# Costume evolution during the development of romantic relationships and its impact on the positions of power in the *Star Wars* prequel and original trilogies

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**Abstract**

This study explored the costume evolution of the *Star Wars* film characters Padme Amidala and Leia Organa as romantic relationships were introduced and progressed and how this impacted their positions of power. The study aimed to investigate how female characters have their position of power minimized through the use of costume as their involvement in romantic relationships evolves throughout the films. Objectification theory was used as a theoretical framework under which the study was carried out. The researchers utilized a qualitative content analysis of the audio and visual content of the first six *Star Wars* films. The results indicated that both characters were objectified through costume. Before romantic relationships were introduced, both women were acknowledged for their positions of power which were emphasized by their costumes. It was observed that as both women progressed in their romantic relationships, their perceived power decreased, and an increase of objectification through greater skin exposure occurred.

**Keywords:** Costume, Objectification theory, *Star Wars*, Film

## Introduction

The *Star Wars* film franchise is one of the largest of all time with a combined worldwide box office gross for all of the films totaling over $9.2 billion ("Highest Grossing Film," 2018; Lucasfilm 2018). Merchandise sales have brought in an approximate $32 billion as of 2016 since the release of the first film in 1977, with an increase of $1.5 billion each year ("Look at the Size" 2016). Along with the financial success of the films and its merchandise, the popularity of the franchise has resulted in the creation of large franchise-focused costuming clubs, conventions, rides, parades, and park expansions at the Disneyland and Walt Disney World resorts, among other related ventures. This commercial and financial growth demonstrates the impact on society the franchise continues to have over 40 years after the first film's release.

For years, *Star Wars* has been praised in popular media for its portrayal of strong and independent female characters (Dougherty 2015; Gustines 2016; Wilson 2016). *Star Wars Episodes I* through *III*, colloquially known as the prequels, tell the story of Anakin Skywalker and his eventual downfall as he becomes Darth Vader. His story is not one that is journeyed alone; he meets, falls in love with, and marries a politician named Padme Amidala. In the first episode, Padme is a queen of her native planet, Naboo. Padme was elected to the position by her people at the age of 14 years old. In the subsequent two films, she is a senator in the Galactic Republic, described as the "democratic union of star systems" (Sansweet 1998, p. 110). By the end of the third episode, Padme gives birth to twins Luke and Leia. *Star Wars Episodes IV* through *VI*, also known as the original trilogy, is the story of Luke Skywalker in his journey in becoming a Jedi and defeating the Empire. He is revealed to be the son of Darth Vader, as well as the twin brother of Leia Organa. Leia, a member of the Imperial Senate, is also working to overthrow the Empire through her role as a leader of the Rebel Alliance and eventually meets and falls in love with Han Solo, a man who assists in the battle against the Empire.

Both Padme and Leia have strong influence in the political arena and prove to be formidable fighters in battles, and are both involved in a romantic relationship throughout their respective trilogies. Although *Star Wars* has received praise for its portrayal of lead female characters, it has also received criticism. Award winning science fiction author Jeanne Cavelos (2006) calls Padme and Leia "inconsistent and underdeveloped" characters (p. 306). Cavelos is the author of the nonfiction book,"The Science of Star Wars" and is a scientist who previously worked for NASA. Cavelos (2006) pointed out how their positions of power fade as their romantic relationships evolve. This shift from a woman in power to the subject of a man's affection is evident by costume and hairstyle changes throughout the films (Cavelos, 2006). In one concise statement, Cavelos (2006) reveals her criticism of the development of Padme and Leia: "Never has a character been so undermined simply by wardrobe" (p. 317). Cavelos' (2006) statement informs the need for research examining the costumes and the evolution of the portrayal of these two leading ladies.

This study has significance by investigating how female characters' positions of power might be viewed differently through the use of costume as their involvement in romantic relationships evolves throughout the films as Cavelos indicates as occurring in the films (2006). The researchers conducted an empirical review of the films relevant to the two most well-known female characters in *Star Wars* films, Padme and Leia. Objectification theory was used as a theoretical framework under which the study was carried out to determine if Cavelos' (2006) claim that Padme and Leia are being undermined by their wardrobe is supported by the portrayals in the films.

## Literature review

### Women and their positions of power in film

It was reported that women accounted for 32% of speaking roles in film in 2016 (Lauzen, 2017). They are rarely portrayed in positions of power (i.e. military or political leaders), with only 9% of female characters occupying a "formal leadership position in an organization, government, or group," and are valued based on who they sleep with, who they marry, and who they give birth to (Lang, 2015; Lauzen, 2017). Male characters are

much more likely than female characters to be seen in their work setting actually doing their jobs, while female characters are typically bound to low-status jobs and have goals related to their personal lives (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Lauzen 2017). As Montgomery noted in the mid-1980s (a time period reflective of three Star Wars films), female characters are typically centered around "themes of self-sacrifice," whether through their relationship to men or to children (Montgomery 1984). When women are portrayed in roles that demonstrate leadership outside of a familial unit, they are often marginalized. For example, in a study of approximately 60 feature films, Flicker (2003) found that there were six stereotypical portrayals of female scientists: the old maid, the male woman, the naïve expert, the evil plotter, the daughter or assistant, and the lonely heroine. Each stereotype calls the woman's competence as a scientist into question while emphasizing the stereotype by the character's dress, and typically does so by demonstrating her need for a male counterpart or suitor (Flicker 2003).

### Women's costumes in film

Costumes in film are commonly seen as a "symbolic language" that is used to express an actor or actress' role in the movie (Hayward 1997). As such, the costumes worn have a psychological effect on the viewing audience as the characters' dress not only helps the flow of the story, but also influence the audience's cognitive behaviors including informing perceptions, interpretations, and attitudes towards the characters portrayed on screen (Choi et al. 2014). Through a unified and cohesive image of clothing, hair style, accessories, and makeup, the character's costume has the ability to convey pertinent information about the character such as social status, personality, and relationship status (Choi et al. 2014).

Women's costumes have a history of emphasizing particular stereotypes of the roles they are portraying. In a content analysis of 147 superheroes in 80 movies, it was found that female characters typically wore costumes that were more revealing on their upper and lower bodies compared to their male counterparts (Miller et al. 2016). This finding can be furthered explained by objectification theory.

### Objectification theory and the male gaze

Objectification theory is a theoretical framework that recognizes and understands the consequences that result from the sexualization of women (Frederickson and Roberts 1997). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) indicate in their research that objectification of women occurs through the evaluation and "visual inspection of the body," otherwise known as the observer's or male gaze, which then results in women being treated as bodies that exist only for the purpose of pleasing others. The *Star Wars* films have a target audience of predominantly male viewers, with an average of 53% of its adult audience being male and an average of 30% being female ("Share of adults" 2018). Additionally, a study by YouGov indicated that 69% of adults in the United States have seen at least one *Star Wars* film (Moore, 2015). Due to the films' large audience reach and its commercial and financial societal impact, it is important to investigate the portrayal of women within these films. Since males are the primary viewing audience, the male gaze may have more of an impact on the character development in order to make the female characters appealing to them.

Women are frequently objectified in film both through their roles and their costumes (Flicker 2003; Miller et al. 2016). The male gaze is used in a manner to inspect and evaluate the female body, resulting in women being treated as objects (Frederickson and Roberts 1997). Mulvey (1975) explained the male gaze as when "the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (p. 11). Devereaux (1995) expanded on the male gaze by suggesting that there are three levels of gazes: the gaze of the filmmaker, the gaze of the characters in the film, and the gaze of the spectator. This is particularly prominent in shows such as *Game of Thrones* where female nudity is commonplace even if not necessarily relevant to the storyline. According to Needham (2017), women on the show are seen as "eye candy" and become decoration for a scene to enhance and bring pleasure to the gaze of the male viewing audience (p. 6).

Furthermore, objectification theory argues that women will eventually see themselves through the perspective of the male gaze and treat themselves as objects (Bartky 1990; de Beauvoir 1952; Berger 1972; Frederickson and Roberts 1997; Young 1990). Frederickson et al. (1998) discuss how women value their bodies based on the perspective of an observer's gaze, focusing on their physical body attributes that can be observed rather than body attributes that are nonobservable, such as personal abilities. Questions such as "how do I look," rather than "what am I capable of" arise as a result (Fredrickson et al. 1998). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) also pointed out how images of women's body appearance have the potential to interrupt those women's thoughts and actions. Furthermore, research that has shown that such interruptions are meant to draw attention to the physical appearance of women, such as with their breast development or weight (Brownmiller 1984; Martin 1996; Thorne 1993). This physical focus on the women's body is also concentrated on by how sexual objectification relates to how much skin is visible (Frederickson and Roberts 1997; Murphy 2015). Thus, during data collection specific attention was paid to how Padme and Leia's physical appearance was portrayed in relationship to their actions, status, and relationship involvement.

Objectification theory and the male gaze will be used as a foundation and guide for this study by observing changes in dress as romantic relationships are introduced and established throughout six *Star Wars* films. Investigating the claims of how clothing and relationship status diminish the positions of power will be facilitated by utilizing objectification theory and the male gaze. By noting how the (a) body definition, (b) visibility of skin, and (c) hairstyles evolve, the potential arises to see how the viewing audience perceives the leading women through a male gaze, and ultimately interrupts their fictional activities within their positions of power. It is important to consider all three concepts as each is part of the cohesive image of a character's costume and identifies the character's status in a film which has the ability to influence the perception of that character (Choi et al. 2014). The goal of this study, guided by objectification theory, is to see if the costumes of strong female characters, in Star Wars films, evolve as romantic relationships are introduced and established. Additionally, this study aims to investigate if female characters' position of power is communicated through their dress.

## Method

The researchers carried out a qualitative content analysis of the audio and visual content of the first six *Star Wars* films. As defined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), qualitative content analysis is a "research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278). Furthermore, qualitative content analysis can be conducted beyond the scope of just written text and can include audio and visual content (Mayring, 2000).

This study employed a directed approach (also known as deductive category application) to content analysis by using Objectification Theory to provide direction regarding the variables of interest and in the determination of the initial coding scheme (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). Utilizing directed content analysis, coding can begin immediately with the use of predetermined codes (Hsieh & Shannon 2005). The predetermined codes used in this study were developed based on the variables of interest and objectification theory. The two initial variables of interest for this study were the characters' position of power and relationship status. In addition to this, the following codes were developed based on objectification theory: body definition, visibility of skin, and hair style. These codes were chosen based on Choi et al.'s (2014) concept of what is considered part of a character's costume, the draw to the physical appearance of women, and sexual objectification's relation to skin visibility (Brownmiller 1984; Frederickson and Roberts 1997; Martin 1996; Murphy 2015; Thorne 1993). Additionally, the "visual inspection of the body" as mentioned by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) helped to define these codes.

### Definitions of predetermined codes

*Position of power* Formal leadership position in an organization, government, or group.

*Relationship status* A range of stages which denotes the character's actions and intentions to be involved with another character. This involvement could be with or without romance. The researchers used Levinger's Relationship Stage Theory to define the character's relationship status while coding. Levinger (1983) defined five stages of a relationships: (1) Acquainted, (2) Building Up, (3) Continuation, (4) Deterioration, and (5) Ending.

*Body definition* The degree to which the body is defined (concealed or revealed) by the character's costume. Body definition takes into account the fit (loose or form fitting) of the costume as well.

*Skin visibility* The amount (modest, moderate, great/large) and location (chest, back, legs, etc.) of the skin exposed by the character's costume. Body locations that are typically not covered by clothing (i.e. face and hands) were excluded.

*Hairstyle* The way in which the character's hair was style for each scene. Hairstyles were observed in terms of masculine or feminine (heteronormative definitions) and also for the perceived harshness (style severity, tight or slicked back) and softness (waves, curls) of the style.

**Table 1  *Star Wars* films**

| Movie title | Character and age[a] | Position of power | Stage of relationship[b] |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Episode I: The Phantom Menace (1999)* | *Padme Amidala, 14* | *Queen* | *Acquaintance* |
| *Episode II: Attack of the Clones (2002)* | *Padme Amidala, 24* | *Senator* | *Build-up, Continuation* |
| *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith (2005)* | *Padme Amidala, 27* | *Senator* | *Continuation* |
| *Episode IV: A New Hope (1977)* | *Leia Organa, 19* | *Princess, Senator, Alliance High Command Member* | *Acquaintance* |
| *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back (1980)* | *Leia Organa, 22* | *Princess, Senator, Alliance High Command Member* | *Build-up, Continuation* |
| *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi (1983)* | *Leia Organa, 23* | *Princess, Senator, Alliance High Command Member* | *Continuation* |

[a] Character age based on "*Star Wars* Character Ages" (n.d.)

[b] Stage of relationship based on Levinger's Relationship Stage Theory (Levinger 1983)

The five predetermined codes were used to start the data collection process. Additional subcategory codes emerged as the researchers began coding the data. The additional codes were added to the code book in order to provide context for the character's relationship status and position of power. The following subcategory codes were also collected: character's age, physical location of the scene, other characters present during the scene, physical gestures (facial expression, hand holding, kissing, etc.), and conversational text. These subcategories helped to verify the accuracy of coding relationship status and position of power.

### Film and character selection

This study used a purposive sampling method. This method necessitates that "members of the sample are chosen with a 'purpose' to represent a location or type in relation to key criterion" (Ritchie and Lewis 2003, p. 79). The inclusion criteria used for this study was that only leading female characters of the episodic films were evaluated. These characters must have appeared in each film of their given trilogy, each must have held a position of power, and each must have entered into a romantic relationship. Thus, the only two female characters that met the criteria for inclusion were Padme and Leia. Other female characters did not meet the criteria for inclusion in this study.

The film selection was based on the examination of these two characters, Padme and Leia. The two trilogies that incorporate these two characters were selected for analysis. All together this totaled six films (aka episodes). Deleted scenes from these films were not examined or included for analysis. For clarification, actress Natalie Portman plays Padme Amidala in *Episodes I* through *III*, however Keira Knightley portrays a decoy Queen Padme Amidala in *Episode I*. For this study, Keira Knightley's false portrayal of the queen was not taken into consideration as the researchers sought to only evaluate the costume evolvement of the actual queen. Furthermore, *Episodes VII, VIII,* and *IX* were not evaluated as *Episode IX* has not yet been released, disallowing for a fair and complete content analysis of the female characters. The anthology films and animated

series and shorts were also not evaluated so as to focus strictly on the overarching and continuing storyline of the *Star Wars* universe.

The full list of the films included for analysis are presented in Table 1. As mentioned the purpose of this selection was to examine the characters Padme Amidala (*Episodes I* through *III*) and Leia Organa (*Episodes IV* through *VI*) as they progress through their respective trilogies. Additionally, the codes for each characters' age, position of power, and relationship status are presented.

### Data collection and analysis

Each film was watched twice by the lead researcher. The researcher used the code book that was developed with the predetermined codes and additional subcategory codes to collect data while watching each film. The researcher detailed every scene that Padme or Leia were depicted in. The researcher's notes included time stamps of when the character appeared, notes that detailed the costume, hairstyle, skin visibility, body definition, characters in the scene, physical gestures, and contextual information like scene location and conversational text. The researcher watched each film with the subtitles turned on so that there was no misinterpretation of what the characters said. Additionally, the researcher took screen shots of each costume that was worn by both Padme and Leia. Watching each film twice insured that the data interpretation and coding was accurate. Any discrepancies in coding that occurred between the first and second viewing of each film were discussed with the second researcher. Scenes in which a discrepancy occurred, the second researcher watched the scene, reviewed the screen shots, and used the code book to code the data independently. Both researchers met to discuss their interpretation of the data and determine how the data should be most accurately coded. This process was repeated until 100% agreement was reached.

When analyzing the data, the researchers consider multiple codes in order to make a conclusion about the portrayal of the character. Position of power, relationship status, and the objectification codes were examined simultaneously. With this in mind, the predetermined codes of body definition, skin visibility, and hairstyle were all considered factors in objectification. However, during data analysis a costume did not have to have all three codes depicted as objectifying to be considered as an objectifying costume. Only one of the codes needed to be observed as objectifying. For example, Padme's "Villa Retreat Dress" is backless with a large amount of skin visible, however the dress is loose and does not conform to her body. The large amount of skin exposure is enough to objectify the character. Included in the data analysis is a total of 118 scenes and 43 costumes. Padme appeared in 63 scenes throughout the prequel trilogy wearing 34 costumes. Leia appeared in 55 scenes in the original trilogy wearing nine costumes.

## Results

### Costume evolution in positions of power and in romance

#### *The political arena*

*Padme Amidala*   The royal costumes worn by Padme when in her role as queen in the first episode are lush and opulent. Bold colors and heavy fabrics are used, and great detail is shown in the embroidery. As queen, Padme's costumes are exceptionally conservative. She is fully clothed; even the skin on her neck is completely covered, and the dresses hide the shape of her figure. Her hair is either tightly wound in intricate designs or in a head covering, and she is in full facial makeup, reminiscent of east Asian cultures. Her overall costume is designed to be an imposing presence and remind the viewing audience of her political status. The dress most commonly associated with the role and typically used for promotional images of the film is known as the "Regal Gown.". This particular costume features a floor length red dress with wide shoulders, gold embroidery, and fur trim, along with a golden face frame adorned with a jewel.

In Padme's royal attire, she performs in her position of power and wields that power. She makes authoritative decisions, participates in senate meetings, and desires to lead her people in a peaceful and democratic way. Additionally, when performing as queen, she is regularly addressed by her royal title. This demonstration of being active in a powerful leadership role is unusual for women in film as they are rarely portrayed as leaders in film, particularly in an organizational or governmental group (Lauzen 2017, p. 4). Padme as queen is a shift in Hollywood norms; she is performing her duties in her governmental leadership position and is acknowledged, respected, and even feared for it. In her scenes as queen, there is little skin visibility and body definition.

Padme is still in a political position of power in the second and third episodes, this time as a senator. In relation to her political position of power, her senatorial costumes have shifted in appearance to represent her shift in that position. While the costumes are still lush and opulent in the second episode, they deviate from the royal attire by featuring low necklines, form-fitting bodices, defined waistlines, and hairstyles that continue to appear tightly styled yet smaller and more feminine rather than large and imposing. By the third episode, the costumes return to the full coverage seen in the first episode, and begins to use darker and muted tones with a distinct lack of ornamentation that had been previously seen in her political and regal attire. Her hair is usually down or pulled into a low ponytail. Unlike her role as queen, Padme is typically not seen performing senatorial duties, and is rarely addressed by her political title. This is particularly the case in *Episode III* where she spends almost the entirety of her scenes in her apartment.

Padme's imposing presence as a queen in the first film of the prequels has shifted to a more feminine style for her senatorial wardrobe. The full, conservative coverage that had been associated with her position of power has given way to more visibility of her skin. This costume evolution allows the viewing audience to view Padme from the perspective of the male gaze; she may be someone in power, but she also has physical body attributes that should be admired. When Padme returns to her full coverage costumes, the colors are in dark, muted or neutral tones, as if fading into the background. With Padme's presence in the films having dropped considerably, the costumes ceased to highlight her as a prominent political figure.

*Leia Organa*    In the first film of the original trilogy, Leia's multiple roles and positions of power are established; she is a princess, a senator, and a leader of a rebellion. Leia has only one costume change that occurs at the end of the film that does shift from conservative to more revealing, but most of the shift in the perception of her position of power comes from her actions such as when she kisses Luke on the cheek and hugs Han and keeps her arm around him. This physical affection is a departure from the previous portrayal of the character as an independent woman who was seemingly more interested in trading barbs with the male characters rather than displaying affection toward them. Apart from the end scene, Leia is seen in a hairstyle of tightly wound side buns and a long and plain white gown that loosely and fully covers her; only her face and hands are exposed. A belt is worn to cinch in the gown at the waist. Similar to Padme, the conservative look becomes quickly associated with Leia's position of power. In the first film, Leia's position is not questioned. She is respected for her authority and admired for ability to fight in combat without hesitation.

In the second film of the trilogy, known as *Episode V*, Leia is primarily seen in a costume that is a white, insulated jumpsuit and off-white padded vest. The vest features a rank insignia, but Leia rarely demonstrates any position of power as she is more commonly seen standing or sitting near the men who are making the decisions. The costume is more fitted to her body than the costumes worn by males to protect them from the harsh elements of the ice planet that serves as temporary headquarters for the rebellion. Leia's all white costume also allows her to visually stand out against other costumes that may feature darker or bolder colors. Rather than her hair being tightly styled into side buns, Leia's hair is now braided and wrapped around her head in what could be perceived as a more feminine style. Although her overall costume is still conservative, small changes, such as costume fit and hairstyle, appear to represent a symbolic change in the perception of her position of power.

A common theme appears to be shared between *Episodes V* and *VI* in that pantsuits are seemingly representative of the position of power. Leia again appears in a military uniform that fits closely to her body, yet is conservative, and her hairstyle is braided and wrapped around her head. It is the only indication of her power; not even her royal or political title is used by anyone other than a protocol droid by the last film. In addition, Leia appears to have grown a dependency on the men in her life; rather than continuing to be depicted as the strong-willed leader, Leia is now need of assistance from the men who are rising in their own positions of power, whether through rescue or basic decision making. Once depicted as a strong, powerful fighter, Leia is now depicted as a woman who needs a man for protection. In fact, in *Episode V*, Leia is depicted as fleeing the scene when a minor attack ensues, leaving Han to battle alone. This is a strong contrast to *Episode IV* when Leia was depicted as fighting alongside Han.

### Impact of relationship status on character depiction

*Padme Amidala*    As romance is introduced into the *Star Wars* saga, there is a noticeable shift in costume style. For Padme, this is depicted through the amount of skin revealed and through hairstyle. Softer and lighter colors are used on more flowing fabrics, but there is also the use of tight bodices and jumpsuits. This shift in costume style is symbolic

of the shift in relationship that Padme has with Anakin. Scenes that show personal interactions with Anakin typically show more of Padme's skin, such as her bare shoulders and back in a feminine and flowing costume known as the "Villa Retreat Dress," or her midriff. In addition, her hair is also usually styled in long soft braids and curls. These individual and combination of looks are evident in both the dresses and nightgowns she wears in the films. Even Padme's political attire, which partly demonstrated a shift in her position, begins to symbolize her status as a romantic interest as more skin begins to show, particularly when in Anakin's presence, allowing for observers to objectify her through visual inspection. The low necklines and defined waistlines are commonplace when she is in a scene with Anakin. To further emphasize the connection between Padme's more feminine styles and her status as a romantic interest, the costumes are typically worn during scenes where Anakin is expressing his desire for her, where physical affection is present, or when spoken character lines revolve around love and physical beauty. Her return to a completely conservative look in the third film of the prequels is meant to hide her pregnancy.

Objectification and the male gaze play a strong role in Padme's more romantic attire. One of Padme's most notable costumes in *Episode II* is a form fitting, full coverage, white jumpsuit, intended to be practical and allow for more mobility in what will be the movie's climactic battle. It is in this costume that Padme declares her love for Anakin. Shortly after her declaration, Padme is injured in a way that tears her costume to make it almost perfectly cropped exposing the midriff. What was once a tight but fully covering costume has become a costume that now bears her midriff. In spite of the large gashes on her back, her costume remains pristine white without a single drop of blood. The viewing audience is no longer meant to see the costume as a battle outfit, but one that reinforces her position as Anakin's romantic interest, particularly when he comes to her aid and she kisses him on the cheek.

*Leia Organa*   Although Leia experiences an evolution in costume once a romance is introduced and established with Han Solo, the changes are subtler. Instead of going from completely conservative to more skin-revealing clothing as depicted by Padme's costume evolution, Leia's evolution is typically shown through the use of color and hairstyle. As her relationship with Han is introduced and established, Leia trades in her recognizable side buns for long hair and up-dos with braids and she begins to use warm colors, embroidery, and sheer fabrics in her wardrobe.

In what appears to be the most blatant example of objectification and the male gaze in the *Star Wars* films, Leia appears in a gold metal bikini in *Episode VI*. The bikini's top covers Leia's breasts with metal plating in the front and back serving as the bikini bottom. A long, burgundy colored loin cloth hangs from each plate. Her hair is styled in a long braid that drapes over one of her breasts. Most of Leia's skin is visible in this costume.

Commonly referred to as the Slave Leia costume, her attire depicts her as a slave, devoid of any power. Her role at this point is merely to provide viewing pleasure for her captor, demonstrated by her captor earlier enjoying a dance from another scantily clad female slave while licking his lips, and by him eventually licking Leia. Leia is forced into situation where she is erotic being for her captor, intended to be physically admired

without any sense of her persona. It is a stark reminder that the woman is valued for her physical body rather than her personality traits.

Leia's costume changes are far less frequent than Padme's, and the subtle changes become more noticeable as a result. Such changes are typically only seen in scenes where she interacts with Han, either through barb-filled banter, flirting, physical affection, or declarations of love. Emphasizing her role as a romantic interest rather than a person of power are spoken character lines that focus on her physical beauty. This emphasis is also seen when it is implied by Han that Leia's stubborn attitude associated with her leadership style stems from her need to have a good kiss.

### Discussion and evaluation

Literature indicates that roles women play in film are often stereotyped by their costumes (Flicker 2003; Miller et al. 2016). Factors of the costume, such as hairstyle and clothing, communicates a message about the character, including their status, when viewed as a cohesive unit (Choi et al. 2014). Sexy and revealing costumes, particularly when not considered necessary to further the plot, draw attention to the woman's body, potentially communicating that she is "eye candy" rather than reflecting any leadership or position of power she may hold (Flicker 2003; Miller et al. 2016; Needham 2017). The female character becoming eye candy is not just in relation to the male character; the viewing audience also may see her this way as well, thus objectifying the character (Devereaux 1995; Frederickson and Roberts 1997; Mulvey 1975).

Padme and Leia are examples of how objectification and the male gaze can diminish the position of power female characters hold. Neither woman lost their position of power completely, but as the romantic relationships of each character developed more the films depicted their leadership roles far less. The lack of focus on their positions of power, coupled with costumes that evolved into more skin-revealing and form fitting styles, along with changes in hairstyles, paved the way for the viewing audience to view them with the male gaze.

For Padme, the reduction of the position of power is simultaneously emphasized by her rise as a romantic interest. As Padme's political status is focused on less, attention is drawn to her beauty and her role as Anakin's romantic interest, eventual wife, and finally as a mother-to-be. This attention is emphasized by the clothing she wears whenever she appears in a scene with Anakin as there are changes to the three factors used to observe potential objectification: skin visibility, body definition, and hairstyle. While not every costume worn while with Anakin had all three factors present, two of the three factors were always present, such as hairstyle and skin visibility as with the Villa Retreat Dress, or hairstyle and body definition as with the fully covering white jumpsuit Padme wears until it is ripped and exposes her skin. All three factors were not required to be present as the context of the scene, including dialogue and physical gestures, indicated objectification was still occurring. This commonly takes place in *Episode III* when Padme makes use of looser costumes to disguise her pregnancy, but objectification is still present through skin visibility and hairstyles as there is a drastic shift in how Padme is portrayed with the focus now being a wife and mother-to-be, which is reflected in her costume.

Reynolds et al. (2006) point out in *Star Wars: The Complete Visual Guide,* how Padme's costumes are an unconscious decision that is "expressive of her true feelings" (p.

99). Although the character is written in a manner where her decisions may be unconscious and unintentional, the films are intentional in changing the costumes to focus on romance rather than Padme's position of power. Similar to Padme, Leia's rise as a romantic interest also occurs simultaneously as the perception of her position of power changes. The use of her title decreases as her romantic relationship with Han develops. When Leia has the least amount of clothing on, she is at the lowest power level. Even when Leia is fully clothed, however, there is still a shift in the perception of her power level; fabric types, use of color, and hairstyles are all utilized to demonstrate this shift as her relationship with Han develops. This shift appears to be similar to Padme's costume changes where Leia is written in a manner where her decisions are unconscious and unintentional, but the films are intentional about the focus the costume changes represent.

With both women, the attention is drawn to their physical attributes which is demonstrated through their costume by the factors used to investigate objectification. In spite of being unusual for being portrayed in a leadership role in film, they ultimately are reduced to the value Lang (2015) found typical for portrayals of female character: through their romantic relationships. Certain costumes or costume adjustments are unnecessary to the storyline; Padme does not need her midriff showing in battle and Leia does not need to be in a bikini as a slave. However, both examples allow the viewing audience to objectify the women and see them through the male gaze. They become the eye candy that Needham (2017) discusses as being a scene enhancement rather than a relevant storyline. Padme is no longer seen a political player or a formidable battle opponent. Leia is no longer a viewed as a strong-willed leader, princess, and politician. They have become beautiful women whose bodies should be exposed and enjoyed by the males who come to their aid and the males who view them on screen.

## Conclusion

The study revealed that the *Star Wars* films objectify Padme and Leia through the changes in their costumes and shifts in their positions of power as their relationship statuses evolve. As the women were more established in their relationships, costumes became more revealing or colorful, their bodies were typically more defined, hairstyles became softer and more feminine, and there was less focus on their power levels. Women in media can be portrayed as strong and independent with an obvious and demonstrated high position of power while still wearing feminine costumes. They can still be portrayed as appealing and romantic in conservative costumes without losing that sense of strength and independence. As long as media continues to portray women in film as romantically and sexually appealing when they reveal more skin and diminish their power levels, they will continue to be objectified and viewed through the male gaze.

## Implications

Gender inequality continues to be a pervasive problem in film. Statistics indicate that women are depicted wearing more revealing costumes and being partially naked more often than men (Perrone 2018; Thompson 2018). Although character such as Padme and Leia are lauded for being strong, there is still evidence that the characters fall prey to the same statistics pointed out with gender inequality in film. With gender inequality being

a frequent topic of discussion in today's society, it is important to ensure that strong women and objectified women are not confused as being the same. By ensuring separate definitions of the strong woman and objectified woman, future films have the ability to send a message that a woman does not need to reveal her skin, define her body, or change her hairstyle in order to be appealing to the characters within the film or the viewing audience.

### Limitations and future research

One limitation to this study is that only one researcher coded the data. Although typically it is important to have at least two coders, the researcher did perform multiple rounds of coding in order to insure the data was reliable. In future research, it would be beneficial to have more than one researcher code the data.

Furthermore, this study focused specifically only on the theatrical releases of the live action *Star Wars* prequel and original trilogies. As a result, the study does not take into consideration any character development that occurs in any other medium, such as in the animated series, potentially limiting the view of the characters' positions of power. The same limitation potential is also present due to not considering any deleted scenes that may further explore the characters. Additionally, although dialogue used in the film was taken into consideration in order to ensure the context of the scene, it was not specifically evaluated. These limitations present an opportunity for future research. Future studies should include all mediums where Padme and Leia are featured to evaluate how their positions of power evolve, as well as evaluate the objectification of the characters. Dialogue in the film should also be explored through a textual analysis to determine occurrences such as the number of times formal titles are used and the number of references to physical beauty or attractiveness. This exploration of dialogue should then be compared to how the character is dressed in the scene to determine if there is a connection between specific dialogue being used and how the character is dressed.

*Episodes VII* through *IX* also provide more research opportunities. Future studies should evaluate development of the lead female character, Rey, and potentially the other female supporting characters once all the films are released. This development should include the same focus on costume evolution and positions of power in relation to objectification to see if how Lucasfilm develops the female characters has changed since the previous six films.

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#### Competing interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

#### Availability of data and materials
Those that are interested in seeing the data can request it from the author.

## Publisher's Note

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