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## Pop Culture Intersections

*Star Wars*: From Fantasy Film to Statement Showcase

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### Abstract

This paper will examine the success of the *Star Wars* franchise by comparing two of its films: *Episode IV - A New Hope* (1977) and *Episode VII - The Force Awakens* (2015). During the nearly 40 year period in between each film's release, there was significant socio-political change that had occurred. Therefore, in order to continue to appeal to its existing audience, as well as adopt new audiences, *Star Wars* had to deviate from the traditional characters and storylines of *A New Hope* and instead, focus on diversity and representation in *The Force Awakens*. Using socio-political and feminist approaches, I will analyze *Star Wars*' place as a strong force in American popular culture in both the late 1970s and in 2015. By fitting into the specific cultural landscapes of these times, the *Star Wars* films asserted themselves as works that satisfied what people were looking for, whether it be a fascinating fantasy adventure film or a film that conveys the importance of on-screen representation. I will compare the two time periods' socio-political climates through my analysis of how male, female, and BIPOC characters are depicted in each of the films. At the end of the paper, I also discuss the importance of representation, both on the screen and in marketing. By understanding the ways in which films respond to and influence our socio-political landscapes, we can become a more socially-conscious audience.

“You will remove these restraints and leave this cell with the door open.” In this scene, the heroine of the newest *Star Wars* trilogy, Rey, has just been captured by the First Order and is attempting to escape before being forced to give up any information that may help the villains find the elusive Jedi, Luke Skywalker. While alone in the cell with a stormtrooper, she uses a mind control technique to direct the stormtrooper’s actions and forge her own escape (Abrams, 2015). Not only is this scene a big moment in and of itself because it is the first time Rey is seen using the Force, but this statement also symbolizes the ground-breaking nature of *Star Wars: Episode VII - The Force Awakens* because it alludes to the restraints that were placed on female characters in the past *Star Wars* films and indicates that they are now being taken away. Disney’s acquisition of Lucasfilm in 2012 brought about significant change for the *Star Wars* franchise. Under Disney, *Star Wars* has undergone a transformation marked by changes in their characters, storylines, and audiences. As one of the most well-known franchises since its premier in 1977, *Star Wars* has been forced to adapt alongside society over the past several decades. One of the most major changes that has occurred during this time is the rise of social media. These days, there is immense pressure in Hollywood to produce films that maintain a high level of social awareness. However, this was not always the case. Despite males being depicted as powerful heroes, females needing to be rescued, and all of the main characters being portrayed by white actors, *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* was a huge success. This film lies in stark contrast to *Episode VII - The Force Awakens*, in which the leading characters consist of a female heroine and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color).

Compared to recent years, the United States in the 1970s, was a much simpler time. In that decade, culture was more straightforward; a film was meant to entertain, and if it looked

interesting, people would go and watch it. Nowadays, films are subject to an intense level of scrutiny. Before watching a film, one might ask a series of questions before deciding whether or not they truly want to watch it. Does it feature a female lead? Has the director been involved in any scandals? Is the cast diverse? My purpose in this article is not to decide which time period's movie-going practices are better, but instead it is to demonstrate that there *is* a significant difference between these two time periods, and it is for this reason that the *Star Wars* franchise has evolved into what it is today.

I will argue that *Star Wars* had the ability to remain at the top of the box office, despite the forty year gap in between *A New Hope* and *The Force Awakens*, because they used their characters to fill a need that audiences were lacking in their socio-political landscape, whether it be the need for an entertainment-based escape from reality or the need for on-screen representation. The franchise's long-standing success is due to the fact that they shaped the films according to the landscape of the time in which they were released. I will analyze the United States' social context in the late 1970s, its social context in 2015, and the role of representation in film. Within these areas of analysis, I will be exploring the differences in diversity between *A New Hope* and *The Force Awakens* and how social media has impacted the film industry. By comparing the socio-political landscape of the 1970s to what it was in 2015, my aim is to elucidate the increasing complexity of popular culture. Such change calls upon filmmakers to leave behind the perception of film as a standalone piece of work and to adopt the mindset that film extends into multiple directions: filmmaking, marketing, and social advocacy.

I will discuss how the current *Star Wars* franchise deviates from the original Lucasfilm trilogy in order to market their films to new audiences and remain in demand by showcasing

feminism and the representation of minorities. In recent years, activism for female rights and equal representation has been at the forefront of social change. In merging with Disney, the franchise was given the opportunity to satisfy this effort by opening themselves up to Disney's female audiences, thereby expanding upon their historically male viewership. While this merger gave the *Star Wars* franchise the *chance* to adopt a new population of fans, I argue that it was the social landscape that led them to make the decision to increase the diversity in their casting. Therefore, to engage both female audiences and younger generations, who tend to be more left-leaning demographics, the franchise made an effort to incorporate these progressive attitudes into *The Force Awakens* and to connect to these groups' socio-political values.

Furthermore, *Star Wars* has been able to remain relevant in popular culture by appealing to social media users through the use of diversity in their characters. Due to the strong presence of social media in popular culture in 2015, the franchise was able to use it to their advantage by utilizing it as a tool to generate more support for the film. By showcasing diversity, the film was used to inspire fans who could then take to social media to spread positive reviews. It is in this manner that the *Star Wars* franchise utilized their social landscape to rope in new audiences. The evidence illustrates how *Star Wars* fulfills the need for on-screen representation in a time when race and gender are viewed as divisive topics in the American socio-political sphere. While the recent films receive criticism from both the right, for straying too far from the original trilogy (Golding, 2019), and from the left, for not doing enough to truly represent minorities (Warner, 2017), on the whole, *Star Wars* successfully bridges nostalgia and forward thinking. In doing so, the franchise has taken a step in the right direction by creating a space for discussion about how characters' portrayals in film can be used to reflect current trends and social progress.

### **Breaking down my approach**

In this paper, one of the main points I will be discussing is diversity. What I am referring to by this is demographic diversity, specifically relating to the variety in casting in terms of gender and race. I will also use the term “representation” somewhat interchangeably. Even though representation *does* indicate the portrayal of *diverse* characters, it goes one step further by engaging the audience; so, instead of simply referring to what appears on the screen (diversity), representation is something more tangible that the audience can relate to and internalize as a result of seeing these characters on the screen.

I will be using Merriam-Webster’s definition to define what “social media” refers to in my paper, which is stated as being “forms of electronic communication... through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This definition includes Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, messaging apps, etc.

Another term I will use in this paper is “conservative.” I will be using this term to refer to traditional values and ways of thinking. This definition encapsulates conventional attitudes in regard to both social and political ideals. In his article, which discusses conservative responses to progressive social movements in the 1970s, Bruce Schulman (2008) describes how there was an overwhelming response of conservatism among those who perceived the social movements of the 70s to be too extreme. While political conservatism also rose during this time, Schulman indicates that it gained such a large following because it appealed to the existing conservative

viewpoints that many Americans already possessed. Therefore, in this paper, the term “conservative” refers to the general mindset of individuals to preserve and embrace traditional values.

As for my analysis, I am going to be using a socio-political approach (as opposed to only a sociological or only a political one) because diversity and popular culture are very much intertwined with political activism, even more so nowadays. Socio-politics is the intersection of social and political systems (LiVecchi & Obasaju, 2018). It is important to recognize the interaction between these two systems because audiences’ experiences are shaped by the multiple identities they possess, like, for example, race, gender, class, political stance (Crenshaw, 1990). It is through the lens of these intersecting identities that audiences watch films, and only after acknowledging that these systems influence one’s attitudes toward a film, can filmmakers produce something that truly engages viewers. Therefore, because these subjects work in tandem with one another, we can work to fully understand the impact that *Star Wars* had in American society by examining them together. I will use this framework to analyze how George Lucas and J.J. Abrams, directors of *A New Hope* and *The Force Awakens*, respectively, used social and political influences to inform their filmmaking and how, in turn, their films informed their socio-political landscape.

I will also be using feminism as a framework in my analysis of gender in these films. Feminism, as defined in *Manifesta: Young women, feminism, and the future*, is “a word that describes a social justice movement for gender equality and human liberation” (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000, p. 50). The authors also state they consider a feminist to be “each and every politically and socially conscious woman or man who works for equality within or outside the



movement” (p. 54). I will use this idea of feminism to inform my argument that *The Force Awakens* was created in a politically and socially conscious manner that advocates for gender equality through film. I will also use this framework to critique the ways in which *A New Hope* both succeeded and fell short on creating a film that advocates for equality. While there are many definitions of what “feminism” is, I decided to use Baumgardner & Richards’ definition because it was conceived in 2000, which is roughly in between when the two films were made. Because this definition does not favor any one time period and does not convey political bias toward any one side, it serves as a solid framework and middle ground with which I can analyze the two films.

### **The films**

Before beginning the plot overviews, I will first explain the timeline of the *Star Wars* films because it can be confusing given that the prequels were released after the originals. To briefly explain, in chronological order, it goes *Episode IV, V*, and then *VI*. Those films make up what is referred to as the “original trilogy” and they were released in the 70s and 80s. Then, *Episodes I, II*, and *III* were released in the early 2000s, and are called the “prequels”. And then, in 2015, *Episode VII - The Force Awakens* was released, followed by the two final films, thereby making up the “sequel trilogy”.

*A New Hope*, which was the first *Star Wars* movie to be released, is a fantasy film that, at its core, is about good versus evil: the Light Side of the Force versus the Dark Side of the Force. Using the Death Star, which is a weapon powerful enough to destroy planets, the Dark Side

hopes to gain control over the entire empire, but first, they must get rid of the Rebels who are trying to stop them from doing so. The film begins with a Dark Side Imperial destroyer capturing a Rebel ship, and on that captured ship is Princess Leia. This is when Leia's famous scene takes place, where she is speaking to R2-D2 to record a holographic message for Obi-Wan Kenobi saying that she needs help and that he is her "only hope". Upon coincidentally receiving this message, Luke Skywalker teams up with Obi-Wan Kenobi, and eventually Han Solo and Chewbacca, to go to the Imperial destroyer and save Leia. Over the course of this rescue mission, Luke finds out that his father was once a Jedi Knight and Obi-Wan teaches him how to use the Force. Once on the ship, the group is able to save Leia, but while they are escaping, Obi-Wan is confronted by Darth Vader and ends up getting struck by Vader's lightsaber, resulting in his death. After escaping the ship, the group of Rebels, led by Luke and Han, are able to successfully fight off Dark Side fighter ships and triumphantly destroy the Death Star. The film ends back on a Rebel base where Leia awards Luke and Han for their bravery (Lucas, 1977).

*The Force Awakens* follows a similar storyline of the Light Side versus the Dark Side. However, in this film, the distinctions between the two sides are blurred and the audience is left piecing together exactly how each of the new characters fit into the existing *Star Wars* universe. 30 years after the death of Darth Vader in *Episode VI*, this film involves Leia leading the Resistance against the First Order, which is the villainous group led by Kylo Ren that has come to power following Vader's death. The events of this film surround each side's efforts to find Luke Skywalker because he is the only remaining Jedi in existence, making him one of the last signs of hope for the Resistance but also the last threat that the First Order faces before achieving

total control over the galaxy. This story involves a small group of Resistance members, mainly featuring Rey, Finn, Poe, and their droid, BB-8, who fight the First Order and ultimately secure the coveted map leading the way to Luke Skywalker's location. Throughout the course of the film, Rey discovers her connection to the Force and finds herself wondering how she came to possess this Jedi power (Abrams, 2015).

As the first films in their respective trilogies, *A New Hope* and *The Force Awakens* are known for capturing a sense of wonder in their audiences and providing them with the first piece to an epic story. In a time when special effects were still somewhat new, *A New Hope's* success was largely due to its ability to present its audience with a novel adventure film. The fun and fascinating nature of this movie created a loyal fan base that helped bring the next two *Star Wars* films to the same level of popularity. In 2015, *The Force Awakens* saw massive success as well, and with 9.3 million dollars in earnings, it continues to claim the title as the highest lifetime grossing film in the United States (IMDb, 2020). However, the success that these films saw were due to very different reasons.

### ***Star Wars* in the 70s: Reconnecting with tradition and simplicity**

The first point I will make is that the tumultuous social climate of the 1970s is what allowed *Episode IV - A New Hope* to be so successful, despite its overtly sexist and all-white cast. The 1970s were a turbulent time, as the U.S. had just come out of their roughly eight year involvement in the Vietnam War (History.com Editors, 2009). It was a time following a decade that saw equal rights movements for women, African Americans, and LGBT individuals

(History.com Editors, 2010). These social movements collided with Nixon's presidency, which began in 1969 and continued until 1974 and served as an opposing force to many social movements. Writing for the *Journal of Contemporary History*, Schulman (2008) discusses the 1970s as the "Me Decade," which was "defined by apathy, self-indulgence, and vapid dance music, and the backlash thesis, depicting the decade as a simply conservative recoil from the perceived excesses of the 1960s" (p. 695). Schulman goes further to say that "The era was more than a national bad hair decade" (p. 699). With competing interests and values persisting throughout this time period, this description of the "Me Decade" illustrates the want of many Americans to separate themselves from the messiness of the social and political world by indulging themselves in simpler activities. In addition, given that the United States was going through a "bad hair decade," cinema provided Americans with the ideal way to escape and distract themselves. Because *A New Hope* is a fantasy adventure film, its success is due in part to its ability to transport its audience to a make-believe place, as is reinforced by the film's famous opening crawl, which begins with, "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away..." (Lucas, 1977). Rather than making a political statement or acting as a commentary on the events of the time, director George Lucas' goal was instead to simply entertain. In their book, *Myth, Media, and Culture in Star Wars: An Anthology*, authors Douglas Brode and Leah Deyneka (2012) state, "Lucas's film was, and always will be, a Hollywood entertainment: a movie that assumed, as its primary purpose, the dual desire to please as many people as possible with moments of action and romance that, along with what were then state-of-the-art... special effects, would thrill, excite, and allow for enjoyment in a theater" (p. 7).

The film was able to make a statement by *not* making a statement in the sense that by removing itself from the politics of the decade, Lucas added a dimension to popular culture that was marked by the reintroduction of myth and stories reminiscent of Western movies from earlier decades (Gill, 2019; Brode & Deyneka, 2012). From journeying across the galaxy to fighting the forces of evil and saving a princess, Luke Skywalker was a character that fit the traditional narrative of what a “hero” should be. Therefore, despite its purpose to stay away from political messaging, the film still managed to appeal to conservative audiences through its traditional portrayal of Luke Skywalker as a hero.

The most apparent example of Luke as a hero is the well-known scene from *A New Hope* where he saves Princess Leia after she is captured and held on board the Imperial ship. Upon opening the cell door and taking off his stormtrooper disguise, he says, “I’m Luke Skywalker. I’m here to rescue you” (Lucas, 1977). This scene illustrates the traditional hero narrative because the male protagonist is coming to the aid of his female counterpart and saving her from evil. The importance of this scene is denoted by its place within the plot of the film. Since it occurs at the climax of the storyline, which is the most exciting and highlighted part of the film, it conveys the significance of Luke’s heroic actions. *A New Hope* appealed to conservative audiences because it subtracted itself from the competing political messages of the time and provided audiences with a familiar storyline.

Another aspect of the film that engages its viewers is how Luke Skywalker is presented as a character. Luke comes from a middle class family and works with his uncle, who is a farmer. He later finds out he is the son of a Jedi Knight and takes up a mission with a fellow group of rebels who journey across the galaxy to save a princess (Lucas, 1977). As a young man

who comes from humble beginnings and then goes on to save Leia and destroy the Empire's largest weapon, Luke is the conception of an ideal conservative individual. He embodies the traditional narrative of a young individual who finds his place in the world through a life-changing journey. By using Luke to echo stories of myth and adventure, *A New Hope* appeals to conservative values and engages audiences who can relate to coming from a similar working-class background. However, what truly captivates these individuals is the film's ability to bring them along on the adventure as if they are one of the characters on the screen, allowing them to indulge themselves in a world of fantasy.

### ***Star Wars* in 2015: Embracing change**

The next point I will make is that *The Force Awakens* also saw a great amount of success because it incorporated diversity in a time when women and BIPOC continued to be marginalized. Due to the rise of the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag in January of 2015 and feminism still remaining a strong force in the social and political landscape, *The Force Awakens'* release in December of 2015 proved to fit in with the "pop culture discourse... of identity, inclusion, and representation" (Golding, 2019, as cited in Fischer, 2017). Similarly to *A New Hope*, although director J.J. Abrams did not necessarily intend to make the film out to carry an overt political message, it still appeals to its audience because its showcase of diversity resonates as a form of social activism. According to a 2015 Theatrical Statistic Summary (Theatrical Market Statistics), 58% of *The Force Awakens'* viewership was male and 42% was female. Despite the majority of viewers being male, a significant portion are female, meaning that if the film were to contain the

same sexist and mainly white characters as did *A New Hope*, then it is highly unlikely that it would have been the one of the highest grossing films of all time (IMDb, 2020).

In his book, *Star Wars After Lucas*, Dan Golding (2019) quotes Angela Ndalianis, who states, “In their own way, science-fiction films attempt to come to grips with the radically changing world around us” (p. 93). *The Force Awakens* confronted our changing world because it reintroduced a classic film but substituted in characters and values that were indicative of its social climate. Since the film essentially mirrors the storyline of *A New Hope*, it leaves room for the audience to pay attention to the difference in characters between the two films. The 2015 film is symbolic of the social change that has occurred since the 1970s because it replaced the original characters with ones who are diverse and who reflect the social movements that have been taking place in the United States for the past several decades. Because *The Force Awakens* is able to give people a hopeful look into the future of film and the representation of marginalized groups, it succeeds in ushering in a new generation of *Star Wars* fans who may have previously opposed the franchise for its more traditional and oppressive messages.

Within the first ten minutes of *The Force Awakens*, prior conceptions of the *Star Wars* universe are already challenged. In the opening scene, a stormtrooper, named Finn, is shown questioning his orders to kill civilians, which has never been shown before, as the stormtroopers are usually depicted as obedient soldiers. In the next scene, Finn takes off his helmet, revealing himself as the first Black stormtrooper (Abrams, 2015). At the time of *The Force Awakens*’ release, *Star Wars* had not made a new film in ten years, which means that fans were likely itching to see the newest installation. The decision to introduce Finn as a central character at the beginning of the film is so powerful because the filmmakers chose to present an unorthodox

narrative very early on, demonstrating that they were willing to go against tradition in order to stand up for the representation of minorities. Finn represents the effort to strive for inclusion in film through the remaking of what is traditional into material that is current and socio-politically aware.

This concept is also exemplified when Rey and Finn meet on the planet of Jakku and must work together to get away from First Order forces. In between the chaos of gunshots and attacks from starships, Finn is seen twice grabbing Rey's hand so that they can run away together. The second time Finn grabs her hand, however, Rey says, "Stop taking my hand!" (Abrams, 2015). While this line provides some comic relief from the intensity of the scene, more importantly, it is indicative of diversity and female empowerment. Finn taking Rey's hand is twofold: it symbolizes unity between two races and it showcases Rey as a strong female character through her interjection regarding Finn's action. This scene illustrates the changing nature of our society because in the 70s, having two main characters from marginalized groups would have opposed the values of the majority who took part in "conservative recoil from the perceived excesses of the 1960s" (Schulman, 2008, p. 695). However, since our society has become more accepting of progressive values, characters such as these are now celebrated and encouraged.

### **Representation in the *Star Wars* universe**

In 2015, "representation" was the magic word. It worked to fight against the decades of stereotypical portrayals of women and BIPOC, specifically in regard to top box office action



series, such as *James Bond*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Jurassic Park*, where white men were the heroes and white women were the love interests who were roped along into their partner's adventure (Nulman, 2014). Even the original *Star Wars* trilogy itself was filled with stereotypical characters. The trilogy featured a mostly white and male-led cast, consisting primarily of Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and Obi-Wan Kenobi. It featured Princess Leia as the sole main female character, who, while is depicted as a strong-willed female, is largely remembered for wearing a gold bikini in *Episode VI* (Rosenberg, 2015). And of the two Black actors, one voiced the villain, Darth Vader, and the other, Lando Calrissian, was "introduced as a scoundrel, a swindler, and a sexual threat" (Golding, 2019, p. 96). With such iconic portrayals of these characters hanging in the shadows of *The Force Awakens*, it made it that much more powerful for the 2015 film to make their characters so representative.

The importance of representation is held in its ability to influence societal expectations. It is for this reason that when "Leia is acted upon... [but] does not act" (Ellis, 2002, p. 136) in *A New Hope*, it sends the message to audiences that females do not have the power to influence their situation, but rather that their situation influences them. Ellis further states, "Earlier scenes suggest that Leia is capable and indeed experienced in getting herself out of dangerous situations, however upon being rescued by Luke Skywalker she is positioned in the frame recoiling behind him" (p. 136). Earlier scenes do in fact support the ideas of feminism because Leia *is* depicted as a powerful figure; she does not let herself get pushed around by Darth Vader and Imperial General Tarkin and while captured on the Imperial ship, her power and importance is conveyed through her position as the sole Rebel standing between the Dark Side and their domination over the entire empire (Lucas, 1977). However, Leia's seemingly backward character

development conveys the idea that although women may appear tough and self-reliant, at the end of the day they ultimately need men to come to their aid. This portrayal of women fit the socio-political landscape of the United States in the 1970s because it contrasted the feminist movements that were taking place, thereby playing into the environment of conservative recoil.

Arriving at 2015, *The Force Awakens* also fit in with its socio-political landscape because it showcased minorities and reinforced the prevailing efforts of the time that pushed for feminism and the representation of BIPOC in film. The change in female representation is shown through the consistent depiction of Rey as a strong and independent character. In the beginning of *The Force Awakens*, Rey is shown working and making living for herself. She is shown living alone in an old Rebel fighter ship, exactly like the one that Luke flew in the original trilogy, and she even puts on the flight helmet, foreshadowing her eventual involvement in the fight against the First Order. At the end of the film, she is shown doing just that. In the final duel of the film, Rey wields a lightsaber to severely injure Kylo Ren and cause the destruction of the First Order's Starkiller Base (Abrams, 2015). Unlike Leia, whose strength declined throughout the course of the film, Rey developed into a character even stronger than the one she was at the start. Rey's character development is one that elucidates the fact that women are capable of fighting their own battles.

*The Force Awakens* also works to appeal to the landscape of inclusion through its diverse cast. In this film, the three protagonists are white (Rey), Black (Finn), and Latino (Poe Dameron) individuals who heavily contrast the uniform racial makeup of *A New Hope's* three protagonists. Moreover, *The Force Awakens* deviates from its predecessor because it does not use race to differentiate between the protagonists and the antagonists. In *A New Hope*, blackness was used to

signify evil, specifically through Darth Vader's costume and the fact that he was voiced by a Black voice actor, James Earl Jones. On the other hand, the whiteness of the Rebels was used to signify good (Wälivaara, 2018), thus perpetuating division and racial stereotypes. These stereotypes are broken down in *The Force Awakens* because Finn is seen physically taking off his stormtrooper uniform and putting on the jacket of Poe Dameron, a Resistance pilot (Abrams, 2015). Through this scene, the film establishes that blackness is not to be equated with evil. The clear representation of racial minorities reflects the socio-political landscape of 2015 because the filmmakers were able to use diversity to show audiences that they were aware of what changes needed to be made.

### **Holding films accountable for representation efforts**

In recent years, our society has come to acknowledge and advocate for the importance of representation because it empowers marginalized individuals to break away from the established norms that paint whiteness and male authority as having the most value. According to Golding (2019), Abrams' goal was to change the culture of dads taking their sons to see *Star Wars* and make it a movie that mothers could take their daughters to as well. The new characters in *The Force Awakens* have given rise to "heartwarming stories featuring young girls cosplaying as Rey and young black boys taking on Finn as a role model" (Golding, 2019, p. 104). Golding also discusses representation in terms of marketing and how buzz surrounding the film was generated due to a greater number of people being able to relate to these characters. It is for this reason why

it is not only important for films to have representation on the screen, but it is necessary for marketing strategies to be representative as well.

At first, *The Force Awakens* actually failed to mirror their on-screen representation with their merchandising efforts. In analyzing the #wheresRey hashtag that arose following the lack of Rey merchandise being sold, Jeffery Brown (2018) discusses how it communicated both the persisting practices of gender discrimination but also the efficacy of using social media for social activism. Rather than letting the franchise get away with half-baked shows of representation, the fans used social media to hold the franchise accountable and see to it that Rey's merchandise was made available. Since social media activism was not possible in the 70s, it forced audiences to accept that the filmmakers had the final say with how they marketed their films. However, now that technology allows fans to advocate for equal representation, filmmakers are the ones who are pressured to keep up with the demands of the times.

This shift has implications for the future of film because audiences are no longer satisfied with hollow shows of representation. Rather than allowing filmmakers to simply remake old films and feature newly diverse characters, activists are starting to push for the creation of *original* content featuring minorities so that stories are not just being reused and then labeled as "representative" when in reality, they only display visual diversity and hold no substantive value (Warner, 2017). The strong movements for gender and ethnic representation that came to light in 2015 indicated a major shift in filmmaking. While there are still improvements to be made in achieving true and full representation, filmmakers are moving in the right direction by continuing to respond to the cues in their socio-political environment.

## Conclusion

In this paper, my goal is to demonstrate that *Star Wars* had the ability to remain at the top of the box office, despite the forty year gap in between *Episode IV - A New Hope* and *Episode VII - The Force Awakens*, because they used their on-screen characters to fill the needs that existed in society at the time of the films' releases, whether that be the need for social and political escape or the need for representation. Film has the power to resonate with audiences in two ways. First, a film that is successful in evoking emotion leaves viewers with specific feelings toward the film. Whether good or bad, emotions are what strengthen memories; therefore, a film has the power to live in an individual's memory for years to come, perhaps influencing their decisions and actions. The second way a film resonates with its audience is by provoking thought, and in turn, discussion. By making viewers think about the ideas and stories presented in the work, films prompt dialogue surrounding the featured topics and as a result, inspire action.

*Star Wars* gave rise to both emotion and thought because *A New Hope's* new and exciting elements of fantasy left audiences with positive emotions that contrasted the complex reality in which they lived. The film prompted thought and discussion through its lack of representation of female and racially diverse characters, which eventually led to the creation of more inclusive sequels. *The Force Awakens* had a similar effect, though it was produced in the opposite manner. Unlike its predecessor, this film inspires emotion and thought through nostalgia and the on-screen representation of marginalized groups. While successful in their own respects, each film will rightfully be remembered as being a part of one of the greatest and well-known

franchises to ever exist in cinema. Films have a unique relationship with society, in that they strongly influence one another. It is important to understand this relationship because as an audience, we are what connect a film's content to its impact on the world around us.

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