Weaponizing the haters: The Last Jedi and the strategic politicization of pop culture through social media manipulation.

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Weaponizing the haters:

The Last Jedi and the strategic politicization of pop culture through social media manipulation

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Abstract

Political discourse on social media is seen by many as polarized, vitriolic and permeated by falsehoods and misinformation. Political operators have exploited all of these aspects of the discourse for strategic purposes, most famously during the Russian social media influence campaign during the 2016 Presidential election in the United States and current, similar efforts targeting the U.S. elections in 2018 and 2020. The results of the social media study presented in this paper presents evidence that political influence through manipulation of social media discussions is no longer exclusive to political debate but can now also be found in pop culture. Specifically, this study examines a collection of tweets relating to a much-publicized fan dispute over the *Star Wars* franchise film *Episode VII: The Last Jedi*. The study finds evidence of deliberate, organized political influence measures disguised as fan arguments. The likely objective of these measures is increasing media coverage of the fandom conflict, thereby adding to and further propagating a narrative of widespread discord and dysfunction in American society. Persuading voters of this narrative remains a strategic goal for the U.S. alt-right movement, as well as the Russian Federation. The results of the study show that among those who address *The Last Jedi* director Rian Johnson directly on Twitter to express their dissatisfaction, more than half are bots, trolls/sock puppets or political activists using the debate to propagate political messages supporting extreme right-wing causes and the discrimination of gender, race or sexuality. A number of these users appear to be Russian trolls. The paper concludes that while it is only a minority of Twitter accounts that tweet negatively about *The Last Jedi*, organized attempts at politicizing the pop culture discourse on social media for strategic purposes are significant enough that users should be made aware of these measures, so they can act accordingly.

Weaponizing the haters: *The Last Jedi* and the strategic politicization of pop culture through social media manipulation

Introduction

Eight months after it opened in theaters, *Star Wars* fans were still talking about the eighth installment in the series, *The Last Jedi*. During this time, media outlets ranging from lightweight pop culture websites to serious news organizations have covered the "toxic" parts of *Star Wars* fandom, i.e. fans who hate *The Last Jedi* and have gone as far as trying to crowdfund a remake of the film, start Change.org petitions to strike the film from the *Star Wars* canon and create videos, websites and social media content that criticize the film and call for the firing of its creators. Supporters of *The Last Jedi* have called these detractors out as being predominantly white males with misogynistic views that did not care for the film's attempts at improving representation of women and ethnic/sexual minorities in the *Star Wars* franchise. However, as the study presented here shows, this is more than a heated discussion among social media users. There is also evidence that the fan conflict caused by *The Last Jedi* stems from deliberate and organized social media influence tactics employed by politically motivated operators, foreign and domestic. This study explores how these political influence tactics on social media have jumped from political debate spaces to pop culture discussions – but with the same goals of disruption or persuasion.

Background

In *National Review,* conservative commentator Peter Spiliakos described the conflict as having less to do with the movie itself and more to do with the political polarization of the Western societies into which *The Last Jedi* was inserted: "People on both sides of this divide are trying to drag the *Star Wars* franchise into a pre-existing set of obsessions and resentments."

(Spiliakos, 2018). Whether you agree with Spilliakos' take on the film or not, this is an intriguing perspective. How does the current state of political discourse and the use of social media for political influence tactics in the U.S. and other Western nations impact our consumption of pop culture phenomena such as *The Last Jedi*?

The *Star Wars* franchise is an interesting object of study in this regard. Even though it was originally targeted towards cinema-goers who were too young to vote, *Star Wars* was always double-coded, with layers oriented towards adults, often involving subjective critiques of contemporary politics. *Star Wars* movies, books, video games, tv shows and comics have consistently attempted to convey left-leaning values. For years, the franchise's creator, George Lucas, has explained the series' impetus as partially being a comment on the Vietnam war, which ended just as Lucas started work on the first *Star Wars* film. The evil, oppressive, technologically and economically superior Empire represented the United States, while the far less advanced, but resilient South Vietnamese forces and their unlikely victory inspired the "good guys" in the Rebel Alliance (Teague Beckwith, 2017). Political commentary is even more present in the so-called "Prequel trilogy" from 1999-2005, in which the hyper-capitalist Trade Federation, led by Nute Gunray (named after Republican Newt Gingrich) becomes part of a Separatist Alliance wishing to split the republic. In this parallel to the American civil war, the Separatist Alliance represents the Confederate States of America. The conflict turns out to be the work of Senator Sheev Palpatine, who uses his provisional war privileges as Chancellor of the Republic to consolidate and centralize power at the executive level, similar to the changes in the national security apparatus that happened under then-president George W. Bush, such as the passing of the PATRIOT Act and the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security. The references to the Bush administration became even clearer, as Anakin Skywalker, about to

become Darth Vader, paraphrases Bush' words about Western nations and Islamist terrorists: "If you are not with me, you are my enemy." (O'Connor, 2016).

It should not have been a surprise, then, that a new trilogy in the *Star Wars* franchise would express equally left-leaning sentiments. Although they may still have a long way to go (Brown, 2018), the *Star Wars* films, books, video games and tv shows produced after Disney's acquisition of Lucasfilm in 2014 have made an effort to address identity politics by introducing strong, female protagonists and a better overall representation of gender, race/ethnicity and sexuality. This was the case in the first entry in the new trilogy, *The Force Awakens*, but even more so in *The Last Jedi* (Watercutter, 2017), which took a no-holds-barred approach to address issues of gender discrimination, class warfare, the destructive character of masculine aggression and war profiteering, while still working within the left-of-center frame constructed by George Lucas in 1977. Criticism of American engagements in the Middle East had already been present in the anthology film *Rogue One* from 2016 (Doescher, 2016), so clearly *Star Wars* was continuing to convey left-of-center values in the new Disney era. In other words, in the more than 40 years it has existed, politics and left-leaning political commentary has always been woven into *Star Wars'* fabric.

Still, it appears that some fans with right-leaning political views expected the franchise to be politically neutral, as they went to see the first *Star Wars* film of the Trump presidency, *The Last Jedi*. They saw its arguments for equality of gender, race and class as a new, leftist takeover of *Star Wars*, even though *Star Wars* has always been politically left-leaning. *The Last Jedi* is unique in that it landed in the Trump era, acting as a lightning rod at a time when most cinemagoers had chosen a political side for or against the president and adopted the "obsessions and resentments" of their political camp, with social media acting as the primary battleground.

However, *The Last Jedi* fan conflict is not just an interesting case because it is a microcosm of the overall political discourse on social media in the Trump era, but also because it is possible to identify organized and deliberate attempts at right-wing political persuasion and/or defense of conservative values as well as sexism, racism and homophobia in the social media discussions about the film. It is important to stress, of course, that there are also a substantial number of fans who simply think *The Last Jedi* is a bad film and who use social media to express their disappointment. Regardless of motive, almost all negative fans express the belief that they are in the majority and that most *Star Wars* fans dislike *The Last Jedi*.

In this paper, I analyze tweets sent to the director of *The Last Jedi* over the first seven months after its release. In the collected data, I have discovered political agitation for right-wing values using *The Last Jedi* as a placeholder for left-wing positions. Furthermore, it appears that political activists have used bots and sock puppet accounts to troll left-wing fans, and there is even evidence that Russian influence operators have inserted themselves into the debate to exploit and exacerbate the conflict, thereby securing more media attention to the conflict, which again helps spread the perception that America is divided and in chaos.

Thus, this analysis of tweets pertaining to *The Last Jedi* shows that pop culture spaces on social media are now also political battlegrounds, vulnerable to the same organized vitriolic polarization, manipulation and disinformation seen in the usual venues for political discourse online.

Related work

Fandom studies, and studies of fan interactions online are now in their third decade, after the groundbreaking early work of scholars such as Camille Bacon-Smith (1990), Nancy Baym (1993), and Henry Jenkins (1992). From the beginning, the internal conflicts among fans and in

the producer/fan relationship have been part of the equation, but since the emergence of social media and their many affordances for community-building, expression and discussion, studies of these conflicts have become more frequent among scholars. Authors like Stanfill (2018, 2010) and Brock (2015) have brought attention to the heteronormativity and racial biases that live in many fandoms (and also in fandom studies itself). Jonathan Gray turned his attention to those who are not fans, or have explicit opinions about, e.g. a tv show and might even become 'haters', a group he referred to as "anti-fans" (Gray, 2003). These are different from "fantagonists", which is a term introduced by Derek Johnson (2007) for fans who engage antagonistically with other fans or with content producers, for example by belonging to certain factions of the fandom who are in opposition to other factions with different views of the content. In the book chapter introducing the concept, Johnson references Brooker's (2002) important work on fan reactions to the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy and the so-called *Special Edition* versions of the three original films. The visceral and vitriolic fan reactions against these installments in the *Star Wars* series were so prevalent in the pre-social media world that a documentary, *The People vs George Lucas,* was produced on the subject.

In recent years, inspired in part by the #GamerGate controversy as well as other controversies that followed it, scholars have been studying what is now termed "toxic" fandom. The widespread view among academics is that some toxic fan practices are symptoms of endemic and omnipresent misogyny in geek culture, entertainment fandoms and in society as a whole (Massanari and Chess, 2018; Massanari, 2017; Salter and Blodgett, 2017; Todd, 2015; Bealer, 2011). William Proctor is one of a few scholars trying to moderate this view. Though he does not deny or downplay the presence of sexist, homophobic or racist fan practices, he argues that some practices that often described as "toxic" in popular media outlets can be "benign" and

"innocuous". In his view, these defensive stances are indications of a "totemic nostalgia" which ties the fan's past to the present, (Proctor, 2018, 2017) and severing this connection by redefining or changing the meaning of "totems" from the fan's past is the psychological equivalent of invalidating that part of the fan's personality.

These scholars, and many more, have uncovered and unpacked fandom divides along fault lines of gender, race and sexuality in much more impressive ways than I could ever aspire to. Hence, I will mostly rely on the work mentioned above as accepted knowledge, focusing on how these divisions are being exploited for political and agitation purposes. Literature on the latter will be introduced below.

Method

Collecting Tweets

To ensure that the dataset was not restricted by adherence to certain hashtags or so large that it would exceed my computational resources to analyze it, I chose to study to tweets addressing *The Last Jedi* director Rian Johnson directly. Using Twitter's Advanced Search functionality, I retrieved 1273 tweets tweeted directly at the director's Twitter handle, "@rianjohnson" between December 13, 2017 and July 20, 2018. *The Last Jedi* opened in Europe on December 13, so this is the earliest that substantial amounts of fan reactions could be expected. Deadline restrictions meant that the tweet collection had to be performed on July 20, but the frequency of tweets sent directly to Rian Johnson about *The Last Jedi* had also slowed down substantially at this point – even though the debate was still somewhat alive among fans elsewhere. The tweets were scraped from Twitter using the *Data Miner* software. The data set was subsequently cleaned, so that errors, duplicates and tweets from Rian Johnson himself were

removed. Retweets and Likes that appeared as individual tweets in the data set were also removed, as were GIFs and meme images in order to retain text searchability.

Collection practice

No mass collection of tweets has been performed, since only tweets engaging with Rian Johnson have been collected. Only information stated publicly on the studied Twitter accounts has been collected. All information revealed in this paper was immediately available and observable on public Twitter accounts during the study period collection. Only handles of subsequently deleted or suspended accounts are revealed in this paper. The collected data has been stored on protected computing devices.

Sentiment analysis and coding

To ascertain how the collected tweets were attitudinally constituted, a manual sentiment analysis was performed, which is described below. As one of the main objectives was to study the political leanings of *Star Wars* fans engaging with Rian Johnson (rather than, say, how frequently those fans tweet), series of several tweets expressing the same sentiment from the same account was reduced to one. This reduced the number of tweets under analysis to 967 and simultaneously created the foundation for the account analysis to follow, since each user was now represented by one tweet.

I then performed a manual sentiment coding of the tweets. Benefits of this method have been shown in several studies based on analyses of tweets (Borromeo and Toyama, 2015; Chikersal *et al.*, 2015; Barclay *et al.*, 2014) and include higher accuracy than many current automated systems, the ability to detect satire or sarcasm and a lower noise rate. The disadvantage is that manual sentiment analyses are too labor-intensive to perform on large

datasets, but with 967 tweets, the dataset in the present study was manageable enough for manual coding and analysis.

As can be seen in the examples below, the language used in the dataset contained very little nuance. Because of the unequivocally positive, negative or neutral nature of the collected tweets, forcing a rating upon them for coding purposes could entail overinterpretation, raising the risk of bias significantly. I believe the advantages of inference-driven generalizability and the assessment of sample quality would undercut by this high risk of bias, and since the size of the data set is significant, yet still manageable, I chose instead to adhere to a simple categorization of the tweets as negative, positive and neutral.

An example of a negative tweet: "@rianjohnson your movie is the worst. I hate you for ruining Star Wars.#kathleenkennedy #RianJohnson #TheLastJedi #starwars #thelastjediawful" Other negative tweets included phrases such as “You ruined *Star Wars*”, “Please don’t make anymore *Star Wars* movies” and tweets calling the film a “travesty”, “dumb”, “terrible”, “career-endingly bad”, “abhorrent” and “awful”. Other users stated that Rian Johnson had committed a “war crime” or should “be in jail”. Only four tweets out of the 967 were more gradual in their negative sentiment, with one user admitting to being “in the camp that did not enjoy it though I did appreciate the cinematography” and another calling a Johnson a “great filmmaker”, but also stating that “I couldn’t disagree with your take on Luke more”. One of the four tweets came from a user that adopted a slightly less negative stance towards the film months later. The four less unequivocal tweets mentioned above were coded as negative.

On the positive side, tweets were similarly unequivocal. This is an example of a positive tweet: “@rianjohnson TLJ is a true piece of art! The symbolism and the chemistry between Rey

and Kylo is just amazing. Thank you for such a great film." Other positive tweets used words such as "great", "beautiful", "fantastic"and "wonderful".

Finally, a number of tweets can be said to be value-neutral in that they engage in discourse on the film, other *Star Wars* productions or general entertainment industry topics without passing judgment on *The Last Jedi*. An example includes this tweet about another of Rian Johnson's films: "@rianjohnson Having binged Jean-Claude Van Johnson this weekend, I keep wondering if you've seen it, if so, what you thought of all the Looper vs. Timecop arguments and lastly, how many people have already asked you about this?". It seems reasonable to assume that those who actively chose to engage with Rian Johnson directly on Twitter in the seven months after the release of *The Last Jedi* without expressing negative sentiments towards the film are also unlikely to actually harbor such negative sentiments, at least to a significant extent.

It is also important to note that the abovementioned removal of GIFs and meme images did not do a disservice to the coding of negative tweets, as even a quick overview of Rian Johnson's Twitter account from the study period makes it clear that positive or neutral memes/GIFs far outnumber negative ones. Suspected use of sarcasm or irony was accounted for by consulting the context of the tweet.

Account analysis

With the dataset now consisting of one tweet per account, it was now possible to turn towards an analysis of the accounts of those users who had tweeted negatively. This analysis was performed to ascertain whether the users behind the negatively-tweeting accounts were simply sufficiently dissatisfied with the film that they felt the need to express this directly to the director, or whether some – and how many – had a different, politically-motivated agenda

driving their negativity. The analysis was also performed to identify any outside influence from foreign actors and how many Twitter bots participated in the discussion.

For the account analysis, I divided the negatively-tweeting accounts into three categories, coding them as Political agenda, Troll/Sock Puppets/bots and Real fantagonists. This was done by visiting each of the negative twitter accounts and reading through tweets sent during the study period. In cases where the account was highly active and contained large amounts of tweets or retweets, I would conduct searches for specific terms on the accounts to find tweets that could help place the account in one of the following three categories. The specific criteria for each category are specified below.

1. Political agenda

These are accounts that are not solely *Star Wars*-related but most likely belong to real human beings, rather than bots or sock puppeteers (see below), and from which several/frequent tweets have been sent that can be characterized as overtly political. The tweets on these accounts would typically only occasionally or even rarely be about *Star Wars*, but also consisted of comments on current affairs or personal matters – the latter being one of the indicators that the owner of the account is not using the account as a sock puppet or exclusively for trolling activity. For example, these accounts would also often include selfies or family photos containing objects or persons that were consistent over time.

For accounts with high tweeting/retweeting activity, search terms such as “Trump” and “SJW” (see below) were employed to discover tweets that might indicate a political stance, e.g. for or against the current U.S. President.

2. Troll/Sock Puppet/Bots

Several of the accounts could be identified as fully or semi-automated bot accounts, accounts specifically used for trolling, the latter often involving accounts with a false identity, also known as sock puppets. See below for definitions of these terms and how they were detected/identified in the dataset.

3. Real fantagonists

These accounts are the most likely to belong to the human beings claiming to be behind them, who are *Star Wars* fans who were simply disappointed by *The Last Jedi* for reasons other than political ones and expressed their discontent to Rian Johnson on Twitter. These are fans who tweet very frequently about *Star Wars*, and who also often did so before the study period. Some of these accounts would contain the occasional politically-oriented tweet or retweet, but not enough to indicate an agenda or position like the accounts in the Political Agenda category.

Identifying sock puppets, trolls and bots

Bots are software robots that post content to Twitter with little or no human control involved, mostly for strategic purposes (Fitzgerald and Shaffer, 2017), and though bots are widely used for strategic communication in commercial contexts, they are increasingly used in political contexts as well, as witnessed in the U.S. presidential election in 2016 (Woolley and Howard, 2017; Bessi and Ferrara, 2016) For bot detection, I used the Botometer tool created by Indiana University Network Science Institute (IUNI) and the Center for Complex Networks and Systems Research (OSOME, 2018), which relies on very large sets of social media data and machine learning to ascertain the likelihood of a Twitter account being operated, fully or partially, by a bot.

Sock puppets are fake accounts where the user profile represents a user other than the person actually controlling it. Kumar et al. (2017) show how sock puppet account owners use their accounts to post content they would perhaps do not want to include on accounts disclosing their real identities. They may also operate several such accounts. According to Kumar et al., sock puppets post more frequently than regular users and participate in more, mostly controversial discussions than regular users (but rarely initiate them). They are often treated harshly by the rest of the community and use more swearwords.

A troll is a human actor that "teases people to make them angry, or somebody who offends people, or somebody who wants to dominate any single discussion, or somebody who tries to manipulate people's opinion (sometimes for money)" (Mihaylov and Nakov, 2016, p. 1). Most often, trolls use sock puppet accounts or fake identities to avoid repercussions, but a small number of trolls are willing to be identified by using their actual identities on their profiles.

Mutlu et al. extracted a range of troll characteristics from a data set of 95,578 tweets posted by 3,321 users. Trolls may send more than 50 tweets a day, often exceed a 70% retweet rate (70 retweets per 100 tweets sent), have follower/following ratios of 0.4 and below and often don't change the visual presentation of their profile very much from the default settings. Posts from trolls/sock puppets contain simplified language with shorter sentences and words with fewer syllables. Finally, sock puppets/trolls and bots often use handles that are "variations on a single "real" name, variations on a celebrity name, and long strings of alphanumeric garbage (often after a "real" name)" (Fitzgerald and Shaffer, 2017).

Russian trolls

In addition to the characteristics mentioned above, certain parameters indicate that a troll may part of a Russian social media influence campaign. Several studies have shown how trolls have

been used by the Russian Federation in order to sway public opinion in the west through social media and online forums (Kaminska *et al.*, 2017; Zelenkauskaite and Niezgoda, 2017; Giles, 2016; Lange-Ionatamishvili and Svetoka, 2015; Nimmo, 2015) The U.S. intelligence community as well as social media platforms have acknowledged that such a campaign was ongoing during study period, targeting the U.S. midterm election in November 2018 (Diamond, 2018; Gleicher, 2018). From studies of the Russian influence campaign of 2016, researchers have constructed comprehensive lists of criteria for detection of Russian trolls. Analyzing 27,000 tweets from 1,000 Twitter users submitted to the U.S. Congress as part of a list of 2,752 accounts identified by Twitter as having ties to the Russian "troll farm" Internet Research Agency, Zannettou et al. found that Russian trolls usually target "very specific world events" and "political threads", i.e. they insert themselves in, and often solely focus on, discussions that take up space in American media discourse. They also find that Russian trolls "…adopt different identities over time, i.e., they "reset" their profile by deleting their previous tweets and changing their profile name/information" (Zannettou *et al.*, 2018, p. 1) and prefer the Twitter web client over the mobile client. They predominantly report their location (if at all) to be in the U.S., Germany and Russia, mostly tweet in the languages of these nations, and can be observed randomly switching from one to the other. They also often pretend to be sources of information or news outlets and "nudge" other users to follow them. Their accounts are often created just before or just after events relating to topics that the troll is focused on. Llewellyn et al., analyzing the same 2,752 alleged Russian troll accounts, found that Russian Troll activity peaks at certain points in time. Zannettou et al. also noticed this, finding that Russian troll tweets had two peaks on a typical day during the 2016 presidential election, where their activity was higher than the established baseline for Twitter. Tweets from Russian trolls exceeded the base line between 7am and 10pm

and then again - more substantially - between 12 noon and 5pm UTC. Russian trolls also like to retweet other trolls, contact prominent users through mentions and they frequently attempt to organize "political events and abusive behaviour and harassment" (Llewellyn et al. 2018, p. 1).

In the present study, the Twitter accounts were categorized after how many of these criteria they met, and those that met a large majority of them would only be placed in the Troll/Bot/Sock Puppet or Russian Troll categories after an extra, qualitative inspection. It is important to mention here that it is widely considered almost impossible to attribute any sort of cyberattack or strategic operation in the online sphere to an actor with absolute certainty, due to the many opportunities for anonymization, masking of IP addresses, adoption of false identities online, etc. (Lobel, 2012; Dipert, 2010; Geers, 2010). This also applies to the trolls and bots found in this study. Though the above described classification has been performed with rigor and the accounts in Troll/Bot/Sock Puppet category fulfill most of the criteria listed, these accounts should be viewed as having *a high likelihood* of being trolls/sock puppets, bots and Russian trolls. No absolute attributions are claimed.

Findings

Negative-to-positive/neutral fan ratio

Among the 967 tweets analyzed, 206 expressed a negative sentiment towards the film and its director, which is 21.9% or a little more than one in five fans. This number includes all negative tweets analyzed, i.e. also those who came from the 44 accounts identified as bots, sock puppet accounts and trolls. It also includes 61 users who showed clear political agendas in their tweets against the film. Thus, the number of fans whose tweets are purely motivated by a negative stance towards the film is 101 or 10,5%.

Overall, 50.9% of those tweeting negatively was likely politically motivated or not even human.

Some bots – a lot of trolls

Using the Botometer mentioned in the Method section, 11 out of the of 206 accounts expressing negative sentiments were identified as bots.

I identified 33 of the 206 negative accounts as trolls and/or sock puppets. Besides meeting a majority of the detection criteria mentioned in the methods section, these accounts would mostly tweet or retweet right-wing messages alongside their attacks on Rian Johnson and *The Last Jedi*. All of these troll/sock puppet accounts were created – or became active after being dormant for months or years – during the study period, most of them around the time when *The Last Jedi* opened in theaters and the first negative fan reactions began being posted to Twitter. This may indicate that the accounts were created or revived specifically for trolling behavior related to *The Last Jedi* or using that debate as a platform for activities related to other subjects.

16 of these 33 troll/sock puppet accounts appear to be Russian trolls, or at least possess several of the Russian troll characteristics presented above. 7 of the 16 had auto-generated handles consisting of a very common, English name followed by a series of seemingly random digits, and five of those seven had not uploaded a profile image, a combination which according to the studies mentioned above, is a typical characteristic of Russian troll accounts. One such account tweeted at Rian Johnson, with only little lingual variation from tweet to tweet, that he "ruined *Star Wars*" no less than 13 times during a three-week period, along with other tweets disparaging the director. In addition to these tweets, the vast majority of other tweets on the account were retweeted messages from Donald Trump and black conservative activist and

commentator Candace Owens. 11 of the 16 accounts suspected of being run by Russian trolls almost exclusively tweeted about *The Last Jedi*, Rian Johnson or right-wing U.S. politics, typically retweeting personalities from the right or alt-right. Eight of the 16 had their primary Twitter activity within the timeframe established by Zannettou et al., The coordinated efforts typical of Russian troll activity was also seen in a somewhat offensive tweet originally posted by the account @1popculturefan, which has since been taken down during one of Twitter's purges of Russian-controlled accounts post-study period. The same tweet, along with several other double-postings, was also tweeted by a still-active account using the deliberately misspelled name of a well-known Hollywood actor (another indicator of Russian troll activity), with the same "1" in front of it. @1popculturefan is not the only account that has been deleted or suspended during troll and bot purges by Twitter after the data collection took place. The same applies to these accounts that were identified as Russian trolls during the study period: @MarcoSo94862885, @VPalmera and @ThatNikkaGeeked.

Six of the 16 accounts have an extremely high retweet rate. Nine accounts have been through the "resets" that are highly characteristic of Russian troll accounts, in which the account name (not the Twitter handle) is changed, tweets from before a certain time are deleted, or they go dormant for long periods of time, but then become active when certain events occur that other Russian trolls also comment on. Four accounts present themselves as a type of news source and encourage other users to follow them.

An example of an account that almost sums up these Russian troll characteristics carries an auto-generated handle and has almost exclusively tweeted disparagingly about *The Last Jedi*, and engaged in "anti-SJW" rhetoric. In the middle of these tweets, the account all of a sudden tweeted in support of Donald Trump during the latter's visit to the United Kingdom, which was

met with large protests in London. Besides not containing any personal information, having no profile picture and other Russian troll characteristics, this account only posted 9 tweets in more than a year from its creation in January 2017 to February 2018, all of them regarding a particular Anime series on YouTube. From April 2018 onwards, during the lead-up to the release of *The Last Jedi* for the home video market, and in anticipation of *Solo: A Star Wars Story* opening, the account suddenly comes to life and begins tweeting frequently about *The Last Jedi*, identity politics and Rian Johnson. After the data was collected, the account has been through a "reset" where many of its public tweets have been deleted, leaving only its replies.

One of the above-mentioned accounts which has now been deleted by Twitter exhibited some of the lingual characteristics that researchers have observed in Russian troll tweets. On July 11, @MarcoSo94862885 tweeted: "So, now explain why Mark Hamil didn't like Luje in TLJ?". The simplicity and brevity of the language, as well as the fact that this purported *Star Wars* fan doesn't spell "Hamill" or "Luke" correctly, are all indicators that raises suspicions. In combination with other characteristics (auto-generated handle, lack of personal matter on account etc.), the verbiage suggests that the user may be a Russian troll. The literature suggests that Russian trolls primarily use mobile apps for Twitter posts, and thus auto-correct and word suggestion on smartphones disguise any poor English skills to an extent.

No similar accounts were found on the positive/neutral side, where most accounts signaled that they belonged to an identifiable human being that had a high likelihood of being real (i.e. the accounts contained personal photos etc.) There were also no bots found among the accounts posting positive/neutral tweets.

Political agenda

61 accounts could be characterized as having a political agenda. Unlike troll/sock puppet accounts or bots, these accounts were mostly characterized by the same human identifiability mentioned in the methods section.

A majority of the accounts in this category would tweet frequently and positively about party-based politics, e.g. about President Trump and his administration or retweet supporters of the president or the president's own tweets. In example of more issue-based political activism, the user behind one of the analyzed Twitter accounts replied to a postsss from Rian Johnson in which a quote from *The Last Jedi* was used on a sign protesting the National Rifle Association. The user tweeted directly at the director: "Whoever was over quality control at Lucasfilm was obviously having "naptime" when you presented the script for The Last Jedi. After the crap I witnessed in that movie it figures you'd be a gun grabber."

Some were less focused on politics of party or specific issues and more on identity politics, posting anti-feminist or anti-homosexuality messages, and tweets of a racist nature were also frequent among the accounts in this category. In one example, a user tweeted to comedic actor Seth Rogen after he reacted negatively to the 'Remake The Last Jedi' project: "You know how I know you're gay? You don't want to remake last Jedi". A majority of the accounts in the Political Agenda category tweeted antagonistically about "SJW" – Social Justice Warriors, often referring to an SJW "agenda" not just put in place in the *Star Wars* universe by Rian Johnson, Lucasfilm by way of CEO Kathleen Kennedy, and Disney, but also in American society by liberals and left-wing activists. The SJW term emerged from the #GamerGate controversy (Chess and Shaw, 2015), and has since entered dictionaries as a pejorative term for people who express or promote progressive views (Ohlheiser, 2015). But, as Massanari and Chess as well as

Brock point out, the SJW term is rarely used about people who promote progressive views about e.g. the national economy or the environment. The "social justice" in the SJW term is primarily used to refer (pejoratively) to those who support and promote equality of gender, race and sexuality. Brock describes the perception of an SJW by those who use the term thus: "an SJW is…overly concerned with online reputation and obsessed with being politically correct. Coincidentally, the SJW's activities in this definition revolve around perceived injustices to women and people of color" (Brock, 2015, p. 1). Examples include:

"@rianjohnson The more I read your posts on twitter the more the terrible direction TLJ went in makes sense to me. You SJWs ruin everything"

"…politics is certainly a part of the reason I don't like TLJ; Rose Tico's deeply moronic social justice lectures for instance. The SJWs within Lucasfilm have made this a proxy battleground",

"…dont be fooled #SJWs dont want equality they only truly want what fits their agenda. Look no further than TLJ. Every single male character was either a coward, an idiot, or evil", and

"The reason [Kathleen Kennedy] did not get fired after #BoycottSolo is because Disney cant fire employees with an SJW agenda because then the media will demonize Disney as sexist and racist. Disney/Hollywood will not let that happen."

Several males in this category also express anger over what they perceive to be feminist agitation in The Last Jedi:

"…if you can't see the TLJ was basically "the woman's march in space" than I have to believe you also have an agenda. ",

"I will never watch anything *Star Wars* that you or Kathleen "The Force is Female" Kennedy is associated with ever again", and

"Dont let this distract you from the fact that Rian Johnson killed General Ackbar offscreen to make room for his feminist subplot... #Fact"

In this regard, it is also worth pointing out how the negative and positive/neutral sentiments divide across gender identification. Of the accounts whose owners identify clearly as female, 108 tweeted positively about *The Last Jedi*, whereas only five tweeted negatively. The remaining accounts either belong to owners who identify clearly as male or whose owner does not declare any gender identity.

Discussion

During the study period, in June 2018, one of the lead actors in *The Last Jedi*, Kelly Marie Tran, stopped using social media due to what she later called "online harassment" from fans who held negative views of *The Last Jedi* (Tran, 2018; Chuba, 2018). This led several commentators to call out the negativity towards the film as being driven by sexism and racism (Menta, 2018; Zimmerman, 2018; Mendelson, 2018b; Holland, 2018), something that Proctor (2018) also addresses as mentioned earlier. Based on the findings in the present study, it is not fair to generalize and paint *all* of the *The Last Jedi* detractors as alt-right activists, racists or misogynists. However, the findings above show that a majority of the negatively-poised users included in the study *do* express such sentiments, either in *The Last Jedi*-related tweets or in other tweets on their accounts. These identity-based political values combine with traditional party politics and issue-based politics to represent a politicization of *Star Wars* critique which is found in more than half of the negative accounts in this study.

Whether the criticism comes from a Russian troll/bot or from a fan who feels increasingly distant from the values presented in the new *Star Wars* films, the objective of their actions is a political one. Russian trolls weaponize *Star Wars* criticism as an instrument of information warfare with the purpose of pushing for political change, while it is weaponized by right-wing fans to forward a conservative agenda and for some it is a pushback against what they perceive as a feminist/social justice onslaught.

Because of the limitations on the data set and the less-than-comprehensive nature of this study, generalizing and extending this to the entire *Star Wars* fandom should happen with extreme caution. not all disappointed fans are Twitter users and not all disappointed fans go as far as tweeting directly at Rian Johnson in anger. The same can be said about fans who view the film positively, of course, which is why this study looks at a specific discourse situation as a measure of the situation. It is nonetheless noteworthy that a majority of the negativity stems from politicized accounts which are often part of an organized attempt to disrupt and sow discord using the *The Last Jedi* controversy.

Cognitive dissonance as manipulation tactic

With respect to those individuals who express right-wing political views on their Twitter accounts and who dislike *The Last Jedi*, I argue that the findings show indications of classic cognitive dissonance leading to attitude change, as described by Festinger (1962). There is a close similarity between being a "fan", or supporter, of a political figure and participating in pop culture fandom. Sandvoss (2013) and Wilson (2011) show how the same psychological mechanisms are in place for both these types of engagement, and that there is a strong link between supporting a particular, political viewpoint and the expectation of it to be respected, represented or even amplified in pop culture fandom. When these expectations are not met,

cognitive dissonance can occur, and I argue that for many of the fans in the political agenda category, this is in fact the case. The perceived politics of *The Last Jedi* are in conflict with some fans' perception of *Star Wars* as family entertainment devoid of politics, which was never the case. The realization that *Star Wars* takes up a position that is left-of-center, seems to have created much dissonance in the minds of some fans of with a right-of-center political orientation. But rather than confront the well-documented fact that *Star Wars* has always leaned left, they instead change their beliefs, convincing themselves that in fact, *Star Wars* was never left-of-center or feminist until Rian Johnson made *The Last Jedi* and Kathleen Kennedy was put in charge of Lucasfilm, post-Disney acquisition. In a significant number of the tweets analyzed, these fans blame Johnson, Kennedy and Disney, sometimes collectively, sometimes as individuals, for this supposed leftist/feminist turn in the *Star Wars* franchise.

Disinformation and Russian influence operations

These instances of cognitive dissonance further raise the likelihood of Russian influence operators being present. Several scholars (Rider and Peters, 2018; Fuchs, 2017; Howard *et al.*, 2017; Kaminska *et al.*, 2017) have shown how Russian influence operators exploit precisely this type of cognitive dissonance to persuade individual social media users that their values are under attack, cultivating and advancing polarization and disparity. This breakdown of American's sense of community was and continues to be the purpose of the Russian social media influence campaign targeting the West (Giles, 2016; Nissen, 2015). Getting the media to pay attention to such conflicts only amplifies them, further advancing the Russian objective.

Cognitive dissonance also enables the spread of misinformation, which works to the advantage of the Russian actors, but is independent of such foreign influence campaigns. As

shown by Doty (2013) and Kata (2012) in the case of the anti-vaccination debate, those participating in online debates, regardless of platform, will distort facts and spread them as misinformation to support their own argument. This often happens through the establishment of cognitive authority, such as citing first-hand knowledge, uncritically referencing dubious source material or assuming causality where none has been established (Doty, 2013). As mentioned in the introduction, Fantagonists have claimed that a majority of *Star Wars* fans dislike *The Last Jedi*. They base the claim on "evidence" such as *The Last Jedi* not performing as well as *The Force Awakens* at the box office and later on Blu-Ray/DVD, the user-generated score on the Rotten Tomatoes website and the fact that *Solo: A Star Wars Story* which opened about five months after *The Last Jedi* flopped at the box office, as this was supposedly because of a fan boycott. All of these claims have been easily and thoroughly debunked or shown as having no evidentiary basis (Mendelson, 2018a; Robles, 2018; The Numbers, 2018; Lovett, 2017). Yet, fantagonists still propagate this misinformation, which is then amplified by bots and sock puppet accounts for political purposes, just as it did during the Russian influence campaign during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election.

Star Wars fandom is not the only cultural or pop culture sphere in which these influence operations are conducted. In February 2018, NBC News published a data set of more than 200,000 tweets collected from accounts that Twitter deleted after ascertaining that they were Russian troll accounts and part of the influence operation (Popken, 2018). The data set clearly shows that the Russian trolls were not just spreading messages of a political nature but were using engagements in pop culture and related fandoms as either an alibi to distract from their other trolling activities, or to insert themselves in online social groups that they may not reach through pure political messaging. By doing the latter, the trolls were able to advance their

disinformation practices and create division within the fandoms they infiltrated. Examples from the NBC/Twitter data set includes a number of Russian trolls that played along with the then-popular Comedy Central tv show *@Midnight*'s 'Hashtag Wars', engaging with the online geek culture community @Blackgirlnerds, debating European soccer teams such as Manchester United and F.C. Barcelona and yes, also engaging with the *Star Wars* fan community, even then.

The infectious nature of trolling

Finally, the findings show indications of a much simpler explanation of the behavior of some negative-sentiment fans, especially those who are not in the Political Agenda category or can be categorized as trolls, bots or sock puppets. Cheng et al., in one of the of the most rigorous studies of its kind, state that "trolling is better explained as situational (i.e. as a result of the user's environment) than as innate (i.e. an inherent trait)" (Cheng et al., 2017, p. 11). In other words, the authors show how anyone can engage in trolling behavior, even if only a few users or user accounts can be categorized as trolls. In the present case, this explains the similarity of negative remarks and tweets about *The Last Jedi*, even though the accounts and users posting them are different in nature. Even those who do not have political agendas or are sock puppets, troll accounts or bots, but simply disappointed fans, engage in troll-*like* behavior, and this was certainly the case in the tweets collected for this study.

The main finding by Cheng et al. is that *mood* and *context* are the main proponents of trolling behavior. The authors show how participating in a thread which already contains troll-like comments increases the individual's likelihood of engaging in trolling behavior. They also provide quantitative evidence of the rather intuitive notion that the poster's mood, as determined by the emotional state and physical environment of the person behind the screen, impacts the likelihood of trolling, with a negative mood leading to more troll-like behavior. The authors also

observe how anger can spill over from one online discussion an unrelated one because of the accumulative nature of anger over comments read online, or feelings of anger stemming from completely unrelated incidents, such as losing a quiz on a web site. Simply put, an isolated comment or tweet filled with negativity or anger towards a specific subject, is likely to represent emotions that are *also* derived from other activities that are unrelated to the topic in the tweet or comment. Cheng et al. also show how most trolling behavior displayed by non-trolls occurs late in the day and early in the work week, when energy levels and mood may be less conducive to respectful discourse.

These suggested catalysts of trolling behavior are invisible to anyone who casually enters a discussion on Twitter, perhaps having been led there by Twitter's recommendation and sorting algorithms. These factors will likely not play into any decision to react upon viewing negative tweets, but rather, following Cheng et al., the user is more likely to join in the trolling behavior if it is already ongoing (and is predisposed, in the present case, from being disappointed by *The Last Jedi*). The findings clearly show a clustering of negative tweets around specific times, which would indicate that several instances of the mechanism described by Cheng et al. was in effect during the study period. This could, however, also be impacted by the potential influence by Russian trolls, as these also share this propensity for activity peaks. Whether the peaks of negative tweeting activity in specific moments are mostly dominated by one or the other will require further studies of the data and represents an opportunity for further research.

Conclusion

Assuming that the collected dataset of Twitter interactions with *The Last Jedi* director Rian Johnson is at least to an extent representative of *Star Wars* fandom on Twitter, there are a number of statements that can be made on the basis of the collected data.

First and foremost, the data does not support claims that a majority of fans are so dissatisfied with *The Last Jedi* that they wish to boycott further *Star Wars* releases under Disney ownership. Whether you consider the 21.9% (including, political activists, bots and trolls/sock puppets), or the 10.5% (excluding them) tweets expressing a negative attitude towards *The Last Jedi*, it is clear that a majority is satisfied, more than satisfied or non-committal in their attitudes. It is also shown that a majority of the negative fans with clear gender identifications identify as male, with only a miniscule fraction of negative fans identifying as female. Approximately one in three negative fans express misogynist, anti-progressive, anti-social justice or conservative views. When some detractors of *The Last Jedi* correctly claim that it is an injustice to place these labels on all negative fans, these detractors also have to contend with the fact that the labels actually fit a large portion of their faction.

A number of fans feel like *Star Wars* has been politicized by Lucasfilm and Disney, but since the political and ethical positions presented in the new films are consistent with older films, it is more likely that the polarization of the Trump era has politicized the fans. The divisive political discourse of the study period and the months leading up to it, has likely primed these fans with a particular type of political messaging that is in direct conflict with the values presented in *The Last Jedi*.

The presence of organized influence measures, i.e. bots, sock puppet and troll accounts, is further indications of attempts to manipulate *Star Wars* fans as part of a political persuasion

tactic. This similarity to political influence campaigns on social media – domestic or foreign – is also underscored by the manner in which misinformation appears and (sometimes strategically) gets propagated. The same misinformation mechanisms as seen in the anti-vaccination controversy and the 2016 presidential election in the U.S. are present in the debate over *The Last Jedi*. The three latter points are likely the most important contribution of this small study.

However, the assertions made in this article must be considered within the limited scope of the data set, which may or may not limit generalizability of the findings. Another problem for replicability is the fact that Twitter is a dynamic forum and only tweets from selected accounts are archived outside the platform's own servers. This means that data collected during the study period in this paper may not correspond to later searches because users may have deleted tweets or taken down their accounts – a general problem with research based on Twitter data.

Yet, even considering the limitations of the data set, there are enough indications that pop culture debates on social media are being politicized, sometimes for strategic purposes that have nothing to do with the subject under debate. As the debate on misinformation, political communication and regulation of social media continues, researchers studying these matters may find it beneficial to turn their attention to pop culture and how political messaging is propagated in its fandoms.

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