the notions of femininity and masculinity in film as being social constructions that change with our cultural landscape.

Mulvey's "conception of the visual objectification of women...focused attention on women's visual, rather than vocal and verbal, representation" (O'Meara, 2016). However, in 1985, Alison Bechdel included a *rule* for critiquing films in her *Dykes to Watch Out For* comic

strip for evaluating the representation of women in a film. The Bechdel Test (1985) includes three requirements that a film must possess in order to meet minimal feminist standards, they are: 1) it must include at least two women, 2) who have at least one conversation, 3) about something other than a man or men. Although it was not intended to be taken as a serious means for media critiques, since then, this test has become a loose standard by which feminist media critics measure representation of women within a film (O'Meara, 2016). Bechdel's comic led to an increased interest in the "silencing of women" in film (O'Meara, 2016). Feminist media studies joined the conversation and produced studies examining women's dialogue and voices in film (O'Meara, 2016). This ultimately led to discourse analysis being utilized to critique popular culture films.

The work of Friedan, Mulvey, McRobbie, Kaplan, and even Bechdel laid the foundation for different and important conversations and explorations into women in media. Friedan and Mulvey's publications drew attention to the visual representations of women. These studies mark the beginning of feminist textual analysis of film in which we can evaluate the ways in which women are portrayed visually in popular culture media/film. McRobbie (1978) challenged the notions of femininity being portrayed and explicitly taught in teen magazines. Bechdel's Test (1985) resulted in increased attention being paid to women's dialogue and voice in film. It has continued to be used by feminist critics into the 2000s. Its publication planted the seed for discourse analysis to be used by feminist media scholars to examine the language and the context of dialogue occurring by women in film. Kaplan's work explored the issues of how femininity and masculinity were characterized in films. She evoked the notion that women who dared to occupy masculine spaces would also lose their feminine characteristics and be punished narratively (Kaplan, 1983). Calling further attention to the traditional feminine and masculine

stereotypes provided feminist media studies with yet another area of exploration into the ways in which popular films are used to form and perform cultural norms of femininity.

“You must feel the Force around you.” - Major Themes in Feminist Media Studies

Over the past twenty years, feminist media critics have considered how television and films depict women (Spigel, 2004). Watkins and Emerson (2000) assert that “In addition to influencing how journalists, scholars, and consumers of media read and think about gender, feminism has also influenced images, narratives, and genre forms produced in the medial culture industry” (p. 152). Major themes in feminist media studies include the socially constructed ideas of gender and femininity (as represented through popular culture texts) and the impact that these ideas have on the identity formation of women in our society. Since women use media to “make sense of and inform and inform their own lived experiences” (Watkins and Emerson, 2000, p. 156), we must critically evaluate the context, images, and messages the text is aiming to teach us about ourselves, gender, and femininity. As Thornham (2007) explains, “a central concern within feminist media studies has been the narratives of femininity produced within cultural texts, and the ways in which these are bound up with, and in some ways construct, our sense of ourselves as women” (p. 55). Cultural productions, like the *Star Wars* films, work to influence social relations, create meanings, and form identities.

Feminist scholars examine and address how cultural productions influence gendered interactions and individual identities (Wanzo, 2016). They explore the ways in which representations can create meanings, structure fears and desires, and draw boundaries between self and others (Wanzo, 2016). Representations (and stereotypes) seen within cultural texts inform women on what it means to be socially understood as a feminine subject, the norms associated with femininity, and the activities that she must partake in which make her gendered

as a woman (Ehlers, 2016). Using feminism as a framework to critique female representation found in the media, helps create a culture and a society that is more “cognizant of the social and political implications of gender role stereotyping in popular media discourse” (Watkins and Emerson, 2000, p. 152).

Feminist Media Studies of *Star Wars* Films

In the following sections, literature is organized around two themes: feminist themes in *Star Wars* films and feminist themes in *Star Wars*' female characters. First, literature evaluating *Star Wars*' films, as a whole, in terms of their ability to reach feminist goals is presented. These works include Koushik and Reed (2016), Heckman (2016), and Bruin-Mole (2018). They analyze *Star Wars* films in broader terms in attempt to evaluate their engagement with feminist ideals. Wilson (2007), which is a more oppositional text, also uses feminist values to uncover prevalent misogynistic themes throughout the *Star Wars* films. Literature which analyzes Princess Leia, Padme Amidala, and Rey are presented next. Several studies were found that analyzed the specific characters in the film. Dominguez (2017) and LeBlanc (2017) and Vainikka (2018) each examine at least one of the leading female protagonists in the *Star Wars* film trilogies. These each use different methodologies to evaluate the characters through a feminist lens. Works such as Sperling (2016), and Brown (2018) focus on audience/viewer/consumer perspectives, as well as social protests, and feelings of empowerment that the films elicit in fans. Together, these works were used to build my understanding of our cultural response to the films and their portrayal of female protagonists/heroines.

Feminist Media Analyses of *Star Wars* Films

Evaluating *Star Wars* in terms of feminist themes means analyzing the films in order to see how well, or to what degree, they represent feminist values. It also means deciphering what

messages the films are teaching the audience about gender, gender roles, sexuality, femininity, and masculinity. Brown (2018) discusses his interpretation of the first two *Star Wars* trilogies claiming that the films' primary focus is on the lead male protagonist. Luke Skywalker was the primary focus of the first trilogy and Anakin Skywalker dominated the prequels. Brown (2018) explains, "the focus on Luke and Anakin in these film cycles reduced Leia and Padme to supporting characters and limited the women's strength as both trilogies wore on" (p. 339). Because women were reduced to the margins of the narrative, traditional gender roles and hegemonic patriarchal beliefs are valued above feminist themes and beliefs.

Wilson (2007) evaluated the first two trilogies by analyzing the characters and the messages that the films were portraying through them. Ultimately, Wilson (2007) does not see the first six episodes of the *Star Wars* trilogy as championing feminist themes. Instead, she offers an oppositional analysis of the cultural text. Wilson (2007) begins by explaining that the first two trilogies within the *Star Wars* saga reflect patriarchal and hegemonic values. Power within these films are given to males, sending clear messages of male dominance within the galaxy (Wilson, 2007). Wilson (2007) finds the films to be misogynist and homophobic. Traditionally feminine characteristics are associated with darkness and lead to decay (Wilson, 2007). For example, Anakin's emotional attachments to his mom (Shmi Skywalker), his wife (Padme Amidala), and his mentor (Palpatine) are what lead to his decay and descent into the Dark Side.

For Koushik and Reed (2018) interrogating the feminist themes within the *Star Wars* film franchise meant considering the motives behind the production of the content. In their study, Koushik and Reed (2018) considered the political economy when evaluating Disney's newest *Star Wars* films, *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi*. They explain that the political economy "deals with the question of who controls film and media and how much a structure influences the

production” (Koushik and Reed, 2018, p. 3). Regarding the most recent *Star Wars* trilogy, it is Disney that controls the film and influences its production.

Disney is releasing films with female protagonists in response to a growing feminist movement and cultural change occurring in society. However, Koushik and Reed (2018) argue that this is “emblematic of Disney’s growing tendency to commodify the core tenets of social movements and repackage them in a fashion better suited for their global market interests (p. 2). They claim that Disney uses the language of feminism and women’s movements to appeal to consumers and increase its success in the marketplace (Koushik and Reed, 2018).

In Koushik and Reed’s (2018) work, they admit the female characters appear, on the surface, to be more progressive representations of feminist values. However, at a closer look the female characters are little more than “male character archetypes” (Koushik and Reed, 2018). Koushik and Reed (2018) claim that Rey is simply replacing the original male hero, Luke Skywalker, and functioning within the “traditional male hero quest” (p. 7). For Koushik and Reed (2018) this is evidence that the newest *Star Wars* films are not progressive, nor do they meet feminist standards. Instead, they are merely Disney’s attempt to keep the film relevant and dominate the consumer market (Koushik and Reed, 2018). The authors explain, “In order for a character to be successfully feminist, the character of a story should be conceived in such a way that her gender is part of who she is, not simply a consequence of a marketing strategy” (Koushik and Reed, 2018, p. 9). Therefore, according to Koushik and Reed (2018) the newest *Star Wars* films, *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi*, are not progressively feminist because representations of female characters were not re-imagined. They were merely cast in place of the male hero.

It may be true that Rey and the other female characters in the most recent *Star Wars* films were the result of a marketing strategy. However, the motives behind the production of the film are not often in the forefront of the audience's mind when watching the films. Instead, they are actively consuming the messages that the film is producing. One could argue that regardless why Disney decided to cast more female protagonists, the fact remains, viewers are now able to see women in lead roles. Bruin-Mole (2018) asserts that it is not *Star Wars*' own "female agenda that matters most but rather how these representations and aims are continually negotiated and reinterpreted by fans, creators, licenses, and feminists around the world" (p. 240). It should then be the characters that are analyzed to determine whether they possess agency and power within the narrative. From there, one could decide if the film is truly progressive and engaged with feminist values.

Heckman (2016) took to this approach. She evaluated *The Force Awakens*' progressiveness by looking at the ways in which female characters were portrayed as a whole. Heckman (2016) believes that this episode in the *Star Wars* saga "contains strong female role models who are both young and old." Heckman (2016) references the fact that female characters such as General Organa and Maz Kanata were used to guide Rey in her quest to find Luke Skywalker to prove that the films have succeeded in creating a representation of women that is strong and wise. Heckman (2016) writes of the film, "it addresses many of the feminist fans' basic concerns, sidestepping unnecessarily revealing costumes and passing the Bechdel Test." Heckman's (2016) analysis of *The Force Awakens* finds the film to be progressive and in tune with feminist values and themes.

Bruin-Mole (2018) also evaluated the *Star Wars* galaxy using a feminist lens. She praises the film for allowing a female character to finally 'take up the mantle of Jedi hero that previously

belonged exclusively to the male protagonists” (Bruin-Mole, 2018, p. 228). Bruin-Mole (2018) brings forth the fact that female characters are allotted much more screen time and allowed to speak more in newest *Star Wars* films in comparison to their presence/voice in the first two trilogies. She also claims that General Organa, Rey, and even Jyn Erso (a female protagonist in the film, *Rogue One*, 2016) are feminist triumphs (Bruin-Mole, 2016). However, Bruin-Mole (2016) is not entirely convinced that the *Star Wars* films have truly met their potential as a feminist film; the galaxy is largely patriarchal and “many of the characters do not really encourage serious discussions of feminism at all because they are all privileged in terms of race, ethnicity, class, ability, and sexuality, and face no discrimination in their seemingly postfeminist and colorblind universe” (p. 230). So, while the female protagonists possess agency, their lack of marginalization in their universe diminishes the feminist empowerment afforded them.

“The sacred Jedi texts” - Literature on *Star Wars*’ Female Characters

Research analyzing the female protagonists in the *Star Wars* films is plentiful, especially those focusing on Princess Leia and Padme Amidala from the first two film trilogies. Among these readings there are differing perspectives with different interpretations of the female representations presented within the films. For example, some scholars view Princess Leia as a woman who is the embodiment of feminist values; however, others view her as a damsel who is sexually objectified within the first trilogy. In the following section, I will present literature which offers various interpretations of the leading female protagonists in the *Star Wars* film saga: Princess/General Leia Organa, Princess Padme Amidala, and Rey.

Princess Leia Organa - “Who is she? She’s beautiful.”

A rich source of debate within the *Star Wars* galaxy concerns the portrayal of Princess Leia in the first released trilogy. Many champion Princess Leia claiming she defied traditional

female roles and represents a strong example as a feminist character. Leia was the female lead in the first released trilogy, *Episodes IV-VI*. She is the sister of Luke Skywalker, the love interest of Han Solo, and the daughter of Darth Vader. Leia, Luke, and Han must help the Rebel Alliance defeat Darth Vader and the Empire. She and her male companions embark on a mission to save the Republic.

Dominguez (2017) claims that Leia was a groundbreaking character; “she transcends all of the stereotypes and archetypes: she is a princess, but not a damsel in distress; she is a warrior, but does not live solely by the sword; she is a sister and, eventually a wife and mother, but she never stops being a rebel; and she exemplifies traditional and feminist qualities of the hero” (p. 120). Feminist themes of agency and empowerment are often detected in Princess Leia’s character as she rescues her friends, battles storm troopers, and fights to save the Republic.

Dominguez’s (2017) evaluated Princess Leia in terms of their status as a good role model for young women. According to Dominguez (2017) Leia’s character was spunky, outspoken, caring, and strong. “Leia is a hero without losing her gendered status; she does not have to play the cute, helpless sex kitten or become sexless and androgynous to get what she wants, she can be strong, sassy, outspoken, bossy, and bitchy and still be respected and seen as feminine” (Dominguez, 2017, p. 116). Leia is seen throughout the original trilogy displaying traits of a soldier and she is not a passive female who lets the men fight the battles and rescue others.

Leia is able to speak her mind, take control, and give orders with authority (Leblanc, 2017). However, she is also able to demonstrate emotions as she falls in love with Han Solo. Vainikka (2018) writes, “she is not constantly in peril...does not seem constantly afraid...is no more helpless or in need of rescuing than her male companions are shown from time to time (p. 23). Even after being rescued, Leia does not instantly “fall into the arms of the male heroes,

express her overflowing gratitude by kissing them, nor does she praise them for their heroism” (Vainikka, 2018).

Even though Leia is, often, triumphed as a feminist hero, her character is not as progressive and altogether feminist as many scholars would claim. Vainikka (2018) explains that the first time we see Princess Leia she needs rescue calling Obi Wan Kenobi her “only hope.” In several occasions, Leia is the object of male desire Luke calls her beautiful. She is the love interest of Han Solo, and flirtations between the two of them begin early on in the films. Vainikka (2018) even points out that Leia is considered weaker than her twin brother Luke, as the force is stronger with him. According to Vainikka (2018) this is all characteristic of traditional female stereotypes. She is the damsel in distress, the love interest, the weaker sex, and even the object of sexual desire.

Princess Leia’s appearance in the metal bikini resulted in her character being sexually objectified, dehumanized, and victimized (Vainikka, 2018). This scene in which she is held captive by Jabba with chains around her neck signifies male dominance and ownership over the female body (Vainikka, 2018). Dominguez (2017) calls this a textbook case for Mulvey’s male gaze (p. 117). Even so, Dominguez (2017) does not fully dismiss this as a loss for feminists. Dominguez (2017) claims that this scene “can be read as a moment of great empowerment for the females in the audience. The powerless and sexually enslaved female used the very elements of that enslavement to kill a captor that understood too late that he dangerously underestimated his prey (p. 117). This is in reference to Princess Leia using the chain that she was bound with to strangle and kill Jabba, her captor.

Considering the literature analyzing Princess Leia through a feminist lens, it’s clear that researchers see some elements of Leia’s character to be in synch with feminist ideals. At times

her character displays agency and empowerment. Leia is strong, resourceful, brave, outspoken, capable, and even caring. However, other times, Leia falls short of the feminists' standards. She needs rescuing more than once, she is the love interest of Han Solo, and she is the only character in the films to be sexually objectified and victimized by being bound while wearing almost no clothes. Even so, Princess Leia is still heralded as a strong female lead character even if she misses the perfectly progressive feminists mark at times.

Padme Amidala - "Are you an angel?"

Padme Amidala was introduced in the second trilogy. However, chronologically, she came before Princess Leia. Padme is Leia and Luke's mother and the love interest/wife of Anakin/Darth Vader. When researching various character analysis of Padme, there is a lot of agreement on her failure to be a feminist example. Padme started out as a strong Queen and member of the Senate who was outspoken and fighting for democracy in the Republic. She becomes the love interest and obsession of Anakin Skywalker. They secretly marry and she becomes pregnant. Meanwhile, Anakin is seduced by the Dark Side and Padme dies during childbirth due to a broken heart.

Dominguez (2017) describes watching Padme's demise, "had we gone back in time? Catapulted back into a world of traditional fairy tales and medieval romances where damsels wasted away and dies of broken hearts...unable to live for themselves when their knight abandons them" (p. 110). From *Episode I* to *Episode III*, Padme's character deteriorates, and she never reaches the potential that feminist viewers wanted her to meet. Dominguez (2017) states "it is clear that many fans were expecting a stronger, more outwardly heroic ending for Padme" (p. 124). Instead, however, the role-model for young girls "was virtually thrown away" in

Episode III of the *Star Wars* trilogy. Padme gives up her identity, her autonomy, her power, and her life to what Dominguez (2017) likens to an abusive relationship with Anakin.

Rey - “The girl I’ve heard so much about.”

Rey was introduced to the *Star Wars* saga in 2015 with the release of *Episode VII: The Force Awakens*. Literature analyzing Rey’s character is limited. Both Leblanc (2017) and Vainikka (2018) both agree that Rey is the epitome of a progressive heroine. Vainikka (2018) claims that Rey defies stereotypes, she is not objectified, and she uses the Force is destined to become a Jedi Knight. Leblanc (2017) describes her as the “antithesis of a damsel in distress.” Rey never needs rescuing by a man. In fact, she rescues herself.

Brown (2018) states “with Rey the *Star Wars* series managed to finally foreground a female hero who is neither limited nor defined by her gender” (p. 341). Rey’s gender is irrelevant. Sperling (2016) further explains, “her femininity isn’t a weakness, and it isn’t a strength. In fact, it isn’t a thing at all. Not only is that remarkable for a female movie character, it is revolutionary” (p. 26). Rey is portrayed as a survivor, scavenger, pilot, mechanic, and warrior (Sperling, 2016). She is even seen as both mentally and physically superior to newest film trilogy’s lead antagonist, Kylo Ren. She manages to escape his capture on her own. “Rey was heralded as a strong, feminist-influenced heroine that capably carved out her own space within the male dominated *Star Wars* universe” (Brown, 2018, p. 335). Rey seems to embody the agency and empowerment that feminist media scholars have been longing to see in a lead female character.

When reviewing the literature concerning female representation in *Star Wars* films, I gained valuable insight; however, I also recognized some key gaps in the research. For example, Dominguez’s interpretations of the female characters are often like LeBlanc (2017) and Vainikka

(2018) in how they view the agency and empowerment of Princess Leia and Padme Amidala. However, determining the characters' feminist credibility by whether they would make a good role model is a subjective methodology for conducting a character analysis. This method sets a low threshold for determining their engagement with feminist ideals. Film characters who would make good role model for girls may not necessarily be progressive feminist representations. Additionally, Vainikka's (2018) interpretation of the female characters in the *Star Wars* trilogy analyzed the characters by how they displayed or defied traditional gendered stereotypes. This method can be useful when trying to reveal if a character has progressed beyond traditional "normative" notions. However, this analysis did not specifically interrogate the discourse or visual texts within the films. Instead, the researcher studied their actions instead of their words.

The literature did not reveal any analysis of the *Star Wars* films using discourse analysis and textual analysis. Little was said about the dialogue of the characters and the visual images and context surrounding them. This is especially true of the newest female heroine, Rey. Therefore, a detailed character analysis can provide new insight into the ways that *Star Wars* female protagonists represent feminine themes. This type of study can also reveal the ways in which the female heroine has progressed over time.

EPISODE III

“I WON’T HAVE YOU QUESTIONING MY METHODS” - METHODOLOGY

In order to examine the progression of female heroines within popular culture media, I specifically chose to examine the three *Star Wars* films trilogies. My inquiry analyzes the ways in which gender and femininity are communicated throughout the *Star Wars* films. By using the three *Star Wars* trilogies, I will explore the progression of femininity and gender identities over time. To conduct my research, I am employing methods commonly found within feminist media studies today. Discourse analysis and textual analysis will both serve as a means through which I am able to explore the curriculum of femininity and gender identity within the *Star Wars* film saga. This chapter outlines the justifications for and the ways that I will use these methods to conduct my inquiry. The chapter also reviews exemplary research in feminist media studies and discusses the contributions of this research to my dissertation project.

“I hope you know what you’re doing!” - Relevant Approaches to Feminist Media Studies

According to Wanzo (2016) “Theorists of representation describe cultural productions as historically situated, and they seek to explicate what the text *does* - what the narrative tells - in cultural context” (p. 663). Both Textual Analysis and Discourse Analysis provide a means through which one can discover what the media text is doing and telling its audience. Textual analysis is used to deconstruct the visual and the situational within each selected scene. It focuses its critique on the physical -- the settings, bodies, gestures, and dress. Discourse analysis will be used to dissect the talk, the verbal, the dialogue, in order to reveal the power dynamics and political struggle being reinforced within each film. By reading films as gendered text and analyzing the discourse within them, one can determine how gender and femininity is

communicated within them. Together these two methods can aid in the deconstruction of popular media texts and help decode the messages being perpetuated.

“Come on! Why don’t you take a look around?” - Textual Analysis

According to McKee (2003), “textual analysis is a methodology for gathering information about sense-making practices...we analyze texts using a form of forensic analysis - treating them like clues of how people make sense of the world” (p. 63). We make meaning from the texts that we see and hear. Texts include written texts, the verbal and the nonverbal interactions, television, films, and other media (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). Each of these mediums influence the way that we think. We interpret them in ways that help us learn about ourselves, our identities, and our place.

Phillips and Hardy (2002) explain that “texts are sites of the emergence of complexes of social meanings, produced in the particular history of the situation of production, that record in partial ways the histories of both the participants in the production of the text and of the institutions that are ‘invoked’ or brought into play.” When reading and analyzing cultural texts we are able to more fully understand the social meanings and the historical context of that particular text. Each part of a cultural text informs our knowledge of our identities. The verbal, the visual, and the contextual elements within a popular culture text provides us with traces/clues about ourselves and our relation to others.

Textual analysis allows one to examine the entire context of a particular cultural text. The context includes physical settings and everything in it; “the bodies, eye gaze, gestures, and moments of those present” (Gee, 2011, p. 12). The physical settings and the visual context are examined in this study. Each selected scene is investigated and analyzed in attempt to understand the message that the images reveal to the audience and the message that the images convey about

our cultural beliefs at those particular times. Bodies, gestures, and even clothes are subject to the feminist reading of the texts. McKee (2003) explains “clothes are not simply material objects-- they are also texts. We interpret them and make sense of the wearer - perhaps reading messages that they want us to read” (p. 38). So, when analyzing the visual (setting, bodies, gestures, costumes), I will textual analysis to understand and make sense of the messages that the popular culture text conveys concerning women and femininity.

Textual analysis is a common method used to conduct a feminist media study. Veronica Wilson’s (2007) study, “Seduced by the Dark Side of the Force: Gender, Sexuality, and Moral Agency in George Lucas’s *Star Wars* Universe” is an excellent example of textual analysis being used to make sense of a popular media production. Wilson (2007) closely analyzes the *Star Wars* saga to “understand how the films reflect and potentially help shape cultural struggles over questions of gender and sexuality in contemporary American society” (p. 3). She analyzes stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, investigates misogyny, and explores the themes of (homo)sexuality that can be found within the films.

Wilson (2007) explains “given the saga’s immense popularity, and its potential cultural and psychological impact upon millions of viewers and their individual and sexual identities and beliefs should not be underestimated (p. 4). She hopes, “analyzing the *Star Wars* saga as a set of mainstream texts might open up, if not a precisely ‘feminist space,’ at least an opportunity for non-patriarchal, non-homophobic, and more egalitarian interpretations (Wilson, 2007). Her study examines the sexual ambiguity of Palpatine and his seemingly homoerotic obsession with Anakin. Wilson (2007) likens Palpatine to an “Eve” type figure who entices Anakin with promises of limitless power. Wilson (2007) points out that this is described in the film and novels as being “seduced” to the dark side. The author admits that the homosexual undertones

within Anakin and Palpatine's close relationship/pairing may have been "unconscious and wholly unintentional" by George Lucas (Wilson, 2007). However, Wilson (2007) believes that "this kind of resistant meaning-making has the potential to help reshape our popular culture values and prejudices...changing those social and political dynamics into more egalitarian dynamics (p. 25). Wilson's (2007) "resistant meaning-making" of the characters and narratives within the *Star Wars* saga allows for textual analysis to be used to evaluate the unexamined cultural assumptions that are deeply embedded within the films and novels.

Wilson's (2007) study was completed before the most recent *Star Wars* trilogy was released. Therefore, her work focuses solely on the first six episodes. Even so, her analysis proves to be very useful in guiding my own lines of inquiry. Within her writing, Wilson (2007) uses textual analysis to briefly examine the narrative and stereotypes represented by the character Queen/Senator Padme Amidala. While she does not focus specifically on the all of the aspects I explore within Padme's character, Wilson (2007) does hint at the failed potential of this once strong female lead. Wilson's (2007) analysis shows that *Star Wars* is a site for "ongoing cultural discourses about gender and sexuality and relationships of power between individuals and institutions" (p. 3). Wilson's successful use of feminism to guide her textual analysis provides this study with a strong and relevant example of how to explore the portrayal of female protagonists throughout all three *Star Wars* film trilogies.

"Do you understand anything they're saying?" - Discourse Analysis

Sharing many similarities to textual analysis, discourse analysis aims to identify the meanings of a variety texts (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). However, as Gee (2011) explains, "discourse analysis is based on the details of speech (and gaze and gesture and action) that are arguably deemed relevant in the context where the speech was used and that are relevant to the

arguments the analyst is attempting to make” (p. 2). Discourse analysis is a method used to deconstruct language and conversation, beyond the surface. This method is a means for interpreting texts and exploring the broader social reality within them. Our social reality, our experiences, and our social interactions cannot be understood without the discourses that provide them with meaning (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). For this reason, discourse analysis can be used to explore the relationship between language and our socially constructed reality. In other words, discourse analysis offers a method for us to dissect the cultural production of social reality.

Johnstone (2017) states “discourse is shaped by the world, and discourse shapes the world” (p.9). When studying discourse, one seeks to examine not only the language and words used but also the historical/social context in which they occurred. Discourse analysis focuses on how the social world is constructed and maintained through discourse (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). Through this method, we can begin to more fully understand social experiences and phenomena.

Discourse analysis works on the assumption that all social reality is constructed by and through the ongoing process of discursive production (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). It is the job of the analyst to deconstruct communication and the context in which it takes place in order to interpret the social reality being formed and performed. Discourse analysis requires that the researcher seek to understand what is being said and what the speaker is trying to accomplish through the text. Gee (2011) explains that “we are trying to understand what someone meant...what they are trying to say, what their intentions were, and what goals or purposes they are trying to achieve” (p. 19). In doing so, we can explore the ways in which the discourse has worked to shape our social reality and worked to create our knowledge about ourselves in relation to others and our experiences.

According to the discourse perspective, our social reality is a social construction that is widely shaped by discourse. So, in order to interpret our social reality, we must examine societal texts. One approach to understanding broader social realities is to examine and explore texts that are widely disseminated (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). By examining widely disseminated texts one can gain much insight into how these texts, and the discourses within them, contribute to the creation of our social reality.

Media productions are influenced by and, in turn, influence culture. Discourse analysis is a method used to reveal the structures of social power that exist within cultures and are disseminated through media. Pioneering the field of discourse analysis was Ien Ang (1985) with her study entitled *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*. While deconstructing the series and providing analysis on what it means to watch *Dallas*, Ang (1985) used 42 fan letters as a source for discourse analysis. Realizing there was greater meaning behind explicit messages in the letters, Ang (1985) deconstructs the implicit connotation the letters held. Ang's (1985) study reveals the ways that popular culture can be read as texts as they consist of visual and audible signifiers that create a system of representation. Her analysis provides insight into the meaning-making that occurs when fans engage with these texts.

While dialogue and language is the key source of investigation for discourse analysis, its purpose lies not on the exact words being said but in their implications and the assumptions surrounding them. In other words, the context framing the language is just as important as the dialogue itself. In "Examining Portrayals of Female Protagonists by Female Screenwriters using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis" Shapiro (2017) provides an exemplary study of how feminist discourse analysis can be used to examine gendered assumptions and power relations within films. Her study uses the only four Oscar winning films whose screenplay was written by

women. She investigates how the female protagonists are portrayed in *Thelma & Louise*, *The Piano*, *Lost in Translation*, and *Juno* (Shapiro, 2017).

Shapiro's (2017) purpose was in "examining the character traits of each female protagonist in these four films and identifying patterns among these characters, a generalization can be drawn about how female screenwriters depict females in their films and whether these portrayals are accurate and representatives of the female experience" (p. 37). Her study revealed that each of the protagonists in the films represented more masculine/male qualities rather than the traditionally feminine/female characteristics usually assigned to women in film (Shapiro, 2017). The female protagonists written by female writers possessed more agency and "control of their situations, choosing their individual courses of action based on their own desires and needs" (p. 45). The female characters embraced and occupied both the feminine and the masculine spaces; they were not confined to or forced to adhere to one over the other. The writers of these characters were able to challenge stereotypes and create a more accurate representation of the female experience than those traditionally written by men with limited knowledge of the female experience.

Shapiro's (2017) text proves valuable to my own research in a few ways. First, her specific method for conducting her discourse analysis provides a framework and guide for how I will conduct my own study. Her process for gathering evidence and collecting field notes was very practical. I will employ her same techniques, which will be explained further in the section of this chapter titled "Design of Study."

Secondly, Shapiro's (2017) identified themes and trends within the four main female protagonists. By analyzing the discourse within the film, Shapiro (2017) discovered that each character 1) was aware of the constraints of their gender, 2) possessed traditionally masculine

characteristics, 3) were able to transcend their gender roles, and 4) executed their own individualism and choice (p. 42). The themes and trends are useful to me as I investigate the female protagonists within *Star Wars* films. When determining whether these characters represent a stereotypical tradition or a more progressive, and complete, female hero, I compared the *Star Wars* characters to the criteria and themes found in Shapiro's investigation.

Finally, Shapiro's (2017) use of the Heroine's Journey, originally developed by Maureen Murdock, also informs my own research into female protagonists in *Star Wars* films. Shapiro (2017) explains that, on her journey, first, the female protagonist is isolated. Next, she escapes the isolation. Then, she rejects the male gaze and discovers/embraces her masculine side. Finally, the female protagonist re-discovers the importance of her feminine side and finds a way to unite it with her masculine side, thus completing her journey and her transformation (Shapiro, 2017). For the women characters in Shapiro's (2017) study, the completion of the journey resulted in a progressive, more accurate, representation of women. The evidence she used to support her claims were all segments of dialogue/conversation seen in the films. By using Shapiro's (2017) modified version of the heroine's journey to investigate the female protagonists in *Star Wars*, I evaluate whether they portray a traditional or progressive representation. My evidence is also gathered from analyzing the discourse within the *Star Wars* film trilogies.

“Now, your coming together is your undoing.” Combining Textual Analysis and Discourse Analysis in *Star Wars* Films

We use popular culture texts, like the *Star Wars* trilogies, to try to “obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them” (McKee, 2003, p. 1). My inquiry into the *Star Wars* trilogy looks at not only the visual

elements of the films, but also the cultural discourses evident throughout the film. These two elements can be explored by using both textual and discourse analysis.

As I use textual analysis to examine the *Star Wars* films I determine how our culture at the particular times the films were released interpreted the identity, role, and place of women. Textual analysis provides a way for me to examine the visual context in order to explore the representations/portrayals of women in order to make meaning of how our society interpreted gender and femininity. This examination of the visual elements (setting, bodies, gestures, costumes) is conducted through a feminist lens to reveal the most likely interpretations of femininity and gender that are made from the *Star Wars* text. I focus specifically on the representations of women and their non/conformity to traditional ideals of femininity.

The *Star Wars* film trilogies is a widely disseminated text. Thus far, the franchise has influenced three generations of viewers. Using discourse analysis to explore the language and dialogue within the film helps me further interpret the social reality that the film aided in creating for those three generations of women viewers. I use discourse analysis to examine the *Star Wars* trilogies to unpack the cultural production of femininity, gender, and social stereotypes of women amidst the historical context of the films' release. Like Shapiro (2017), I search for common themes and elements of the heroine's journey to serve as clues for my investigation. Through my exploration, I seek to uncover a more progressive social reality for women being formed through this popular culture text over time. Again, this analysis is influenced by my feminist lens. Specifically, I focus on the ways in which power and agency of women are revealed and represented through discourses in the film.

“Your eyes can deceive you; don't trust them” - Key Research Issue

My study uses *Star Wars* films to explore the extent to which the curriculum of femininity is supported or contested through the representations of three leading female characters: Princess Leia, Padme Amidala, and Rey.

“Everything that has transpired has done so according to my design.” - Design of Study

Textual analysis was used to focus on the narrative that the visual is trying to tell. Discourse analysis was used to decipher the narrative that the dialogue and language creates. Using a feminist framework to guide my interpretation provided me with a lens through which I interpreted the data gathered from the films. Gee (2011) explains that to do discourse analysis one must “see what is old and taken for granted as if it is brand new...to see all the assumptions and information speakers leave unsaid and assume listeners know and will add in to make the communication clear” (p. 14). This was my approach to viewing the *Star Wars* films for this study. Examining *Star Wars* as feminist text allowed me to analyze the representation of and the construction of femininity within the films. And, through them, uncover something new about gender identity and femininity at a societal level.

To conduct my study, I selected a collection of scenes from the *Star Wars* trilogies which highlight the characteristics and storyline of the female leads. Each of the scenes were relevant to the key research issue of this study. This led to me examining scenes which highlight Princess Leia from the original trilogy, scenes which highlight Princess Padme Amidala from the second trilogy, and scenes which highlight Rey from the most recent films. As McKee (2003) suggests the analysis must “focus on the female characters in the text, how they are represented...how they dress, react to each other, move, speak, take control of the narrative, and so on” (p. 73). McKee (2003) further suggests that the analysis should examine how the female characters are represented in relation to previous female leads. Following these guidelines, I analyzed the

female leads in the three *Star Wars* trilogies. I examined their dress, their dialogue, and the context of the scenes. I also explored the ways in which the female leads progressed socially in comparison to each other.

Much like Shapiro's (2017) process for collecting data/evidence, my study began with a viewing of each *Star Wars* film. The films were viewed in the order in which they were released in order to trace the progression of female representation over time. As I watched the films, I looked/listened for certain dialogical elements to use for the discourse analysis. Power structures and relations were analyzed here using Shapiro's (2017) study as a guide: I examined how the female protagonist's role compares to the males in the film, how they react to their roles, how their role compared to stereotypical portrayals of women, and if/how they are displayed in a sexualized manner. A second viewing of the film was necessary as I searched for specific dialogue and language to serve as examples that support my original observations. For this portion of the process, I printed out the screenplay for the specific scenes I analyzed and read along during my second viewing of the films. This allowed me to pull exact quotations from the film for further analysis and interpretation.

Along with searching for discursive clues to investigate the power and agency of the female protagonists in the *Star Wars* films, I also watched the films for visual clues to reveal the representations of femininity and gender identity. The visual elements were dissected into categories of context, the bodies, the gaze, gestures, and costumes to make sense of the message that each scene conveys concerning women's identity at the time the film was released.

I used textual and discourse analysis to analyze the visual nature of the scenes and the dialogue within them. I looked for the ways in which the scenes and the representation of females influence, and are influenced by, broad social reality. I established how the scenes,

dialogue, and characters are related to our societal views of gender identity and femininity. I found the ways in which power is reinforced through language in these films. Within this analysis, I explored how the different scenes from the different times construct and represent females and femininity differently.

The visual, the contextual, and the verbal from each selected scene served as a rich source of data for my inquiry. I decoded the messages within each scene by analyzing and interpreting the data through a feminist framework. I looked for themes of femininity versus masculinity, male versus female identities, and gender stereotypes as related to social norms found in each scene. Through this investigation, I searched for evidence of how the representations of the *Star Wars*'s female leads demonstrate a progression of female identities over time.

“I wonder if your feelings on the matter are clear.” - Limitations of Study

McKee (2003) explains that there is “no single correct representation of any part of the world and, in the same way, there’s no single correct interpretation of any text” (p. 63). I recognize that this is the case with my inquiry. As a qualitative analysis, my interpretation of the *Star Wars* films as text is subjective. My analysis of the curriculum of femininity in *Star Wars* will be but one inquiry and critique of the lessons these films teach us about gender and femininity in our society. The actions, dialogue, and visual representations of women in the *Star Wars* films can be interpreted in a multitude of ways.

Another limitation of my study lies in the fact that the final *Star Wars* film of the newest trilogy is yet to be released. There is still one more film to be released which will conclude her story and her contribution to the *Star Wars* universe. The representation of Rey, the lead female

heroine, could change drastically in this next film. For now, however, my research and analysis of Rey is limited to the first two films in the most recent *Star Wars* trilogy.

“Your focus determines your reality.” - Positionality Statement

Admittedly, I tend to view the world through a feminist lens. When I view/read cultural texts, my interpretations are widely influenced by my interest in feminism. Denzin (1994) explains that qualitative research reflects the biases of class, gender, culture, and ethnicity; hence, objective interpretations are impossible (p. 507). My examination of representation, femininity, power, and identity within the films are guided by my underlying values and motivations. Therefore, my interpretation is influenced by the feminist lens through which I examine the *Star Wars* texts. While this is a factor that is impossible to eliminate entirely, my aim is to not allow my opinions to skew the interpretations. Rather, I do as Olesen (1994) suggests and use my beliefs in feminist theory as a resource to guide my data gathering and create an understanding of my own interpretation of the research. From there, I offer an honest reflection and interpretation based on my findings.

When conducting feminist research, credibility has been a challenge to overcome by critics (Olesen, 1994). Questions about women’s place, identity, agency, and empowerment will not lead to quantifiable results with easy to replicate processes. Instead, subjectivity must be stressed as an important part of feminist projects (Olesen, 1994). Credibility within these studies do not lie within the traditional notions of quantifiable validity. Instead, credibility is found in the lens used to interpret the research and the paradigm or premise on which the research is conducted (Denzin, 1994, p. 13). The premise of my research is a cultural study, focused on a specific form of popular media text. I conducted a close textual and discourse analysis to determine the ways gender and femininity were produced in *Star Wars* films. These methods,

modeled after other peer-reviewed exemplars within the Feminist Media Studies field, helped to ensure confirmability and credibility in my research. Using feminist theory to frame my study provided credibility for the lens in which my findings were interpreted. The major tenets of feminism guided my analysis and understanding throughout this project. My goal was to produce, with fidelity, interpretations of the cultural texts that were clearly derived from the data gathered in my research.

EPISODE IV

WOMEN ALWAYS FIGURE OUT THE TRUTH. ALWAYS – DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter provides an explanation of the data analysis in my investigation of the curriculum of femininity in *Star Wars* films. The purpose of my study was to examine how *Star Wars* as popular culture text forms and performs gender identity. Analysis for this study considered each film in the order of their release and examined feminist themes such as agency, empowerment, and representation as they are portrayed by three female protagonists from the *Star Wars* trilogies: Leia Organa, Padme Amidala, and Rey.

To conduct my investigation, I employed methods of discourse analysis and textual analysis. I first reviewed each of the films and made notes of scenes portraying the female protagonists. I revisited these scenes using concepts from the literature review as initial coding categories to identify instances in the films where issues of power, agency, and salient themes of representation were present. To ensure consistency within each theme, I created a list of specific topics and details to evaluate when coding the dialogue and context of each scene. I will briefly discuss these coding cues now.

When evaluating the heroine's power in the scene I looked for examples of her giving orders/directing the action, speaking with authority/confidence, and being heard without being undermined or subverted. I also examined context to determine if the female looks powerful in comparison to others, possesses given a meaningful position or title of authority, leads the action, or takes charge of a dire situation. Regarding agency, I studied the scenes for portrayals of the female protagonist's individualism; Is she making her own choice? Is she following her own path or quest? Guiding my interrogation of representation in the scenes, I specifically looked at whether the heroine's identity was her own or if it was linked to another character through a

specific relationship. I also looked for examples of traditional stereotypes such as the *damsel*, the princess, the love interest, the object of sexual desire, and the weaker sex. Together these coding categories and guidelines helped me make sense of the emergent data within my study.

Using my notes and preliminary coding scheme as a guide, I purposefully selected representative scenes from each of the eight films (the ninth has not been released) that highlights the female protagonists. The selected scenes are indicative of the overall female representation to which the audience of *Star Wars* films is exposed. Once the scenes were selected, I located the original scripts using two online databases. The scripts for the original trilogy was found on the ScriptSlug database. The others were located at The Internet Movie Script Database (IMSDb). I used the scripts so that I could gain insight into the intention of the writers and directors. Having the script with me while watching the scenes (multiple times) allowed me to more carefully analyze the dialogue and deconstruct the text in terms of visual imagery, context, and implicit and explicit discourse. This analysis led a refined set of themes that were used to identify patterns in the data.

The organization of my presentation of data analysis follows the release order of the *Star Wars* films. In this chapter, the trilogies are presented and analyzed separately. For each trilogy, I provide a brief synopsis. Within the synopsis of each film, I provide character descriptions of the female protagonists. Imbedded within the synopsis and character descriptions, my analysis of the context and dialogue within key scenes are presented. Key feminist themes of agency, empowerment, and traditional, stereotypical, representation are evaluated as they are seen (or not seen) in the female heroines and throughout the trilogies. Finally, I analyze how those themes progress (or regress) over time.

The *Star Wars* storyline was not released chronologically through the films. Viewers were first introduced to *Star Wars* through the original trilogy released in 1977-1983. However, this was not the beginning of the story. Chronologically, the first *Star Wars* trilogy that was released falls in the middle. The second installments of the story, which convey the beginning, consists of the prequel trilogy, released between 1999-2005. The final trilogy, which concludes this particular *Star Wars* saga, was released between 2015 -2019. For the purposes of this study, I investigated the films in release order, not according to the story line's chronology. My investigation focuses on the three trilogies; anthology films such as *Rogue One* and *Solo: A Star Wars Story* are not part of my inquiry.

Princess Leia Organa is the center of my analysis of female representation during the original trilogy. My analysis of the prequel trilogy highlights the characteristics of its female lead, Queen Padme Amidala. When analyzing the final trilogy, Rey becomes the primary focus of the study. However, I also revisit Leia Organa's character as she appears in the final episodes of the saga.

“You must learn the ways of the Force.” - The Original Trilogy

The original *Star Wars* film trilogy consists of *Episodes IV – VI*. The key characters within these films are: Princess Leia Organa, Luke Skywalker, Obi Wan Kenobi, Han Solo, Darth Vader and Darth Sidious. A description of each of these characters and their basic contribution to the plot follows:

The Rebel Alliance consists of Jedi Knights, supporters of the old Republic who are fighting to return democracy to the galaxy, and generally those who believe in the light side of the Force. Secretly plotting for the Rebel Alliance is Princess Leia Organa. She is a young Princess who was adopted by the royal family of Alderaan. She is elected as a senator of the

planet Alderaan and later becomes a leader in the Rebel Alliance to bring down the evil Galactic Empire and the Sith Lords who control it.

The hero of the trilogy, Luke Skywalker, starts out as a young farmer, raised by his aunt and uncle on the planet of Tatooine. After meeting Obi Wan Kenobi, he becomes a Jedi Knight in training and has a very strong connection with the Force. Obi Wan Kenobi is a former Jedi Master who leaves his self-imposed exile on the planet of Tatooine to help Luke Skywalker save the Princess and destroy the Death Star. Han Solo, a wise cracking smuggler and skilled pilot of the Millennium Falcon, is paid to give Obi Wan and Luke transportation but then becomes entangled with the Rebel Alliance.

The villains in this trilogy are Darth Sidious, Darth Vader, their army of stormtroopers, and sympathizers who support the Empire and the dark side. Sith Lord Darth Sidious names himself Emperor of the Galactic Empire and uses the dark side of the Force as a source of his power. His Sith Apprentice, Darth Vader, is the second ranking officer in the Empire. Vader uses the dark side of the Force and becomes increasingly more powerful. Spoiler alert: In a plot twist, it is revealed that he is the father of Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa who (plot twist again) are twins separated at birth. Both Sith Lords desire to turn Luke Skywalker to the dark side in hopes of shifting the balance of the Force in their favor.

Plot Summary of Episode IV: A New Hope (1977)

Star Wars begins in the middle of its story line. From the opening crawl, audiences are made aware that the Rebels are the good guys and the Empire is bad.

On her way to deliver the stolen blueprints of the Death Star to the Rebels, Princess Leia Organa's ship is captured by the Empire. When Leia realizes the breach in security on her space ship, she sends a droid, R2D2, in an escape pod, entrusting R2D2 with the responsibility of

delivering her message and the blueprints to a Jedi, Obi Wan Kenobi. Princess Leia is then captured by the Sith Lord, Darth Vader, and held captive inside the Death Star, the Empire's base and ultimate weapon. After coming in possession of the R2D2 droid, Luke Skywalker, along with Obi Wan Kenobi and Han Solo embark on a mission to deliver the blue prints, destroy the Death Star, and save Princess Leia.

Plot Summary of Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back (1980)

The action begins three years after the rebels destroyed the Death Star. Darth Vader escaped the destruction and seeks revenge on the rebels. A new Rebel base has been established on the ice planet of Hoth.

At the start of *Episode V*, Princess Leia is seen as a leader among the rebels on the planet Hoth. She remains busy at command central, viewing monitors, occasionally relaying orders based on the decisions of General Rieekan. Without warning, the evil Empire learns the location of the new base and Darth Vader orders a ground attack on Hoth. Under heavy enemy fire, Rebels are forced to evacuate. Escaping the Empire's attack on Hoth, Luke Skywalker heads to Dagobah where he receives Jedi training from Yoda. Princess Leia, Han Solo, and Chewbacca fly away, dodging an onslaught of laserfire from the pursuing enemy TIE fighters.

Aboard the Millennium Falcon, Han and Leia share their first kiss. Then, they travel to Cloud City for refuge; but, *It's a trap!* Vader tracks them down, captures the team, and freezes Han Solo in carbonite. Luke Skywalker senses that his friends are in danger and heads to Cloud City to rescue them. Again, *It's a trap!* Luke ends up in a light saber duel with Darth Vader in which Vader cuts off Luke's hand then reveals that he is, in fact, Luke's father. Meanwhile, Lando Carlissian, a resident of Cloud City, comes to rescue Princess Leia. Together they return

to save Luke Skywalker. This time, the battle between good and evil was a draw; fans would have to return for the next film to find any resolve.

Plot Summary of Episode VI: Return of the Jedi (1983)

The final episode of the first trilogy begins with Princess Leia and Lando Calrissian orchestrating a rescue for Han Solo, who is still frozen in carbonite and hanging on Jabba the Hutt's wall. However, in the process of rescuing Han she gets them both caught. Leia is made Jabba's slave and Han is imprisoned. Once again, Leia is a *damsel in distress*. This time, however, her flowing gowns have been replaced with a golden, metal, bikini. Luke Skywalker shows up to rescue Leia and Han, ultimately he causes a distraction which allows Leia an opportunity to free herself. Together, the team escapes from Jabba's army.

Meanwhile, the Sith Lords and evil Galactic Empire have created yet another ultimate weapon, another Death Star, but larger. The Rebel Alliance sends *General* Han Solo, Princess Leia, and Luke Skywalker to Endor. The team must disable the new Death Star's defense shield so the Rebel pilots can fire upon and effectively destroy the Empire's weapon. *It's a trap!* Vader knew they were coming and a battle ensues on Endor. Luke Skywalker, sensing Vader through the Force, realizes he must to confront him to keep his sister, Leia, and his friends safe; but, *It's a trap!* Luke has to face Vader and Sidious to save the galaxy and bring balance to the Force.

“Maybe you'd like it back in your cell, Your Highness?” - Analysis of Princess Leia

Princess Leia in Episode IV: A New Hope (1977)

Throughout *Episode IV: A New Hope*, Princess Leia is primarily motivated by her desire to destroy the Death Star, defeat the evil Empire and restore the Republic. She is placed at the center of the plot as she tries to carry out a plan to deliver the Death Star's blueprints to the

Rebel Alliance. Princess Leia's capture and rescue scenes were selected for this portion of her character analysis. Leia's strong personality is first revealed when she is caught by stormtroopers and brought before Darth Vader. When facing the evil Sith Lord for the first time, she stands firm though she's bound in cuffs, and surrounded by troopers, she speaks first "Lord Vader, I should have known. Only you could be so bold. The Imperial Senate will not sit for this when they hear you've attacked a diplomat." Upon the first impression of Leia, she appears brave, resourceful, intelligent, and outspoken.

The same tenacity is demonstrated by her character when Princess Leia is escorted into the Death Star's control room and faces Governor Moff Tarkin. She speaks boldly, "Governor Tarkin, I should have expected to find you holding Vader's leash. I recognized your foul stench when I was brought on board." He replies, "Charming to the last. You don't know how hard I found it signing the order to terminate your life!" Remaining prideful, Leia reacts, "I'm surprised you had the courage to take the responsibility yourself!" (Lucas et al. & Lucas, 1977). Again, the initial portrayal, when only considering Leia's words, is indicative of a strong female character whose progressive representation defies stereotypes.

While Leia's boldness and bravery are demonstrated in the faces of Vader and Tarkin, the imagery in these scenes tells quite a different story for her character. Lucas et al. & Lucas (1977) wrote her character to have to have outspoken opinions; yet, he still purposefully created Princess Leia to be weak in many ways. To see this, we can refer back to the aforementioned moment when she comes to face to face with Vader for the first time. Lucas et al. & Lucas (1977) sets the scene: "Princess Leia...hands are bound and she is brutally shoved when she is unable to keep up with the briskly marching troops...Darth Vader emerges from the shadows. The sinister Dark Lord stares hard at the frail young senator, she doesn't move." This imagery

evoked by this scene shows how small and helpless Leia looks in comparison to the seven-foot-tall Vader. Lucas et al. & Lucas (1977) wanted her to look *frail* and vulnerable.

The instance in the control room with Governor Tarkin creates a similar image of helplessness for Leia. As Tarkin demands information about the location of the rebel base, her hands are bound and she is escorted by Vader. Tarkin towers over her, he moves towards her until Leia is backed into the chest of Darth Vader. She appears small, weak, and vulnerable as she stands sandwiched between the two villains. She clearly needs someone to come to her rescue. Along with being weak and vulnerable, Leia's character succumbs to several other ideological assumptions concerning her gender as the trilogy progresses.

One assumption that is reinforced through Princess Leia's character is that female protagonists are meant to be beautiful and in need of help. After being sent away by Leia during the ambush of her space ship, R2D2 comes under the possession of Luke Skywalker, a young man with dreams of becoming a fighter pilot. As Luke fiddles with the droid, a fragmented message is delivered through a hologram of Leia. She pleads, "Help me Obi Wan Kenobi. You are my only Hope" (Lucas et al. & Lucas, 1977). Luke is immediately fascinated with her looks, "Who is she? She's beautiful." Princess Leia Organa is cast to be very beautiful. In fact, repeatedly in the original script, Lucas describes her as "beautiful," "the beautiful young princess," and "staggeringly beautiful" (Lucas et al. & Lucas, 1977). Throughout the first released episode she is dressed in a long white flowing dress, with loose long sleeves. Her body is covered from the dress' mock turtleneck all the way to her white boots. She wears a silver belt to draw in the waist line. Her hair is fixed in two buns placed on each side of her head. Luke, cannot get the image of the 'beautiful princess' out of his head. His instinct is to come to her aid and rescue her.

Finally, after R2D2 finds Obi Wan Kenobi, we hear the complete content of hologram recorded by Leia,

General Kenobi. Years ago, you served my father in the Clone Wars. Now he begs you to help him in his struggle against the Empire. I regret that I am unable to present my father's request to you in person, but my ship has fallen under attack and I'm afraid my mission to bring you to Alderaan has failed. I have placed information vital to the survival of the Rebellion into the memory systems of this R2 unit. My father will know how to retrieve it. You must see this droid safely delivered to him on Alderaan. This is our most desperate hour. Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You're my only hope (Lucas et al. & Lucas, 1977).

The full message reveals that Leia is not asking for someone to rescue her, instead she is asking Obi Wan to complete her mission for her since she has been taken captive. With neither Luke nor Obi Wan in possession of a space ship, they persuade a pilot/ smuggler, Han Solo to provide them transportation aboard Han's ship, the Millennium Falcon. Together the male protagonists start their mission to deliver the plans to the Rebels. When they arrive the Rebel base has already been destroyed by the Death Star. The crew discovers...*It's a trap!* Their space ship is captured by the Empire. Now, inside the Death Star their plans change. Luke, still preoccupied with the idea of saving the beautiful Princess, orchestrates a plan to rescue Princess Leia before destroying the Death Star.

Leia's character in *Episode IV: A New Hope* in some ways delivers conflicting messages concerning her agency and empowerment. Her boldness to speak her mind, remain brave during

her imprisonment, and her role as a leader in the Rebel Alliance contradict stereotypical representations of women in film. She does not cower when facing Vader and Tarkin. She does not explicitly ask Obi Wan to come to her rescue. Instead, she is more motivated to have the blueprints delivered to the Rebels than she is to have Obi Wan come to her. However, the emphasis on her beauty and her helplessness to escape Vader on her own has quite the opposite effect on her character's validity as a feminist model.

To truly and effectively deconstruct the representation of the female heroine in this first *Star Wars* film, one must look beyond what is said and how it is said, another layer of each scene must be examined. Along with the dialogue, the context, the visual, must be deconstructed to discover how Leia is represented and what messages this representation conveys to the audience. For deeper examination into the character of Princess Leia in this film, I selected a scene that displays the nuances of Leia's character in this film, Princess Leia's rescue from the Death Star. In this scene, the visual, the bodies, gaze, gestures, context, along with the dialogue reveal messages about gender that repeatedly surface throughout *Episode IV*.

“This is some rescue.” To set the stage, Luke Skywalker, Obi Wan Kenobi and Han Solo have been forced to enter the Death Star when their space ship was pulled into the Empire's base. Soon, they learn that Leia is aboard the space station, Luke convinces Han that they must rescue her before they escape the Empire's base. They attack two stormtroopers and steal their armored uniforms. Luke makes his way to Leia's detention cell while Han keeps a lookout down the hallway. Below, the scene description and dialogue are from Lucas et al. & Lucas' (1977) original script:

Luke stops in front of one of the cells and blasts the door away with a laser pistol. When the smoke clears, Luke sees the dazzling young princess-senator. She had been sleeping and is

now looking at him with an uncomprehending look on her face.

Luke is stunned by her incredible beauty and stands staring at her with his mouth hanging open.

LEIA: (finally) Aren't you a little short to be a stormtrooper?

Luke takes off his helmet, coming out of it.

LUKE: What? Oh... the uniform. I'm Luke Skywalker. I'm here to rescue you.

LEIA: You're who?

LUKE: I'm here to rescue you. I've got your R2 unit. I'm here with Ben Kenobi.

LEIA: Ben Kenobi is here! Where is he?

LUKE: Come on! (Lucas et al. & Lucas, 1977).

When the scene first begins, Lucas et al. & Lucas' (1977) description reveals a lot about the way in which he wanted Leia to be seen. He intended for her to be the object of the *male gaze* (Mulvey, 1975). He writes, "When the smoke clears, Luke sees the dazzling young princess-senator. She had been sleeping...Luke is stunned by her incredible beauty and stands staring at her with his mouth hanging open" (Lucas et al. & Lucas, 1977). Leia was meant to be a source of visual pleasure in a galaxy dominated by men.

As Princess Leia wakes and looks up at her rescuer, she rises to a position that remains visually pleasing. She was in a side-lying position then rises up to place her weight on one hand, her knees are slightly flexed under her body. One foot wraps slightly around the calve of the opposite leg. Her back is slightly arched drawing attention to her silhouette and accentuating the curve outlining her buttocks. The soft white dress creates a deep contrast against the dark black

walls and bench upon which she lay. As Luke enters the room, he is “stunned” and the camera lingers, pausing on her beauty.

Luke stands awestruck at her beauty, there is a purposeful pause, the camera is allowed to linger a little longer so that we may see the beauty that Luke sees. The action resumes with Leia remarking, “Aren’t you a little short to be a stormtrooper?” (Lucas et al. & Lucas, 1977). Her words are meant to insult the presumed stormtrooper entering her cell and her delivery of this comical comment shows her boldness. However, immediately after she speaks, Luke declares with confidence, “I’m Luke Skywalker. I’m here to rescue you!” (Lucas et al. & Lucas, 1977). Here, she is represented as a *damsel in distress* (Zeisler, 2008).

Leia’s role is to be objectified; her power to stop men in their tracks comes from her beauty, not her intellect or strength. She remained helpless and a damsel until Luke, intrigued by her beauty, could not stop thinking about her plea to Obi Wan Kenobi, “Help me, Obi Wan Kenobi! You are my only hope!” This leads him to seek her out inside the Death Star and rescue her from the evil clutches of Darth Vader. Despite her bold personality and her outspokenness, the fact remains, she was held captive and sought no escape herself. She sat (or rather slept) passively in her detention cell awaiting her own execution. It was only when she hears Luke explain that he is with Obi Wan Kenobi does she finally move towards her rescuer and attempt to escape with him.

As Luke and Leia leave her cell and head down the hall, they realize Han and Chewbacca have been spotted by stormtroopers and they are blocked in. The scene plays out:

Luke and Leia crouch together in an alcove for protection as they continue to exchange fire with troops. Han and Chewbacca are barely able to keep the stormtroopers at bay at the far end

of the hallway. The laserfire is very intense, and smoke fills the narrow cell corridor.

LUKE: There isn't any other way out.

HAN: I can't hold them off forever! Now what?

LEIA: This is some rescue. When you came in here, didn't you have a plan for getting out?

HAN: (pointing to Luke) He's the brains, sweetheart. (Lucas et al. & Lucas, 1977).

Princess Leia quickly let her male rescuers know that she was disappointed in their failures and their poorly thought out mission. She contradicts the expected gratitude that a female *damsel* usually bestows upon her rescuers. Instead, she snidely maintained, "This is some rescue. When you came in here, didn't you have a plan for getting out?" (Lucas et al. & Lucas, 1977). Leia clearly expected more of her liberators and she did not mind letting them know. Again, her quick wit and outspokenness defy expected feminine behavior. However, upon a deeper examination, the power she exerts is immediately subverted by a male protagonist, Han Solo. In this moment he replies, sarcastically, "He's the brains, sweetheart." The term "sweetheart" is used sardonically; he intends to 'put her in her place.' Solo's remarks are patronizing and insinuates his superiority over Leia. To this remark, she had no reply. The outspoken Princess was silenced.

Throughout this film (and others in the original trilogy), we continually see an undermining of her boldness in her exchanges with Solo. When they have no route of escape, she snapped at Solo, "You managed to cut off our only escape route!" Her frustration was apparent and she let her rescuers know. However, in line with his persona, Solo angrily insists "Maybe

you would like it back in your cell, Your Highness!” Again, his sarcasm challenges her and effectively quietens Leia’s voice. He exerts his dominance and subverts her power.

As the rescue from the Death Star proceeds, Leia is repeatedly seen ducking behind Luke or Han. Although she remains openly critical of their decisions, she still follows them and uses them as a shield from laser bullets. The males are seen at forefront to the action and the cameras demonstrating bravery. Meanwhile, she depends on them for her protection against the Imperial troops as they chase them down the corridor. She stands behind them, hiding, using them as her shield. This suggests that she is vulnerable and needs the protection of the strong male heroes.

With the team trapped, with no way out, the audience is allowed a brief glimpse of Princess Leia’s resourcefulness and decisiveness. She quickly thought of plan to *save their skins* by shooting an escape hole through the wall; but, her plan was immediately questioned by Han then demeaned when it led them to a smelly garbage chute. He remarks “Oh what a lovely smell you’ve found.” (Lucas et al. & Lucas, 1977) Then, when she demanded he put his blaster away after his stray laser bullet almost killed everyone, he defensively (and sarcastically) replies, “Absolutely, Your Worship. Look, I had everything under control until you led us all down here!” (Lucas et al. & Lucas, 1977) With each of Han Solo’s comebacks, Leia’s power is subverted and her voice diminished. His intentions were meant to embarrass her for speaking up and prevent her from doing it again.

While some fans liken Princess Leia to a feminist heroine in *Episode IV*. The analysis of the discourse and text tell a different story. Her representation as the “Princess,” *damsel*, the subject of visual pleasure (Mulvey, 1975), and eventual love interest, of the man who repeatedly subverts her authority overshadows her role as an Imperial Senator and a leader in the Rebel Alliance. In some moments within this film, Leia does display some agency. She set the Rebel

plan in motion to destroy the Death Star. And, during her rescue, she quickly thinks up and implements her plans at various moments in their escape. However, once introduced to the “heroes,” she mostly follows the direction and plans of Luke Skywalker. As her rescue continues, she loses power and agency through her interactions and dialogue with Han Solo. Along with her passivity in awaiting rescue, she allows her voice to be quietened when her authority or words are mocked by Solo.

Princess Leia’s gender in this film afforded her a specific space/place for her to occupy within the *Star Wars* saga. Leia falls into traditional stereotypes in *Star Wars: Episode IV A New Hope*. She is represented as a *damsel in distress*. Despite her bold personality and her outspokenness, the fact remains, she was held captive and sought no escape herself. Along with her passivity in awaiting rescue, she allows her voice to be quietened when her authority or words are mocked by Solo. This episode reproduced and reinforces the female stereotypes; she is the object of beauty, she needs to be rescued, she is frail and vulnerable, and despite her intellect it is okay for males to challenge and subvert her power. *Episode IV* effectively set the tone for her ‘place’ in the original trilogy’s storyline. Males are the saviors and heroes of this story and males deserve the accolades for their bravery and success in defeating the enemy.

Much in line with the dominant stereotype, the males in this film receive awards for their successful destruction of the Death Star. Although often placed in a situation of needing rescue or protection, it was Princess Leia who, in the beginning, risks her life to obtain the blueprints of the Death Star and sets in motion the plan to destroy it. Nevertheless, Leia is not a recipient of the bravery medals that Luke Skywalker and Han Solo are awarded and the end of *Episode IV*. Instead, she was the “beautiful Princess” who placed the medals around the heroes’ necks. This

reaffirms the ideological assumptions about her gender; her role, as a female in this saga is to look pretty and thank the men, the real *heroes*, for their accomplishments.

Princess Leia in Episode IV: The Empire Strikes Back (1980)

The scene selected for this portion of Leia's character analysis is Princess Leia and Han's first kiss.

Upon learning that Han Solo planned to leave the base at Hoth to settle old debt with Jabba the Hutt, Leia briefly abandons her post in the control room to chase Han down to ask him to stay. In their exchange, Leia is challenged by Han to admit her feelings for him. When she refuses, he becomes angry and in his frustration, he yells "You could use a good kiss!" (Lucas & Kershner, 1980). The assumption here is that a *good kiss* could tame Leia, make her more docile, and they would both be better off.

During the Empire's attack on Hoth, Leia is back at her post, giving out commands in an attempt to save as much of the base and as many rebels as possible. However, when Han returns, the command center is in chaos. It has been hit, debris is falling, and alarms are sounding. Leia is so focused on her duties, she ignored the dangers surrounding her. Seeing the danger imposed to Leia if she stays in the center any longer, he grabs Leia by the arm and says "Come on. That's it!" (Lucas & Kershner, 1980). Leia barely resists his demands as he pushes her out of the command center. She submits to Han's male authority and follows him on board the Millennium Falcon.

Chased by an onslaught of Imperial TIE fighters, Han, Leia, and the Falcon team, hide out in an asteroid field until it's safe to leave. Here, Leia and Han have their first intimate moment on screen. It is this moment/scene that I have decided to deconstruct for my inquiry into the curriculum of femininity taught in *Episode V*.

“You could use a good kiss!” In this scene, Princess Leia and Han Solo have escaped the Empire’s attack on Hoth. While they hide out aboard the Millennium Falcon they share their first kiss. Lucas & Kershner’s (1980) original script sets the stage inside the Millennium Falcon’s mechanical room.

Leia finishes welding the valves she has been working on and attempts to reengage the system by pulling a lever attached to the valve. It doesn't budge. Han notices her struggle, and moves to help her. She rebuffs him.

HAN: (CONT'D) Hey, Your Worship, I'm only trying to help.

LEIA: (still struggling) Would you please stop calling me that?

Han hears a new tone in her voice. He watches her pull on the lever.

HAN: Sure, Leia.

LEIA: Oh, you make it so difficult sometimes.

HAN: I do, I really do. You could be a little nicer, though (he watches her reaction) (Lucas & Kershner, 1980).

Immediately upon entering the scene, Han assumes Leia needs his help. Leia, representing the *weaker sex* throughout this scene, is struggling to turn a lever in the mechanical room of the Millennium Falcon. Han walks over to help her. He reaches over her body with both arms around her and grabs the lever. Without warning, without asking, he surrounds her whole body with his. Presumably, this is okay...or at least it is in so many popular culture love stories and romantic comedies. However, at this moment, Leia shoves him off, seemingly suspicious of his motives. Here, Leia’s response is contradictory to the expected assumptions concerning her gender. Instead of accepting his help and leaning in to his body as he uses his strength to come to

her assistance, she appears insulted. At her rebuff, Han backs off, “Hey, Your Worship, I'm only trying to help.”

Nearly a dozen times over the two films we have heard Han patronizingly call her these ironic terms of “your highness,” “your majesty,” “princess” and “sweetheart.” Each time his words were intentionally insulting and worked to quieten Leia. Now, finally, we hear Leia advocating for herself. She asks him “would you please stop calling me that?” At last, she seems to be regaining her agency and power. However, upon a closer examination of the scene and the script notes, we notice Leia’s request was meant to evoke something other than advocacy and strength. The script reads, “Han hears a new tone in her voice.” It is unclear what tone, exactly Lucas & Kershner (1980) intended for Han to hear. But, whatever tone it was, Han must have been interpreted as an invitation to make sexual advances towards Leia, or at the very least exploit his “emotional power” over her.

After admittedly being “difficult,” Han then tells Leia, “you could be a little nicer, though” (Lucas and Kershner, 1980). With these words, he is asking Leia to become more like the stereotypical women we are used to seeing. She needs to be more passive, less outspoken, and even more subordinate. She needs to be more *feminine*.

Then, the scene continues:

HAN: Come on, admit it. Sometimes you think I'm all right.

She lets go of the lever and rubs her sore hand.

LEIA: Occasionally... (a little smile, haltingly) ... when you aren't acting like a scoundrel.

HAN: (laughs) Scoundrel? Scoundrel? I like the sound of that.

With that, Han takes her hand and starts to massage it.

LEIA: Stop that.

HAN: Stop what?

Leia is flushed, confused.

LEIA: Stop that! My hands are dirty.

HAN: My hands are dirty, too. What are you afraid of?

LEIA: (looking right into his eyes) Afraid?

Han looks at her with a piercing look. He's never looked more handsome, more dashing, more confident. He reaches out slowly and takes Leia's hand again from where it is resting on a console. He draws it toward him. (Lucas & Kershner, 1980).

The visual text of this moment is very telling of the gender assumptions made in this film. As Han speaks to Leia, he moves in closer and closer to her until their faces are just a few inches apart. He is towering over her. While talking and walking slowly towards her, he backs Leia against a mechanical wall and is pressing against her when he talks. The script notes describe Han's looks, "He's never looked more handsome, more dashing more confident" (Lucas & Kershner, 1980). Now, Leia is challenged with resisting the sexual magnetism of Han Solo. Being the *weaker sex*, she will not be able to put up much of a fight.

HAN: You're trembling.

LEIA: I'm not trembling.

Then with an irresistible combination of physical strength and emotional power, the space pirate begins to draw Leia toward him... very slowly.

HAN: You like me because I'm a scoundrel. There aren't enough scoundrels in your life.

Leia is now very close to Han and as she speaks, her voice becomes an excited whisper, a tone completely in opposition to her words.

LEIA: I happen to like nice men.

HAN: I'm a nice man.

LEIA: No, you're not. You're...

He kisses her now, with slow, hot lips. He takes his time, as though he had forever, bending her body backward. She has never been kissed like this before, and it almost makes her faint. When he stops, she regains her breath and tries to work up some indignation, but finds it hard to talk, (Lucas & Kershner, 1980).

According to the script, Han used his “irresistible combination of physical strength and emotional power...to draw Leia toward him.” The depiction on screen is quite different. In fact, he kept moving towards her until she could not back up any further. She was up against a wall and he still kept advancing. Han was able to lower her defenses by rubbing her hand and moving in closely. His *handsome* and *dashing* looks and confidence inside the confines of a small dark space were too much for the vulnerable Leia to resist any further...if, in fact, she really wanted to. Even though his actions are not overtly violent, he has still demonstrated his role as the sexual aggressor and dominant male. Han’s forward advances were enough to “excite” Leia and he was able to give her the *good kiss* she could *use*.

A common element in the discourse throughout this scene seems to be Leia saying the opposite of what she means. Leia calls Han a scoundrel, asks him to stop rubbing her hand, and even tells him she likes *nice* men. However, what we see happening is the opposite. She calls

him a scoundrel but smiles when she says it. She says “Stop that” but allows him to keep rubbing her hand. She says she’s not afraid but is trembling. Then, she passionately kisses the not-so-nice man. Was she intentionally playing hard to get? Was she just having a hard time admitting her own feelings? Or did she mean all of it, but his “slow, hot lips” changed her mind? The answers to these questions are dubious. Her ability to resist his advances are obscured. Then, after a kiss from Han Solo she almost *faints* and finds it hard to talk (Lucas & Kershner, 1980). Surely, her lack of resistance, her passivity, to the kiss indicates that she was asking it for it the whole time, right? The implicit lesson taught here is that girls do not always say what they mean. Perhaps, “no” means “yes.” She submits to his sexual advances and ultimately proves Han right. Almost immediately, her role becomes more supportive and docile.

This scene reinforces gender roles in the representation portrayed by Leia. She is now putty in the bad-boy’s hand. All she needed was a good kiss to shut her up. As the stereotypical love-interest, Leia’s role and leadership repeatedly takes a backseat to Han’s. The context and visual imagery surrounding Han and Leia’s first kiss shows Han Solo’s “*emotional power*” over Leia. Han’s kiss and her developing relationship to him effectively rendered Leia silent, in more ways than one. Prior to the first kiss scene, we saw Leia relaying orders at the command center, speaking her mind to Han Solo, and openly questioning his plan and skills as pilot as they escaped from Hoth. From this scene forward, Leia’s storyline in the original trilogy becomes almost exclusively attached to Han Solo’s. Her quest is not her own.

Princess Leia is subsequently portrayed as more affectionate, more “feminine.” Her character transitions from being the leader of the Rebel Alliance to being a love interest for the bad-boy, smuggler, pilot. Her identity becomes almost exclusively linked to Han Solo. This reinforces the common portrayal of women, they can be successful; however, they must also

remain submissive to men and identified in relation to a man. So, in terms of offering an ideal feminist lead, her character succumbs to another traditional female trope: the love interest of a hero. Once a revolutionary, now, Leia is the romantic lead. She remains the object of male desire.

Shortly after their kiss, Han and Leia seek refuge in Cloud City through an old friend of Han's, Lando Carlissian. Despite her reservations, Leia submits to Han and agrees to go to Cloud City. But, Lando betrays Han and turns the rebels over to Darth Vader who intends to use the team as bait to lure Luke Skywalker to him. He freezes Han in Carbonite and gives him to the bounty hunter, Boba Fett, who plans to collect the bounty set on Han by Jabba the Hut. Leia and Chewbacca are held hostage. The *damsel in distress* trope reappears as the Princess waits, passively, in peril for a male to rescue her.

Through the Force, Luke senses his friends are in danger and leaves Dagobah to rescue his friends only to be faced with Darth Vader's seething hatred and red lightsaber. Through Force telepathy, Luke calls for Leia. She feels Luke is in danger leading Lando and Leia to return and save Luke. This is an important moment for Leia's character; it shows that the Force is also *strong with this one*. It establishes the potential for what she could become in the *Star Wars* saga – the potential to be a savior/hero like Luke Skywalker. To the disappointment of many, the potential for Leia to become a Jedi, or at the very least, learn to use the Force to aid in the Rebellion, was lost with the conclusion of the first trilogy.

Princess Leia in Episode VI: Return of the Jedi (1983)

In search of a scene from *Episode VI* to deconstruct, one which I believed would not only show Leia's character and personality but would also symbolize her role in the film's overall storyline, I ultimately decided to use the golden bikini scene. This decision was not easy because

I wanted to refrain from using such an obvious scene to conduct my inquiry. I was fearful that my choice would be regarded as limited in scope and/or cherry-picked to prove my point.

However, upon watching the film for what I think is my sixth time and combing through every line of the original script at least twice, I came to the conclusion that this scene is too important to omit.

It is a formative scene for many reasons. Arguably, it is the scene that Leia is most famous for among the trilogy. On the theatrical release poster, she is posed front center in her golden bikini, shoulders back, arms at her side. While Han and Luke are portrayed mid-action, Luke with his light saber drawn and Han with his blaster aimed and ready. The image of Leia in her golden bikini has inspired costumes for both cosplay and foreplay. It is the scene which many men have found sexual pleasure in viewing. The beautiful heroine in bondage, wearing almost nothing, is not an image soon to be forgotten for *Star Wars* viewers and has become an iconic piece of our popular culture history.

“Where’s Leia?” Lucas et al. & Marquand (1983) provide this description of the scene in the original script:

INT JABBA'S THRONE ROOM

Jabba is asleep on his throne, with Leia lying in front of him. Salacious sits by Jabba's tail, watching it wriggle. Leia is now dressed in the skimpy costume of a dancing girl; a chain runs from a manacle/necklace at her throat to her new master, Jabba the Hutt. Threepio stands behind Jabba as Bib comes up to the gangster slug.

Luke Skywalker enters demanding the release of his friends. He even attempts to use

Jedi mind tricks to persuade Jabba to cooperate. It's not until later on, when Luke is escaping the palace that enough commotion occurs to distract Jabba's focus from Leia. She then grabs the chain with which he enslaved her and wraps it around his neck, strangling Jabba to death. The script reads:

Leia turns from the spectacle outside, leaps onto Jabba's throne, and throws the chain that enslaves her over his head around his bulbous neck. Then she dives off the other side of the throne, pulling the chain violently in her grasp. Jabba's flaccid neck contracts beneath the tightening chain. His huge eyes bulge from their sockets and his scum-coated tongue flops out. The Exalted Hutt's huge tail spasms through its death throes and then slams down into final stillness. Leia struggles to free herself of her bondage (Lucas et al. & Marquand, 1983).
Leia manages to break free and join Luke Skywalker and the team in their escape.

The visual context for this scene is full of elements to be analyzed. First, Leia's costume must be deconstructed. The skimpy golden bikini almost reveals her entire body. Her legs, slim stomach, arms, and chest are all visible as she sits in front of Jabba the Hutt. Leia is almost entirely exposed and vulnerable. Her positioning, seated at the front of Jabba, places her at the center of the camera's focus. Leia's seductive posture, leaning to the side, propped up on one hand, legs slightly flexed at the knees, with her shoulders back accentuates her curves and small figure. It is reminiscent of her posture in *A New Hope* when Luke rescued her for the first time. The chains and bondage, extended from her throat to her 'master,' add another element to this text. She is on a short leash. She is the slave of a male gangster slug. This confirms male

dominance over her. In fact, the script calls him “her new master” (Lucas et al. & Marquand, 1983). She is an object to be desired and owned.

Similar to what we have seen in the previous two episodes, Leia’s character starts out strong and in charge. She demonstrates her bravery as she orchestrates a plan to free Han. Leia manages to free Han. However, all of that progress was deliberately undermined by her slavery scene in Jabba’s throne room. Princess Leia’s golden bikini was a deliberate attempt to place her at the center of male gaze. Leia’s “skimpy costume of a dancing girl” provides the male audience with visual (if not also, sexual) pleasure. Throughout the original trilogy, Leia was the only character to be sexualized and objectified in the films. She is the only character repeatedly described by her “stunning” and “dazzling” beauty in the script. She exists, at least in part, for the visual pleasure of others. The golden bikini provides proof of that.

The dialogue in the golden bikini scenes focus on the men. Though clearly seen as Jabba’s slave girl, the men make no mention of her near nakedness and bondage. Luke demands their release, Jabba refuses. When Han is brought in, cuffed, to stand before Jabba, he doesn’t immediately recognize the Princess and asks “Where’s Leia?” she replies, “I’m here” These are Leia’s only words throughout her captivity and escape. She is rendered powerless by her chains and the outspoken Princess was silenced. In this scene, Leia is once again the *damsel in distress* (Zeisler, 2008).

It is only after Luke Skywalker shows up to save his friends and ultimately creates a distraction that Leia takes matters into her own hands. She manages to kill Jabba the Hut with the very chains he was using to enslave her. Although she does manage to regain her power and escape the chains of bondage on her own this time, the damage to her character and all that it

represents had already been done. In this film, the audience is left with two memorable things from Leia, “she is Luke’s sister?!” And “Wow! How about Leia in that golden bikini!?”

For the remainder of the *Episode VI*, Leia remains somewhat of a minor character in terms of changing the trajectory of the plot or saving the galaxy. Her story reunites with Han and she forfeits her agency to follow his paths and his plans. After their escape from Jabba, they are sent on a new mission to help the Rebels destroy a weapon deadlier than the Death Star. Leia’s role as a leader has almost completely disappeared. Han is referred to as a “General” for the Rebel Alliance. Leia is still Princess, a title which has very little meaning or power in the Rebel Alliance or the evil Galactic Empire. While she does volunteer to accompany Han’s team to Endor for the sake of the rebel mission, it is not clear to the audience whether she does this out of duty or out her need to be with Han.

On Endor, Leia takes the lead when trying to chase down stormtroopers. She races through the wilderness at 200 mph on hovering speed bikes. However, for the larger part of this film, she remains dependent on Han to make decisions. She follows his commands. Leia’s emotional dependence on Han is also evident; when she learns that she is Luke’s twin and the daughter of Darth Vader, she turns to Han Solo, needing him to hold her. She has regressed into something more docile, tame, and vulnerable than what we see in her first encounter with him in *Episode IV*.

To conclude the story presented in the original trilogy, Through the force, Vader senses Luke’s presence. Luke realizes that as long as he is with the team, he puts them in danger. Luke leaves to confront Vader. When Vader brings Luke to Darth Sidious (Palpatine) he tries to convince Luke to give in to his anger and kill his father. Luke’s refusal to kill Vader enrages Darth Sidious and he electrocutes Luke with Force lightning. To save his son, Vader picks up

the Emperor and throws him down a shaft to his death. The act of redemption by Vader ultimately costs him his life as he was mortally injured by the Emperor's lightning.

The team on Endor effectively disabled the new Death Star's defensive shield, allowing Rebel pilots to destroy the weapon. With the death of the Sith Lords, Darth Vader's return to the light side, and destruction of the Empire's base, balance was restored to the Galaxy...for a time. In their efforts to defeat the Empire, Leia assists Han in fending off stormtroopers with her blaster as Han breaks down the bunker door standing between him and the defense shield. She remains brave and devoted to the Rebel cause; however, she now appears as a subject of Han's and his sidekick in the mission to defeat the Empire. Leia's potential to be a strong feminist representation died with the Empire. In this final episode of the original trilogy, she was effectively sexualized and marginalized.

“This disturbance in the Force is growing stronger.” - The Prequel Trilogy

The *Star Wars* prequel trilogy consists of *Episodes I–III*. These episodes lay the foundation for the events leading to the civil war between the Rebel Alliance and the evil Galactic Empire occurring in the original trilogy. This trilogy provides the backstory for many of the main characters of the original trilogy including Obi Wan Kenobi, Yoda, Luke Skywalker, Leia Organa, Darth Sidious, and Darth Vader. The key characters within these films are as follows:

Queen Padme Amidala is a young queen of the planet Naboo. She is an elected senator for the Republic. Eventually, she becomes the love interest of Anakin Skywalker. Anakin Skywalker was raised as a slave on Tatooine, He is only nine years old when he meets Padme. He, then becomes a Jedi apprentice. As an adult, he falls in love with Padme and they secretly

marry. Anakin has a very strong connection with the Force; some believe he is the chosen one to who will return balance to the galaxy.

There are a few Jedi in the trilogy. Qui Gon Jinn is a Jedi Master who meets the young Anakin. He senses his power in the force and convinces the academy to train Anakin. Jedi Knight Obi Wan Kenobi is the apprentice being trained by Qui Gon Jinn. Obi Wan is often placed in charge of protecting Padme Amidala. He later becomes a Jedi Master and trainer of Anakin Skywalker. Mace Windu and Yoda are also Jedi Masters in this film trilogy.

Chancellor Palpatine is another senator of Naboo that works closely with Padme. He manipulates Padme and orchestrates his way to being named Chancellor of the Republic. Later, Palpatine reveals that he is a user of the dark side of the Force. He dismantles the senate and names himself Emperor. He works to corrupt Anakin and is secretly the Sith Lord, Darth Sidious, and creator of the evil Galactic Empire. Throughout the first two episodes, his alter ego remains hidden. He uses his apprentice to carry out his commands publicly. In *Episode I*, Sidious's apprentice is Darth Maul who kills Qui Gon Jinn. Maul is then killed by Obi Wan. In *Episode II*, Sidious has taken on Count Dooku (Darth Tyranus) as his apprentice.

Plot Summary of Episode I: The Phantom Menace (1999)

Episode I: The Phantom Menace begins when The Trade Federation, commanded by a phantom benefactor, Darth Sidious, issues a blockade on the planet of Naboo. Two Jedi, Qui Gon Jinn and Obi Wan Kenobi are sent to the capital city where they rescue Naboo's queen, Padme Amidala.

As the Jedi rescue the Queen, their spaceship is damaged. They are forced to land on the planet of Tatooine to repair their ship. Disguised as a handmade, the queen accompanies them on their trip to the nearby settlement. Here, working as a slave alongside his mom, they meet the

nine-year-old Anakin Skywalker. As Anakin sees Padme for the first time, he notices her beauty and asks “are you an angel?” The two become friends. Sensing that the Force was strong with Anakin, Qui Gon Jinn becomes convinced that the young boy is the ‘chosen one’ meant to restore balance to the force. He takes him on as a Jedi in training.

After Padme makes a request to the Senate to support her in ending the blockade, she realizes the galactic government was too slow to act in her favor, Padme returns to Naboo and devises a plan to save her people. The Jedi and the Gungans help Padme and the people of Naboo to defeat The Trade Federation.

Plot Summary of Episode II: Attack of the Clones (2002)

Ten years have passed since The Trade Federation was forced out of Naboo under the leadership of their Queen, Padme Amidala. Since this time, she has been elected Senator. On a trip to the capital to vote on whether the Republic should have an army, she is nearly killed in an assassination attempt. This once again prompts the Jedi to offer their protection. Jedi master Obi Wan Kenobi and Jedi apprentice Anakin Skywalker, now 19 years old, have been assigned to guard her against future attacks. Anakin is still infatuated with Padme.

When Obi Wan is sent away to search for a bounty hunter responsible for the assassination attempt of Padme, Anakin and Padme are left alone for days and grow closer to each other. He escorts her to her home planet. At her home, in Naboo, the two kiss for the first time. Having visions and sensing his mother is in danger, Anakin returns to his home planet of Tatooine. He was too late to save his mother’s life. In a rage, he seeks vengeance on the people responsible for his death. He kills an entire village of sandpeople, including the women and children.

Shortly after the incident on Tatooine, Anakin and Padme learn that Obi Wan has been captured on the planet of Geonosis. In trying to free Obi Wan, the two are captured as well. The three are chained and thrown into an arena full of onlookers. They have to fight against beasts and countless droids in an arena full of onlookers to survive. Soon, the Jedi arrive to help and a battle ensues against a droid army controlled by Count Dooku. This signifies the beginning of the Clone Wars. At the end of the film, Anakin Skywalker and Padme Amidala are wed in a secret ceremony.

Plot Summary of Episode III: Revenge of the Sith (2005)

The prequel trilogy concludes with *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005). Padme Amidala and Anakin Skywalker remain secretly married. At the beginning of the film, Padme shares the news of her pregnancy with Anakin. Anakin starts to have nightmares about Padme dying in childbirth. His fear of losing her increasingly plagues his mind. His obsession with finding a way to help her live forever intensifies.

Chancellor Palpatine, reveals he is Darth Sidious, and tempts Anakin with the dark side of the Force, as he claims that Anakin can find a way to keep those he loves from ever dying through the dark side. Fearing that he would never learn the secret to save Padme's life if Palpatine dies, Anakin impulsively strikes down Jedi Mace Windu. His actions give Palpatine the opportunity he needed and he killed Windu.

Realizing what he had done and the role he played in Windu's death, Anakin knows he can never go back to the Jedi Council. There, he pledges his allegiance to Palpatine, the Sith Order, and the dark side. Palpatine gives Anakin a new name, Darth Vader. Following the orders of his new master, Darth Vader goes on a murdering spree. He kills the remaining Jedi in the

temple, including the children. He then goes to Mustafar to kill any separatists. When Obi Wan realizes what Anakin has done he goes to Padme looking for him.

Padme learns of her husband's evil actions from Obi Wan. Then, the very pregnant Padme boards her spaceship and heads to Mustafar to try to bring Anakin back home. Anakin notices Obi Wan, who had secretly boarded Padme's ship, walking towards him. Convinced that Padme had turned against him, his anger swells, and he force chokes Padme until she collapses on the ground.

To conclude the story in this trilogy, Obi Wan and Anakin duel. Obi Wan gains the high ground and swipes his lightsaber, cutting off the legs of Anakin. Anakin is left to burn and die in a rising sea of hot lava until Palpatine sends a rescue team to save Anakin. He is operated on by medical droids and becomes a half-human/half-droid version of himself. He is fitted with prosthetics and thick black armor and a black helmet. Having lost all those he cared about, and most of his body, his transformation into the evil Darth Vader was made complete.

Meanwhile, Padme gives birth to twins, Luke and Leia. Then, Padme dies. The birth of the twins is kept secret by Obi Wan and Yoda. They are separated and sent to live on separate planets with adoptive parents.

“For reasons we can't explain, we're losing her.” - Analysis of Padme Amidala

Padme Amidala in Episode I: The Phantom Menace (1999)

Padme Amidala is the young queen, around 14 years old, of Naboo. She is beautiful and intelligent. Padme is driven by the desire to protect her people and preserve democracy in the galaxy. She stands firm in her conviction that the Trade Federation is a threat to her people and

the Galactic Republic. In *The Phantom Menace*, Padme is dedicated to politics and serving her planet. She takes her duty very seriously.

Though very beautiful, Padme is young (and so was the actress playing her) and was not created or seen as an object of sexual desire in this film. Padme's wardrobe adheres to ceremony and formality. She is seen in multiple ornate dresses, covering her from neck to toe, complete with elaborate hair styles and head dressings. Many times we can only see her face which is often covered in ceremonial make up. It is only when she is pretending to be her own handmade that she dresses in a more casual style, still covered and not sexualized. The formality of her wardrobe works to disguise her age and creates a seriousness about her character.

Throughout the film, Padme shows her passion for politics and commitment to duty. Her sole motivation is preserving democracy and saving her people. When confronting the Viceroy of the Trade Federation in her throne room, she warns the leader, "You will not be pleased when you hear what I have to say...Beware, Viceroy...the Federation is going too far this time." Her threats were ignored by the Trade Federation who were under the influence of Darth Sidious. However, her threats were not empty.

She informs the newly named Chancellor Palpatine of her intent to return home. Seemingly worried about her safety, he tells her she should stay in the capital. Padme, replies, "No place is safe, if the Senate doesn't condemn this invasion. It is clear now that the Republic no longer functions as a democracy" (Lucas, McCallum & Lucas, 1999). She intends to take matters into her own hands.

Back on Naboo, we see Padme's plan to attack the Trade Federation which freed her planet from their blockade. As the people of Naboo and the Gungans prepare for battle, Padme

reveals her true plan to her trusted captain and Jedi friends. This scene offers significant data for investigating the curriculum of femininity seen in *Episode I*.

“This is why we must not fail...everything depends on it.” The scene begins with Padme standing at her command post, surrounded by her trusted companions, she is dressed for battle.

CAPT. PANAKA: Almost everyone's in camps. A few hundred police and guards have formed an underground movement. I brought as many of the leaders as I could. The Federation Army's also much larger than we thought, and much stronger. Your Highness, this is a battle I do not think we can win.

PADME : The battle is a diversion. The Gungans must draw the Droid Army away from the cities. We can enter the city using the secret passages on the waterfall side. Once we get to the main entrance, Captain Panaka will create a diversion, so that we can enter the palace and capture the Viceroy. Without the Viceroy, they will be lost and confused.

QUI-GON and OBI-WAN look on with interest.

PADME: (Cont'd) What do you think, Master Jedi?

QUI-GON: The Viceroy will be well guarded.

CAPT. PANAKA: The difficulty's getting into the throne room. Once we're inside, we shouldn't have a problem.

QUI-GON: There is a possibility with this diversion many Gungans will be killed.

BOSS NASS: Wesa ready to do are-sa part.

JAR smiles a very worried and sheepish grin. ANAKIN watches with interest, as does ARTOO.

PADME: We have a plan which should immobilize the Droid Army. We will send what pilots we have to knock out the Droid control ship which is orbiting the planet.

QUI-GON: A well-conceived plan. However, there's great risk. The weapons on your fighters may not penetrate the shields on the control ship. And there's an even bigger danger. If the Viceroy escapes, Your Highness, he will return with another droid army.

PADME: That is why we must not fail to get to the Viceroy.

Everything depends on it (Lucas, McCallum & Lucas, 1999) .

The scene occurs near the battle field. There are armies of Naboo and Gungan people in formation, standing ready for the signal to fight. In the background we can see the preparations for war being made. Standing at her command post, she is accompanied by Jedi Qui Gon Jinn, Jedi Apprentice Obi Wan Kenobi, Boss Nass, Jar Binks, and her trusted Captain Panaka. As she gives her orders, the male leaders are attentive and even seem impressed by her secret plan. The script directs Obi Wan and Qui Gon to look on with interest.

The attempt to make Padme's character strong, dedicated, and decisive is evident through this exchange. It is also relevant that she is respected and obeyed, despite her age. She is respectfully called "Your Highness" by her captain and by the Jedi. Ultimately, the child-queen of Naboo, has developed a secret plan to take on the powerful Trade Federation. She surprised the Jedi and the captains on her council. Padme confidently gave orders to a group of adult men and they were willing to obey. Her authority was not questioned nor subverted by the male leadership surrounding her.

The image of a young queen, clothed in her battle dress, standing at an outside command post near the battlefield, giving order to experienced captains and Jedi would more often than not cause one to question the likelihood of such an event. However, in the galaxy far, far away, Queen Padme does just that. Not only does she devise the plan, she also places herself at the center of its action and danger. She is part of the team sent in to distract and capture the Viceroy. Her skilled marksmanship is highlighted as she eliminates several droids in the process. The plan she orchestrates is effective in capturing the Viceroy. Meanwhile, with the inadvertent help of the child-pilot, Anakin, the battle outside was won.

With the help of the Jedi and the Gungan aliens of Naboo, Padme Amidala is able to effectively defeat The Trade Federation and end the blockade against Naboo. Queen Amidala was instrumental in devising and orchestrating the events that saved her people. While there are times in *The Phantom Menace* when Padme was in need of Jedi protection, these moments did not evoke the same *damsel in distress* stereotypes seen with Princess Leia. Padme is never captured nor does find herself in a perilous situation where a male is needed to come to her rescue. Instead, the males are sent as security detail to protect her from assassination attempts due to her outspokenness against The Trade Federation. Still, with this part of the storyline, it is implied that her gender requires that she be protected. Padme's dedication to her people becomes the main focus of her storyline.

It is apparent that Anakin is enamored with the Padme. He feels an attachment to her and is taken by her beauty. Eventually, this will change how the character is portrayed as she gets older. And, eventually, we will learn, that Chancellor Palpatine manipulated the young ruler to help him rise to power in the Senate. He took advantage of the young, unsuspecting, female ruler's trust. However, if we only focus on what we know from this film, Padme's character

challenges many ideological assumptions about her gender. She is not passive, she is not sexually objectified, and she is not submissive.

Overall, Padme demonstrates agency throughout the film as she refuses to abandon Naboo and allow the Trade Federation to blockade her home planet. Her agency is also displayed in her course of action for saving her planet when the Senate failed. As she ignores the advice of Palpatine, returns to her home planet to implement her own plan of attack, and gathers herself an army, she becomes empowered. Her empowerment is demonstrated as she reveals her true identity and no longer hides behind her decoy handmaiden. This analysis reveals that in *Episode I*, Padme has the potential of becoming a progressive feminist heroine within the *Star Wars* franchise.

Padme Amidala in Episode II: Attack of the Clones (2002)

At the beginning of this film, Padme is focused on her duties as a Senator. She is striving to preserve democracy in the galaxy. As the story progresses, Padme is developed more as a love interest for Anakin. Through private dinners, picnics in a meadow, and intimate conversations by a glowing fireplace their affections grow.

Despite the Jedi Code which forbids attachment, Anakin remains attached to Padme and Padme's romantic feelings develop. Her character changes quickly and drastically once she suspects Anakin's romantic interest in her. Her focus shifts from senatorial duties to a hidden romance with Anakin. The Queen, turned Senator, begins to appear sexy and sultry. Her wardrobe is no longer full of the formal ceremonial costumes. Instead, she appears in more revealing gowns that accentuate her figure, expose her neck and shoulders.

In the scenes leading up to Anakin's confession of his love to Padme, Lucas et al. & Lucas (2002) transforms her from the serious Senator and politician we had known into someone

sexy and *feminine*. Her gowns were all free flowing, revealing her shoulders, neckline, cleavage, and even her entire back. She is shown laughing flirtatiously, frolicking, and literally rolling around in a meadow with Anakin. Padme is made to appear more carefree and fun. All the while, Anakin maintains his obsessive gaze in her direction.

Once Padme was more feminized, sultry and vulnerable, then we witness Anakin's confession. Allowing his emotions to control him (breaking Jedi code) he admits to his love. This scene is a turning point for both Anakin and Padme's characters. For this reason, it was chosen as the source of analysis in my inquiry.

"I've been dying a little bit each day since you came back into my life." After a day of flirtations, Padme and Anakin find themselves in a dark room, lighted only by the glow of the fireplace. She sits on the couch with her back to the fireplace facing Anakin. They almost kiss for the second time but at the last second they both pull away.

ANAKIN: From the moment I met you, all those years ago, a day hasn't gone by when I haven't thought of you. And now that I'm with you again, I'm in agony. The closer I get to you, the worse it gets. The thought of not being with you... I can't breathe. I'm haunted by the kiss you should never have given me. My heart is beating, hoping that kiss will not become a scar. You are in my very soul, tormenting me. What can I do? I will do anything you ask...

Silence. The logs flame in the hearth.

ANAKIN: If you are suffering as much as I am, tell me (Lucas et al. & Lucas, 2002).

Examining the visual texts of this moment brings to light the intentions of Lucas et al. & Lucas (2002) to portray Padme more seductively than before. She is wearing a black sleeveless dress. The top of the dress was designed like a corset, form fitting, and pushing her bosom over its top. An adornment at the top of the dress starts at the center of her breasts and wrapped itself around her neck, much like a choker. Her waist is accentuated, her shoulders are revealed, the top of her bosom is visible. Her hair is styled but a little more untamed. In front of the glowing fireplace, romance is meant to take place. The camera gazes at Padme's face and her wardrobe accentuates her sexuality. She is subtly objectified and Anakin stares at her like he wants to own her.

The dialogue effectively turns Padme into Anakin's love interest. Anakin's unhealthy attachment to Padme is revealed. Under the guise of love, Anakin's language clearly shows his obsession with Padme. The torment she causes him, the agony he feels, he can't breathe...all these conversational codes indicate his instability. Confessing his love for her here was Anakin's first step towards the dark side.

PADME: I can't. We can't. It's just not possible.

ANAKIN: Anything's possible. Padme, please listen...

PADME: (as she stands and walks to the other side of the room)
No. You listen. We live in a real world. Come back to it. You're studying to become a Jedi Knight. I'm a Senator. If you follow your thoughts through to conclusion, they will take us to a place we cannot go... regardless of the way we feel about each other.

ANAKIN: Then you do feel something!

PADME: I will not let you give up your...your future, for me.

ANAKIN: (Anakin moves across the room closer to Padme as he speaks) you are asking me to be rational. That is something I know I cannot do. Believe me, I wish I could wish my feelings away... but I can't.

PADME: I am not going to give into this (Lucas et al. & Lucas, 2002).

From this moment, no longer does the audience see her as a Senator from Naboo working to preserve the Galactic Republic. She is a love-struck woman, forced to deny her feelings. Instead of cheering for her to protect her people, as we did in the first film, the audience now desires to see her romantic longings fulfilled. Padme is now the love interest, the romantic lead, of Anakin Skywalker. Her storyline and identity becomes linked to his.

Padme, after claiming that she would not give in, continues to develop feelings for the emotionally unstable Jedi. When she confesses her love, there is no question of the extent Anakin will go to be with her. Despite the warning signs that her new boyfriend might be unstable, she continues to be drawn to him. She breaks the rules and Anakin breaks the Jedi code as they pursue their forbidden romance. Her words, seemingly romantic, were powerful enough to change the trajectory of both of their futures. Despite all the warning signs that Anakin might be a psychopath headed for the dark side, Padme allows herself to get closer to him until she falls in love.

Padme's portrayal in this film is centered around being Anakin's love interest. She is made more stereotypically feminine and vulnerable and a source for visual pleasure. Padme's story becomes connected exclusively to Anakin Skywalker, much like Leia and Han. Her role in politics is diminished. Padme compromises her values and goes against her better judgement to be with Anakin. Her place in politics fades to the background and now, her primary

responsibility is to nurture her emotionally unstable lover. Her political voice is essentially silenced and her individual quest ends.

Now, she accompanies Anakin in his endeavors. It seems, no matter what course of action Anakin takes, Padme remains passive and supportive. This is evident when Anakin exacts revenge for his mom's death. He admits to Padme that in his rage he killed even the women and children of the sandpeople. However, Padme does not challenge his behavior. She does not tell the Jedi what Anakin has done. Instead, she remains silent. She is seen holding him, consoling him, and nurturing him, enabling him to continue his spiral towards the dark side. She ignores any behavior of his that is abusive, obsessive, or destructive. Furthermore, her silence proves her willingness to compromise her moral standing to be by his side. She is devoted to their love.

Not long after this dialogue takes place. Anakin and Padme are faced with possible death on Geonosis when they travel there to save Obi Wan Kenobi. As they stand, awaiting their fate, Padme decides to reveal her true feelings and stop denying their love. She tells Anakin, "I've been dying a little bit each day since you came back into my life...I love you...I truly, deeply love you and before we die, I want you to know" (Lucas et al. & Lucas, 2002). Despite knowing that this love is dangerous for Anakin, and forbidden, and will ultimately destroy them, Padme gives in to her emotions.

As a representation of a feminist heroine, Padme regresses in this film. Even though she fought fiercely and intelligently to survive the battle in Geonosis, she did so alongside her boyfriend. Again, reinforcing that her story is only relevant as it pertains to him. This film signifies Padme's descent into a voiceless character whose place is only relevant as it pertains to the male protagonist's ego and story line. She is the romantic lead and not much more.

Padme in Episode III: Revenge of the Sith (2005)

At the beginning of the film, Padme shares the news of her pregnancy with Anakin. Padme's role is limited almost entirely to her interactions with Anakin. Padme is often seen or heard nurturing Anakin and calming his emotions, reassuring him that she will be fine. Her conversations are centered around comforting her husband. Her role in politics is virtually non-existent. She is seen once in the Senate but only as an interested listener, not a voice or a vote. Other than that, her presence is limited to her home. She is not placed in the center of the action.

“Anakin, all I want is your love.” When Padme arrives on Mustafar, she tries to convince Anakin to come back; he sees Obi Wan exit her ship and thinks she has betrayed him. She is almost full term in her pregnancy. Mustafar is a volcanic planet. The sharp cliffs and steep mountains are surrounded by rivers of flowing lava. The script reads:

The sleek NABOO SKIFF lands on the Mustafar landing platform near Anakin's GREEN STARFIGHTER. ANAKIN runs up to the SKIFF as the ramp lowers. PADME runs to him.

ANAKIN: Padme, I saw your ship . . .

They embrace

PADME: Oh, Anakin!

ANAKIN: It's all right, you're safe now. What are you doing out here?

PADME: I was so worried about you. Obi-Wan told me terrible things.

ANAKIN: What things?

PADME: He said you have turned to the dark side . . . that you killed younglings.

ANAKIN: Obi-Wan is trying to turn you against me.

PADME: He cares about us.

ANAKIN: Us??!

PADME: He knows . . . He wants to help you.

PADME: Anakin, all I want is your love (Lucas et al. & Kershner, 2005).

This emotionally charged scene is intensified as volcanic lava and fire surround the characters. When Padme arrives, it is dark outside and the glow of the fire and lava provide the only light in this metaphorically dark scene. When Padme exits her ship, she runs to Anakin, longing to comfort him and nurture him, no matter what he had done. He admits to killing children, again, and she still proclaims, "all I want is your love." This dialogue manages to complete Padme's descent into weakness and Anakin's descent into the dark side. Knowing of Anakin's allegiance to the dark side and his recent killing spree, Padme still desires to be with him.

ANAKIN: Love won't save you, Padme. Only my new powers can do that.

PADME: At what cost? You are a good person. Don't do this.

ANAKIN: I won't lose you the way I lost my mother! I've become more powerful than any Jedi has ever dreamed of and I've done it for you. To protect you.

PADME: Come away with me. Help me raise our child. Leave everything else behind while we still can.

ANAKIN: Don't you see, we don't have to run away anymore. I have brought peace to the Republic. I am more powerful than the

Chancellor. I can overthrow him, and together you and I can rule the galaxy. Make things the way we want them to be (Lucas et al. & Kershner, 2005).

Anakin's lust for power is revealed as he claims that he will be more powerful than any Jedi has ever dreamed and he can save her from death. He expresses his desire to rule the galaxy. He manages to justify his actions by telling Padme, "I've done it for you. To protect you...don't you see, we don't have to run away anymore" (Lucas et al. & Kershner, 2005). His dangerous obsession of Padme, his irrational fear of losing her, and his emotional instability has all resurfaced in the dialogue of this scene. Still, Padme, clings to the delusion that he is good. She begs Anakin to come home, "...come away with me. Help me raise our child" (Lucas et al. & Kershner, 2005). Essentially, she knows he has turned into a murderer, but she still wants him to raise their child. She craves his love, regardless of how dangerous he has become.

Images of male dominance are evoked as Anakin force chokes Padme. He shows that she is his possession. If he cannot have her, no one will. She belongs to him. Her life belongs to him. When she spoke out against his actions, he effectively silenced her...forever. She survived long enough to birth their twins. However, for a reason the medical droids cannot explain, she was still dying. She lost her will to live and literally died from a broken heart. Her final words were to Obi Wan, "There is still good in him..." Is this the hope of an eternal optimist? Or the same love-struck female refusing to accept that her husband is a psychopath?

Anakin's obsession with Padme led him down a dark path; she enabled it, encouraged it, nurtured it. In doing so, she lost her agency, power, and life. She stopped making decisions, stayed home, and waited for her next opportunity to console Anakin's ego. She became powerless in politics and in her relationship. She was unable to stop Anakin from obsessing over

the fear of losing her. She was blinded to the warning signs that Anakin displayed. Ultimately, she became so weakened, she died of a broken heart when Anakin turned to the dark side.

Throughout the prequel trilogy we see evidence that as Anakin's power grows, Padme's power weakens. Padme transforms from a powerful queen and senator to a love-struck female building her life around a man who ultimately leads to her death. In contrast, Anakin goes from a powerless slave to a Jedi apprentice and eventually leader of the evil Galactic Empire.

“The Force is strong with this one.” - The Sequel Trilogy

The lead protagonist in the sequel trilogy is a young woman, around 19 years old, named Rey. She is an orphaned scavenger on the planet of Jakku, her backstory is largely unknown. She discovers she has a strong connection to the Force. She, unintentionally, becomes part of the Resistance's efforts to find Luke Skywalker and defeat the First Order.

Finn (FN2187) is a stormtrooper, who through a crisis of conscience, abandons the First Order. During Finn's defection, he meets Poe Dameron. Together they escape the First Order which essentially results in Finn's alliance with Resistance. He becomes a loyal friend to Rey.

The Resistance effort, formerly called the Rebel Alliance, is now lead by General Leia Organa. Vice Admiral Holdo is second in command and takes charge when General Organa is unable to lead. Poe Dameron is a Resistance pilot, arguably the best in the galaxy. When he is sent by the resistance to find the map to Luke Skywalker, he is captured by the First Order and meets Finn. Han Solo returns in this trilogy, with Chewbacca. He and Leia are not together, but they are the parents of Ben Solo/Kylo Ren. Han is killed by his son. Luke Skywalker has placed himself in exile. The Resistance is searching for him to help them defeat the First Order.

The First Order, formerly called the evil Galactic Empire, is controlled by Supreme Leader Snoke. His second in command is Kylo Ren. Kylo Ren, born Ben Solo, is the son of Han and Leia. Kylo has a strong connection to the Force. He is also drawn to Rey through the Force.

Plot Summary of Episode VII: The Force Awakens (2015)

It has been thirty years since the Rebels defeated Darth Sidious and the evil Empire and witness Darth Vader's redemption. The Empire's First Order, under the leadership of Supreme Leader Snoke has risen again. The Resistance is determined to stop them. General Leia Organa, believing her brother can help the Resistance, has launched a search effort for Luke Skywalker. The First Order is also searching for Luke, in an effort to eliminate him as a threat to their power.

Just as the Resistance, through a pilot, Poe Dameron, gains a map to Luke's location, Kylo Ren appears on the planet of Jakku to capture Poe. Poe had already hidden the map inside of a droid, BB8, and sends the droid on its way. Meanwhile, a stormtrooper, FN2187, has a conscience and frees Poe. Together, they escape. However, they crash on Jakku. FN2187, now called Finn, survives the crash but all he can find of Poe is his jacket. Finn puts the jacket on and wanders into a village. All the while, BB8 is on Jakku and has been rescued from junk dealers by a girl named Rey.

Shortly after Rey comes into possession of BB8, two ruffian aliens attempt to steal the droid. Rey moves in to protect the droid. The commotion catches the attention of Finn, who had recently crashed on the desert planet and wanders into the town seeking water. Finn instinctively starts to move towards the scuffle but quickly realizes that Rey can handle herself. She fights the attackers, defeating them, leaving them lying on the sand. BB8 notices Finn watching and begins to beep.

BB8 lets Rey know that Finn is wearing the jacket of his owner, Poe. They assume Finn stole it from Poe and starting chasing Finn. Rey grounds Finn with her staff and stands over him. He explains to BB8 and Rey that he was working with Poe to help him escape when they crashed on the planet. He explains that he tried to help Poe, but Poe did not survive. Shortly after they meet, Rey and Finn are targeted by stormtroopers and their escape ensues.

Together Rey and Finn run through the dessert and escape on an abandoned spaceship, the Millennium Falcon. Once the ship is fired up, it triggered a beacon sent to its former owner, Han Solo. He and Chewbacca capture the ship, board it, and meet Rey and Finn. From there, Han and Chewie have become part of the mission to get the information hidden in BB8 to the Resistance.

Han takes Rey and Finn to the planet of Takodana, here they meet Maz Katana. Maz senses something in Rey. In Maz's cantina Rey is drawn by the Force to an old chest hidden in Maz's vault. Inside was Luke Skywalker's lightsaber, which had also belonged to his father, Anakin Skywalker. Not fully understanding what is happening to her or what she is feeling, as the Force is speaking to her, she flees.

Kylo captures Rey and takes her to the First Order's Starkiller Base (Yes, this is yet *another* superweapon capable of destroying planets). Rey uses the Force and orchestrates her own escape from Kylo. She is close to an exit when Han, Finn, and Chewie show up to plant explosives inside the base. Here, Han is confronted by Kylo Ren, his and Leia's son. Proving he is no longer "Ben Solo" and has no attachments to his past, Kylo kills his father.

Rey and Finn escape as Chewbacca shoots and injures Kylo. Kylo pursues the three of them into the woods as the explosives detonate inside the base. In her first lightsaber battle, Rey uses the force and Skywalker's lightsaber to defeat Kylo. He is rescued by Snoke's men. Rey

helps Finn, who is now unconscious from an injury inflicted by Kylo, escape the unstable planet/weapon. They return to the Resistance and reunite with General Organa. The search for Luke Skywalker resumes.

Plot Summary of Episode VII: The Last Jedi (2017)

Rey has found Luke Skywalker on Ahch-to and asks him to come with her to help the Resistance. Luke rejects her and remains in exile. Rey refuses to leave until he trains her to use the Force. While she waits for several days on the island, she and Kylo Ren start to communicate through the Force. They do not fully understand how or why this connection is happening. However, they begin to gain an intimate understanding of each other.

Convinced that she can turn Kylo Ren, which would shift the Force balance in favor of the Resistance, Rey allows herself to get captured at the First Order base. Kylo takes her to Supreme Leader Snoke who reveals he is the one who connected their minds. He was trying to find Luke and lure Rey here to destroy her. As Snoke is about to kill Rey, Kylo saves her and kills Snoke. Rey, believing Kylo has been turned, asks him to help her save the Resistance pilots who were outnumbered and being destroyed by the First Order. However, seeing his opportunity to rule the galaxy, he refuses and asks her to join him. At odds with each other again, they both reach for Luke's lightsaber using the Force. Their powers split the light saber in half causing a blast. Rey escapes.

Meanwhile, throughout the film, General Organa, Poe Dameron, and Finn work to help the Resistance escape the First Order. Out of fuel and resources, and with their numbers drastically reduced, they head for an abandoned base on Crait. Rey meets the team there. In a last-stand attempt against the First Order, the Resistance prepares for battle. Luke Skywalker arrives to help. He and Kylo Ren duel. During their fight, Rey helps the remaining Resistance

escape on the Millennium Falcon. However, we learn that it was only a Force projection of Luke. Exhausted from his efforts, Luke dies in peace alone on Ahch-to. Leia and Rey sense his death through the Force.

**“She’s strong with the Force. Untrained, but stronger than she knows.” - Analysis of Rey
Rey in Episode VI: The Force Awakens (2015)**

When we are first introduced to Rey, we see her climbing and maneuvering through an old ship and great heights with ease. In her opening scene, one cannot tell she is a woman; she could possibly be an alien. Her face and head are covered with a thick tan wrap and goggles. Finally, when the goggles are removed, we see the face of a young woman. From there, it is apparent that every article of clothing she wears is practical and useful. In fact, it is apparent that most of her items are from previous scavenging finds. Her wardrobe is never revealing or “girlish.” Her body is covered with a tan colored tank top, brown pants, and high top boots. Her canteen is strapped to her waist belt; she carries a staff with her for hiking and protection. Rey is a self-sufficient scavenger.

“I know how to run without you holding my hand!” Rey and Finn’s initial encounter and subsequent escape from the stormtroopers is the focus of my analysis concerning representation of female heroines portrayed by her character. The scene begins immediately after Finn informs BB-8 that Poe did not survive their crash on Jakku. The script reads:

BB-8 heads off to the side, depressed. Rey watches BB-8, then considers Finn again. Says, a bit impressed:

REY: you're with the Resistance?

Finn's mind races again. He makes an easy decision: to lie.

FINN: Obviously. Yes. I am. I'm with the Resistance, yeah.

(WHISPERS) I'm with the Resistance. Rey lowers her staff, Finn stands. Rey studies him:

REY: I've never met a Resistance fighter before.

FINN: Well, this is what we look like. Some of us. Others look different.

REY: BB-8 says he's on a secret mission, he has to get back to your base.

FINN: Apparently he's carrying a map that leads to Luke Skywalker, and everyone's after it.

She turns to him, concerned, curious. And asks:

REY: Luke Skywalker? I thought he was a myth (Abrams et al. & Abrams, 2015).

When the scene begins, Rey has just knocked Finn down to ground with her staff. Her skills in combat were no match for the former Stormtrooper. She is standing over him and refuses to let him get up until she is satisfied that he is no longer a threat to her or BB-8. This image contradicts ideological assumptions of her gender; Rey proves she is in control and can be aggressive when she feels it is necessary.

Rey asks Finn, "You're with the Resistance?" The script notates that Rey was a bit impressed. It is not clear at this exact moment whether she is supposed to be impressed with Finn or impressed with someone, anyone, fighting for a purpose. Her life, until now, was solitary and purposeless. She woke up each day scavenging for just enough junk metal/parts for that day's meals. It was always more of the same. As the scene progresses, it is clear, Rey is not fascinated by this new male in her life. Instead, Rey is fascinated with his knowledge of the Resistance. She

needs help getting BB8 back to the Resistance base. When she hears the name, she becomes even more intrigued, “Luke Skywalker? I thought he was a myth” (Abrams et al. & Abrams, 2015).

Just then BB-8 BEEPS MADLY at something he sees.

REY: (CONT'D) What is it?

Rey moves to him, peeks around a tent corner. Now Finn moves to see: at a distance, TWO STORMTROOPERS TALKING TO UNKAR'S THUGS -
- who POINT THEIR WAY! Finn urgently grabs her hand and heads for the tents:

REY: (CONT'D) (re: her hand) What are you doing?!

FINN: Come on!

Suddenly LASER BLASTS RIP PAST THEM, HIT THE CLEANING UNIT, SPEWING STEAM! Rey SCREAMS -- MORE BLASTS as they run!

Finn and Rey holding hands, the three race, ZIGZAGGING through a maze of tents:

FINN: Come on, BB-8!

REY: Let go of me!

FINN: No, we gotta move!

REY: (pulls her hand back) I know how to run without you holding my hand! BB-8 stay close! This way! (Abrams et al. & Abrams, 2015).

As Rey and Finn are in danger of being captured or killed by the stormtroopers on the ground and the airstrike from above, they are forced to run. Finn, instinctively reaches for Rey's hand. Rey tries to jerk away, “What you doing? Let go of me! I know how to run without you holding my hand.” Again, she tells him “Stop taking my hand!” With these words, two truths

emerge. First, Rey is used to being independent. She is used to taking care of herself and feels capable enough to do so even during this high pressure escape. Secondly, Rey is not a *damsel in distress*, she can run and maneuver and pilot her way to safety. She did not need Finn, or any man, to escort her from danger. Finn, instinctively wanted to save her and grab her hand to lead her to safety, his help was not needed. He is continually surprised by her capabilities at each turn. Seemingly, everything (every stereotype) he thought he knew about women and their role, and even his role as their savior/protector, was debunked.

It is also important that we recognize Rey's continued effort and concern for protecting BB-8. With this one line, she manages to defy absurd notions that women need rescuing while at the same time demonstrating her protective instincts and loyalty to the droid. Her protection over BB8 also shows her compassion (or leanings to the light side of the Force) as she does what she feels is good and right. Instead of protecting the droid, she could have sold BB8 for "60 portions" enough to feed the poor scavenger for a month. She refused to abandon BB-8. She made a choice to protect the droid from being sold for parts or sold to the First Order. In the escape scene, she still demonstrates care for BB-8. She did not have to forsake her feminine trait of compassion to remain tough and fierce. The action continues:

Now Finn and BB-8 follow Rey...REY, FINN AND BB-8 duck into another tent.

REY: They're shooting at both of us!

FINN: Yeah, they saw you with me! You're marked!

REY: Well, thanks for that!

FINN: I'm not the one who chased you down with a stick! Does anyone have blasters around here?!

REY: (TO BB-8) Are you okay?

Finn QUIETS HER WITH A GESTURE, HEARING SOMETHING. PUSH IN ON FINN -- whatever he hears alarms him greatly --he GRABS HER HAND AGAIN -- PULLS HER AWAY --

REY: (CONT'D) Stop taking my hand!

Finn pulls Rey from the tent -- BB-8 FOLLOWS --As they race from the tent a TIE FIGHTER SCREAMS INTO VIEW

FROM BEHIND THE TENTS! A SECOND FOLLOWS CLOSE BEHIND. IT FIRES AT THEM -- A MASSIVE BLAST SENDS REY AND FINN FLYING -- BB-8 ROLLING! Rey is thrown HARD to the ground -- she is rattled, truly afraid. Then she turns: FINN lies nearby, unconscious. Suddenly afraid, she scrambles to him, rolls him over. BB-8 ROLLS OVER, BEEPING in concern.

REY: Hey!

As Finn comes to, he sees her. Through his fog:

FINN: -- Are you okay?

And that very question touches her -- having never in her life been asked it.

REY: Yeah. (extends her hand) Follow me.

Grateful, Finn takes it. They're off. LOCALS run amok as TIE fighters DIVE BOMB. REY, Finn and BB-8 SPRINT, BLASTER EXPLOSIONS GET CLOSER AND CLOSER! (Abrams et al. & Abrams, 2015).

Midway through their escape scene, feeling the concussion of an explosion nearby, Finn and Rey are sent flying through the air. They both land on the dessert sand, hard. She gets

up almost immediately and scrambles to check on Finn. He quickly comes to, and asks “Are you okay?” With a look of confusion, she replies, “Yes.” The script notates that she was to react to his question as if she had never been asked this question before. Instead, her reaction looks much more like confusion... ‘why is *he* asking *me* that?’ After all, he is the one laying on the ground, she is standing over him. Nonetheless, after denying Finn a chance to lead the way by holding her hand, now she offers him *her* hand. Gratefully, he accepts. This moment solidifies her role as the *hero*, the *savior*. She will lead him to safety.

Rey, STAFF strapped to her back, leads the way as she, Finn and BB-8 race into the spaceport. Finn glances back: TWOTIE FIGHTERS BANK their return. They YELL:

FINN: We can't outrun them.

Rey POINTS to a parked, four-engine SHIP ahead:

REY: We might in that quad-jumper!

FINN: We need a pilot!

REY: We've got one!

FINN: You?! (then, indicates one OFF-CAMERA) What about that ship? (Abrams et al. & Abrams, 2015).

When Rey quickly devises a plan to steal an abandoned space ship, Finn tells Rey, “We need a pilot!” She replies, “We’ve got one!” implying that she can fly the space ship they are running towards as they flee from the stormtroopers. Again she challenges Finn’s assumption that Rey, a female, is probably not capable of piloting the space craft. It also demonstrates that Rey is skilled and decisive. She saw a need for a quick plan of escape and she ran toward it. As they are running to the space ship, which Rey will pilot to escape the onslaught of stormtrooper

lasers, Rey outruns Finn and is taking the lead guiding them to safety. She is seen in the foreground of the shot, Finn following behind. There is no doubt who leading this escape.

This scene in which Rey meets Finn for the first time demonstrates many of the characteristics that are indicative of her behavior throughout the film. We see that she is a fighter and brave as she fends off the attack of the two alien thugs who try to steal BB8, chases down Finn, and then leads their escape from the stormtroopers. In no part of this scene does Rey appear as a stereotypical *damsel in distress*. In fact, it is obvious that she was quite the opposite. She demonstrated her agency as she clearly makes her own choices. She did not expect or allow the male to rescue her or lead her to safety. She was confident that her abilities and her instincts would take them further than Finn's would.

After leaving Maz Kanata, Rey is captured by Kylo Ren. This is enough to make any feminist cringe upon the brink of disappointment, fearfully anticipating another *damsel in distress* trope is about to take place. However, here again, Rey defies the stereotype and manages her own escape. She, without any training, discovers she can use the Force to keep Kylo Ren at bay. Then, she uses the Force to perform a Jedi mind trick on her guard. She escapes her holding cell on her own and is well on her way to find a way off the Starkiller Base

We learn, through the film, that Rey was abandoned on the planet of Jakku by her parents when she was very young. She has little memory of her parents, who they were or where they were from. However, she holds onto hope that they will return for her. Orphaned, she learned how to take care of herself. She lives a solitary life, scavenging for junk parts on old ships just to survive. While perfectly capable of defending herself, surviving, and even piloting, she held very little power in her life. She was left to the mercy of the junk trade, forced to scavenge for scraps each day and forced to take whatever rate (portions) the junk trader offered.

Often leaving her with just enough food to eat until the next day when the process started all over again.

Rey becomes empowered as she realizes her connection to the Force. She becomes just as powerful, if not more so, than Kylo Ren. In her escape scene we witness her first steps toward that empowerment. She defeats thugs, leads Finn to safety, then finally steals the Millennium Falcon and successfully pilots their escape. Taking the Millennium Falcon was an even larger step towards empowerment than simply a means of escape. She finally left the planet where she had been abandoned as a small child. Rey was no longer waiting for her parents to return and tell her who she was. She had embarked on a path to find out for herself.

There are a couple of fleeting moments in the film where a love-connection between Rey and Finn is teased. Aboard the Millennium Falcon he asks, clumsily and seemingly interested in her, “You got a boyfriend? Cute boyfriend?” Then, as the film continues the audience witnesses two characters that genuinely care about each other. When Finn is injured and unconscious at the end of the film, Rey is seen sitting with him, worried. She gives him a kiss on the forehead and says “We’ll see each other again. I believe that. Thank you, my friend.” This moment indicates their relationship is perhaps that of a true friendship. Her kiss intentionally landed on the forehead, not his lips. She is not type-cast as a lovely woman who needs to be/have a love interest to move the storyline forward. In fact, in the next episode, each of their stories continue separately. Rey’s quest to *fulfill her destiny* is her own. Her identity is her own, and largely, unknown; it is not linked to anyone.

Rey in Episode VIII: The Last Jedi (2017)

In the previous film, we see Rey’s call to adventure. She discovers her ability to use the Force. In this episode, Rey is on a quest to figure out her identity, purpose, and place. She still

works to help her friends of the Resistance. However, her motivation is not necessarily inspired by the cause of the Resistance. Instead, she acts in ways that she feels will ultimately reveal her identity and purpose. Her motivation is two-fold: protect her friends and find herself. When analyzing Rey's character in order to uncover the implicit messages in *Episode VIII*, I have chosen a few moments of dialogue from the film that reveal not only her quest for identity and purpose, but also other characteristics that demonstrate her complexity.

“Something inside me has always been there. Now its awake.” The first time we see her true motivation, she is talking to Luke Skywalker on Ahch-to, asking him to come help the Resistance.

LUKE: Why are you here, Rey, from nowhere?

REY: The Resistance sent me. We need your help. The First Order has become unstoppable.

LUKE: Why are *you* here?

REY: Something inside me has always been there. Now it's awake. And I'm afraid. I do not know what it is...or what to do with it. And I need help (Abrams et al. & Johnson, 2017).

In this moment, Rey finally admits why she was there. Yes, she was motivated to help her friends in the Resistance. However, there was more to her story than that. Later, she tells Luke, “The galaxy may need a legend. I need someone to show me my place in all this.” (Abrams et al. & Johnson, 2017). Rey's journey is a mission to find out about herself. She asks Luke Skywalker to be her mentor and teacher. She believes the only way she will know her place and purpose is for someone to tell her. Essentially, she *is* seeking the help of a man to give her answers about herself. This does not happen. Repeatedly, the film challenges the notion that someone is going to tell her place and purpose, and ultimately identity.

“Let the past die. Kill it if you have to.” Rey’s mind is somehow linked to Kylo Ren’s. They are able to see each other across distances. They can talk to each other. They can feel each other. The first time it happened she is enraged and tries to kill him with her blaster. Later, when it happens again she calls him a monster. However, the more times the Force connection occurs, the more they learn about each other. The next connection occurs, Rey is outside on Ahch-to and Kylo is alone in his living quarters on the First Order command ship. She demands to know why Kylo killed Han Solo.

REY: Then why?

KYLO: Why, what? Why, What? Say it.

REY: Why did you...why did you kill him? (sobs) I don’t understand.

Rey is angry and crying.

KYLO: No? Your parents threw you away like garbage.

REY: They didn’t!

KYLO: They did. But you can’t stop needing them. It’s your greatest weakness. Looking for them everywhere...in Han Solo...now in Skywalker.

KYLO: Did he tell you what happened that night.

REY: Yes.

KYLO: No. He had sensed my powers as he senses yours. And he feared it.

REY: Liar.

KYLO: Let the past die. Kill it if you have to. That's the only way to become who you were meant to be (Abrams et al. & Johnson, 2017).

Rey realizes in this moment that she was not going to find answers in Luke Skywalker. He lied to her about how Kylo Ren turned to the dark side. Luke covered up that Kylo's descent into the dark side is was Luke's fault. She also realizes that Kylo was right. She was looking for a parent (a guide) to tell her who she was meant to be. Determined to find answers that night, Rey enters a dark cave that had been calling to her through the Force. She was searching for her parents but found only an image of herself. Then, we see her connecting again with Kylo Ren.

REY: I thought I'd find answers here. I was wrong. I've never felt so alone.

KYLO REN: You're not alone.

REY: Neither are you (Abrams et al. & Johnson, 2017).

Again, Kylo and Rey are using the Force to communicate. She is sitting in her hut on Ahch-to. Kylo is across the galaxy. Their connection this time is stronger than before. They are looking at each other, face to face, from across the galaxy. Rey extends her hand to show him he was not alone. Fearfully, they reach out to each other. Their fingertips touch. They can feel each other physically and emotionally. He feels her empathy and compassion. She feels the conflict inside him. Luke Skywalker walks in on them and demands she leave the island. Rey confronts Luke for lying. She grabs her staff and the two of them duel briefly, with a staff and a stick. When he disarms her, she reaches out and his lightsaber comes to her. She has bested Luke Skywalker. She is standing over him and deactivates her weapon. She tells Luke, "You failed him by thinking his choice was made. It wasn't. There is still conflict in him. If he turned from

the darkside, that could shift the tide.” Luke warns her not to go to him. Rey leaves anyway, determined to face Kylo Ren.

After leaving Ahch-to, she willingly entered Snoke’s ship to find Kylo. This was her rescue mission for him, for his redemption. And while saving him, she could save her friends at the Resistance. Her empathy for Kylo, and her belief that he could turn, led her to him. When Rey arrives, Kylo escorts her to Snoke. There are times in this scene when Rey is suspended in the air and paralyzed by Snoke. She is in danger. When faced with killing her, Rey looks up at Kylo, and says “Ben.” Realizing that she is the only person in the galaxy that still sees his humanity, he kills Snoke instead. Ultimately, Kylo did choose to save her. However, the scene does not evoke the same damsel in distress stereotype of the past. Rey was there to save Kylo’s soul and the Resistance. Immediately after Snoke’s death, Kylo and Rey team up to fight off Snoke’s guards. She slays her share of the enemy. Then, seeing Kylo in danger, she quickly saves his life.

The outcome did not turn out exactly as she had hoped, Kylo refuses to turn. Nevertheless, her efforts still resulted in the demise of Supreme Leader Snoke. Trying to convince Rey to join him Kylo reveals what he knows of her parents, “They were filthy junk traders who sold you off for drinking money. They are dead in a pauper’s grave in the Jakku desert. You have no place in this story. You come from nothing. You’re nothing. But not to me. Please.” Throughout the film, Rey was searching for her place. She was wanting someone to give her a purpose. Kylo finally offered her a place, next to him. He tells her that she could be something if she were with him. He is offering Rey a connection to something and someone. Rey pauses for a minute. Then, makes up her own mind. In this moment, her purpose and place is not being his second in command. She has her own destiny to fulfill.

Rey escapes in the Millennium Falcon and arrives at Crait just in time to shoot enemy TIE fighters out of the sky. Then, she uses the Force to lift huge rocks and boulders out of a cave's exit to save her friends and the remaining Resistance fighters trapped inside. At this moment, when the rocks cleared Finn and Rey are reunited and embrace in a long hug. Everyone boarded the Millennium Falcon and flew away to safety. As Rey boarded the ship, her mind was once again Force connected to Kylo Ren. He looks at her as if he is waiting for her to speak. She looks at him with a combination of pity and disappointment. She shuts the door to the Millennium Falcon, effectively shutting him out and severing their connection, for now. He is left alone.

Rey's actions in the final moments of the film demonstrates her bravery, resourcefulness, skill, and determination. She bravely and skillfully flew into the battle on Crait. Amidst the danger, she found the Resistance and helped them escape. Aboard the Millennium Falcon, we see Rey is definitely not alone. She is surrounded by friends. Rey looks content. Perhaps, she has found her place. And with the final words of the film, perhaps Rey has found purpose. General Organa sits next to Rey.

REY: How do we build a rebellion from this?

LEIA: (puts her hand on Rey's leg, looking at her) We have all we need (Abrams et al. & Johnson, 2017).

Throughout this film, Rey demonstrates the same capabilities and complexity as she has in *Episode VII*. She is strong, brave, fierce, and in charge of her own quest. She does not play the damsel in distress. She does not allow anyone to tell her what to do. She possesses agency and empowerment. These traits are evident when she refuses to let Luke keep her from going to Kylo Ren, when she refuses to join Kylo Ren's offer to rule the galaxy next to him, and when she decides to not let her past as a "nobody" define her purpose now.

Rey is never sexualized or objectified in the film. Her hair remains practically pulled back. Her clothes cover her body; she wears pants and boots, a satchel, and a staff strapped to her back. She looks ready for adventure and knowledge. Though her wardrobe is not traditionally feminized, Rey still portrays traditionally feminine characteristics. She is kind and compassionate. She does not conceal her emotions, she is capable of being happy, angry, empathetic, and sad. She does not have to sacrifice the traditionally feminine qualities in order to embrace her masculine ones. She can possess and display both.

“Excuse me, Prin -- uh, General.” Analysis of Princess Leia/General Organa

Princess Leia in Episodes VII (2015) and VIII (2017)

Princess Leia’s role in the first two episodes of the sequel trilogy is quite different from her role in the original trilogy. She is no longer referred to as “Princess.” Instead, she is General Organa. In *Episode VII*, it is revealed that she is the mother of Ben Solo/Kylo Ren. Although she shares a son with Han Solo, her identity is no longer linked to his. She demonstrates agency and empowerment as she leads the Resistance. She commands the missions and her orders are obeyed. The mission she orchestrates to find Luke Skywalker sets the plot in motion.

“Get your head of out your cockpit.” In *Episode VIII*, General Organa is seen commanding the Resistance pilots as they try to take out the First Order. When she gives an order to Poe Dameron, he turns off his communication link and refuses to listen to her. Though his effort does produce the end result, a lot of Resistance fighters were killed in the process. General Organa scolds Dameron when he returns to the ship:

Inside the Resistance ship, Leia is seen slapping Poe.

LEIA: You’re demoted.

POE: What? Wait! We took down a dreadnought.

LEIA: At what cost?

POE: If you start an attack, you follow it through.

LEIA: Poe, get your head out of your cockpit. There are things you cannot solve by jumping into an X-wing and blowing something up! I need you to learn that.

POE: There were heroes on that mission.

LEIA: Dead heroes, No leaders (Abrams et al. & Johnson, 2017).

When Poe Dameron tried to subvert General Organa's power and authority, she took it right back. She demoted him for not following orders. In this, we see General Organa's place and identity. She is the commander and leader of the Resistance. Her voice and her orders will not be ignored. She represents a strong female leader and a progressive female protagonist. General Organa has also become an empowered user of the Force. She uses it to rescue herself when she is thrown from their space cruiser during battle.

“I can show you the ways of the Force” - Emergent Patterns

The emergent pattern when analyzing Princess Leia's character in the original trilogy revealed a decline in Leia's agency, empowerment, and representation within each film and across the trilogy. Leia begins every film in the original trilogy in a position of leadership and power. However, she gradually relinquishes her power and agency as the film progresses. This is a pattern repeated in each film. Also, as each subsequent film is released, her representation as a strong female character diminishes further. In *Episode IV* she was a revolutionary motivated by her desire to destroy the evil Empire. Her anger was evident through her outspokenness and boldness. Even though she was a stereotypical *beautiful princess* and *damsel*, waiting to be

rescued, ultimately it was her Rebel leadership and willingness to risk her life that set the plot in motion.

Then, in *Episode V*, Leia starts out as a commander of a Rebel base. That part of the plot was short in comparison to rest of her role in the film. She was primarily challenged with her feelings towards Han Solo, resulting in her becoming the romantic lead. Once she succumbs to his dashing looks and sexual magnetism, she becomes a lot more docile. Her anger and boldness diminishes. Her story becomes defined by and liked to Han Solo. She begins to demonstrate more stereotypically traditional feminine qualities. She is more passive, submissive, and pleasant for her male counterpart.

Finally, by *Episode VI*, Leia's identity and quest is never her own. She appears as a scantily clad sex slave who, upon her escape, follows the quest of her boyfriend, Han Solo. Though she did kill her captor, Jabba the Hutt, for the larger part of this film, she is shown as more traditionally feminine than in any other of the films. As proof of this transition, beyond what is evident by watching the films, Carrie Fisher, the actress portraying Leia provides insight into the transformation taken by her character throughout the trilogy. In an interview with Rolling Stone, Fisher (as cited in Caldwell, 1983) commented, "Leia gets to be more feminine, more supportive, and more affectionate. But let's not forget, these movies were based on the boys' fantasies. So, the other way they made her more female was to have her take off her clothes."

This quote from Fisher (as cited in Caldwell, 1983) is all too telling of the curriculum of femininity found in the original trilogy. It implies that because her character was bold, take-charge, and clothed in the first film, she was not "female" enough. So, by *Episode VI*, they fixed it by putting her in a bikini and making her a silent slave. To be female, the heroine has to be

supportive, affectionate, and ultimately the object of sexual desire. A woman must be willing to be in a *place* subordinate to men, remain silent and passive, and serve the primary purpose of looking good to satisfy their fantasies. As the virtually the only female character in the original *Star Wars* trilogy, other than a singular appearance of Mon Mothma, leader of the Rebel Alliance, Leia falls short of providing a strong feminist representation of a female heroine. From the promising roots of the outspoken, youngest senator in the galaxy and the bold Rebel Alliance leader, Leia was transformed into something much different. She is continually portrayed and described as an object of beauty, the damsel, and the love interest of Han Solo. She, more often than not, reinforces the tired old tropes and stereotypes instead of defying them.

The pattern that emerged in the data collected from the prequel trilogy shows an overall decline in Padme's agency, empowerment, and, in turn her representation of a strong feminist heroine. Her decline remained a constant across all three films, collectively. In *Episode I*, Padme displayed strong leadership skills and was motivated by the desire to save her people, and the Republic. She demonstrated agency and empowerment by orchestrating and executing her plan to end The Trade Federation's control over Naboo. Though beautiful, she was not sexualized or objectified. Her identity was not linked in a connection to a male counterpart. She stayed true to her own quest and saved the people of her home planet.

At the beginning of *Episode II: Attack of the Clones*, Padme is focused on her duties as a Senator. She is striving to preserve democracy in the galaxy. However, as the story progresses, Padme is developed more as a love interest for Anakin. Her character changes quickly and drastically once Anakin expresses his romantic interests in her. Her focus shifts from senatorial duties to a hidden romance with Anakin. Despite the warning signs that her new boyfriend might

be unstable, she continues to be drawn to him. She compromises her convictions and Anakin breaks the Jedi code as they pursue their forbidden romance.

The Queen, turned Senator, begins to appear sexy and sultry. Her wardrobe is no longer full of the formal ceremonial costumes. Instead, she appears in more revealing gowns that accentuate her figure, expose her neck and shoulders, and at times expose her entire midriff. This devolution into the sex-object designed to attract the *male gaze* (Mulvey, 1975) was intentional. In the film's special features, Lucas explains that he wanted her to be appealing as Anakin's romantic interest. She needed to appear "sultry in nature...sexy, gorgeous, and young in skimpy clothes" (Lucas, 2002). She was intentionally transformed into an object to be desired instead of a force to be reckoned with.

Padme's role in *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* is limited almost entirely to her interactions with Anakin. She is seen only once in the Senate and only as an interested listener, not a voice or a vote. Other than that, her presence in the film is limited to her home until she travels to Mustafar to try to save Anakin. Her role in politics is virtually non-existent. Her conversations are centered around comforting and/or trying to save her husband. Padme is often seen or heard nurturing Anakin and calming his emotions. She is not placed in the center of action until the very end when Anakin force chokes her. This is a striking contrast to her role in the first film. Her motivations have clearly shifted from that of preserving democracy and protecting her people to preserving her love with Anakin and protecting his evil deeds from the Jedi. Her failure to overcome the heartbreak, even when faced with motherhood, shows how drastically her power and agency regressed from *Episode I* to *Episode III*. Padme's potential to provide the early 2000s with a strong female character failed tremendously in the last installment

of the prequel trilogy. Padme represents the stereotypical, emotionally weak female, willing to give up her power and voice to her romantic interests.

The pattern that emerged in the data collected from the sequel trilogy shows a firm representation of a heroine who possesses agency, empowerment. Rey's portrayal of a strong female heroine remained a constant in both films. In *Episode VII*, Rey introduces us to a female heroine who represents a balance between masculinity and femininity. Her softer, more "feminine" characteristics remain just as important as her "masculine" ones in this film. She is compassionate, caring, and warm, while at the same time strong, brave, and capable. She offers affection as well as determination.

In *Episode VIII*, the focus on Rey's effort to discover her *own* purpose, place, and identity serves to show the progressive representation seen in this heroine. These choices for the filmmakers were intentional. She was intentionally not given a surname. While it is true that it adds mystery to her character and drives fans to speculating her origins, it also serves another purpose. Writer and director of *Episode VIII*, Rian Johnson explains, "For me if Rey had gotten the answer that she's related to so-and-so, had learned her place in the story, that would be the easiest thing she can hear...The hardest thing to hear is, 'Nope, this is not going to define you'...and you're going to have to make the choice to find your own identity in this story" (as cited in Desta, 2018).

With this, Johnson (as cited in Desta, 2018) confirms his intentional decision to give Rey agency in this trilogy. She challenges the traditional representations of female protagonists. No one is explicitly directing her quest. Even if they try, she may not listen. She does what she thinks is right. Her identity was not linked or connected to anyone else. It was her own to find. Her purpose was not directed by anyone else. It was her own to discover.

And her place, as a leader and heroine of the Resistance, was not directed or informed by anyone else. Her motivation to protect her friends and find herself led her there. Rey's agency and empowerment does not decline through the sequel's first two films. In fact, in her search to find her place and purpose, we see her become more empowered as she realizes her identity is her own to create.

Leia's transformation from Princess to General also shows a more progressive representation of women over time. General Organa was empowered as she commanded the Resistance fighters. Her identity was no longer linked to Han or Luke. She demonstrated intelligence and authority throughout the films. She demanded the respect of her team. And we finally we see her use the Force.

EPISODE V

PASS ON WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED : MEANING MAKING, SIGNIFICANCE, AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

This research endeavor was born of both fandom and feminism. As a fan, I watch the *Star Wars* films for enjoyment and entertainment. Yet, as a scholar and feminist, I must also critique the curriculum of femininity taught within these popular culture texts. As an immensely popular cultural text, *Star Wars* operates as powerful pedagogy, influencing social understandings of gender and identity. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss findings from this study, address theoretical and educational implications, and provide recommendations for future inquiry.

This study problematized the gendered curriculum taught in three *Star Wars* trilogies as represented through the dialogue and actions of Princess Leia/General Leia, Padme Amidala, and Rey. It interrogated the films, past and present, to reveal the cultural representations of femininity that could be identified. The purpose of this inquiry was to examine of the extent to which *Star Wars* female characters Princess Leia/General Leia, Padme Amidala, and Rey support or resist a traditional curriculum of femininity. Using Feminist Media Studies as a methodological framework and discourse analysis and textual analysis as methods, feminist concepts of agency, empowerment, and representation were explored through the portrayal of women in the *Star Wars*'s trilogies. Below, findings from this study are presented and discussed, followed by a discussion of theoretical and practical implications of this inquiry project. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future inquiry.

“The longer it takes to find her. The more dangerous she becomes” – Finding Leia, Padme, and Rey

This discussion is organized by the three characters analyzed in this study: Princess Leia/General Leia, Padme Amidala, and Rey and addresses the following research question: To what extent do *Star Wars* female characters Princess Leia/General Leia, Padme Amidala, and Rey support or resist a traditional curriculum of femininity (Kidd, 2016)? Following the discussion of specific findings for each character, emergent themes are discussed.

Princess Leia/General Leia – “‘The General.’ To me she’s royalty.”

Princess Leia’s agency and empowerment declined from the beginning of each film, throughout the storyline, to the end of each film. In *Episodes IV – VI*, her first scene in each film showed her as a leader, a Rebel with a plan. She was in a position of power. However, by the end of each film, her character regresses, and her power diminishes. She repeatedly needs rescuing. Through her interactions with the ‘male heroes,’ her power and her voice is subverted. Her identity as a leader is lost as she becomes the ceremonial Princess, the love interest, and the sidekick. Her connection to the Force was never explored as she was intentionally kept in her marginalized, traditionally stereotypical, feminine place. In the original trilogy, Princess Leia supports the traditional curriculum of femininity. She occupies the place afforded to her as a marginalized female. However, in the sequel trilogy, she offers a contrast to the previous lessons her character taught. In the latest episodes, she engages with new notions of female empowerment and agency as she has become General Organa.

Padme Amidala – “The negotiations were short.”

In *Episode I*, Padme Amidala’s character was a strong, progressive, example of a feminist lead. Her first appearance in the *Star Wars* franchise appears to negotiate traditional gender

roles and stereotypes. However, in the subsequent episodes, her representation regresses. Her strength, her voice, and her leadership all declines once she engages in a relationship with Anakin Skywalker. She abandons her convictions and spends her time on-screen compromising her morals to support her obsessive and abusive boyfriend/husband. She was portrayed as a weak female, love-interest, who dies of a broken heart. For these reasons, Padme Amidala's character supports a harmful version of the traditional curriculum of femininity.

Rey – “She’s just beginning to test her powers.”

Rey's strength, decisiveness, agency, and empowerment progresses throughout the storyline of each film and over time. Though captured, she never awaits rescue; she saves herself. On several occasions, she saves her friends. At the end of *Episode VIII*, she saves the entire Resistance. Rey's identity is her own to discover. It is not formed in relation to any man (father, brother, sidekick, or love interest). She makes her own choices. She is on a path to discover her own destiny. She is not in a position of leadership, but she continually takes charge. Rey is a much different representation of a female character than what was portrayed by Leia and Padme. She is not a side-kick; rather, she is the hero, the savior, the Jedi. With each subsequent film, Rey becomes stronger with the Force and as a feminist example of a strong female lead over time. The character of Rey resists the traditional curriculum of femininity. Instead, she offers a new way of doing femininity and being a woman.

“Your insight serves your well” - Feminist Themes Revealed in this Inquiry

Interrogating the portrayal of women in the *Star Wars* films revealed certain themes of representation within the first two trilogies. One of the most prevalent themes revealed during this study was the regression of power and agency within the characters of Leia and Padme. Additionally, the two female leads represent traditional societal norms in terms of gender and

femininity. Also, the female protagonists in the first two trilogies possessed neither an identity nor path of their own. Finally, in the sequel trilogy, a theme of female empowerment is revealed through the character Rey. These emergent themes are further discussed below.

Both Princess Leia and Padme Amidala's characters show an overall decline in agency and empowerment across their trilogy's releases. Leia and Padme begin their debut episodes with the potential to be strong representations of/for females. They are both Senators, primarily motivated by saving democracy and their people. They are responsible for orchestrating missions and setting the plot in motion. However, with the release of each successive film, their respective character regresses into something much different. Leia goes from being an outspoken operative in *Episode IV*, to a reluctant love interest in *Episode V*, to the object of sexual desire and subject of male dominance in *Episode VI*. Padme's declination is very similar to her daughter's. She is seen as a decisive political agent in *Episode I*, then the forbidden love interest of Anakin Skywalker in *Episode II*. By *Episode III*, Padme's character is nothing like her former self. She has very little purpose, voice, or agency. She is motivated only by her desire to protect and be with Anakin. Leia and Padme become increasingly more passive, and more stereotypically feminine throughout the films and over time.

Additionally, in the first two trilogies, the female lead characters display traditional societal perceptions of femininity. Their characters are unable to effectively possess any traditionally masculine traits. Even when Princess Leia tries by speaking out and up, her strength and authority is subverted by a male. Following their fleeting debut with positions of leadership and decisiveness, Princess Leia and Padme Amidala were purposefully made more stereotypically feminine. Both are stripped of their positions of authority and, instead, were given roles of support for their romantic counterparts. Immediately upon their engagements with

romance, they were made to be more passive, more submissive, and more visually pleasing. Leia and Padme were created to be objects of sexual desire and the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). These characteristics are reflections of traditional societal views associated with normative femininity.

Princess Leia and Padme Amidala also lack an identity of their own. This is especially true once they submitted to their respective love interests. Princess Leia followed the direction of Han Solo and Luke Skywalker throughout the original trilogy. She was Han's love, Luke's sister, and Darth Vader's daughter. She never embarks on a quest of her own. She continually allows the men in her life to provide her with direction. Her on-screen time is almost always shared with a male indicating her identity is only validated as it is linked to men. The same is true of Padme Amidala in *Episodes II and III*. She becomes the love-interest of Anakin Skywalker and her identity is now connected with him. She lacks both individuality and a path of her own. Princess Leia and Padme Amidala occupy a place of marginalization within the *Star Wars* galaxy. They exist solely to support the plot and story as led by men.

In the sequel trilogy, a theme of female empowerment is revealed throughout the films. Rey becomes more powerful through and with the Force. As she searches for her place and helps the Resistance, she is the hero. Rey's representation in this trilogy suggests that women are free to exist outside of patriarchal norms. She occupies both masculine and feminine spaces to representing a complex reality in the ways gender and femininity are understood today. Rey's lack of a surname is a lesson that her identity and place (and by extension, women's identities and sense of place) does not have to be connected to a man. The character Rey suggests that a woman's identity is her own to discover. Rey shows that females do not have to be love-interests, members of royalty, or damsels to serve a purpose in the world.

“Taking one last look, sir, at my friends.” – Leia, Padme, and Rey

Princess Leia, Padme Amidala, and Rey offer us insight into the identities of women during their respective historical eras. The female characters in *Star Wars* reveal what it meant to be socially understood as a woman. Their representations inform us about the role, place, and identity of women of that time. The gendered ideals represented by each of those portrayals are discussed here.

“Luke, you have a power I don’t understand and could never have.” - Leia in the Original Trilogy

As an immensely popular text, *Star Wars* is a key site for the (re)production of hegemonic gender norms (Storey, 2010). Specifically, Princess Leia’s character allows us a glimpse into the cultural and societal constructs surrounding women during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Through careful analysis, this study uncovered hegemonic structures pertaining to gender and femininity being reproduced through Princess Leia’s character in *Star Wars Episodes IV - VI*. The research conducted here revealed the place of women, as represented by Leia, was one of marginalization. This reinforced hegemonic patriarchal beliefs of the time. Women belonged in subjugation to men. Women were something to be owned and controlled.

Through Princess Leia, we learn that women were not empowered and lacked agency. Leia succumbed to the traditional gender roles of damsel, love interest, subject of dominance, and object of sexual desire. In both *Episode IV* and in *Episode V*, when she is captured by Darth Vader, Princess Leia awaits rescue. While she does stand firm and refuses to reveal the location of the Rebel base, she does not try to escape or save herself. Instead, she sleeps in her cell awaiting her fate or her rescue. Princess Leia, then, is a reproduction of the traditional *damsel in distress* (Zeisler, 2008). Leia’s romantic entanglements with Han Solo portrayed her as a love

interest and object of male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Finally, Leia is sexually objectified by men and viewed as something to be owned and dominated when she is shown in bondage wearing nothing but her golden bikini. The societal norms associated with Princess Leia's brand of femininity reflect the hegemonic beliefs that women were to be weak, vulnerable, beautiful, sexually desirable, and subservient.

The representation of women seen in the original films work to normalize hegemonic values which reinforce male dominance over women (Watkins and Emerson, 2000). The gendered stereotypes (re)produced by Princess Leia's character both demonstrates and shapes the dominant beliefs of her time. Although Leia was introduced as an outspoken Senator and operative of the Rebel alliance, this role is perpetually minimized throughout the films. Instead, her value lies primarily in the fact that she is a sexually attractive Princess in need of love and rescue. Her voice is repeatedly silenced and her power subverted in her exchanges with Han Solo. She is viewed as property of a male gangster slug, when he claims her as his slaves and binds her with chains. The way she is portrayed visually in her golden slave-girl bikini effectively negates any claims, like those of Dominguez (2017), of her being a progressive female representation.

Furthermore, Princess Leia's identity becomes solely linked to men within the film. She follows the path of the men from her first rescue forwards. She is Luke Skywalker's sister, Darth Vader's daughter, and perhaps most noticeably Han Solo's love interest. Leia's portrayal works to prove Brown's (2018) analysis in which he claimed that the focus on women as supporting characters limited her strength. Her role in the films and her place in the storyline lacks significance and importance outside her connection to men. She lacks agency as she fails to control her own path and choices. She reinforces the patriarchal notions that women are

incapable of autonomous action (McNay, 2016). The messages interpreted here tell us that women's place and identity bore little significance outside of their connection with a man.

The lessons of femininity in the original *Star Wars* trilogy teach us that to be considered feminine in the 1970s and early 1980s, a woman must be frail, vulnerable, and passive. Princess Leia taught women that it was okay for women to be outspoken and opinionated. However, if you do, be prepared to be mocked and patronized. Women should, instead, squelch their natural instincts to speak out. As we see in the regression of Leia's strength and empowerment, silence and passivity (and less clothing) makes one more feminine and more appealing to men. Therefore, her role as the Senator and the spy operative in charge of missions to aid the Rebellion needed to be diminished. The dazzling "Princess" in need of rescue and a *good kiss* was much more the norm during her time.

"We're losing power!" – Padme in The Prequel Trilogy

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, *Star Wars* again offered us a curriculum of femininity (Kidd, 2016) through its lead female, Queen Padme Amidala. With the passing of more than a decade, one might expect to see changes in the representation of women within the *Star Wars* films. In the first episode of the prequel trilogy, that expectation would not be wrong. Padme Amidala's portrayal of the female lead in *Episode I* demonstrated a female who was strong, dedicated, decisive, and respected. She was not objectified; nor was she submissive. Padme's character had great potential to overturn the traditionally weak and passive stereotypes played by her predecessor (and on-screen daughter) Leia. However, this potential was lost with the subsequent films in the prequel trilogy.

Episodes II and *III* revealed an eerily similar representation of females to that seen in the original trilogy. As Padme becomes the object of Anakin Skywalker's desires and obsession, she

grows more passive, weak, and vulnerable. She is intentionally made to appear sexy, sultry, and seductive so that Anakin's infatuation with her is believable to the audience. To be "more feminine" and desirable, she was dressed to accentuate her body and show more skin. Furthermore, her focus was shifted from politics and preserving democracy to protecting her love with Anakin at all costs. The gendered stereotypes, like those portrayed by Padme, inform women on what it means to be socially understood as a female (Ehlers, 2016). They also draw boundaries for women (Wanzo, 2016). So, as Padme was made to be more visually pleasing and politically passive, women learned that she too belonged in a role of objectification, not leadership.

Padme's voice was effectively silenced throughout Episodes *II* and *III*. In *Episode II*, she is mostly heard thwarting Anakin's advances and speaking rarely of the politics which had previously been her primary motivation. By *Episode III* she has very few lines in the film; and, all but a couple are focused on her doomed relationship with Anakin. Much like Jones (2018) found in his analysis of *Wonder Woman*, Padme's lack of dialogue demonstrates her lack of empowerment. Similar to Jones (2018) analysis of Diana, the lack of opportunity for Padme to have a voice illustrates the intention for her to share her story as a love interest. Furthermore, her political voice and vote were silenced as she no longer held the title of Senator. Instead, she passively watched democracy die "with thunderous applause" (Lucas et al., & Lucas, 2005) as Darth Sidious took control of the Republic and replaced it with the evil Empire.

It could be argued here, however, that the haunting deterioration of Padme offers more harmful and dangerous lessons of femininity than those in the original trilogy. As Disch (2016) reminds us, the portrayal of women in film has political consequences; continually representing women as weak and ineffectual works to constrain her political rights and empowerment. The

representation by Padme reinforced traditional perceptions that women are frail, vulnerable, weak, and passive. Padme compromises her morals and abandons her convictions in order to fulfill her role as Anakin's love interest. She comforted and nurtured his tortured soul until it killed her. Padme's ignoring of any and all abuse by Anakin represents the stereotypical notions of vulnerable femininity. Padme was too weak to stand against Anakin's obsessions. She was too weak to report his vengeful actions and his dangerous fixation with gaining power to the Jedi Order. She was also too weak to live after having her heartbroken. The stereotypically weak and vulnerable characterization of Padme (re)produces the hegemonic beliefs that were/are used as reasons to subjugate women.

“You were bested by a girl who had never held a lightsaber” – Rey in The Sequel Trilogy

As our beliefs about femininity and masculinity change with our historical context, so do the ways in which they are represented in onscreen (Steiner, 2014). In 2015, with the release of the sequel trilogy, the lessons concerning what it means to be a gendered woman appear to have changed drastically. The social norms of femininity are portrayed much differently in the sequels than those seen in the first two trilogies. Rey, the newest female lead in the *Star Wars* saga, represents a progressively feminist heroine. She personifies a negotiation between the traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine spaces.

Rey is characterized by her self-sufficient nature, her resourcefulness, and her ability to protect herself and others. Rey is a skilled fighter and pilot. She is independent yet loyal. She is aggressive when necessary, yet compassionate. She demonstrates agency as she follows her instincts. And, she is empowered as she seeks her path and learns to use the Force. Rey is not represented as a sidekick or a love interest helping the male hero fulfill his destiny. Instead, Rey

is a heroine with a destiny of her own to fulfill. Rey is the first female lead character in the *Star Wars* galaxy to utilize the Force and become a hero in the *Star Wars* saga.

Furthermore, Rey is the first female lead in the *Star Wars* saga without a royal title. She also exists without a surname. This reveals a change in perspective concerning women's roles in society. It defies the old ideal that without a royal title a woman cannot not be significant to the storyline. Rey represents a new ideal for women. Her portrayal teaches women it is okay to be in control; it is okay to take the lead; and it is okay to be self-sufficient. She is strong enough to defeat Kylo Ren, while at the same time, comfortable enough to show empathy towards him. Her emotions do not make her weak; they drive her to do what she feels is right.

Though attractive, Rey's beauty seems to be incidental. The way in which Rey is portrayed visually does not negate her representation as an example of a progressive female heroine. She is not the object of sexual desire. She is not dressed to be sexy or sultry. The male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) does not define her existence; neither does her relationship to a man. She is confident and determined. She is motivated by her own convictions and instincts. The message that her character communicates to women is one of empowerment. It is possible to still be considered feminine and gendered a woman without being sexually objectified, submissive, vulnerable, and weak.

Is she “strong with the Force?” – Examining the Progressiveness of Leia, Padme, and Rey

In consideration of Shapiro's (2017) work which was used as an exemplary study to guide my own methodology, it is imperative that I evaluate the female protagonists in *Star Wars* to the feminist themes. Shapiro (2017) found the following to be critical in determining the progressive nature of a female lead: she is aware of the constraints of her gender, possesses

traditionally masculine characteristics, transcends gender roles, and executes her own individualism and choice.

Leia. Princess Leia falls short as a progressive lead using Shapiro's (2017) model. She is aware of the constraints of her gender as she is captured and awaits rescue. Her outspokenness and moments of leadership are traditionally masculine characteristics. However, she ultimately fails to transcend gender roles. She is the sexualized object of desire and the love interest of Han Solo. Princess Leia also fails to exercise individualism and choice. Once her story, and identity, is linked to Han Solo, her agency is lost. For these reasons, Princess Leia's gendered representation is more stereotypical than progressive.

Padme. Padme Amidala meets the criteria established by Shapiro (2017) for being a progressive female protagonist in *Episode I*; however, her devolution ultimately results in her missing the mark. In *Episodes II* and *III*, Padme, though aware of the constraints of her gender, does very little to transcend them. She does not display any traditionally masculine characteristics. Her agency disappears the moment she becomes romantically involved with Anakin Skywalker. Padme's strong beginning juxtaposed to her weak conclusion shows disempowerment. Padme represents a culture that was not convinced that femininity could coincide with feminism.

Rey. My analysis reveals that Rey represents a much more progressive female heroine. Rey's character proves that femininity and feminism can, in fact, coexist. Considering Shapiro's (2017) model, Rey measures up to the standard for being a feminist example. She is aware of her gender. She allows herself to feel and show emotions as a traditional female would. However, Rey is able to transcend any constraints that her gender might afford. She transcends the traditionally weak notions of femininity and displays strength and bravery. She possesses agency

as she exercises her own choice and individualism. She is determined to fulfill her own destiny and discover her own identity. She follows her own instincts.

“People keep telling me they know me. No one does.” - Interrogating Rey

Steiner (2014) brings forth a significant consideration when evaluating whether a character is truly progressive. For a character to be progressively feminist, she must challenge the traditional notions of femininity; however, she must not be disguised by being placed in a traditionally masculine space and storyline (Steiner, 2014). Building on this same concept, Koushik and Reed (2018) argued that Rey’s character was not progressively feminist. Instead, it was little more than a marketing strategy by Disney. Koushik and Reed (2018) claimed that Rey was a female on the same Hero’s Journey taken by Luke Skywalker. There was little about her representation in *The Force Awakens* that was new and reimagined. As Koushik and Reed (2018) explain that placing Rey at the center of a Hero’s Journey means that she ignores the part of her that is female. She fails to acknowledge that her gender and femininity is a part of who she is. To address Koushik and Reed’s (2018) claims, it is necessary to further evaluate and critique Rey’s representation as a progressive female heroine. To do so, I utilize Shapiro’s (2017) study once more and employ her use of the Heroine’s Journey to evaluate Rey’s complexity and progressiveness.

The Heroine’s Journey was first created by Maureen Murdock. This journey is different from that of a hero; the female character must acknowledge, embrace, and unite both her masculine and feminine sides. According to Shapiro (2017) the heroine is in isolation when her journey begins. Rey accurately fits this description. When the film begins, she lives a solitary life on the planet Jakku. She was abandoned as a child. She scavenges during the day and sleeps alone during the night. Her only contact with others is when she sells her daily finds for food.

The next stage of the Heroine's Journey occurs when the heroine escapes isolation (Shapiro, 2017). Again, Rey accomplishes this feat in *Episode VII* when she rescues BB8, meets Finn, and is then forced to run from stormtroopers. She steals the Millennium Falcon during the escape. This ultimately ended the solitary nature of her existence. From here, she becomes part of the Resistance efforts to defeat the First Order.

Shapiro (2017) explains that the heroine must then reject the male gaze and embrace her masculine side. Rey's rejection of the male gaze is inherent in her character. She dresses in a way that is practical, not seductive. She does not recognize, or at least does a great job at ignoring, Finn's motives when he asks her if she is returning to Jakku for her boyfriend. Rey is not motivated by being the object of male desire or male gaze. Additionally, Rey is independent. She unapologetically demonstrates her strength and skills as a fighter. These are all traditionally masculine qualities.

We see Rey fully embrace her masculine side as she learns to use the Force. Frightened of her power at first, she tells Luke Skywalker, "Something inside me has always been there. But now it's awake. I'm afraid. I don't know what it is or what to do with it" (2017). However, Rey becomes more powerful as she allows herself to feel and use the Force. She uses it to escape from harm, protect her friends, and defeat her enemies. It solidifies her connection with the traditionally masculine notions of protector and savior.

The final stage in the Heroine's Journey occurs when the heroine learns to embrace both the feminine and masculine sides within her (Shapiro, 2017). At this stage, the heroine learns to unite the two forces within her, completing her transformation into a true heroine (not a girl placed in the story of a hero). Though the conclusion of Rey's journey has not yet been revealed, *Episode IX* will be released a month after I am writing this chapter, her character has already

shown evidence of this final stage. Her feminine side is seen as she embraces Finn after a long time apart from her friend. She allows her feminine side to show as she sits next to General Leia Organa seeking her advice and comfort.

The emergent data revealed in this study debunks Koushik and Reed's (2018) claims against Rey's progressive representation. Though she may incidentally share similarities with Luke Skywalker's journey, the evidence revealed thus far in Rey's journey, proves she is amidst the true Heroine's Journey. She does not deny or ignore those elements within her that gender her as a woman. She does not run from the traditionally feminine qualities of compassion and empathy. She embraces her masculine side not only as she fights to survive and protect her friends, but also when she uses learns to use the Force. Her masculine and feminine sides appear to be reconciled to create a complex, progressive, representation of a female heroine.

“This Resistance must survive” – Significance of this Interrogation

Reading *Star Wars* films as gender texts provides insight into the lives and identities of women across three generations. The *Star Wars* trilogies teach us about the perceptions of gender and femininity across time. From 1977 through 2017, it offers a curriculum of femininity (Kidd, 2016) to its audience. The representations of the female leads in each film reveals what it means to be socially understood as a feminine subject at the time of the Episode's release. The ways in which women are portrayed in the films informs us of the norms associated with femininity and the social rituals which are expected of her as a gendered woman (Ehlers, 2016). The films demonstrate the social behaviors and boundaries to which women were/are expected to adhere. Interrogating the curriculum of femininity within *Star Wars* films holds significance for the identity formation of young women, broader goals for social justice, cultural curriculum studies, and the field of education.

“I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine” – Rey as a Force for Empowering Female Identities

Star Wars has created millions of fans, and as many fanatics. However, regardless of how deep one's amusements and emotional connections run with the films, those who engage with *Star Wars* are affected by the representations within them. Popular culture representations, like those seen in *Star Wars*, prescribe and perpetuate how we perceive our roles and identities (Steiner, 2014). The images, contexts, and dialogue presented within popular culture films, like *Star Wars*, work to both perform and form the identities of females within our culture. As young girls engage with popular culture texts, they see the characters performing roles and rituals that represent socially normative behaviors. They interpret these performances and representations in ways that inform their understandings about their own place, role, and identity. In many ways, popular culture works as a powerful pedagogue which normalizes gender roles and constructs our notions of femininity. Specifically, this study examined the gendered pedagogy within the *Star Wars* trilogies.

Deconstructing the gendered curriculum within the original and prequel trilogies provides insight into the cultural landscape (Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015) of that time. The traditional and stereotypical representations of females serve as an indication of a culture and a society that had not fully accepted feminist notions and goals. Women internalize the representations perpetuated in media and then have a limited sense of their possibilities and agency (Steiner, 2014). Princess Leia and Padme Amidala were often portrayed in extremes: strength then helplessness, empowerment then objectification, agency then passivity, leader then love interest.

Ultimately, these representations contributed to a generation of women struggling to come to grips with feminism; women who longed for empowerment but struggled imagining an

identity of their own, women who desired a stronger role and political voice but who often remained silent, women who longed for agency but whose sexual vulnerability in the workplace put them at risk for abuse. The messages of female passivity, objectification, subjugation, and silent victimization were each reinforced through *Star War's* prequel and original trilogies.

The 2010s have brought about significant cultural change for women. Women are stepping forward, speaking up, and protesting publicly against subjugation and victimization. With movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp, it seems this time, *The Resistance will not be intimidated*. Along with social movements demanding social change, popular culture films, like *Star Wars*, can also become sites for a pedagogy of resistance (Wright, 2009). These are spaces where stereotypes can be challenged and gendered identities reimaged. The constraints and limitations brought on by occupying a place in the margins are being loosened, as are our socially constructed understandings of gender and femininity.

It is fitting that Rey fights for the Resistance since she is a product of cultural resistance through popular culture. Rey represents the complexity that is now understood about our gendered existence. She demonstrates empowerment and agency. She teaches that it is possible to occupy both traditionally masculine and feminine spaces. She is not punished for daring to occupy masculine spaces, as Kaplan's (1983) study found true for female characters of the past. Rey is not forced to choose between her feminine characteristics and her agency and empowerment. Rey's character represents a shift in the cultural perception of femininity today. She indicates that our society and culture is starting to better understand and embrace the ideals championed by feminism. The strict binary lines of gender roles are being blurred; the masculine and the feminine are no longer perceived as opposite and disconnected.

Rey defies traditional stereotypes and offers a representation of a new social reality for young girls. Rey symbolizes new ideals from which young girls can structure their identity. Her character demonstrates strength and power, yet she remains compassionate and empathetic. She is the protector and savior, not the *damsel*. Rey proves that femininity is no longer confined to the ideas of objectification, weakness, and passivity. Instead, a woman can lead, take control, fight for just causes, and still be considered feminine and a woman.

Through our engagements with popular culture, like *Star Wars*, we learn how to experience and act within our world (Maudlin & Sandlin, 2015). The meanings that the latest *Star Wars* trilogy evokes within female fans challenges them with a new way of experiencing our world and new ways of “acting feminine”. This challenge extends across four generations, including the youngest of viewers. Rey challenges young girls of Generation Z to put away princess tiaras and the vulnerability associated with them. Instead, she encourages them to pick up a lightsaber and unapologetically fight for the resistance against injustice. She challenges Millennials and Generation Xers, to seek their own destiny, construct their own identity and follow their own instincts. Additionally, the transformation of Leia from Princess to General Organa challenges Baby Boomers to seek a place of empowerment and agency by resisting the places of marginalization. The messages within the sequels challenge all women to reconcile the masculine and feminine “forces” within us. Just as the concepts of femininity are negotiated with this newest *Star Wars* heroine, identities for women in our culture will also reflect those negotiated terms.

“We’ve passed on all we know” – Curriculum Studies as a Force for Negotiating Norms

Curriculum studies encourages critical engagements with cultural texts so that we may challenge assumptions and reveal the curriculum within them. As we engage and reflect on

curriculum, the responses to it change with each historical moment (Pinar, 2004). By interrogating of the gendered curriculum within *Star Wars*, this study reveals the ways in which the identity of women and concepts of femininity have changed over time. Comparing the films' representation of females from each trilogy, reveals a recent historical shift in our culture's understanding and perception of gender roles and femininity. The research here offers significance to cultural curriculum studies by exposing the implicit popular culture pedagogy being taught through, and to, females today.

Representations seen in Princes Leia and in Padme Amidala indicate the difficulty women have had acknowledging ourselves as human and equal to men. Myths of frail, passive, and vulnerable femininity have worked define and subjugate women's gendered identity. Schubert (2006) explains that the "big curriculum" that surrounds our existence and is experienced on our journey can force many persons into states of exile. Women's existence and experiences have traditionally led to a place of exile, with roles and identities subordinate to men. Implicitly and explicitly societal conventions such as politics, religion, and media have reinforced the perception of women as the lesser sex.

For curriculum scholars, the changing notions of gender identification, gender formation, and gendered behavior have been richly investigated and discussed for years. Now, these discussions and desires for social change are reaching mainstream attention and thought. As evidence of this move towards popular thought, *Star Wars* is both a reflection of social resistance and a site of resistance. It is both performing and forming the negotiated terms of gendered social norms.

"We are what they grow beyond. That is the true burden of all masters." – Educators as a Force for Empowering Female Students

The shifting cultural lessons learned from experience and engaging with cultural texts find their ways into schools as part of the big curriculum (Schubert, 2006). Therefore, this study of *Star War's* gendered curriculum brings to light the knowledge that exists outside our classrooms in hopes of revealing the ways it affects the individual female learners in our classrooms. Luke (2010) explains that “the gendered politics of classroom encounters – at school and university – have taught so many women about the politics of voice and silence, even though we didn’t always have terms or theory to talk about how pedagogy can function as a silencing device” (p. 133). Through politics, the workplace, and churches, and schools women’s voices have been silenced. Women have been effectively marginalized and “othered.” However, now, there are sites and movements of resistance seeking to change that reality. These efforts are aimed at empowering young girls to speak boldly and live an existence that is unapologetic for being female.

Curriculum studies problematizes popular culture so we better understand the lessons it imparts upon young learners. It encourages the field of education to be cognizant of the ways cultural texts nurtures subjectivities and forms identities. Curriculum studies challenges educators to address inequalities at its root cause, confront the stereotypes aimed to marginalize and silence groups, and locate ourselves within the hierarchy. By doing so, we can critically understand our own identity as well as the identities of our students.

My study provides an understanding of the shifting cultural ideals contributing to the complex identities of female students. The implicit messages of empowerment and agency seen in Rey symbolize a change in the ways women are being represented in popular culture media. The defiance of old stereotypes is a step towards a more socially just representation of the complexity of a gendered woman. Smith (2000) reminds us that popular culture is

“unquestioned pedagogy” that is “absorbed” by our students. Therefore, it can transform how young girls see themselves within our culture. It is important that educators recognize that education is a search for who and how our students are becoming (Schubert, 2010). As we engage in a formal curriculum with our students, we must also acknowledge the informal influences that shape their identities. Realizing that curriculum is experienced (Schubert, 2010), not just taught, educators are charged with providing an equitable experience in which consideration is given to each student’s individuality and journey. This could mean reconsidering and renegotiating the power structures that have been traditionally disempowering for female students.

Understanding the gendered lessons embedded within the most recent *Star Wars* films provides educators with a knowledge of youth culture that we can use to build meaningful connections with our female students. We can engage in teachings which nurture and encourage the messages of empowerment females are seeing in today’s popular culture media. Educators must be able to understand how students view themselves in relation to the larger social context. Doing so will allow us to become an active agent in contributing to an educational experience of fairness and solidarity with other human beings (Schubert, 2006). Providing young girls with a safe space to speak and exist as equally human in schools can work towards a socially just classroom, curriculum, and culture. This is necessary to nurture their developing sense of empowerment and agency.

“...but, this is your fight.” – Implications of this Resistance

This study implicates the current state of education, especially as it pertains to the lack of female representation within its standardized curriculum. It also implicates future researchers to further investigate the representations of various groups within our culture. Our broader society

is also implicated by this research as they must be willing to embrace the changing perceptions and understandings of gender norms and femininity. These implications are discussed below.

“I have a bad feeling about this” – A Lack of Females in Standardized Curriculum

Though *Star Wars*' Rey is a step towards a more socially just and progressive representation of females in popular culture, the work of feminists is most definitely not complete. This study brings about further implications for education, research, and our society as a whole. As the emergent data revealed the resistive nature of Rey's character, it beckons one to look into the ways our current curriculum is not empowering, and needs resisting. One might ask: *Are female students leaving theaters empowered but then feeling the opposite when they enter our classrooms? If young girls are cognizant of the most recent social movements led by women, are such efforts being supported or subverted in schools? And knowing that identities are formed through systems of representation, are female students being provided with powerful and progressive representations through and within our school's curriculum?*

For a brief glimpse into the possible answers to such questions, one could consider the current high school social studies standards. After all, this would be just one logical place for providing girls with feelings of empowerment by offering them representations of historically powerful women. Also, my position as a veteran social studies teacher afforded me the confidence to interpret the standards with fidelity. However, upon doing so, it is clear that there is little empowering about this curriculum. In fact, throughout the entire secondary curriculum for social studies, there are only five females mentioned. Is Eleanor Roosevelt the ONLY female worth teaching about in the entire history of the United States? And are there only four women who have made a contribution to the world's history? The answer is yes, according to the state of Georgia's "Standards of Excellence."

If this is the standards being taught to within Georgia classrooms, it can be assumed that movements towards female equality, empowerment, and agency are lost at the school house doors. So, in our deeply religious South, girls are not receiving consistent, formal lessons of empowerment. The two institutions charged with educating young women are perpetuating their silence and marginalization. Neither churches, nor schools, find value in the accomplishments or thoughts of women. Therefore, the goal for curriculum studies scholars and educators must be to find sites of resistance within our classrooms to bring about desired social change.

“Always in motion is the future” - Considerations for Further Research

My research into the curriculum of femininity in *Star Wars* films interrogates the representations portrayed by Princess Leia, Padme Amidala, and Rey. While my study did reveal a more progressive representation for females, this progression most specifically pertains to white females. Therefore, the progressive nature of *Episode VII* through *IX*, should be further investigated through different lenses. In this sequel trilogy, the cast is more ethnically and racially diverse than the first two trilogies. For example, Finn (FN2187) represents black men and Rose Tico represents Asian women. However, whether these representations are empowering or reinforcing of old stereotypes could be investigated in a future study. Also, interrogating the representation of black women in the films might prove that this cultural text is not progressive in its efforts to meet feminist goals.

The research provided here looked at the traditionally masculine versus the traditionally feminine characteristics in the female lead characters. The data revealed a recent blurring of those traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine lines. However, it did not take into consideration the value that young girls find within those gendered lines. Investigating which qualities young female students consider empowering in popular culture heroines, like Rey,

would serve to further the work of this study. This would provide insight into how girls see the portrayal of progressive heroines, how they *want* to see those heroines, and how they see themselves through those heroines.

Future research might also investigate current educators' awareness and understanding of the ways in which identities are formed through representations. This effort could reveal ways in which their knowledge of representation informs their curriculum and instruction. Additionally, it might offer important information into ways to raise awareness and ways to use daily curriculum as a site for resistance against un-empowering state standards.

“Complete your training. Fulfill your destiny” – Broader Society Embracing the Resistance

Furthermore, this research implicates our broader society. Resistance of gendered stereotypes within popular culture texts requires attention to the implicit messages they convey. To benefit from resistive texts, we must embrace the cultural shifts that informs and forms the resistance. Each of us are implicated in our contributions that we make towards creating a more socially just culture, curriculum, and classroom. For women to live in an empowering culture, men are challenged to rethink their own location/place in the hierarchy. As we deconstruct tired old stereotypes in an effort to construct a new identity and place for women in our culture, men must also be willing to reconstruct their identities.

“The Force will be with you. Always.” - Concluding Thoughts

The lessons learned by watching *Star Wars* films have been absorbed into popular culture and into the consciousness of fans everywhere. Fans know the explicit lessons of *Star Wars* by heart: “Fear is the path to the dark side,” “Always in motion is the Future” and “Your focus determines your reality.” Amidst the science fiction and the action, audiences learn that we are all capable of good and evil. We are taught that the Force surrounds us and is within us. It is

pulling us in conflicting directions, ultimately seeking balance. The ways of the Jedi, the seductiveness of the dark side, and the power of hope are only a few of the messages explicitly embedded throughout the *Star Wars* films. And, along with the more serious philosophies, fans are also well aware that the Millennium Falcon “made the Kessel run in less than 12 parsecs.”

Implicitly, *Star Wars* offers a pedagogy which works to form our sense of self and others. Within its many lessons, exists a curriculum of femininity. Those engaged with the films gain knowledge about expected roles of women and their place in society. Traditionally, this place was one of marginalization and subservience. However, the most recent trilogy offers a much more progressive representation of women. Rey embodies the resistance to social norms which perceived women as weak, damsels, in need of rescuing and love. Instead, she offers a representation of women that is empowered and possesses agency.

The gendered curriculum of *Star Wars* must be taken into consideration when seeking to better understand the identities of women in today’s culture. Educators must be aware of the messages and images that daily form their students’ identities and biases. We must nurture the messages of empowerment and agency. The empowerment that female students are gaining through some popular culture, must continue to inside the classroom. This study implicates all educators and challenges them to use their classrooms and curriculum as sites of resistance against socially unjust standards, beliefs, and practices.

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