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FANS AND BRANDS
A Star Wars Story: The Last Jedi

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ABSTRACT

Cristina Maria Rosas Bagaces: Fans and Brands – A Star Wars Story: The Last Jedi

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Brand communities are a recent focus of study in media management. In this thesis, the Star Wars brand community and their reaction to the latest Star Wars film, Star Wars: The Last Jedi, is analysed to understand how managerial implications shape today's media economy. This develops an understanding of the brand community in theory of practice to explain why fans are so engaged with the Star Wars brand that this enables the stories to be continuously regenerated. The theory framework utilises models proposed by 1) Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) "Brand Communities"; 2) "Understanding Fandom" by Duffet (2013) and 3) understanding the brand management theory in the article "How Brand Community Practice Creates Value" by Schau, Muñiz and Arnould (2009).

Through a collective analysis of threads from three popular discussion boards concerning The Last Jedi, a pattern in the fan reactions emerged; the fan reactions were divided. This thesis aims to discover the cause of the rift and how to avoid future fan divisions in order to uphold its brand value. The managerial implications concluded in this study highlight the importance for managers to recognise the influence its brand community has. It is important to cater to the different types of fans and to conserve the loyalty of the more dedicated fans while constantly renewing the brand. Maintenance of the brand depends on their fans and protecting the brand means safeguarding the meaning of Star Wars which will guarantee its future.

Keywords: brand communities, Star Wars fans, brand management, media management, Star Wars: The Last Jedi

Contents

1. Introduction	5
2. Fan culture	8
2.1 Introduction to fans	8
2.2 Definition of media fans and fandom	9
2.3 How does one become a fan?	12
2.3.1 Contagion	13
2.3.2 Taste	14
2.3.3 Affect	14
2.3.4 Religiosity	16
2.4 Why is fandom so difficult to explain?	17
2.5 Fan practices	19
2.6 A quick dive into nostalgia.....	22
2.7 Fandom texts: myths, cults or places?	23
2.7.1 Myths	23
2.7.2 Cults.....	24
2.7.3 Places	25
3. Brand communities.....	26
3.1 Brand community theory	26
3.1.1 Shared consciousness.....	27
3.1.2 Rituals and traditions	28
3.1.3 The sense of moral responsibility	29
3.1.4 Discussion	30
3.3 How brand community practices create value	33
3.3.2 Discussion	36
4. Presentation of the case: The Last Jedi	38
4.1 Introduction to Star Wars and the industry behind the franchise	38
4.2 The Star Wars brand community	39
4.3 The importance of a brand	41
4.4 Star Wars: The Last Jedi as a case study.....	42
5. Methodology and data.....	43
5.1 Introduction and research question.....	43
5.2 Qualitative design: grounded theory.....	43
5.3 Research method and steps	44
5.4. Data overview: attitudes and themes	46

5.5 Supportive data.....	54
6. Analysis and findings.....	67
6.1 How is Star Wars important to its brand community? (RQ2).....	67
6.2 What factors should be accounted for when managing this brand community? (RQ3)	70
7. Conclusions	78
7.1 Conclusion	78
7.2 Limitations and future studies	80
References.....	82

1. Introduction

Every day it becomes more undeniable that a new business theatre with new business models have appeared. There have been important changes in marketing strategies and changes in consumer behaviour where people are now personally connecting to a brand as opposed to the classical one-way communication from the company to consumers. This has resulted in a specific and evolved new brand culture to emerge that is otherwise known as “brand communities”.

The rise of these brand communities is a term that was first suggested by Albert Muñoz Jr and Thomas O’Guinn in 1995 and later elaborated in their journal article called “Brand Community” in 2001. These communities have changed the economic and business landscape affecting companies worldwide and their brand management. Managers must understand how and why a community is loyal to the brand and why they are no longer simple consumers; the community has in part become the brands’ new owners as well as their content creators (Schau et al.2009). They influence the brand by participating in brand related activities and managers must now nurture and encourage fans to participate more actively and securing their loyalty.

Brand communities form as individuals connect due to a “shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility [to the brand]” (Muñoz & O’Guinn, 2010, p. 412). They are therefore unique and important in the field of media management. Understanding their fan base will also yield new information about their relationship with the brand and offer insights on any differences with other non-media products and their management of other existing brand communities.

This study will demonstrate why this field should be developed to benefit the business management arena by using the Star Wars brand and its community as an example. The Star Wars (The Walt Disney Company) brand today, after 42 years since its first film, is worth \$42 billion (Chew, 2015) due to its fans who over the years have turned it into a one of the most valuable brands on the planet.

Understanding fandom and fan culture theory, is also an important component in understanding the management behind these brand communities as initially, they are fans of a brand. Fandoms are organisations that have often been misunderstood over the years. By applying Mark Duffett’s (2013) “Fandom Culture Theory”, Muñoz and O’Guinn (2001) theory on ”Brand Communities” and contrasting both theories to Schau et al.’s (2009) “How Brand Community Practices Create Value”, this study can encourage a better understanding of why this perspective differs from traditional

management areas. Schau et al.'s (2009) theory determines how value is created and constantly renewed from the consumer perspective. Duffett's (2013) theory explains how fans make a connection to a person or franchise which sometimes can last a lifetime, while Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001)'s theory explains Brand Community mechanisms.

This study will in particular focus on the film Star Wars Episode VIII: The Last Jedi's fan reactions. The Last Jedi was a controversial film as fans throughout its brand community were split amongst those who enjoyed the film and those who disliked it. It is important to understand why this happened in order to ensure the franchises' longevity. Star Wars is a successful brand with the potential and endless possibility of continuous expansion but do fan opinions matter in comparison to the company's?

This study also aims to understand, analyse and highlight any important managerial implications surrounding its brand community. Understanding fandom that determines the value and future of the brand can be used to develop the franchise and further increase its value as well as to serve as an example for other media companies. As there has been a lack in studies of similar brand communities, this study will provide new insight and understanding of the Star Wars media brand community.

To fulfil this research, the following questions are posed as the research questions:

Research Question 1: What does the reaction of Star Wars: The Last Jedi tell us about the relationship between their brand community and their brand management?

Research Question 2: How is Star Wars important to its brand community?

Research Question 3: What factors should be accounted for when managing this brand community?

Through a qualitative study, the study will take threads from three discussion boards of the Star Wars fan community: The Cantina, Original Trilogy and Jedi Council Forums. These threads will contain opinions from dedicated Star Wars fans about The Last Jedi. Using Mark Duffett's (2013) fan culture theory as a guide and the answers from the threads, this study will answer RQ2. To answer the RQ 3, whilst using the direct information from the threads, with theories from both Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) and Schau et al.'s (2009) and contrasting them against other relevant and supporting factual information, a pattern emerges discussing managerial implications from this

study. Lastly, by combining both the answers to both of RQ2 and RQ3, I will approach RQ1 and explain what the film *The Last Jedi* showed about the nature of Star Wars fans and how this information can be relevant to either future managers of the franchise or other media managers.

This study is organised as following. Chapter 2 begins the literature review by explaining fan culture theory. Chapter 3 explains the theories surrounding Brand Communities by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) and Schau et al.'s (2009). Chapter 4 presents the case: *Star Wars Episode VIII: The Last Jedi* and its relevance in this study. Chapter 5 offers a more detailed explanation of the methodology and Chapter 6 discusses findings. Lastly, Chapter 7 includes the discussion and conclusions.

2. Fan culture

2.1 Introduction to fans

According to Mark Duffett (2013, p. 4), the word and concept of fan or fanatics originates from a historical context. It became important to define them with the rise of baseball events in the United States of America. Fandom began in sport spectacles and followed in music and film.

Duffett's (2013) definition of media fandom is described as, "(...) the recognition of a positive, personal, relatively deep, emotional connection with a mediated element of popular culture" (p. 2). Some definitions try to place the fans as "a person who has a strong interest in or admiration for a particular person or thing" ("fan", n.d) from the Oxford English Dictionary, "a form of skilled audience" (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998, p. 121) or is "fandom as the regular, emotional involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text" (Sandvoss 2005, p. 8). Ferris and Harris (2011) state that fans exist because "there would be no fame without fans and there would be no fans without media, whether print or electronic" (p. 13). Media technology gave people the possibility of engaging with the celebrities and the product from the intimacy of their homes. They are able to experience, repeat the experience throughout their daily lives.

The first television fans arrived in the 1960s with the TV shows Dr Who and Star Trek: The Original Series (Duffett, 2013, p. 9). By the early 2000s, transmedia, the art of storytelling throughout different electronic media platforms became the new business model (Duffett, p. 11). An example of transmedia storytelling is Harry Potter: there are many different types of products available for its fans throughout the media industries. Hollywood has since began encouraging fans to engage in transmedia and the internet allowed this to be possible. Forums and other websites began to exist where fan engagement and discussions could take place.

Fandom groups are also quite different from each other. The same type of fandom group does not exist as there are different "relationships, involvement, affinity, enthusiasm, identification, desire, obsession, possession, neurosis, resistance or combination" (Cavicchi, 1998, p. 39). They have different rules, experiences, and practices because they revolve around different narratives with different meanings to people who come from different backgrounds, ages and have different initial reasons for getting into whichever narrative. Their involvement can also be either private and personal or public and because of this, they experience things very differently (Duffett, p. 28).

However, fans will still have the same interests and similar behaviour within their own fan groups (Jenkins, 1992, p. 286). There is a need for a theory to explain and measure these shared experiences. Duffett (2013) states that “if a template could be made, not to generalise about all fandom but to act as a yardstick against which to measure particular contexts” (p. 19) then these fandom groups could be better understood and replicated. Most of the studies surround music and sports fans but there are some gaps within the Science Fiction community among others (Duffett, 2013, pp. 18-19).

This makes studying and understanding fandom difficult. Fan cultures have to be treated as separate entities that have unique ways of behaving. However, people as individuals do share similarities in their behaviour. This leads to stereotyping fans as Henry Jenkins (2006) describes how “public attacks on media fans keep other viewers in line, making it uncomfortable for readers to adapt such inappropriate strategies of making sense of popular texts” (p. 40). This position makes it harder to normalise and study fandom.

Creating a universal theory to describe one group of fans and having more knowledge can help create a bigger insight to how one fandom works. It can also help to recreate those successful characteristics for management purposes and further company knowledge, but fandom does not have a precise definition. Perhaps as Duffett (2013) states, “it is an act of personal persuasion about who fans are and who they are not” (p. 30). A multidimensional approach is needed rather than an individualised form (Duffett, 2013, p. 31).

2.2 Definition of media fans and fandom

As technology progressed, media also became niche and segmented. Television changed and it became engagement television (Duffett, 2013, p.13). There is information going out into the audience, causing the audience to engage in the narrative through the experience of viewing. The arrival of YouTube in 2005 (Dickey, 2013) also changed the audience’s viewing patterns and further emphasised the audience engagement. This then led to co-creation, which also enhanced fans to enter different domains and discover a world of new information and amateur production. People began posting online and suddenly they became journalists, commentators and broadcasters as well as critics (Duffett, 2013, p. 15). The internet allowed people to have the many different angles of the media from where to engage from creating ‘prosumers’: now fans are both consumers and producers.

Henry Jenkins (2006) wrote that “in many ways, cyberspace is fandom writ large” (p. 138) i.e. fandom has become more noticeable and more normalised. However, in the past, the term for fan had always been a description for someone obsessed with a celebrity or band or even a film or TV programme. Overall, Duffett’s (2013, p. 2) fan culture theory agrees that fans create emotional connections as they experience the narratives turning it into a form of cultural creativity. He also states that as it brings out emotional reactions in people, this provokes the desire of wanting to discuss it and to find people that share the narrative – media fandom is “the recognition of a positive, personal, relatively deep, emotional connection with a mediated element of popular culture” (p. 2).

It is important to distinguish between the differences of fandom research and fan studies. Fandom research comes from multiple disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and psychology while fan studies is narrower and more precise. It has also only been developed over the past two decades. While sports fandom is the most widely studied fandom group and is usually used as the most accepted model, there are differences. Sport fandom is often tribal and a competitive discipline, while media fandom on the other hand is social with certain behavioural and emotional patterns which will be analysed later. (Duffett, 2013, pp. 2-3).

There are differences among media fandoms. While films create the illusion of characters being further away emotionally, television shows portray the characters more often which helps create a different type of relationship with the audience. Even so, they have many similarities as “fandom is a sociocultural phenomenon largely associated with modern capitalist societies, electronic media, mass culture and public performance” (Duffett, 2013, p. 4).

Henry Jenkins (1992) in his book, *Textual Poachers*, was the first to explain that fans are not just immature and obsessed people as many others have always viewed them. He began to closely examine fandom on a deeper level and found the complexity and diversity of fan culture. The book became an important addition to academic studies, and it has been adopted by business schools (Jenkins, 2008, pp. 12-13). This increased the number of scholars who suddenly identified as both fans and academics, realising a need to close the gap between fandom and academic research (Hills, 2002, p. 35; Jenkins, 2006, p. 4).

According to Cavicchi (1998) it is important to understand what media fans are as “media fans resemble ideal brand consumers: they snap up the latest thing, buy extra merchandise, participate in promotions, join official fan clubs and build collections” (p. 62). Fandom as a term covers everything, including the consumer perspective. However, the terms fans and consumers cannot be

used interchangeably as the term consumer implies an economic/financial transaction but to culturally consume a product, however, is to meaningfully examine a particular media product (Duffett, 2013, pp. 19-21). Duffett (2013, p. 20) also underlines that the term fan is sometimes used to describe people who are passionate consumers. The gap between these terms is narrowing as fans can act like consumer groups acting collectively in favour of their favourite media product (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). This will be explored further in brand communities’ section.

Thanks to the academic research from Hills (2002), “fan consumers are no longer viewed as eccentric irritants, but rather as loyal consumers to be created, where possible or otherwise to be courted through scheduling practices” (p. 36). Fans, however, are not only about consumption. They also form strong emotional bonds to their favourite brands and create different types of relationships with the product as they have now become “networkers, collectors, tourists, archivists, curators, producers and more” (Duffett, 2013, p. 21).

Nowadays, fans can enter all forms and realms of imagination. In those places, they can participate in creating amateur texts and art forms based on the original narrative. They can also develop role-playing situations amongst others. Fans are very imaginative when it comes to fan inventions – one can consider, for instance the complex and intricate Lego constructions of their favourite narratives. These fan generated objects can be swapped with other fan members or sold (often for non-profit in order not to make any copyright infringements). Due to their success, companies allow fans to enjoy these activities and find ways to nurture more of these fan activities (this is discussed further in the section about how practices create value by Schau et. al., 2009). In spite of this, not all companies accept this consumer behaviour. Some companies are rather strict when it comes to amateur content creation and send cease and desist letters. However, the positive aspect of fans being creative is the more internet traffic, the more other companies are interested in advertising in these websites

Duffett (2013) calls it “agency” (p. 22) when fans behave and act in different ways towards the narrative. This shows how fans are motivated to spread the word of their favourite narrative to other people without any financial gain. This is seen in all fandom groups; people have always met that one person who has tried to convince them to watch or read a narrative. There are countless examples of people explaining how they got into their fandom group. People can usually relate to the story of having had someone introduce them to a Sci-Fi world like Star Wars or Harry Potter. It is a way of gaining knowledge through experience, but it is also more to do with a labour of love which in turn becomes a gift economy (Jenkins, 2008, p. 180; Duffett, 2013, p. 23).

Media fandom is “(...) often pursued as a hobby but it has elements of passionate identification that take it beyond a mere pastime and make it part of the identity of the individual” (Duffett 2013, p. 24). It is not always based on emotional intensity, as Sandvoss (2005, p. 8) notes: not all fans self-classify themselves based on their emotional intensity. Some people find more meaning in knowledge over emotion. Due to feelings and emotions being subjective, they are hard to measure and quantify, which is a problem when analysing fan groups: as fans differ from each other, how can there be common measurement parameters?

While one key issue may be the frequency of watching or listening to the narratives, it is not the same to binge watch all the James Bond films once rather than watching the franchise every year. Some people go back to watching their favourite franchises once a year or more: being a fan is about regular commitment (Jenkins, 1992, p. 56). Sandvoss (2005) also agrees and sees fandom as a “regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text” (p. 8). However, one cannot judge someone’s dedication by only measuring how much time they actually spend on a narrative: it is also possible for people to spend less time on a narrative but still be more dedicated than another person who may invest a lot more time but be less dedicated (Duffett, 2013, pp. 44-45).

Duffett (2013) believes fan practices they can be divided into “breadth (genre) versus depth (single show fandom, fan self-identification, community participation, consumption of publicity material and archiving” (p. 44). On the other hand, Cavicchi (1998) identifies fans to be “minimal, typical and extreme fans” (p. 44). Will Brooker (2002) also found that “obsessive fandom is acceptable as long as it avoids the unacceptable social types of the perpetually single misfit and homosexual” (p. 46).

2.3 How does one become a fan?

There is more to becoming a fan than simply experiencing fan activities. To become a fan, one must somehow be “translating that view into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about program content with friends, by joining a community of other fans who share common interests” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 27). John Fiske (1993) calls this by the term, “fan cultural capital”: the gathering and accumulation of knowledge by fans and any emotional investment they make to any object within a fandom (pp. 30-31). The connections fans make to their narrative are therefore responsible for increasing the value of the fan cultural capital.

Duffett (2013) explains that “any discussion of how anyone becomes a fan has to contain a theory of why fans are who they are and why they do what they do” (p. 124). People are different, life is complex and due to a lack of a model to determine fandom, the gaps are often filled through stereotyping (Duffett, 2013, p. 124). However, fandom is not only about these stereotypes, it emerges from within the experience of fans; there is a social aspect to it and he believes people consciously enter this fandom, people enter “a knowing field i.e. field of emotional knowing, a terrain of conviction that defines their fannish identity” (p. 124). For Duffett (2013), both the individual and social dimensions of becoming a fan can be understood with four dimensions: contagion, taste, affect and religion.

2.3.1 Contagion

The idea of contagion is that fans can ‘infect’ other people around them and there is a ‘before’ and ‘after’ of becoming a fan (Duffett, 2013, p. 125). This theory already raises certain problematic angles. By stating that people become ‘infected’, it is comparing fandom to a disease: stating that people have no choice in the matter and that emotions can be transferred (Duffett, 2013, p. 125). It also suggests that infection has a high contamination rate but not everyone that gets ‘infected’ becomes a fan. Fans often recruit new fans unsuccessfully or become fans many years later (Cavicchi, 1998, p. 161). However, there is a form of invitation at work in fandom: people do get encouraged to explore the narrative by someone in their proximity, but ‘contagion’ is still not a very accurate depiction on how people become fans (Duffett, 2013, p. 128).

Nevertheless, there are some benefits to this contagion theory. Fans do have a way of attracting non-fans. People are attracted to fun and excitement and fans are always enthusiastic (Duffett, 2013, p. 126). Often parents pass down their appreciation for a narrative and companies like Disney count on the nostalgia (Giroux & Pollock, 2010, p. 13) as people want their children to experience the passion and excitement they felt. By doing this, parents are not just simply securing the existence of the fan base, but it also serves as a bonding teaching moment (Vroomen, 2004, p. 244). People are always searching for a connection to other people through common values and a fandom group is a way of bonding.

2.3.2 Taste

Taste is often used as a social indicator of class and status; people use it to differentiate themselves from each other and within a social circle (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 6). Cultural capital is what is used to describe these differences and it is this accumulation that reflects their social position (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 14). However, as this is an indicator of a social position, taste does not indicate that it is a personal choice.

A hierarchy within the fandom groups helps fans identify their position and distinguish themselves from non-fans (Duffett, 2013, p. 130). Although labelling is not preferable, understanding their position as a member can highlight the cultural capital exchange within the group (Fiske, 1993, pp. 44-45). According to Duffett (2013, pp. 130-131) fans, for example, use specific vocabulary to show their commitment to the narrative and is a form of one of the symbolical badges of true fan membership; the more badges, the higher the investment and the higher the position in the hierarchy pyramid. This shows that outside the fandom group, cultural capital has limited value as Hills (2002) states “it cannot easily be converted into economic or academic status that its purity may matter” (p. 132).

However, there are also problems with this theory. Duffett reminds academics that media has changed the meaning of taste as society has changed; it is not so much about social class and status anymore. Popular mass culture narratives such as James Bond or Harry Potter are enjoyed by people from all sorts of backgrounds. Taste in fans is subjective and not rational as fans cannot plan what they will feel an emotional connection to. They will not study every narrative that exists and choose the best one that suits their social advancement; they become fans because somehow, they connect to the narrative. (Duffett, 2013, pp. 131-132)

2.3.3 Affect

Duffett (2013, p. 135) states many forms of fandom support the idea of emotion as being the initiating cause: the special interest that attracts a person to the narrative. This initial emotional feeling is difficult to study as it is difficult to quantify. There is a challenge of how “to discuss the emotional aspect of fandom as a personal and shared activity without resorting to psychological models like the ideas of hysteria or parasocial interaction?” (Duffett, p. 135). However, how can one describe the emotional connection fans feel towards their favourite shows or characters?

According to Sue Turnbull in (2005), 'ekphrasis' is "the attempt to recover in words the emotional affect that a performance has on its viewers." The key word being 'attempt' as it is difficult to describe emotions accurately and their effect.

We also cannot use the words emotion and affect interchangeably (Duffett, 2013, p. 136). His study states that affect simply shows a shift in cultural meanings; some can change with time while others can remain relevant throughout time. However, for academics Gregg and Seigworth (2010), they see affect as something coming from the outside inwards, it is both something social and impersonal that resonates in the individual in a personal matter and as paraphrased by Duffett (2013), 'it is unconscious, seductive and impelling' (p. 137).

Personal fandom begins with a connection followed by emotional investment. Examining the intensity of this emotional investment could be a new and relevant way to understand how and why one becomes a fan. First contact in a narrative is followed by excitement, which then is followed by fan practices. According to both Duffett (2013, p. 138) and Cavicchi (1998, p. 90) as the fan continues their journey to fandom, loyalties can increase causing emotions to run high. It is throughout these fan activities that people will connect and bond further. These feelings are charged with emotions of surprise, mesmerisation and empowerment and can be experienced at home (Cavicchi, 1998, p. 90). Fans have often found ways of remaining private in order not be judged out in the open (Cavicchi, 1998, p. 31; Vroomen, 2014, p. 246).

This still does not answer why a narrative provokes such strong feelings. Perhaps it is the way people interpret the meanings. Duffett's (2013, p.138) study shows that depending on our personal life situations, some meanings can resonate stronger than others causing a bigger or lesser effect. He states that fans have tried to describe the meaning their personal fandom has for them and that when fans feel a moment of low, they turn to their personal favourite narratives for comfort bonding further and forever linking the feeling of comfort to the narrative; they can count on the narrative always being there. This is the reason why people remain fans of a narrative their entire lives and throughout different milestone moments. Duffett (2013) explains this by stating that "we inadvertently generate, understand and frame our experiences" (p. 140). However, these meanings are not entirely personal and individual as they can be influenced later through actions (Duffett, 2013, p. 140). In conclusion, it is how the experiences resonate within the individuals and the fan practices which increase and decrease the cultural capital value.

2.3.4 Religiosity

Many academics have compared fandom to religion. David Giles (2000) has compared fan texts to religious scriptures from the Middle Ages while Nick Stevenson (2009, p. 142) developed his own theories to explain this comparison and states that “by connecting with more than human being, we seek to move beyond ordinary human temporality into the mythic and sacred”. So, does this mean that people use fandom as a form of surrogacy for religion? (Duffett, 2013, p. 143)

We have already stated that fandom and religion have plenty of negative and stereotype views. The comparison also gives a sense of false worship to fictional characters, showing the inaccuracy of this analogy (Jenkins, 2006, p. 17). But is there a grain of truth in this comparison? Chris Rojek (2007), states that “celebrity culture is secular. Because the roots of secular society lie in Christianity, many of the symbols of success and failure in celebrity draw on myths and rites of religious ascent and descent” (p. 143). So, could it be both similar and different to religion? To answer that question, one must understand the differences of fandom and religion.

In the past, Duffett (2013, p. 143) points out that numerous people have compared themselves to God or use religious language when describing the narrative: Madonna with a faux crucifixion (Madonna takes cross show to Rome, 2006) or religious language in Star Wars when speaking about the Jedi order. People are also following Jediism as their religion – even if it is not accepted as one (Jedi is not a religion, 2016). Such metaphorical uses of religion make fandom more confusing.

Spiritual metaphors are used by fans in order to describe their fannish experiences and to normalise their feelings (Duffett, 2013, p. 144). The convenience here lies in the fact that they no longer have to justify as to why they are fans (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 20-21; Hills, 2002, p. 122). Cavicchi (1998) explains that “while religion and fandom are arguably different realms of meaning, they are both centred around acts of devotion which create many similarities of experience” (p. 51). This means he believes them both to be trying to explain similar issues, both surround interpretation and a community that share devotion. He, however, does not believe fandom to be a religion but that they share similar characteristics and similar people behavioural patterns.

Even if there are similarities, there are also important differences. Sandvoss (2005) explains three crucial differences: in fandom, “1) there is no central theology; 2) fans can worship more than one deity at a time and 3) the idea rests on a questionable conception of human need; fandom lacks an absolute otherworldly framework that would make it resemble religion” (p. 62). Fans can belong to

different fandoms as they do not always have to constantly be on top of their single most favourite narrative; they can spread enjoyment around. Science fiction fans are among those that can easily have different fandoms. According to Nye (2010): many Sci-Fi fans “(...) accepted Doctor Who as their secondary fandom, coming to it from Battlestar Galactica, Star Wars or Star Trek, but a few of us had Doctor Who as our primary or sole favourite...I liked Star Wars and Star Trek and many of the others, but I loved Doctor Who” (p. 108).

People today pick what religion or fandom suits them but religion from the fandom point of view, shows that perhaps the answer is to compare fandom to neo-religiosity (Hills, 2002, pp. 117-119; Stevenson, 2009, p. 89). Religion, however, is still being used to describe fans in a derogatory way. By shaming fans, one cannot get accurate accounts of their fandom and will only cast a negative light on the fandom groups (Duffett, 2013, p. 149).

However, what we do know is that both shared and individual experiences and commitment to the fandom is important to fans. If fans can be considered ‘brand worshippers’ of their favourite narratives as the while filling a personal void similarly to religion is a useful question – even if both fandom and religion are not the same. That commitment and personal void is important to consider when companies manage brands and find ways to attract new fans and maintain their loyalty.

2.4 Why is fandom so difficult to explain?

To conclude on Duffett’s (2013) previous theories surrounding fandom, we can establish that there is a lack of explanations and studies as to why people become fans of a narrative. Academics want to understand the moment someone becomes a fan: the “internal shift” (Duffett, 2013, p. 155) or the moment the person goes through the stage of affect.

It is the internal shift that is what is interesting. In order for the person to begin this stage, in the narratives that fans use, there has to be some moments of recognition that mark the invitation of becoming a fan. In these marking moments, a person can feel a point of similarity to and make the connection. These marks are also known as “hooks” (Duffett, 2013, p. 156). He describes them as the moment a reluctant person is dragged to experience a fandom event and the moment their lives become altered; that moment of impact that creates a meaning. Hooks are the reason why people from different backgrounds become fans (Cavicchi, 1998; Duffett, 2013, p. 156).

After the initial shift, people become emotionally invested and vocally supportive. They become enamoured with their fandom universe and everything it has to offer. However, similarly to inter-human relationships, a fan can also break-up with their fandom. As Duffett (2013) states: “unending attention is never guaranteed: if a hero reneges on the relationship in some way, criticism and desertion can follow” (p. 157). He continues explaining that fans react poorly to their heroes not following through on their expectations as well as meanings can change for someone causing the break-up; tastes change, and narratives also lose cultural meanings. What once resonated within someone in a specific time of their life, now no longer exists as they have moved on and so no longer feel connected to the narrative in the same way (Hills, 2002, p. 85).

Television shows can end (*Firefly*) or there are big year gaps between the release of material (*Star Wars*) which effects the cycle of being a fan and while some fans wait, others grow out of it and move on. This is a reason why management of fandom is difficult. Fans want new stories but that are not too new, they want new characters but that do not change the essence of the narratives; they want to see old characters in new stories that do not change the foundation and meanings of the narrative. Yet how can we recycle fans, maintain fans and altogether gain new fans with such small leeway?

Perhaps by understanding why a person ‘chooses’ a certain narrative we may find part of the answer. Duffett (2013) uses Bourdieu’s (1984) study to theorise that we choose according to “what is socially encouraged” (p. 157), while for Bourdieu (1984) it is about our local social environment and identity: nationality, ethnicity, age, gender, dis/ability, class and subculture. Perhaps it is a mixture of both. People seem to choose according to what they have in their proximity or something they have encountered and/or have easy access to. However, these choices still remain personal i.e. comes from within and people will always have numerous reasons as to why they become fans. What this shows us is that the reasons behind them becoming a fan, do not always fit into their social circle and normal daily lives but they are not alone in these choices (Duffett, 2013, p. 158).

Trying to find these explanations is proving to be seemingly difficult but Duffett (2013) proposes a different type of question to the phenomenon of fandom: “Is it possible to be a fan without fandom?” (p. 159). Duffett (2013) states he does not believe that fandom exists due to an innate human need because in that case fans would have existed in the past. In Roman Times, gladiators had enthusiastic supporters as did composers of the romantic period (to name some examples) so indeed they have existed in other times (Fraser, 2001; Karasavvas, 2017). However, perhaps the idea of being someone’s fan is different today due to the progress of media.

What is emphasised in Duffett's (2013, p. 160) study, is that becoming a fan indicates a high level of passion and commitment that comes from a deep and personal meaning. Although he believes it not to be an innate need, he also does not believe it to be a coincidence: there has to be a form of self-recognition in the narrative, a meaningful connection. Hooks therefore also add to the previous difficulties of studying fan culture theory. According to Duffett (2013) the solution is to "begin separating collective and individual elements in theory while admitting that they always happen together in reality" (p. 157). This is because most people are not even aware of their fan process and memories are also not always reliable but to Duffett (2013) a person must "be conscious of the process in order to understand it" (p. 160).

However once again, this still does not explain the exact moment of first contact with the internal shift. Does the internal shift come from both a self-recognition and understanding its social meaning (Duffett, 2013, pp. 161-162)? As people are different, what resonates in someone, might not resonate with the other. They can also feel differently in terms of commitment and concentrating on examining fan practices can perhaps shed a light on these levels of commitment.

2.5 Fan practices

Fan activities show how fans are continuously seeking pleasures from their fandom. Companies that own narratives are interested in these fan practices. Duffett (2013, p. 166) reminds academics that although the main fan activity is to consume the text and/or engage in it, it is the continued practices that maintain the level of interest amongst the fans. It is also what keeps them actively participating in the narrative.

Henry Jenkins (1992, p. 10), when stereotyping, states fans cannot distinguish between fantasy and reality. Gwynne (2013, p. 89) however believes that fans are indeed aware there is a difference: that it is only when the line between both fantasy and reality gets blurred and both are so close and connected that fans become immerse in their fantasies. He concludes that this proximity to reality is what helps fans on a personal level, experience and engage in their favourite narratives.

According to Duffett (2013, p. 166), fan practices also connect fans to other members of their fandom and produce three types of pleasures: "1) connection to connection (to a hero or a story); 2) appropriation (of its meaning) and 3) fresh kinds of performance (enacted by fans themselves) and are further explained in the following list.

1) Pleasures of connection refers to the moments when people meet their favourite celebrities, it gives them a sense of pleasure, and it is one of the primary pleasures of fandom (Duffett, 2013, p. 166).

2) Pleasures of appropriation includes practices such as spoiling and the production fan fictions. *Spoiling* is the act of giving away a plotline of a text before its release. Fans enjoy speculating even if it is considered a form of spoiling as it increases levels of creativity (Brooker, 2002, p. 116). It also allows fans to go beyond the normal fandom knowledge and show their commitment and therefore, status position within the fandom. It is the most dedicated fans that delve into the extreme in order to understand the text in front of them and solve the puzzle (Jenkins, 2008, p. 25). It also serves as a good excuse to closely examine and engage with a text (Duffett, 2013, p. 169).

Spoiling is also an example of a balance of power between the media companies and the fans (Duffett, 2013, p. 169). Each side speculates; however, it is a choice of a personal matter whether fans enjoy speculating or not. Some fans refuse to receive any spoilers of any form and prefer to be completely surprised when a film premieres.

Fan fiction refers to writing fictional pieces inspired by their favourite fandoms. Television and film are the most predominant ways of fanfic (Duffett, 2013, pp. 170-171). Duffett and Hills (2010, p. 55) also state that fans use this creative activity to reshape the narrative if there is a void as they may have been left with expectations, hated the ending or simply did not want their favourite stories to end. They can therefore create a text from their perspective and explore it in their own way. It is also a way of maintaining interest in the narrative which may interest companies owning the narratives.

3) Pleasures of performance are multiple. According to Duffett, (2013, p. 178), the most important primary pleasure between fans and the narratives is *participation*. He highlights that fans will experience meaning through engagement while it is the performance that sets the tone. He also states that each fan creates their own meanings; personal views and those common with other fans. Enjoyment through engagement is not only limited to going to a performance event. We engage with media products and narratives every day which constantly brings us pleasurable moments.

Collecting is another performative practice: “A toy fan, in the truest sense, is not only a collector of objects either, but a creative player of materials and story worlds, and a fan of anyone who dreams them up”. (Heljakka, 2017, p. 103)

Collecting is an activity and has existed for many years, however collecting in fandom has a slightly different meaning and it is about visibly showing the level of commitment (Duffett, 2013, p. 179). Collecting although, often criticised, it is not simply about collecting objects, it is a way to extend the pleasure of their feelings and engage creatively with their favourite narratives (Heljakka, 2017, p. 103).

According to Duffett (2013, pp. 179-180) there are three objects of collecting: “1) Mimetic traces of the performance itself 2) Merchandise (mass produced) and 3) Memorabilia (unique and personal)”. Duffett also states that sometimes academics forget the first type of collecting: people collect objects that represent what they have enjoyed in the past. It gives the collector the ability to relive key moments of their lives: their childhood, when they acquired the object or acquiring the objects over the years (nostalgia) and for a sense of belonging (Garlen, 2013, p. 125).

Blogging and writing fanzines offers another example. Before the internet, fans participated in non-profit magazine publications. They created drawings and typed text sections about their topics of choice in order to also connect with other fans (Duffett, 2013, p. 184). Fanzines were a less censored place and was a way to share interests and swap memorabilia, circulate reviews about events or even find a pen pal (Duffett, 2013, pp. 184-185). According to Duffett (2013, p. 185) it created a continuous flow of information and kept the narrative relevant and in constant dialogue; a way of keeping their favourite stars and characters alive.

However, when the internet arrived, blogging became the new cultural form of fanzines. Duffett, (2013, p. 185) highlights that fanzines were always experiencing lack of resources and low cash flow and blogs became more convenient as they had lower costs, easier accessibility, better storage of information and were global. This reduced the fanzine culture. Duffett in his study also states that blogging is used to either to express a single form of expression (one author) or a collective form of expression (more than one author); changed the media scenery for good.

Fanvideos have become more important. Before the arrival of YouTube in 2005 (Dickey, 2013), people were creating their own videos which can be traced back to the 1970s although they had a different look and format in comparison to what we know now: mash-up videos (Duffett, 2013, p. 186). Duffett (2013, p. 186) also states that these videos have their own narrative art form, made by dedicated fans, where they would bring up mutual topics of interest within the fandom. He believed that these videos were the only form of fan generated culture that brought attention to minor subplots or minor characters in the narratives and share the same creativity foundation as fanzines.

Filking is a practice of commentary that talks back the stereotypes about fandom by singing popular tunes with adapted lyrics that reflect the topic of interest and allows fans to further comment and answer back against their stereotypes (Duffett, 2013, p. 187).

Impersonating and cosplay is another way that fans can extend the pleasure of participation and according to Duffett (2013, p. 189) it is seen as “enacting virtual community in a physical space” and by dressing up as their favourite characters they can explore and engage with other fans in a safe place. He also states that costume making contributes to the experience as to impersonate their favourite characters, fans want their costumes, hair and make-up to be as accurate as possible as part of the bonding experience towards the characters and the texts. In addition, he notes that although talent is partly responsible, commitment is more important; having the most accurate costume shows the fans dedication and status within the fandom group. Gunnels (2009) also adds that cosplay is as a social coping mechanism and another way to extend childhood pleasures and experience.

2.6 A quick dive into nostalgia

Many of the fan practices mentioned before imply a focus on *nostalgia* as part of the motivation of fandom, a sense of how fans try to recreate their pasts through these activities (Williams, 2013, p. 54). Fandom does a great service to narratives by making them become an ongoing dialogue. Fans keep the nostalgia going by engaging in fan practices and by reliving moments from their past; they amplify and transfer those feelings into the future (Williams, 2013, p. 55). This ensures the continuation of the narrative and its fandom; the narrative is recycled.

In order to make a long-lasting fan base, nostalgia seems to play an important and complex role in the relationship with the fan and their past. Fans constantly bring up the past and remember those feelings they once felt, by referencing the original text: memory narrative (Hunt, 2011). This is what gives the text a higher culture capital value. These fan practices can be either individual or shared.

Although Hunt (2011), when discussing memory narrative, refers to special features and extras on a DVD or cinema packaging we can however apply memory narrative to fan practices as the idea is fundamentally the same. Fans are constantly trying to relive those past moments and trying to find out new information on their favourite characters from existing material. Rebooting a series is another way to reinvolve those past feelings of nostalgia into the present with a guaranteed and

recycled future fan base. Examples of this can be seen in the rebooted series of *Lost in Space*, *Star Trek: Discovery*, *Charmed*, *X-Files* and lastly, *Star Wars* film series.

2.7 Fandom texts: myths, cults or places?

Henry Jenkins (2006) has stated that fandom is about “resonant myths and not false faiths” (p. 17). Certain texts can resonate deeply for those who read them and by analysing Duffett’s (2013) theories on myth, cult and place we can highlight and see the uniqueness of the narrative within the fandom phenomenon.

2.7.1 Myths

According to Duffett (2013, pp. 210-211), myths are a pleasurable way of telling a story: they are somewhat similar to a legend but with a social meaning as well as an ideological aspect to it (a moral). He states that a social meaning addresses a social concern; they are culturally relevant to society. Additionally, he adds, that when it comes to fictional texts, fans want to accompany the main characters on their quest and may want to be similar to them but not actually be them.

Matt Hills (2010, p.105) also explains that the larger the myth, the more they seem unfinished and have the possibility to be continued. Many narratives have many fictional works outside of the main films or books and these creative works keep being released due to the narrative having a different range of genres within (Duffett, 2013, p211). Some story lines cover drama and romance, others adventure and action etc. This variety offers the audience a wide range of options for an internal connection. Duffett also states that this also allows more creative works to be updated and reinvented/recycled as well as attracting new fans.

The internet serves as an important tool for storytelling. Due to the media convergence, storytelling has now become a complex art form as the narratives spread across different media platforms and this allows texts to be “re-established, re-imagined or extended” (Duffett, 2013, p. 212). As Duffett (2013, p.213) also continues to state, “it is about creating an immersive cultural and artistic universe (...)” and for those more successful franchises such as *Harry Potter*, Hills (2010) explains that “[Dr] Who has become more than just an ‘unfolding text’, instead aspiring to the status of a multi-platform, multi-layered mega-text from which fans and academics can only ever consume a cross

section” (p. 4). This quote can be applied to multiple franchises as well. It is all about understanding the mythos behind the narrative. Mythos is explained by Duffett (2013, p. 211) as the “guiding forces” behind the mythology and is what encourages new stories to be created and/or extended.

However, there are limits to just how much a narrative or in this case a myth, can expand (Duffett, 2013, p. 213). This is only possible if the fans believe in the story and it continues being coherent. Fans will reject any storyline that does not fit in with the mythos (Jenkins, 1992, p. 106). This proves that emotional realism exists and is very important within fandom (Hills, 2010, p.100). Hills underlines this as he states, that “Doctor Who’s narrative universe, for instance, is a fantasy world stitched together by a sense of truth” (p. 100). This can be also applied to other fandom narratives. Mythos therefore is an important component to the fan base; if it follows the canon (resonates and makes sense within its narrative), fans will be loyal.

2.7.2 Cults

The word cult has been commonly used to describe fan objects that cause intense feelings to those who possess them. Duffett (2013) describes them as [fan objects that] “have evoked a special intensity of interest, type of audience, strength of popular commitment or longevity of appeal” (p. 218). Duffett also points out that over time the meaning of the word cult, has multiplied as people tend to use it differently and is describe a primary text (cult text) or a fan base (cult phenomenon). Additionally, he mentions it has a different meaning in the fan culture theory field than in the religious field, which is the most common meaning for people, which gives the word a negative meaning and connotations to cult phenomenon. Throughout Duffett’s (2013, p. 217) chapter on cults, he explains how cultural products can become cult objects: it is the popularity and demand of niche products that can turn films and TV series into a series of cults objects as well as the dedication the fandom has surrounding the narrative.

This is all supported by Hills (2002, p.xi) who states that media cults evoke three kinds of elements:

- 1) affective (evoking intense fan attachments),
- 2) linguistic (the adoption of cult discourses) and
- 3) temporal (suggesting longevity).

2.7.3 Places

With the arrival of the internet, fans consume their material in a different way than they did before. Duffett (2013, p. 225) asserts that people now have a virtual place with unlimited space; fan consumption can be placeless and timeless while at the same time it takes place in people's homes. Duffett also adds that this shows an incongruency of being 'at home' yet at the same time not necessarily in a physical space while being online (Duffett, 2013, p. 225). Using the internet from one's home is convenient as well as giving a sense of comfort and security as people may or may not choose to interact with others. Cornell Sandvoss (2005, p. 58) describes that with the word 'Heimat': an area of physical, emotional and ideological safety. A place where people can connect with others and find a sense of belonging without feeling ashamed (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 64).

For Sandvoss (2005, p. 54) there are several spaces of fandom; he distinguishes the emotional space from the physical places of consumption: 1) physical spaces of consumption, 2) spaces of representation of those physical spaces, 3) virtual realm of fan narratives and the 4) public spaces of fan pilgrimage.

The word Pilgrimage is usually used to describe religious journeys but Brooker (2007), Sandvoss (2005) and Duffett (2013) in their studies find there are connections within fandom culture theory. They believe that fans go on symbolical pilgrimages (they are usually at home) when experiencing a narrative and 'travel' along with the characters through their journeys and adventures.

Duffett (2013, pp. 227-229) states that when fans visit theme parks or places and can participate in an activity, they are in a sense, creating more memories which adds to more emotional investment. Duffett (2013) recognises this by stating that "although narratives of cultural history tell the story by moving forwards, we create such narratives, as fans, by looking backwards" (p. 230). So, if these moments and experiences are enjoyable, fan base and loyalty increases. It also brings nostalgia as an element of the experience. He describes this as when they go on a pilgrimage and have an enhanced experience, they are also connecting to their favourite characters. He calls this, 'imagined memory' which helps fans experience these journeys by second-hand imagination i.e. imagining what it would be like if they would indeed be there.

3. Brand communities

3.1 Brand community theory

The introduction to the concept of a brand community can be credited to both Albert Muñiz and Thomas O'Guinn. For them this is the definition of a brand community:

“A brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialized because at its centre is a branded good or service. Like other communities, it is marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility.” (p. 412).

According to Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) this type of community is not limited with a geographical location. The internet helps link fans all around the world and therefore they are able to easily connect with their favourite narratives and brands. Initially, the thought of a community came down to a group of people in a specific/limited space, but today the emphasis is on people spread out that have a mutual understanding of a shared identity.

Modern technology and modern marketing opened brands to be advertised throughout newspapers, magazines, radio and television. It became easier for smaller communities to spread and expand as well as for existing bigger communities, it became easier for a network to form and members to connect. Without a limited geographical location, people found they became intra-connected through a series of mutual and emotional bonds (Bender, 1978, p. 145). This shows that people connect and bond over primary interests rather than other local general interests, even if it would be easier to connect with the localised general interests (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

When Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) published their article on Brand Communities, many academic studies had tackled collective consumption but less focused on collective consumption when the group members were in different physical locations and towards a mass production branded product. McAlexander and Schouten (1998) conducted a study observing Harley Davidson's bikers and members which Muñiz and O'Guinn later incorporated into their findings. However, they were careful to not compare marginal subcultures to brand communities as they stated that while marginal subcultures use their symbolism and meanings to contradict the majority, brand (fan) communities do not. Although fans may have different meanings about their favourite narrative, this does not mean they oppose the majority in culture. Although a person can admire Captain Malcolm Reynolds from Firefly and have positive feelings towards the character, another person

who is not a fan of Firefly can also feel those exact same feelings towards someone else (fictional or real). These feelings and meanings are the same basis for everybody, but their focus can differ. Thus, Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001), found a way to re-assess the meaning of community in a more modern sense of the word. Other types of communities throughout history had a criterion of religion but here consumption is used as the main criteria. The economic context has nowadays changed, and the media environment has created this new type of community. The following markers are what they found in their study and outlines the core essence of brand communities.

3.1.1 Shared consciousness

According to Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001), members of a community not only feel a connection to the brand but also to each other. These members act and feel collectively different than other non-members of the community. The connection between each other therefore becomes more important than the product (Cova, 1997).

Media fan communities such as Star Trek or Star Wars care deeply about the turns their narratives take. The examples about Myths (see above) show precisely that fans will remain loyal to their narratives as long as they do not expand in a way that does not fit into their mythos (Duffet, 2013, p. 113; Jenkins, 1992, p. 106; Hills, 2010, p. 100). One can argue that one of the reasons why these universes are so popular is due to it being a fictional universe that has real characteristics that people can connect to, closer than Lord of the Rings for example. However, when discussing how their connection, mutual bonding and shared consciousness is more important than geographical location, online community's existence proves this (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). They share feelings and act together in benefit of their community.

Similarly, to fan communities, in brand communities it is important for the members to be true believers of the brand. According to Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) there is a hierarchy within the members as people can have different degrees of passion and knowledge about the brand. They also say that these people can also contribute in different degrees to the community and have different effects on others as those with the most knowledge are the ones higher in the hierarchy. Their study also points out that people who try and enter the community to use the brand for the wrong reasons will be met with opposition, especially those higher in the hierarchy.

Oppositional brand loyalty is a concept Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) also highlight. An example is how some people are against Apple as a brand so they will always undoubtedly support Android

and vice-versa. In the fan community area, we have the example of Star Trek and Star Wars. Both can boast of having an enormous fan base supporting the different universes and fans will act defensively if they feel their narrative is under threat or being attacked. Similarly, brand community members and fandom members will not understand why the threat exists and why non-fans do not share in their optimism towards the brand (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

However, the main difference between brand communities and other communities is that the members are very aware of the economical attributes of their brand and brand community (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). They are aware that their feelings are being mass produced and mass advertised but they choose to ignore this aspect; they believe those who criticise their feelings and behaviours do not know understand the brand value as they do (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

3.1.2 Rituals and traditions

Community members will follow certain fan practices (rituals and traditions) in order to maintain the significance in the meaning of the product. Even though Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) speak about cars in their study, we can use the fan practices stated before from Duffett (2013) as the examples. These involve fan participation, collecting, blogging among others. Some of these can be practiced locally while others will be spread globally with the help of the internet. They will always involve the shared consumption of the brand and shared consciousness of the members (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Both Muñiz and O'Guinn, (2001) state that an important part of these rituals is storytelling; stories based on common experiences within the brand. They explain how storytelling increases the brand value and allows members to connect meaningfully to each other as storytelling as an activity reinforces the shared consciousness and gives symbolism to its commercial texts. Muñiz and O'Guinn, (2001) show another example of this in a brand logo and the effect it has on people. For fans seeing any logo of their favourite narrative such as Star Wars and its famous letters scrolling down or simply hearing the fanfare from the main theme, will have a huge impact.

Another ritual that Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) mention, is that by finding ways to celebrate the history of the company and brand it can keep the communities vital and expand their reach, therefore transmitting their brand culture. However, in Sci-Fi media cases, such as Star Wars, the evolution of the brand is what is important, not the company. Management of LucasFilm has undergone some changes since Disney acquired the rights in 2012 (Disney buys Star Wars, 2012).

What matters is the future of the brand and its narrative to its fan community. When LucasFilm became part of Disney and they announced the release of Episodes VII, VIII and IX, the fans were suddenly affected. This meant that much of the fan culture created would be considered non-canon and might therefore become obsolete (Hood, 2015). Star Wars has numerous amounts of amateur fan written books and numerous fan art. The announcement of new films started a new era for its fandom and new storylines. While some fans protested as they had spent many years invested in these fan generated creations, others looked forward to seeing what was in store for the future. Another example is Doctor Who and Star Trek. Many different actors have played the Doctor or characters from the Star Trek universe and they work due to the importance being the narrative and the brand and not the company. As long as the narrative is respected, fans can get on board with more storylines being developed. Actors do not matter, storylines do.

3.1.3 The sense of moral responsibility

This marker described by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) is what members feel towards their brand and how when the brand is under threat, they will protect it. They also describe it as the duty they feel towards the community and its members. In addition, they note that this sense of moral responsibility is characterised by collective community action which also contributes to group bonding.

According to Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001, p. 424) here are two ways they act towards each other:

- 1) integrating and retaining members and
- 2) assisting brand community members in the proper use of the brand.

Both in Duffett's fan culture theory (2013) and Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2001) brand community theory state that integrating and retaining members is a common collective behaviour found in communities. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) state that survival is a primary concern so members will act in order to ensure this. However, in order to ensure its long-term survival, older members must be retained as well as new ones must be integrated.

In the second point, Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) explain that members feel the responsibility to assist others in the proper use of the brand; older members will always help other members, whether

they know them personally or not. They explain this is done out of impulse due to that sense of moral responsibility towards the community and its members. As they act to help other members, they are also solving any problems they may encounter themselves as well as also spreading out information about the product (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). This supports the theory of contagion by proximity that can create new fans (Duffett, 2013, p. 124).

Throughout their study, Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) try to state that they do not believe that brand communities are generally communities of limited liability. They believe that brand communities evolve and move past the delimitations that belong to the brand. They highlight that members can voluntarily withdraw their membership, although few choose to do so. Brand communities behave more like a 'real' community in social context. The members create bonds through their moral responsibility, support and help and this becomes specialised depending on the nature of the community; brand communities show a limited and specialised moral responsibility which is consistent to Duffett's (2013) fan culture theory (Wellman, 1990; Wellman & Wortley, 1990; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Therefore, brand communities have evolved and behave like fandom groups (fan communities).

3.1.4 Discussion

Some of the points that Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) address in their study are not relevant to this thesis. However, it is still important to consider this as primary work and an introduction to what have become brand communities. Consumer culture behaviour is what caused this change and there are three positive aspects from Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) in this type of community:

- 1) They have a collective power (they have a more powerful voice due to strength in numbers).
- 2) The community is a fountain of knowledge for others.
- 3) A collective sense of security (a Heimat aka. a safe haven).

There are also several branding implications. Throughout the study, both Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) move away from the traditional sense of branding and recognise the social aspect of brands; brands are socially created and therefore a social product. They reflect that consumers are directly involved in brand creation and therefore this affects its brand equity. The four components of brand equity theory by Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) are perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand awareness and brand associations. Brand communities directly affect all these four components.

What the study by Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) shows us is that a strong brand community means communities can lead to higher forms of brand loyalty through emotional investment. They also remind us that members of brand communities are just passionate fans of the brand and who are also connected to other people through networks; there is a macroeconomic and social connection between the brand and members of its brand community. Companies should put their focus towards the brand communities instead of individual people; it is about building a long-term relationship with the consumers (consumer-centric) (Berry, 1995). Therefore, in relationship marketing the target becomes to maintain and expand the fans of the brand through loyalty and love of the brand. What the brand communities' value is important. Without these social implications, the brand would decrease in value.

According to Muñiz and O'Guinn, (2001) a brand community is not only about the power in numbers but also of its social function. They state that people assist other people and help provide information about the product as well as preserve the history and culture of the brand with their influence and pressure. However, once they become quite powerful, they can also be considered a threat to the company (Rivera, 2015). They can reject the change in a product. A case in point, people often complain about the Star Wars fandom and the strength and reach they have. The Star Wars fandom group have certain expectations and use different channels to voice their disapproval (Kamp, 2017). The company needs to be prepared for this to happen as a powerful brand community can be quite problematic which will be analysed later.

Both Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) conducted their research on product brands and not media brands. Perhaps media brand communities act differently than a product brand community or perhaps there are similarities. However, some generalisations have been made in this chapter to adapt their work onto media fan communities.

Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) believed that brand communities appear when their brand appears under threat (perceived or real). As for *fan* communities, they do not only appear due to an occurring threat. Rather, people become fans because they find a connection with the narrative, a safe haven, as they actively pursue to increase their knowledge continuously connecting to that narrative (Duffett, 2013). The fan community also fulfils other social functions. However, there is a threat when it comes to competition in hegemony (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). For example, other fan communities may consider themselves to be superior or more important than others: examples would include Star Wars vs. Star Trek fandoms or Star Trek vs. Babylon 5 or Battlestar Galactica, Doctor Who or Firefly. Understanding and unlocking the key to how these communities work and perdure could help companies advance ahead of their brand community and maintain afloat.

3.2 Brand/fan communities and the internet

The internet brought many benefits including allowing fans the ability to access information easily. Fans were early users of the internet as it gave them the opportunity to share their cultural capital with other people (Duffett, 2013, p. 236; Jenkins, 2006, p. 143). In a way, the internet allowed people to have a form of fan library at the click of a button, so it caused new narratives to emerge at a fast rate. These new generated narratives have, however, caused problems with some companies. While there is a big benefit in these fan generated contents, some companies can claim copyright infringement and therefore companies have different policies on what they allow fans to create.

According to Duffett (2013, p. 237) the internet also brought about false intimacy. The idea of intimacy has now changed where according to Ribes (2010), “distinguishing between face-to-face and mediated interaction is no longer useful in this discussion”. Duffett also continues to explain that virtual intimacy also brings problems of veracity and authenticity. However, social media platforms can still be used as a one-one-one conversation traditional approach, creating multiple networks of communication. Duffett concludes that although celebrities still having a limited amount of time, there is still the pleasure of seeking out stars for attention such as when meeting stars face-to-face. Reality and virtuality have become blurred due to the internet.

Due to the method of communication changing, the internet has taken away global barriers as now people can connect with each other without any geographical limitations. There is therefore a connection to what both Duffett (2013, p. 236) calls fan communities and Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) call brand communities: they essentially make the same case when speaking of the internet. Fans can now converse anywhere at any time, although they usually keep close to their communities of choice (Duffett, 2013, p. 241). Duffett (2013, p. 241) also mentions how the internet has also brought fandom to become more public and how fans now have the possibility to also coordinate themselves, co-ordinate events internationally or locally; they can communicate to each other directly without going through any commercial channels. However, while Muñiz and O’Guinn, (2001) speak about shared consciousness, Duffett (2013, p. 245) states that the internet creates a sense of connection but not an actual shared experience (the expectation), adding once again to the false sense of intimacy.

Lastly, as the media environment has changed, fans are forced to find new ways of acquiring and spreading information. The security across the internet poses a threat as competitors can easily spy on the fandom groups, brands can be sabotaged, misappropriated as well as rumours can be spread

(Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). Duffett (2013, p. 249) also adds that when this happens, the quality of the brand will suffer as brand communities are representatives of the brand as part of their external function. He explains that fan communities have two functions: internal and external. His study also describes that the internal function has the responsibility of welcoming people and supporting the brand, the external function acts as a collective representative of the brand and its fans. This is why fan community activity must be protected by its fans under the supervision of the companies.

3.3 How brand community practices create value

In the traditional economic sense, value is created by the companies while the audience remains passive. Schau, Muñiz and Arnould (2009) – using Muñiz and O'Guinn's (2001) brand communities' theory – have a different theory. They support a more consumer-centric approach and claim that community members are responsible for the value creation. The authors demonstrate why companies should pay closer attention to its community members in order to co-create the marketing program and recreate the community practices. They state how these practices should also be different in order to cover everything and not just be specialised practices according to the product. They also believed these practices encourage a greater interaction between the customers and the brand as well as serving as a guidance to what are people's needs and how to satisfy them (Von Hippel, 2002).

However, Schau et al. (2009) were not able to ascertain *how* actually value is co-created, which makes any attempt to successfully replicate co-creation strategies from one product to another nearly impossible. Nevertheless, they categorise the different forms of practices into a template. These are the practices responsible for enhancing the collective value creation:

Table 3.1: Four thematic categories and twelve brand community practices

<p>Social Networking:</p> <p>1) Welcoming 2) Emphasising 3) Governing</p>	<p>Community Engagement:</p> <p>6) Documenting 7) Badging 8) Milestoning 9) Staking</p>
<p>Impression Management:</p> <p>4) Evangelising 5) Justifying</p>	<p>Brand Use:</p> <p>10) Customising 11) Grooming 12) Commoditising</p>

Note. Reprinted from “How Brand Community Practices Create Value”, Schau et al., 2009, p36

Schau, et al. (2009, Appendix A) also describe the practices as following:

- 1) **Welcoming:** This is the act of older members greeting new members and adding them to the community. They assist people and teach them about the brand and community. However, it can also have a negative quality. It can discourage participation and pressure others in using the brand correctly.
- 2) **Emphasising:** Members can sometimes lend emotional/physical support to other members. It is either brand related (product failure or customising) or non-brand related (personal problems). However, emphasising can be problematic if it is emotional support towards a matter of intragroup conflict.
- 3) **Governing:** Expressing the group norms and behaviour expected within the brand community.
- 4) **Evangelising:** This action involves sharing the brand’s “good news”. It inspires others to use the brand, but it can also have a negative effect. It is considered a form of preaching and may involve negative comparisons with other competing brands. It can reach extreme forms which is considered annoying and off-putting.
- 5) **Justifying:** Explanations as to why so much time and enthusiasm is spent on the brand to people outside the brand community. These may include discussions and even jokes about Obsessive-Compulsive brand-directed behaviour.

- 6) **Documenting:** This is the action of recollecting the brands evolution and journey. The brand usually hits milestones along the way which are recorded. From the birth of the product to its distribution, changes made, evolution, customisation etc.
- 7) **Badging:** Translating the brands' milestones into symbols.
- 8) **Milestoning:** Observing crucial events in the brand's life.
- 9) **Staking:** The realisation of differences within the brand community membership. Distinguishing the members but also recognising their similarities.
- 10) **Customising:** The modification of the brand to meet the brand community's needs or its individual members. These can be changes in the factory settings to improve the product or in the case of an intangible product, the creation of fan fiction and fan art.
- 11) **Grooming:** Looking after your product (washing a car) or finding a way to use a product optimally by getting prepared before (cleaning a surface before applying a product).
- 12) **Commoditising:** A behaviour and opinion towards or away from the marketplace. It can be directed at other members (e.g. you should do this or that) or directed at the company (you should change this or do that).

Social networking: these practices focus on creating, enhancing and sustaining the bonds in the brand community. This study shows how these practices engage in the intangible (emotions) and they keep the fans engaged as well as help them bond with the products and their community. They can be collective or individual actions and are what highlights the homogenous behaviour of the group members and shows what is expected of them. Schau et al. (2009) challenge Duffett (2013), as they state that these practices evolve beyond those of a community of limited liability.

Impression management: the authors state these practices are what show the commitment level within the community. They evangelise and justify their love for the brand to other non-members and act as an ambassador to the brand to the outside world. They want to create favourable views on the brand and its brand community. A noticeable example is in the Sci-Fi brand communities. They are continuously trying to justify their devotion to the narrative and find ways to cope with the stigma surrounding their love of the narrative. All members feel a sense of moral responsibility towards the brand and its community (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Community engagement: these practices are those that reinforce membership fan practices and differentiate the members. According to the authors, it is through these actions that one can see a group hierarchy; different members have different levels of commitment towards the brand. They are competitive actions as they provide the members with social and culture capital and highlight

the brand community's heterogeneity. With these set of fan practices, members can carry out the rituals and traditions to promote a consciousness of a kind (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Brand use practices: these practices are what improve and reinforce the use of the brand. The authors believe it is through the care of the product (grooming), fan created fiction or art based on the original product (customising) and price restriction for better diffusion (commoditising) that also show how the members feel a sense of responsibility towards the brand (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001).

3.3.2 Discussion

While other studies usually concentrate on the relationship between individual people and the brand, Schau et al. (2009) use brand communities to explain how knowledge is transferred from community members to newcomers; seasoned members show the newcomers expectations of being a member and their role through continuous appropriation of fan practices. The authors also state how practices in turn create value for the brand through consumption and not the other way around. By analysing the nine brand communities, the authors also prove how to build better brand relationships as well as creating value at the same time; this creates customer loyalty.

Schau et al. (2009) also prove they found three points of interest from the marketing perspective: 1) They realise value is increased through collective fan practices and therefore these networks are more important than company-consumer strategies; 2) Allowing consumers to take control helps build brand equity; 3) Companies collect brand value by allowing consumers creativity to unfold. Therefore, Schau et al. believe that if companies allow the brand communities the freedom to act, they will customise the products. Their research shows that by giving the communities opportunities to engage in the 12 practices they will reinforce the brand community, making it stronger; a greater diversity in practices will lead to a strong market leadership and a healthy brand community. They state this is because healthy brand communities engage in depth in all fan practices and continuously evolve and improve these practices.

Based on the above Schau et al. (2009) suggest that there are specific steps for management to follow to achieve a strong and healthy brand community. They suggest that companies must encourage new and innovative ways to cultivate the practices and encourage new forms of engagement. They also suggest documenting as an important way for companies to realise where they lack and their strengths. Documenting badging, milestoneing leads to increased membership

action, rather than lurking, and it is important for the communication channel between the company and community to be transparent and in constant engagement -so it will not be one-sided- and the company can be immediately aware of any problems.

Practices reveal the consumer demands while the evolution of the practices reveal the needs of these consumers however, it is the decision of the company to allow or recognise which of these practices is beneficial for the company due to copyright infringements (Schau et al.,2009). Schau et al. (2009), state their belief that companies should agree to the more successful fan creations as co-branding might be beneficial for both the company and the brand community. This in turn also helps companies understand the consumer needs of high-fidelity instead of the usual low-fidelity needs (O'Hern & Rindfleisch, 2007).

When applying their theory to fan culture theory (Duffett, 2013) can these practices be generalised to apply to media products? The fan practices mentioned in this text (and before in fan communities and brand communities) are common practices from a sociological point of view which can also describe those of media product fan communities. Understanding them may help answer questions such as how value is created or how can companies can encourage more practices in order to gain a stronger brand community. Can they also encourage co-creating value and which practices are the ones most likely to help reach these goals and how?

While some academics encourage social networking and more collective community practices (Moisio & Beruchashvili, 2010; Duffett, 2013), others encourage more brand use (Mathwick et al., 2008). Duffett (2013), tries to explain the importance of becoming a fan and how the process begins. Mixing all three theories from this thesis (fan culture theory, brand communities and how brand community practices create value) perhaps can give management a clue as to how and why some communities successfully attract new members while others do not. Understanding this may also help give insight as to how to create a competent company marketing strategy.

4. Presentation of the case: The Last Jedi

4.1 Introduction to Star Wars and the industry behind the franchise

George Lucas was the creator of the Star Wars universe with the first original trilogy film, *A New Hope*, airing in 1977. He founded his company, Lucasfilm in 1971, a film studio that became a leader in film special effects, sound and computer animation. The company helped produce many films, amongst the most famous are the Star Wars franchise and the Indiana Jones franchise. In 2012 Lucasfilm was bought by The Walt Disney Company and Lucas retired (Leonard, 2013). This also caused a new era for both Disney and the Star Wars universe. The company announced future games, a new Star Wars section in The Walt Disney Parks and most importantly, new films: Episodes VII, VIII and IX as well as new standalone films (Leonard, 2013).

In the past four decades, Star Wars has expanded beyond the starting film trilogy and across different media platforms such as novels, comics, TV shows etc. showing Star Wars to be an example of contemporary transmedia storytelling; one story across multiple media platforms and is also an example of media franchising (Geraghty, 2018, p. 117). This is due to Star Wars continuing to develop and evolve from the different fan practices and their rituals and traditions. Understanding this can give new insight as to why Star Wars is so unique as the development of transmedia storytelling as a media-industrial practice is a complex term that is constantly changing its definition (Guynes & Hussler-Forest, 2018, p. 12).

Star Wars became a transmedia experience since the beginning. George Lucas exchanged a pay cut in order to support additional products which is what gave way for the creation of its merchandise and novelisations (Lomax, 2018, p. 38). They became equally important to the storytelling as the stories did not end with the films. This was the first time in the Science Fiction genre that a film had received both blockbuster status while continuing its off-screen experience; Star Wars became both a mass fandom phenomenon and/or a mainstream niche success (Jenkins and Hussler-Forest, 2018, p. 17).

However, in 2012, when Disney acquired Lucasfilm they announced that the canon was to be reset, previous fan creations were disregarded as an attempt to gain a new generation of fans, and only the original six films as well as TV shows *The Clone Wars* and *Rebels* would however remain (Geraghty, 2018, p. 118). While maintaining some continuity secures these characters as brand

ambassadors, the deletion of all those other characters also secures new creations of new characters and material. It is part of an expansion plan Disney has in store for the Star Wars universe.

Characters have always had an important role in the Star Wars universe as they have continuously crossed over the different storylines while also giving a certain familiarity to the fans. It is easier to get emotionally invested in a new storyline when an old familiar face is part of the new story. They also act as catalysts for new stories to develop and as milestones in the timeline of the Star Wars universe (Geraghty, 2018, p. 118).

As these stories are developed and expanded through what Mejeur (2018) explains that “a narrative universe relies on the creation of narrative space, including a dynamic process of expanding and exploring that space” (p. 199). There is a “represented space” and that of a “space representation” where the first is what the audience encounters but the second is the universe that is not seen and hinted by the creators (Thon, 2015, p. 47). Mejeur (2018, p. 200) explains this as the represented space that continuously expands with new storylines which allows fans to expand their knowledge and understanding of the Star Wars universe. Mejeur continues saying that the represented space, therefore, is what the audience knows and has seen; occurring events, multiple characters and the representation of the planets. When new films or storylines are released, this introduces new characters and places showing that there is much more to be developed in the Star Wars universe. Matt Hills (2002, p. 137) explains that this type of storyworld “hyperdiegesis” works that while only a fraction is ever directly seen of a vast and detailed narrative world, the rest also functions with the same operative rules. Regardless as to what the terms coined are, all authors agree on endless future possibilities of Star Wars storylines.

4.2 The Star Wars brand community

After the release of the original trilogies, the Star Wars fandom was shaped over the following decades. The theories used to describe fan culture theory (Duffett, 2013) explains the reason for this. Star Wars has become much more than just a fairy tale space opera as its Extended Universe began to develop. Having creative collaborators write more storylines helped Lucas’ creation giving it a more complete and less juvenile touch as it sketched out a larger and more complicated world (Canavan, 2018, p. 278).

According to Muñiz and O’Guinn (2001) and their definition of a brand community, Star Wars has become a brand community on its own over the span of 42 years: a structured community of people,

without any geographical borders (internet) that fulfil fan practices and obligations within their community surrounding the admiration of a brand (the Star Wars brand).

This is also supported by the main theories in this thesis and therefore we must differentiate between the wording that Duffett (2013), Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) and Schau et al. (2009) use to describe similar and different fan practices. To describe Duffett's fan practices the wording will be 'fan practices'; Muñiz and O'Guinn are 'rituals and traditions' (storytelling and celebrating the brand through fan practices) and Schau et al. will be 'value creating practices' (along with its thematic categories). However, fan practices are examples of how fans act in order to fulfil the rituals and traditions as well as the value creating practices.

It was these fan practices (rituals and traditions as well as value creating practices) that helped keep the Star Wars universe alive in between releases. It is what helped establish Star Wars as a brand along with the release of the sequel and prequel films, games and other merchandise. This is what also helped expand the Star Wars universe giving more depth of characters and the universe where they came from. It gave characters new dimensionality and allowed for more potential with each creation (Webster, 2018, p. 54). Jenkins and Hussler-Forest (2018, p. 19) initially saw conflict between immersion (into the film) and extraction (out of the film). However, with Star Wars, they realised the extracted elements (toys, consumer generated content etc.), builds up a greater interest and later greater immersion in the films. Other film franchises have also been successful in this co-creation of interest although not to the extent of Star Wars.

Many people do not realise the importance of Star Wars toys had since the beginning. Jenkins and Hussler-Forest (2018, p. 18) and Duffett (2013, p. 179) agree that collecting toys is a form of extending the experience. But before nostalgia kicks in, toys are seen as tools that gives the owners the imagination to keep retelling the characters' stories and expand them (Jenkins & Hussler-Forest, 2018, p. 19).

This suggests that there is more to these characters and the fans' imaginations; that characters' backstories are just as important as the central story fans see on-screen (Jenkins & Hussler-Forest, p. 18). Jenkins and Hussler-Forest, (2018, p. 18) say that looking back, these toys could have predicted the stand-alone films: Solo: A Star Wars Story, Rogue One and the uncertain Obi-Wan standalone which is rumoured. People do not just have an interest in the Skywalker family and Luke's Hero's Journey (represented space), but also in Star Wars Universe (space of representation) and secondary characters (Thon, 2015, p. 47).

In conclusion, Star Wars fans in the brand communities participate in all the fan practices, ritual and traditions and have tuned the value creating practices into a perfect machine. These fans are big in number, incredibly loyal and have supported the storyline for many years: The Star Wars brand is strong within. It is this combination which makes this brand community and its possibility to replicate worthy of a study.

4.3 The importance of a brand

The brand of a company is defined by Keller et al. (2008) as “a name, term, sign, symbol, or design or combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition” (p. 2). The brand is what distinguishes the company and their products from other competing companies; it saves time and energy when differentiating the brands which customers appreciate. Keller et al. (2008, p. 1) state that linking the brand to the company therefore reduces mistakes made and customers know what to expect when purchasing the products. They also add that a strong brand gives a company a high value which is why management seeks to establish a strong brand connection with its audience as well as therefore increase their market share and profits.

Brand recognition happens when a customer is satisfied with the product and will repeat the purchase i.e. recognising their preferred product on the shelf. Brand loyalty occurs when the action of purchase from a particular company, is repeated enough. Solomon et al. (2010, p. 37) defines that moment to be how customers can develop emotional attachments to a brand (in this case, to the Star Wars brand). They also clarify that brands can have either positive or negative meanings to people and people will choose accordingly to what resonates better with them.

This is why more and more companies have realised that having a strong brand name is an important asset to the company and because it is the fans who help give the brand value, over the last years companies have emphasised having a customer-centric strategy (Solomon et al., 2010, pp. 37-38). They value having a relationship with their customers and it is these customers which then organise themselves into communities; brand communities.

4.4 Star Wars: The Last Jedi as a case study

Recent research has suggested that the rise in brand communities has affected media management as they now must understand how and why the brand community is loyal to the brand. The community has now become partly the brand's new owners as well as their active content creators; they are no longer simple consumers. They influence the brand by co-creating content in literature and art as well as participating in brand related activities. This has caused a change in how companies manage, nurture and encourage fans to co-produce content and participate more actively making the brand more successful and also lead the charge in competitiveness.

However, these studies have not yet addressed what makes the Star Wars brand so successful and important to its brand community; the Star Wars franchise is approximately worth \$42 billion (Chew, 2015). There have been previous studies related to brand communities from other products but none covering the Star Wars brand community in this manner. Studying the fans within this brand community can encourage a better understanding of why perhaps this perspective differs from other traditional management areas.

As Star Wars: The Last Jedi was released, fans were suddenly divided. Some felt that it had ruined their childhood while others praised Rian Johnson's new direction. The purpose of this thesis is to find the managerial implications to understand the following: how the Star Wars brand renews itself constantly, ensures its longevity and what should The Walt Disney Company continue and/or avoid in the future (what made the fans so divided about The Last Jedi). The Star Wars community is an example of a long-lasting successful brand but what happened with the release of the Last Jedi? How did this impact the Star Wars brand community? How will this threaten future film releases? Did the Star Wars brand lose some of its faithful followers and how will this impact the brand? Questions such as these will be analysed in the following chapters order to support the research questions.

5. Methodology and data

5.1 Introduction and research question

In order to answer the research questions and find the managerial implications that will help understand how the brand renews itself, it is important to understand the fans' reactions towards the film *The Last Jedi*. The connection between its brand's value and community can lead to an improvement in the management arena which is the key to building a successful business. In order to do so and to analyse this case, methodology must be chosen carefully. In order to do this, I will discuss the components involved in this research approach: qualitative and grounded theory as well as the research methods.

5.2 Qualitative design: grounded theory

In a qualitative approach, data is typically collected and then analysed to form an inductive conclusion on what has been observed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 19). The researcher acts as the primary instrument and interprets and finds themes within the analysed data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 19). The purpose of this research is to observe fan reactions towards the film *The Last Jedi* and if the Star Wars brand community loyalty can be imitated, reproduced as well as developed further to ensure a greater everlasting loyalty that can be constantly be recycled and be used on other media products. The researcher therefore is interested in understanding how people view their experiences and give meaning to them with a rich description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 21).

For this study, a grounded theory approach seemed the most fitting of the other qualitative choices (narrative research, phenomenology, ethnographies and case study) (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). It takes an inductive stance from the data collected resulting in a theory that according to Merriam & Tisdell (2016) "emerges from, or is grounded, in the data- hence grounded theory (p. 31)." It is a theory that relies on heavy description although it is not the primary focus. It is a theory that involves data collection, refinement and finding correlations in themes and this fits well with the fore mentioned perspectives in a qualitative form of study (Creswell, 2014, p. 14).

5.3 Research method and steps

Data collection method

The Star Wars brand community numbers is inestimable due to the non-geographical boundaries and the existence of the internet. There are many people who are Star Wars fans that do not hold a Star Wars website membership and/or are lurkers as well as in the thousands of Star Wars websites that exist. Therefore, information from the most popular fan discussion boards is the most easily accessed data. The data will be conversation threads from fans about their opinions about The Last Jedi. Following Creswell's (2014, p. 196) template, the data is processed with a manual coding system takes place (axial coding) and fans' opinions will be organised into different themes according to their reactions to The Last Jedi. Trolls will be taken into consideration. Following the coding, any theories emerge can interpreted and connected. These are the steps:

1. Find the data
2. Organising the data for analysis
3. Reading through all the data
4. Manual codification of data
5. Data organised into themes
6. Interrelating the themes
7. Interpreting themes to see any emerging theory

(Creswell, 2014, p. 197)

Research instruments and validation

After careful consideration, three of the most popular Star Wars websites were chosen amongst the main existing ones. The official Star Wars page was not eligible due to it not having discussion boards so other sites were chosen. The three websites and their fan discussion boards are:

1. Original Trilogy
2. The Force.Net's Jedi Council Forums
3. The Cantina

The sites were chosen due to their legitimacy as they all have site content copyright, serious moderation, transparency in their operation modes as they give information on the statistics of their websites and no password is needed to access the archived information. They also have the biggest traffic numbers. The data was observed, not disrupted and names or any personal information will remain anonymous to protect the privacy of the forum members. The three websites were chosen

also to allow triangulation i.e. using multiple sources of data in order to compare and cross-check the data collected. This supports the study's validity as themes that emerge will have come from multiple converging sources.

Subjects of study and sampling

The subjects are the people giving their opinions on The Last Jedi. They are from different geographical locations, different ages and sex. By locating them in fan forums it is easier to research them as opposed to interviewing the same amount of people face to face which would not be feasible. Purposive sampling is also used in this study as not every member of society is a Star Wars fan (Sampling and its Types, n.d).

The samples will consist of six threads:

- 1) Original Trilogy = 1 thread (positive, mixed and negative fan reactions towards The Last Jedi in one).
- 2) Jedi Council Forums = 2 threads (positive and negative fan reactions towards The Last Jedi, mixed reaction is spread out in both threads).
- 3) The Cantina = 3 threads (positive, mixed and negative reactions each have their own threads).

All threads were chosen due to their size in order to have as many fan opinions as possible and are popular where The Last Jedi is still being actively discussed since the film's release. They are different sizes which did not influence the results as after a certain amount of opinions, there is a saturation of information as themes are constantly repeated.

The data was collected by reading every comment posted. Firstly, the names of the people posting were recorded to make sure the person was not counted more than once. Then, the comment was analysed and the main idea of the compliment or complaint or mixed feelings were also jotted down. Whenever a new idea emerged, it was written down, if the opinion was repeated, a tally system was developed in order to count how many similar opinions existed. The comments containing no pertinent information were discarded. Once all the comments were analysed, it was time for calculations. Percentages for the three opinions were calculated and transformed into pie charts. The top five opinions (themes) that had been repeated the most were included in the results.

Delimitations

The different perspectives that were taken into account were: Brand Community Theory, Fandom Theory, Product Life Cycle Theory, Brand Equity Theory, Brand Management Theory and its seven management approaches, where the brand is seen from the economic approach, identity approach, consumer-based approach, relational approach, personality, community approach and cultural approach (Heding et al., 2009, p. 3).

Fandom theory as well as brand management seemed most relevant and most appropriate to study the fans and brand of Star Wars as the study was not done only from a brand or economic perspective. Brand communities are not a simple economic theory, it involves a social science fit which is a reason to use the Fandom Theory. However, as managerial implications need to also be induced from the results, a brand management perspective must also be included.

Star Wars fans are the only subjects in this study due to this being a study about their brand community loyalty. Looking up Star Wars websites ensures a higher chance to find fans and although it is purposive sampling, finding these fans commenting on threads ensures they are from different geographical locations, of different ages and sex. It is important to include a more varied demographic for more generalised results.

5.4. Data overview: attitudes and themes

The last Jedi film came out in December of 2017 and since then it has caused a lot of friction between the fans. The fans remain divided and the following chapter will show and highlight the themes that divide the fans. The film is a continuation of the plot set up in Star Wars: The Force Awakens (Episode VII) yet had a different director as Rian Johnson replaced J.J Abrams. The story continues following the adventures of the new and younger characters that fans hoped would answer many remaining questions from The Force Awakens. Here is a summary of the data collected:

Profile: Original Trilogy

Table 5.1. Profile of The Original Trilogy Forum

Website	http://originaltrilogy.com
Date established	March 10th, 2003
Number of members	41,585
Total number of members in thread evaluated	120
Threads evaluated:	1
Date threads evaluated	11-15th March, 2019

Note: data from The Original Trilogy (2017).

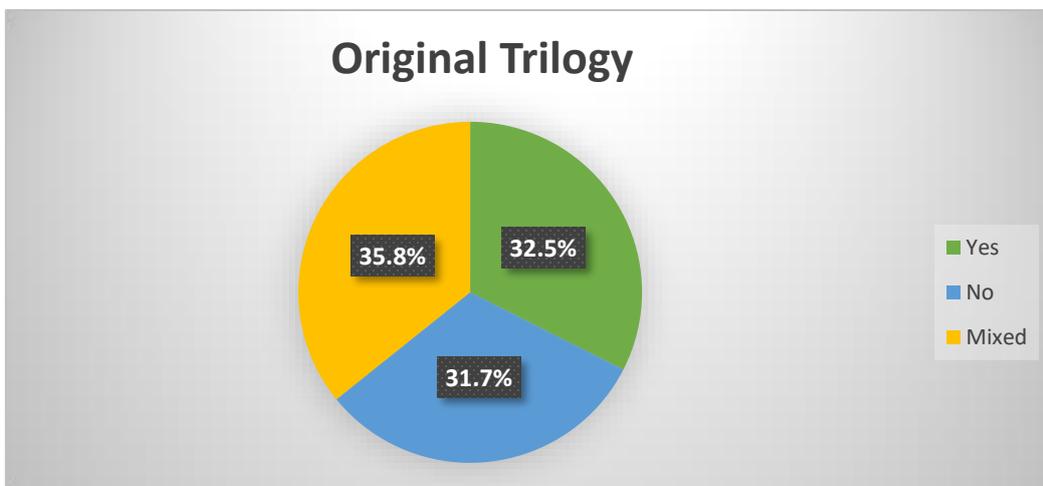


Figure 5.1. Results of opinions by The Last Jedi by fans from: Original Trilogy Forum, (2017).

Profile: Jedi Council Forums

Table 5.2. Profile of the Jedi Council Forums

Website	https://boards.theforce.net/
Date established	2010
Number of members	269,050
Total number of members in threads evaluated	291
Total number of threads evaluated	2
Date threads evaluated	11-15th March, 2019

Note: data from Jedi Council Forums (2017).

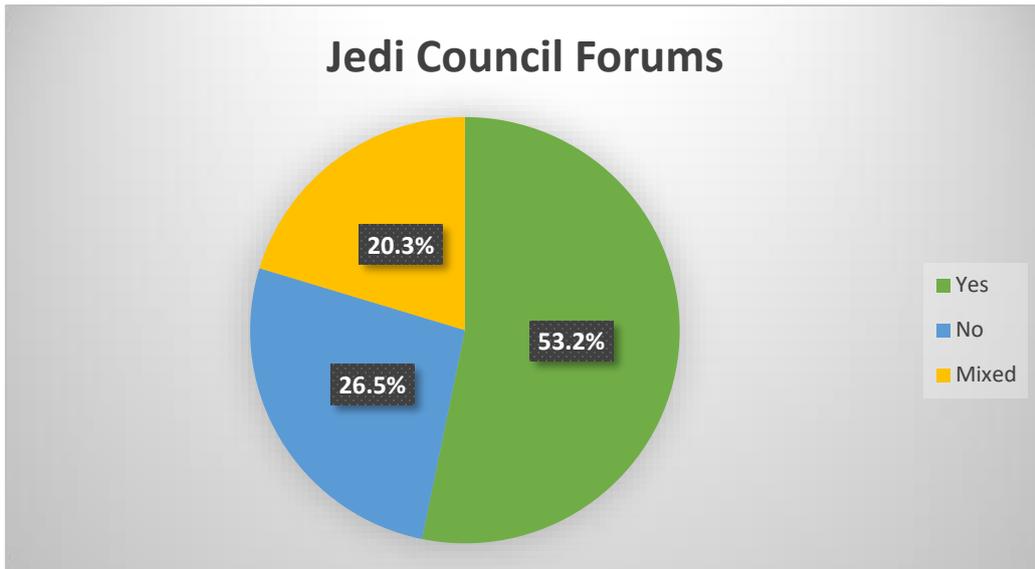


Figure 5.2. Results of opinions by The Last Jedi by fans from: Jedi Council Forums (2017).

Profile: The Cantina

Table 5.3. Profile The Cantina Forum

Website	https://thecantina.starwarsnewsnet.com
Date established	2010
Number of members	9,495
Total number of members in threads evaluated	321
Total number of threads evaluated	3
Date threads evaluated	11-15 th March, 2019

Note: data from The Cantina (2017).

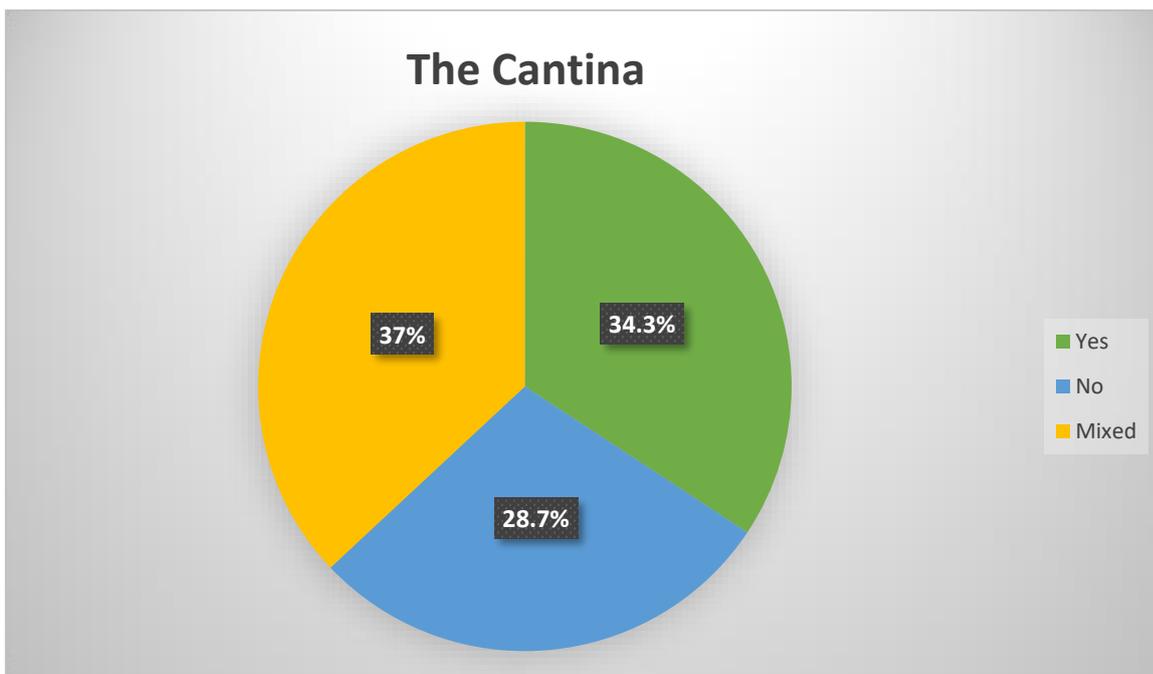


Figure 5.3. Results of opinions by The Last Jedi by fans from: La Cantina Forum (2017).

Star Wars has always been characterised by the world that George Lucas built surrounding the Jedi's and the Sith, dark versus the light, all throughout following the Skywalker family that many fans have grown to love over the years. After the original trilogy and the prequel trilogy, the sequel trilogy built many expectations within the fan communities. The Last Jedi takes place directly after The Force Awakens and these are the following themes that resonated mostly within the fans belonging to these websites in the order of importance. As the themes must be summarised and narrowed, five of the most important themes are highlighted, however there were many others and they all crossed-over.

Original Trilogy

Positive views/themes:

- 1) Risks taken and twists: fans enjoyed the new views undertaken by Rian Johnson and find the film fresh and bold.
- 2) Luke's character arc: fans agreed that an imperfect and grumpy Luke was more relatable and realistic than the idealistic Luke that he had been at a younger age; people go through many things in life and they liked this new changed and more mature Luke Skywalker.
- 3) Humour: fans that were positive about this film found the humour enjoyable and fun.
- 4) Character relationships: fans also praised Johnson for showing great character relationships between Luke and Rey, Ben and Luke, Luke and Yoda, Leia and Luke and enjoyed seeing them on screen together.
- 5) Rian Johnson's new approach: they found that Johnson's new take on the characters, the Star Wars legacy including the Force to be unique and positive with most of them citing they are enjoying the new direction that Johnson will take Star Wars to.

Negative views/themes:

- 1) Luke's character arc: fans disliked the route that his character took finding him too dark, unrealistic and not the same person who fans thought Luke would be at that point in his life. They found his character to be inconsistent to the one from the original trilogies.
- 2) Secondary characters: fans also found the secondary characters to have been wasted and not compelling enough. They found their plotlines to be pointless and a waste of time.
- 3) Humour: the humour throughout the film was also not well received. They found it forced and use the scene where Rey hands Luke his lightsaber as an example of inappropriate humour. The character of Rey had been built up in The Force Awakens where she had come across Luke Skywalker's lightsaber and fans were excited to have a mentor-apprentice situation, not comedy.
- 4) Obvious merchandising: people that did not like the film felt that animals such as the Porgs were an obvious merchandising ploy. They found Walt Disney's involvement to therefore trivialise the meaning of Star Wars with such blatant marketing.

- 5) Rian Johnson's view: fans also disliked the lack of Star Wars pacing the film had and Johnson's new view on how the Force works. There was a new perspective shown of how the Force works and not all fans agreed with Johnson's thinking.

Jedi Council Forums:

Positive views/themes:

- 1) Risks taken and twists: the fans from this discussion board agreed with the film being fresh, exciting, bold and new.
- 2) Mark Hamill's portrayal of Luke Skywalker: the fans that liked the film agreed that Hamill's acting skills were a strong point why they enjoyed the film so much. They also agreed with Luke Skywalker's story arc; his flawed characterisation and death.
- 3) Humour: fans also enjoyed the humour from the film.
- 4) Symbolism: fans enjoyed the symbolism that Johnson gave them throughout the film, underlining the meaning throughout the film of allowing the past to die. This is especially worth mentioning by the fans that see The Last Jedi as a representation of that idea and the new direction Star Wars will take.
- 5) The (new) Force: fans enjoyed the new depiction of the Force by Johnson.

Negative views/themes:

- 1) Lack of continuity from other Star Wars films: as stated before, The Last Jedi is set to be after The Force Awakens which fans have criticised Johnson for ignoring. They find no continuity and connection to other Star Wars films as they felt that Johnson ignored the core elements of what makes a Star Wars story and surrounding mythology.
- 2) Different yet the same: fans also criticised Johnson's new approach and the angle which the film was presented; new, exciting and bold. However, fans found it to be a mixture of Episodes V and VII (The Empire Strikes Back and The Return of the Jedi).
- 3) Lack of world building: fans also found there to be a lack of background information surrounding the rebels and their worlds. They state Johnson could have taken a chance to explore the galaxy a bit more but chose not to in favour of other elements.
- 4) Luke's character arc: once again, fans found an inconsistency to their favourite character.
- 5) Secondary characters: fans also found that the secondary characters, had unnecessary plotlines making them not interesting enough to carry on the franchise in any future films.

The Cantina:

Positive views/themes:

- 1) Looks into the future: fans were excited to see how Johnson was cutting ties with the traditional approach of Star Wars. They found that The Force Awakens played it too safe and were excited to see the next step in setting the storylines for any future films. Han's death in The Force Awakens was now topped with Luke's death and fans found Luke's death to be the perfect goodbye. Other scenes in the film also pointed out for a different future which the fans enjoyed.
- 2) Flawed characters: fans found that they could relate more to characters being flawed. It is a more modern style and take on Star Wars.
- 3) Risks taken and twists: fans once again enjoyed this new bold approach to Star Wars.
- 4) Luke's character arc: fans found it to be interesting that his character be so different and flawed.
- 5) Humour: lastly, they also enjoyed the humour.

Negative views/themes:

- 1) Luke's character arc: fans also here also disliked Luke's character arc story and his unnecessary death. With the late Carrie Fisher gone they felt that the ending should have been changed as the new characters do not have the depth to continue their interest in future Star Wars stories. They did not agree with Luke's character portrayal either and felt that Johnson did not know how to handle such a legendary character.
- 2) Humour: they also disagreed with the joking throughout the film and found it childish.
- 3) Villains wasted: after the build-up of the villains in The Force Awakens, fans found their characters to be wasted in The Last Jedi. Captain Phasma hardly appearing and then dying, General Hux had turned into a cartoon villain, Snoke's build up yet also dying easily as well as Kylo Ren's knights not appearing in the entire film; in their opinion, a lot of potential lost.
- 4) Secondary characters: once again, fans agreed that the characters had unnecessary plotlines, little depth of character making them not strong enough to carry on the franchise.
- 5) Rey's character wasted: one of the characters with the most potential is the character of Rey. Fans however felt that while she was built up well in The Force Awakens, Johnson missed out in The Last Jedi. The question of her family and any theories were thrown away by Johnson who also failed to build a better character relationship with Luke. They wanted to see a more mentor-student situation and instead they saw grumpy Luke with a supposed powerful 'Jedi' that learnt everything in a few hours, something her predecessors had not been able to ever do, thus ignoring previous films.

For the Original Trilogy discussion board (Figure 5.1), it shows us that people who liked, disliked and had mixed feelings are similarly levelled. The pie chart is almost split in thirds. The figure of most importance however is the figure that the mixed and no group make, that is a total of 67.5% and

higher than the positive group which had 32.5%. The mixed groups in all three boards seemed to be confused by the film of whether they enjoyed it or not which means they can be persuaded to change their opinion. Those who answered no, share similarities with those in the mixed group as to why they had a negative reaction.

For the website of Jedi Council Forums (Figure 5.2), the figures were different: 53.2% liked it against the 46.8% which is the total percentage of the group who disliked it and had mixed feelings. Although slightly a lesser percentage, it is still significant when compared to the positive group.

The Cantina (Figure 5.3) has a similar pie chart to the Original Trilogy (Figure 5.1) but there was a difference in comparison to the pie chart of the Jedi Council Forums (Figure 5.2): the 53.2% that liked it, was the most vocal of the groups to express that they enjoyed Rian Johnson’s take on the future of the franchise in comparison to the other groups that said they liked the film. Both the Original Trilogy and The Cantina had fans commenting on very similar themes while the Jedi Council Forums differentiated in the themes slightly, or rather, the order of the importance of the themes. That is the reason as to why the pie charts for both the Original Trilogy and The Cantina are more similar than Jedi Council Forums.

Here is a repeated list of all the themes that stood out during the recollection of the data:

Table 5.4. Positive

The Original Trilogy	Jedi Council Forums	The Cantina
Risks taken and new twists	Risks taken and new twists	Looks into the future
Luke’s character arc	Mark Hamill’s Luke	Flawed characters
Humour	Humour	Risks taken and twists
Character relationships	Symbolism	Luke’s character arc
Rian Johnson’s new approach	The (new) Force	Humour

Note: data from Original Trilogy Forums (2017), Jedi Council Forums (2017), The Cantina Forum (2017).

Table 5.5. Negative

The Original Trilogy	Jedi Council Forums	The Cantina
Luke’s character arc	Lack of continuity	Luke’s character arc
Secondary characters	Different yet the same	Humour
Humour	Lack of world building	Villains wasted
Obvious merchandising	Secondary characters	Secondary characters
Rian Johnson’s view	Luke’s character arc	Rey’s character wasted

Note: data from Original Trilogy Forums (2017), Jedi Council Forums (2017), The Cantina Forum (2017).

As you look at the lists, one can see that the reasons as to why some fans liked the film are the exact same reasons the other fans disliked the film. Luke’s character arc is the most mentioned in these

lists with fans disagreeing on whether the Luke Skywalker appearing in *The Last Jedi* was their all-time favourite character. Had Luke Skywalker naturally progressed to the flawed, traumatised and grumpy Luke that appeared in the film was a question on all the posters' minds. As we can see from the lists, that some fans agreed it was a natural progression while others did not. As an important Star Wars character, Luke was something Rian Johnson had to be delicate about and as the data shows, some fans agreed he succeeded while others disagreed and had mixed feelings. Fans will overlook the pacing of the film or other errors but if Luke Skywalker, their childhood hero is done incorrectly according to fan expectations, this will affect the film's score. The fans that had disliked how the character had been portrayed all echoed the sentiment of how this Luke Skywalker was not "their Luke".

The new bold take by Johnson is also another important theme that is being repeated in the opinions by the fans. They enjoyed the idea that this was a new Star Wars, for a new generation full of new (secondary) characters. The older fans however disagreed and did not understand why they were overlooked in favour of a younger crowd who obviously did not have the same similar emotional investment as they did. Fans that enjoyed new elements of the force which had never been seen before, enjoyed the film's motto of letting the past die. According to the posters, the new characters explored that message and felt they took the story forward with interesting back stories. However, the fans who disliked the secondary characters disliked their pointless story arcs, did not find them strong enough to carry on the franchise in a world that had been poorly built by Johnson in comparison to the world created by Lucas. They disagreed with the villains and Rey's character being wasted after J.J. Abrams had built on their expectations in *The Force Awakens* which led to disappointed fans as the pie charts show.

As we can see, for every argument the positive fans have, the negative fans disagree as they kept disagreeing on the boards; no group convinced the other group and vice-versa. Many fans expressed all themes listed at once while others only felt strongly about one or two. There were also some secondary themes which were not considered for this study but however were still seen often among the posters. At the end, it comes down to the meanings the fan gives *The Last Jedi* which will be explored in the following chapter.

One must consider that if the positive themes had indeed a strong enough impact on the mixed group, they would leave the mixed group and join the positive fans. The question of the matter is that they did not, and we must explore why. While some may still be making up their minds, others may not have enough investment to have such a strong opinion while others may have a more negative than positive. These are important aspects to take into consideration for future films of the

franchise; the positive themes from the positive group vs the negative views of the mixed and 'no' group.

The Walt Disney Company should concentrate on the mixed group from a business point of view, they should have been persuaded towards the positive side since the beginning. The Walt Disney Company managers want the most positive outcome as possible however, there could be confirmation bias about the mixed group. It is important from a business stand viewpoint that there should be no mixed group and as little as possible negative group, as this will affect a films' ratings overall. The pie charts show that the mixed and negative group have a significant percentage.

5.5 Supportive data

The data from this study and the pie charts is limited to only being about the dedicated Star Wars fans, hence why other support information is needed to contrast the results and support this study's claims. Let us now compare the pie charts to other data available from other sources. The following sources are from IMDb, a website leader in Television, film and celebrity content which offers a database of over 250 million data items and as such, offers information on The Last Jedi. The data from IMDb shows that rating scores they award films are weighted average ratings. Various filters are applied to the voting in order to reduce and eliminate vote stuffing by people who are more interested in changing the current rating than their true opinions of it. Their exact method is undisclosed but rather than using the raw data average, a type of weighted average is used. (IMDb | Help, n.d)

Overall rating: 7.2/10

Members voted: 449, 771

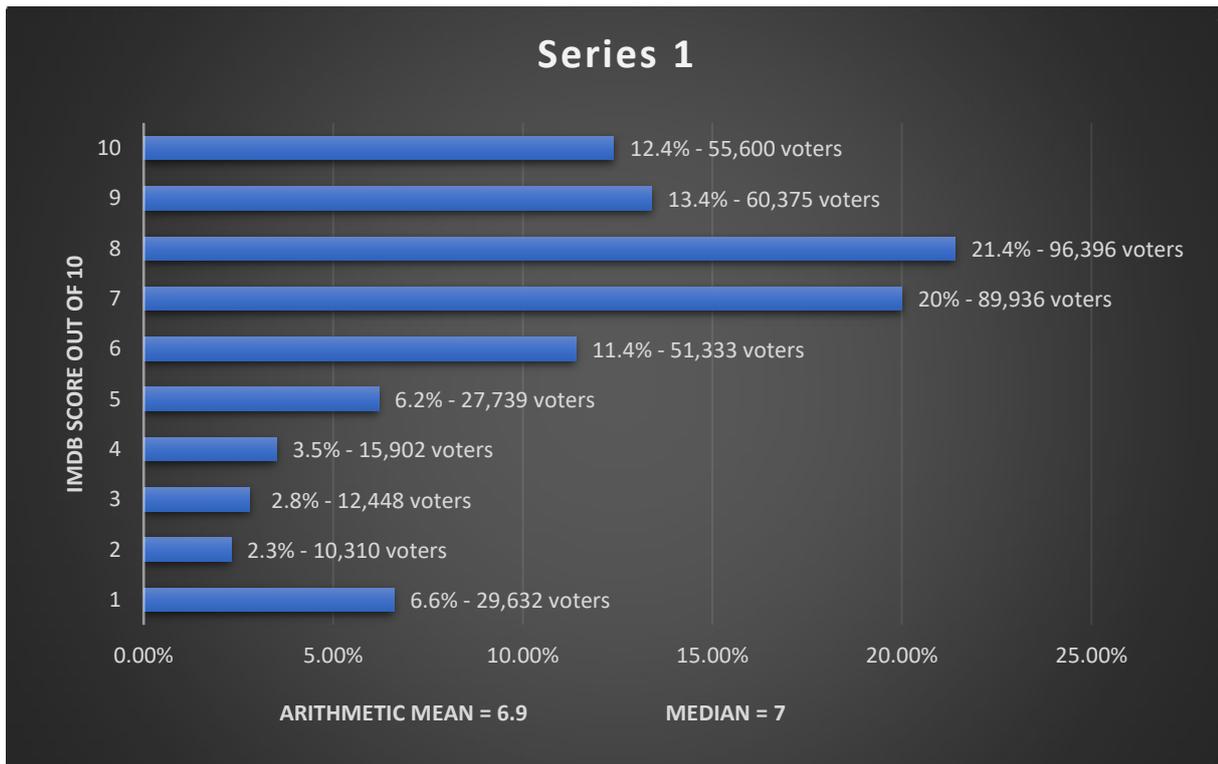


Figure 5.4. Star Wars: The Last Jedi rating by IMDb Users, data from IMDb (Star Wars: The Last Jedi (2017) – IMDb, n.d).

As we can see on the graph, most of the members voted from a score of 6-9 out of 10. For the purpose of this study we will not look at the scores 1 and 10 as it is usually not very indicative of a film’s performance. If a film is terrible or a film is excellent, they will not indicate what the fans feel divided about and what the fans from the three boards have stated they felt. Also, as a film is rarely a 1 or a 10, it is better to look at the higher percentage clusters. This would indicate that the film has an average of 6.89, rounded up to **6.9** if one recalculates the value to show its arithmetic mean. This is not a big difference from the 7.2 but it is still 0.3 different than the IMDb score while its median is actually 7.

Table 5.6. Star Wars: The Last Jedi ratings by demographic

IMDb	All ages	< 18	18-29	30-44	45+
All	7.2 449,771	7.6 1,668	7.3 114,145	7.1 139,132	7.1 36,377
Males	7.1 285, 324	7.5 1,397	7.3 95,835	7.0 122,084	7.1 31,708
Females	7.6 40,236	8.0 207	7.7 16,413	7.5 14, 813	7.6 3,984

Note: data from IMDb (Star Wars: The Last Jedi (2017) – IMDb, n.d).

From Table 5.6 of the demographic of users, we can observe that overall, the average rating is a 7.2 but when compared to the age groups, one can see that it was the age groups of <18 years and 18-29 years of age that voted higher than the age groups of 30-44 years and 45+. In the men's category, the younger they were, the higher they voted. In the women's category however, we see both extreme sides of the age groups <18 and 45+ to have voted the highest, in particular the youngest age group which shows that the females voted higher than the males. Also, from the IMDb website we can also see that US users vs non-US users have a difference of 0.1 of a lesser rating than the US users. These scores reflect the fan reactions from this study. It was stated before that some fans felt that the film had a younger target audience and that they no longer mattered. As we can see from these IMDb tables, the younger male audience rated it higher underlining that fan opinion.

Now, let us take a look at another comparison, a poll taken on IGN Nordic, a website that offers information and reviews on gaming and entertainment. It primarily operates in the Nordic countries of Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Finland since 2012 and is also frequented by many other people located worldwide. It is also a known website that was mentioned often by the fan members of The Cantina discussion board. While IMDb contained votes from many different people, this is a more specific target group. The people voting in the IGN Nordic poll have more in common with the fans found in the three forums as it is a more specialised forum that contained their opinions, in comparison to the IMDb as an overall rating. This is why this poll has been included as supportive data to the results from this study.

For the poll, they asked members/people who frequent the forums, four questions and what these four charts tells us is that the original trilogy is mostly in the lead with Empire Strikes Back (1980) as it was the overall most successful Star Wars film in this audience poll. This film was followed by either A New Hope (1977), Return of the Jedi (1983) and even in one occasion, Revenge of the Sith (2005). The questions posed seem to be similar 1) Ranking of favourite Star Wars films 2) Favourite Star Wars films 3) Worse Star Wars films and 4) Most watched Star Wars films, however, when one looks at them and compares them, they have different meanings.



Figure 5.5. Question 1, Rank your favourite Star Wars Movies (Mandatory), reprinted from: Poll results: How would you rank the Star Wars movies, Claiborn, S., 2017, Retrieved 19-03-2019 from <https://nordic.ign.com/star-wars-episode-iv-a-new-hope/8691/feature/poll-results-how-would-you-rank-the-star-wars-movies>

In question 1 (rank your favourite Star Wars film) we can clearly see that Empire Strikes Back is at the top of the ranking. As there are nine Star Wars films to choose from, the audience was able to rate them from best to worst as a collective result. This chart could be interpreted as a summary of the next questions; however, it is still important to consider as fans will always want to rate their favourite Star Wars films; numerous websites and discussion boards supports that. The Last Jedi, however, was not rated the favourite but this does not mean it was unsuccessful. Simply by looking at this chart there could be confirmation bias so an overall picture with other data is needed. The Last Jedi could be placed at number 6 due to the other films being fan favourites, due to quality or memories or both, which does not necessarily make The Last Jedi a bad film or, fans indeed value The Last Jedi in 6th place out of the entire franchise.

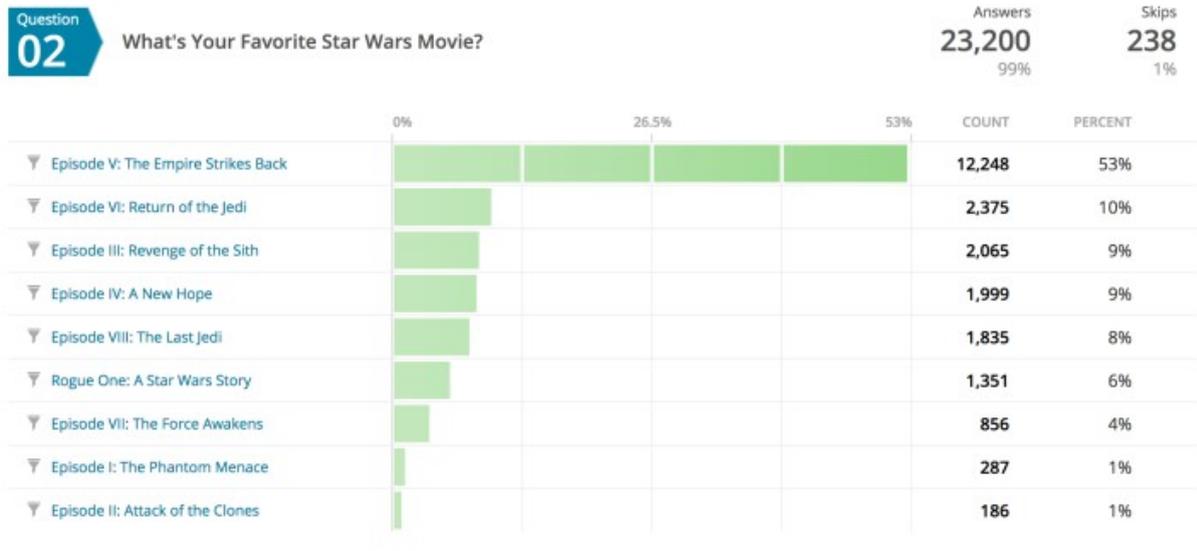


Figure 5.6. Question 2, What’s Your Favourite Star Wars Movie?. reprinted from: Poll results: How would you rank the Star Wars movies, Claiborn, S., 2017, Retrieved 19-03-2019 from <https://nordic.ign.com/star-wars-episode-iv-a-new-hope/8691/feature/poll-results-how-would-you-rank-the-star-wars-movies>

In question 2 (your favourite Star Wars film), we take a closer look at a more precise answer of which are the fan favourites. With Empire Strikes Back coming back on top, we can also see the original trilogy in the top 4 and one prequel in the 3rd spot. The Last Jedi is placed one step higher in 5th place, making it the second film from either the prequels or sequels to be in the top 5 out of 9 which is a very decent spot. When you compare The Last Jedi’s spot to the other films, it has a decent outcome in this chart.

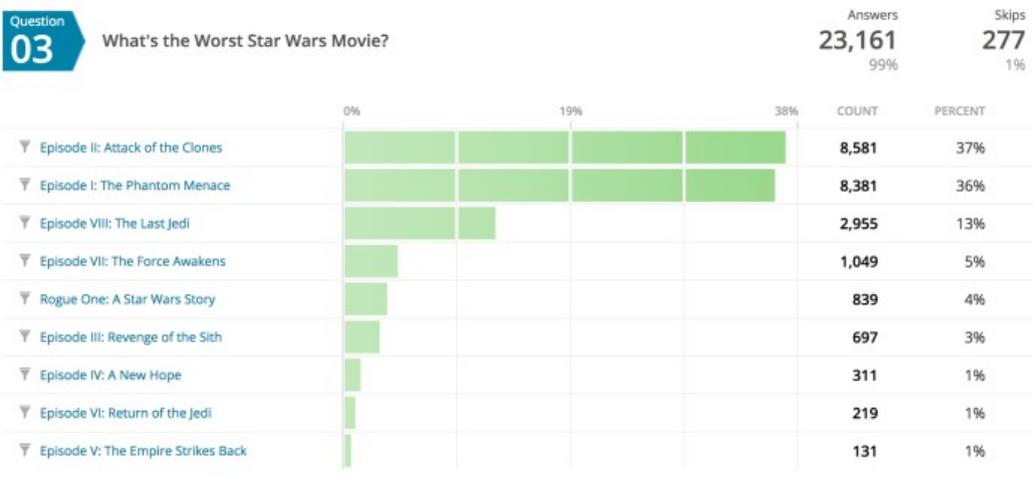


Figure 5.7. Question 2, What's Your Favourite Star Wars Movie?, reprinted from: Poll results: How would you rank the Star Wars movies, Claiborn, S., 2017, Retrieved 19-03-2019 from <https://nordic.ign.com/star-wars-episode-iv-a-new-hope/8691/feature/poll-results-how-would-you-rank-the-star-wars-movies>

In question 3 (worse Star Wars film) we can see a similar outcome to question 2 in terms of the original trilogy. The Empire Strikes back is the fan favourite and voted last, followed by Return of the Jedi and A New Hope. Revenge of the Sith is in the top 4 once again most loved (ranked at 6th place in this graph) and The Last Jedi is ranked as the 3rd most disliked film. Again, this could simply that in comparison to the other films it is ranked worse, but in comparison to other films in the same genre, this is quite a successful film.

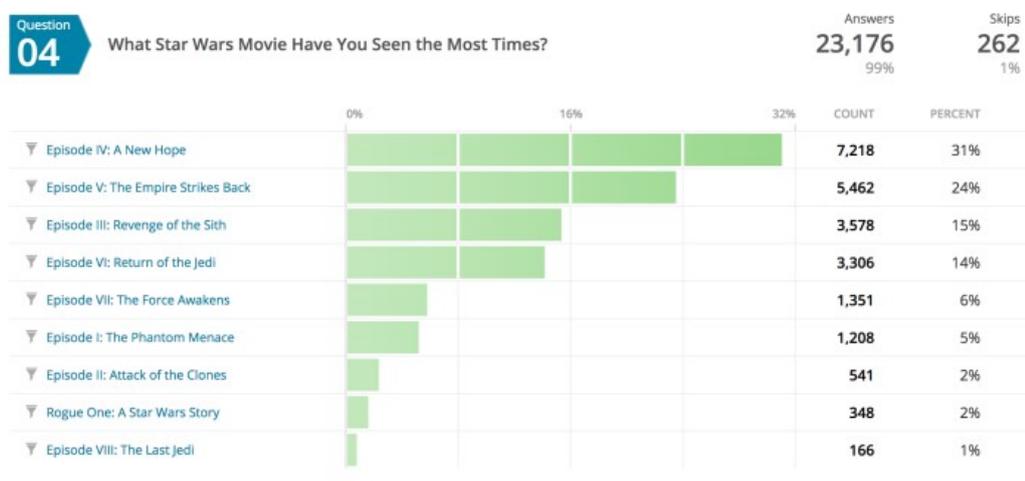


Figure 5.8. Question 4, What Star Wars Movie Have You Seen the Most Times?, reprinted from: Poll results: How would you rank the Star Wars movies, Claiborn, S., 2017, Retrieved 19-03-2019 from <https://nordic.ign.com/star-wars-episode-iv-a-new-hope/8691/feature/poll-results-how-would-you-rank-the-star-wars-movies>

In question 4 (Star Wars film watched most times) we can see the same top four films as most watched films in Star Wars; A New Hope, The Empire Strikes Back, Revenge of the Sith and the Return of the Jedi. However, we must again consider that this is a basic question with no detail in there. It does not ask the audience how many times they have seen it in the cinema, or at home on their newly bought DVD. In addition, the original trilogy has been around the longest and therefore shown on TV the longest. Revenge of the Sith (2005) is in 3rd place of most watched Star Wars films and is the newest of the sequels, it is still watched more than The Last Jedi. This does not necessarily reflect people do not want to see The Last Jedi often, but this poll was conducted on the 21st of December, 2017 and only a few days after The Last Jedi had been released. People would not have had time to watch it many times in comparison to the other films.

Is The Last Jedi considered successful on the IGN poll? Judging from the position in ranks that The Last Jedi goes through in the different charts, an important point to take away from these charts is to look at the trendline. In the first question, the line is a gradual slope. In the second question, the difference is immense between The Empire Strikes back and Return of the Jedi. In question 3, The Last Jedi stands alone between the big differences of the worst two films (Attack of the Clones, 2002, and The Phantom Menace, 1999) and the better ranked films. In the last question, the bars representing the films are divided into two groups, each with two films, followed by the rest. This means that the ranking is likely to change for The Last Jedi, as the information was inconclusive due to it being premature. However, it will not go to the first place with the original trilogy. Fans seemed to be very decided in their answers about the prequel duo, a spot The Last Jedi avoided.

Lastly, The Last Jedi seems to have an average mid position which reflects that there is a fan division as this study has shown (in the pie charts). If people from this poll would have a better opinion of The Last Jedi, this would have positioned the film behind the original trilogy and before Revenge of The Sith. Although, with time, these results could change if the poll was retaken as it would have given people a longer time to assess their opinions. However, for now, we can conclude that they support the evidence shown in the results in this study: the mixed and negative audience gave the scores a moderate rate when averaged with the positive group showing the average position The Last Jedi has on these charts.

The supportive data so far discussed from IMDb and the IGN poll is that a large percentage of the fans are in the mixed opinion or average rating category. The Last Jedi as a film overall got a good grade as this table indicates as well:

Table 5.7. General ratings for Star Wars: The Last Jedi

CinemaScore	A
IMDb	7.2/10
Fandango	4/5
Metacritic	85 (users score 4.4
FilmAffinity (USA/UK)	6.2/10

Note: data taken from Cinemascore (n.d), IMDb (Star Wars: The Last Jedi (2017) – IMDb, n.d), Fandango (Star Wars: The Last Jedi (2017) | Fandango, n.d), Metacritic (Star Wars: Episode VIII - The Last Jedi Reviews – Metacritic, n.d), FilmAffinity USA/UK (Star Wars: The Last Jedi (2017) – FilmAffinity, n.d).

The overall score from the multiple sources on this table supports the audience scores from IMDb. The audience IGN poll however gives a different opinion from these figures. While the table and the IMDb paint a more generalised picture, the IGN poll and pie charts (from this study) show fan reaction more detailed. This contrasting data helps us understand that while a general audience was

positive about *The Last Jedi*, those more dedicated fans have a more negative and mixed opinion that affects the results.

Taking a look at Figure 5.9, we can see an updated overall score showing the film to be in seventh place in comparison to all the other Star Wars films. This shows us that even though the *Last Jedi* score is positive, it still does not have as much pull as the other films. This is due to the dedicated fans who voted mixed and negative towards *The Last Jedi* is a much smaller group in the voters for the other films. This supports the claims that the mixed and negative groups from the pie charts do affect the overall ratings.

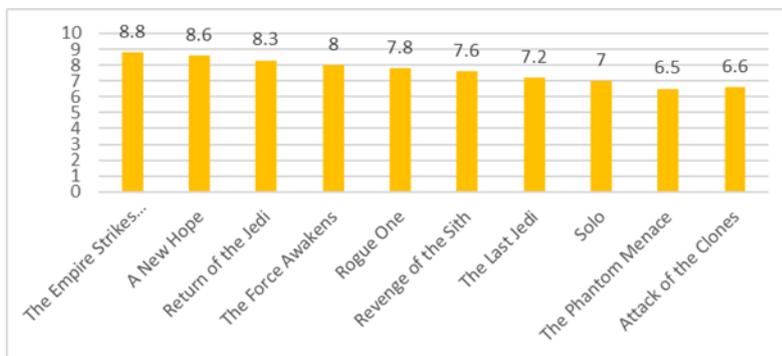


Figure 5.9. Data from IMDb (*Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) – IMDb, n.d.)

However, why should this matter to The Walt Disney Company? Do the mixed and negative groups affect the performance of the film enough that the company should pay attention to their criticisms? To help us answer this, we can observe how the following graphs and tables show the effect that fans had on *The Last Jedi* from a financial perspective:

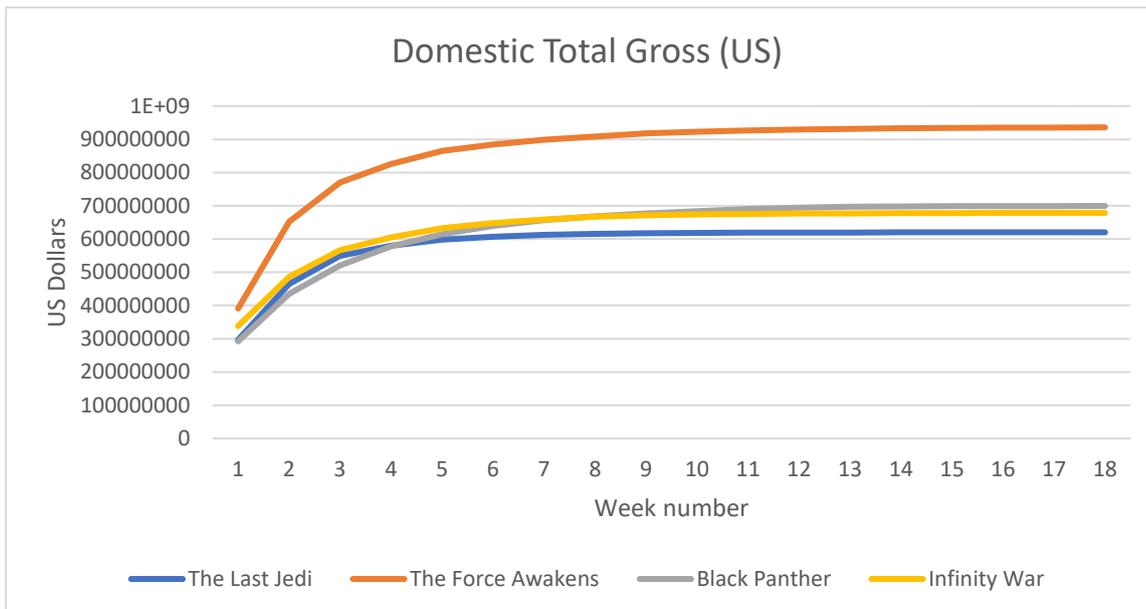


Figure 5.10. Domestic Total Gross Star Wars: The Last Jedi, Star Wars: The Force Awakens, Black Panther, Avengers: Infinity War, data from Box Office Mojo (Star Wars: The Last Jedi (2017) – International Box Office Results – Box Office Mojo, n.d).

What Figure 5.10 indicates is that these figures are comprised of both casual and dedicated fans of Star Wars similarly to the IMDb and multiple sources scoring data. The Force Awakens (2015) takes the lead followed by Avengers: Infinity War, followed by a slower starting Black Panther which overtakes The Last Jedi. You can see a couple of jumps in the graph which indicates the release in China (Star Wars: The Last Jedi (2017) – International Box Office Results – Box Office Mojo, n.d). What is interesting about this graph is that these were the highest grossing films of similar calibre around the same years. That while the marginal unit increase of dollars is higher for The Last Jedi in the first week in comparison to Black Panther, Black Panther has a higher resilience and continues to increase gradually over the following weeks remaining on par with Infinity War. This is in partly due to the premiere dates differing, which makes the comparison difficult, however this is why we will need the help of the multiplier figures. The Force Awakens has the highest marginal initial growth and highest maintaining rate making it the most successful film of them all. All the films also show a small slope of increase over all the weeks.

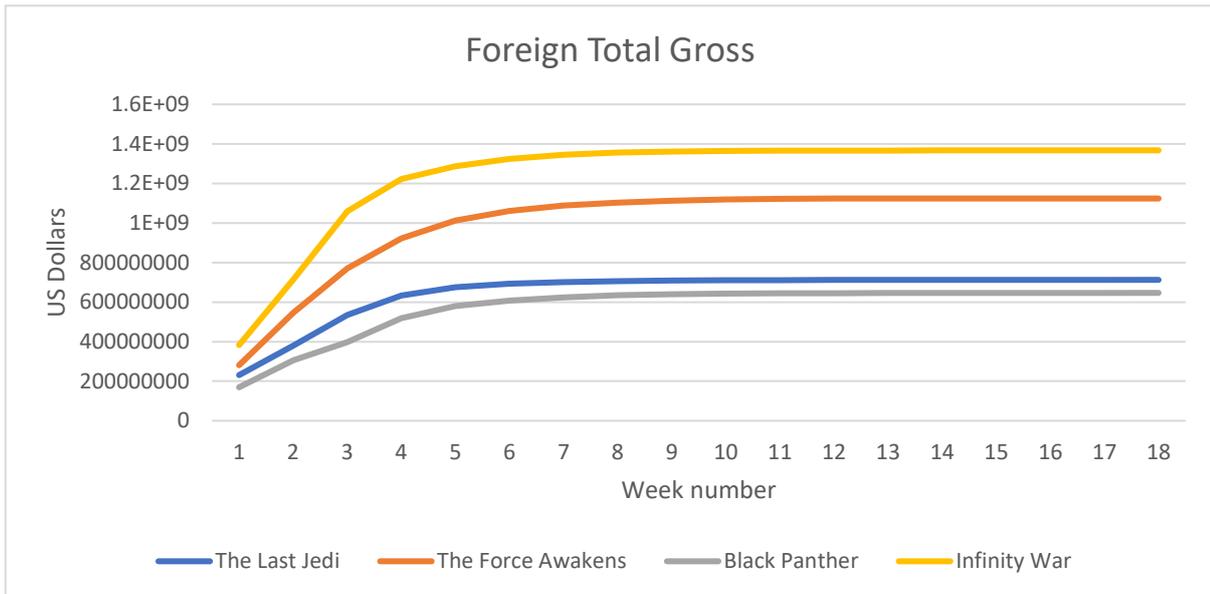


Figure 5.11. Foreign Total Gross Star Wars: The Last Jedi, Star Wars: The Force Awakens, Black Panther, Avengers: Infinity War, data from Box Office Mojo (Star Wars: The Last Jedi (2017) – International Box Office Results – Box Office Mojo, n.d).

Figure 5.11 shows us the same data but on the foreign market. As we can see, the figures are higher than the domestic graph as it includes worldwide data. Infinity War has the clear advantage against the other films with the highest marginal increase in the first few weeks. Again, the jumps on the graph indicate the different worldwide release dates. However, in this case, The Last Jedi is ahead of Black Panther but still behind both Infinity War and The Force Awakens. The difference between The Force Awakens and The Last Jedi is noticeable although they kept a steady pattern for the rest of the release weeks; it is important that the figures do not decrease. This is different to the previous graph as the films all showed a gradual increase in the domestic market release as opposed to this graph which shows a steady course with no sign of increase but no sign of decrease either.

Table 5.8. Multiplier figures

	The Last Jedi	The Force Awakens	Black Panther	Avengers IW
US	2.82	3.78	3.47	2.63
Foreign	2.74	3.39	2.69	2.28

Note: author’s own retrieved from data from Box Office Mojo (Star Wars: The Last Jedi (2017) – International Box Office Results – Box Office Mojo, n.d).

As stated on the Box Office Mojo (Star Wars: The Last Jedi (2017) – International Box Office Results – Box Office Mojo, n.d) website, the multiplier figures in this table accompany the graphs to show us a film's total box office figure divided by its opening weekend box office. It is explained on the website that this is a measure of a film's word-of-mouth throughout the film's release as well as a potential number of repeats. Over the years, the average multiplier for films has decreased due to the pattern of films earning more in its opening weeks than the rest of its release time. However, the higher the multiplier figure, the better "legs" a film has and how many repeated views each film had. This shows us how the films were embraced by the public overall. Here we can see that The Last Jedi is in third position after The Force Awakens and domestic Black Panther. For blockbuster films that earn most of its box office earnings in the beginning, these are average figures yet still low when you consider the scale of the multiplier can reach 10+.

All together what all the data shows us that The Last Jedi, regardless of comments made by the fans of the three websites from this study, it was a successful film that earned \$1.3 billion in comparison to the most successful films in history placing: The Force Awakens occupies 3rd place ahead of The Last Jedi in 11th place (All Time Worldwide Box Office Grosses, n.d). With the box office performance graphs, its multiplier and overall historical ranking, it is still one of the most successful films in history. However, it is important to get a look at the overall picture which is why all these graphs and tables were included in the study to support this study's results. At first glance considering its box office performance, The Last Jedi is a successful film. It's total domestic and foreign gross numbers were able to compete with The Force Awakens, Black Panther and Infinity War. It opened successfully and had a steady (worldwide) or increased run (domestic run) with average multiplier figures (Star Wars: The Last Jedi (2017) – International Box Office Results – Box Office Mojo, n.d).

However, the total gross is not enough to show the success of The Last Jedi. The multiplier number on a standalone film is not something a company would look at too severely as the total gross of a film is the most important aspect, for a franchise, it is different. As a standalone film will not have a sequel, its total gross will suffice for the studio. For a franchise on the other hand, the multiplier will indicate how much of a fan base it has and is accepting of the film and future sequels. The multiplier will also show the number of people that were casual fans against dedicated fans. It is the dedicated fans that will go back to re-watch a film and buy the products belonging to the franchise or standalone films so if the multiplier is low this will indicate a low repeated viewership and also hurt licensing in merchandising and DVD releases. Therefore, companies will want the films to have the longest legs as possible.

The box office performance graphs show a strong beginning performance; everyone wanted to watch the film at first. However, managers should be interested in the dedicated fans in the long run. Casual fans would have gone to watch the film due to curiosity and/or lured in by the heavy marketing but will not be coming back or buying merchandise for their personal collection. They might however buy it for a friend who loves Star Wars but once again, it is because of the dedicated fans that the purchase was made and without dedicated fans, there is no demand for Star Wars products.

It is important for companies to secure the genre and target audience. The Force Awakens performed better so The Last Jedi could have also performed better and at the moment, fans seem to be confused about whether to be excited about Star Wars: Episode IX.

Table 5.9. Top 10 most awaited films of 2019

	IMDb	Atom Tickets	Watch Mojo	Comicbook
1	Captain Marvel	Avengers: Endgame	Avengers: Endgame	Avengers: Endgame
2	Avengers: Endgame	Captain Marvel	<u>Star Wars: IX</u>	<u>Star Wars: IX</u>
3	Dark Phoenix	Spider-Man: Far from Home	Godzilla: King of Monsters	Toy Story 4
4	Once Upon a Time in Hollywood	Toy Story 4	*Wonder Woman	Spider-Man: Far from Home
5	The Irishman	The Lion King	Toy Story 4	The Lion King
6	It: Chapter Two	<u>Star Wars: IX</u>	It: Chapter Two	Captain Marvel
7	Glass	Aladdin	How to Train your Dragon 3	Aladdin
8	Joker	X-Men: Dark Phoenix	Once Upon a Time in Hollywood	Lego Movie
9	Aladdin	Glass	Lion King	X-Men: Dark Phoenix
10	Hellboy	Jumanji Sequel 2	John Wick 3	Shazam

Note: data from IMDb (IMDb-Editors, 2019), AtomTickets (Aune, 2019), WatchMojo (2018), Comicbook (2018); Note 2: It was difficult to find top 10 most awaited films of 2019 due to most films being simply listed in chronological order, not being a fan compilation or websites using these sources, but these samples are general fan examples of most awaited films; Note 3: Wonder Woman was originally scheduled to be released in 2019 but rescheduled for 2020.

From Table 5.9 we can see that Star Wars: Episode IX appears in second place in two of the examples from Comicbook and Watch Mojo. It does not even appear on the IMDb list and only in 6th place of Atom Tickets. While Figures 5.10 and 5.11 and Table 5.8 showed us the successful box office performance (casual fans and dedicated fans), the multiplier, IGN poll and pie charts from this show the dedicated fans' reaction. Table 5.9 however, shows which films people anticipate the

most which is also what we see in the pie charts of the mixed fans group; fans feeling divided over The Last Jedi. The Last Jedi therefore affected the fan base: the dedicated fan base has a group that are not too excited while the film does not have enough pull to make the casual fans so excited to make up the difference. There is also a reason why Endgame is at the top of the list before Star Wars: IX is due to it being the finale of the Marvel films made up to date, hence it has a huge fan expectation.

It would be interesting to see the same data collected throughout this thesis about Episode IX: The Rise of Skywalker. This could be used in order to paint a more accurate picture of the reaction and effect of The Last Jedi. Looking at the data one could also deduce fans were more interested in The Force Awakens as it was the first of the franchise so seeing fan reactions and box office performance of The Rise of Skywalker could indicate how much the dedicated fans were affected by The Last Jedi.

6. Analysis and findings

As we have established in the previous section, those who gave the most positive reviews to *The Last Jedi* are both the casual viewers and the percentage of the fans with positive reactions.

According to the results from this study, however, the bigger group (of dedicated fans) belongs to those that disliked the film and had mixed feelings. The group has had an impact on the film as shown in the previous data and explained in this study's findings. This study's results also show the reasons for the divided reactions and enough of a group for The Walt Disney Company to listen to. This chapter will analyse the research questions in contrast of the theories mentioned in this study and the results from study's data collection along with the supporting data.

To answer the main question of this work (RQ1) -- "*What does the reaction of Star Wars: The Last Jedi tell us about the relationship between their brand community and their brand management?*" -- it is useful to first analyse RQ 2 and RQ3.

6.1 How is Star Wars important to its brand community? (RQ2)

Star Wars has had a dedicated fandom since the release of the original trilogy in 1977 and since then, these fans have become a brand community. As stated in chapter three, there was no existing concept of a brand community until Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) released a concept which this study shows how the Star Wars fandom fits into the description. They described a type of community with no geographical limitations that shared activities and their meanings surrounding the admiration of a brand.

Star Wars fans began finding each other with the internet and began to forming groups or communities. These groups grew and gave the brand a higher meaning and value. People were able to bond over their favourite storyline and share specific rituals and traditions involving their favourite characters (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001). These rituals and traditions also fit into those that Duffett (2013) called common fan practices and as the Star Wars name grew, so did their fandom numbers. There was easier availability of Star Wars material and the release of the prequel films, encouraged more people to seek out more Star Wars.

These fan practices as explained in Duffett's fan culture theory (2013), increased the connection fans had to each other and the Star Wars franchise. Over the years multiple new Star Wars activities began appearing in fan practices and transmedia coverage. Events such as Comic-Con or the ability

to live action role playing are only a couple of examples. Without these pleasures of connection, appropriation and performance, Star Wars would not have meaning to their fandom (Duffett, 2013, p. 32). However, before fan practices, the value of the meaning begins at the origin. How did people become fans in the first place? What is it about Star Wars that holds people's interest and encourages more fans to join and why did *The Last Jedi* divide them?

The Star Wars story began as princess Leia asked Obi-Wan Kenobi for help and thus began one of the most famous stories in history. Those who watched the original trilogy became the first fans through affect. Something lured the person in, whether by contagion (Duffett, 2013, p. 125), someone else encouraged them to watch the films, or by a marketing campaign but first, there must be a spark that lights the interest. It is a person's willing to accept Star Wars, that causes the initial connection. Someone who is forced and has no interest in the subject will not be able to find a connection. This does not mean they will not be able to find it later at another point in their lives, and if they do, then that initial first contact will be the same as if they would have had it many years before. The story of Star Wars serves as this point of initial interest; becoming a fan can neither be predicted nor forced.

People will also attribute different personal meanings to Star Wars. As these meanings differ amongst different people, their intensity of the significance does not. While some can find the character of Luke Skywalker the most relatable, others can enjoy the political symbolism mirroring the current state of society. And this emotional investment is due to its religiosity (Duffett, 2013, p. 140).

While Star Wars is not a religion, it can serve a similar purpose. Its mythos and its symbolical pilgrimage allows the deep immersion. It is therefore no longer only just about the characters, it is also about what the story represents for the fans. Lucas spent a long time building a universe where fans could experience the films he created through films or books or different media and get a sense of *Heimat*. It is their safe place, comfort mechanism and a form of escapism. Whenever a person needs that comfort, they will return to re-experience that feeling of assurance and trust with their favourite characters which is why a fan's love song to Star Wars can last a lifetime.

However, as they can also stop being fans if the story disappoints them, they can stop relating to it or have no more need of 'comfort' from Star Wars. This shows us that fans have a lot of personal feelings towards their favourite narrative. Star Wars is in most cases a life-long emotional relationship. This is why this study focuses on fan reactions of *The Last Jedi*. Fan reaction is important for management to understand in order to maintain the brand community.

As one can see, there is a lot of personal emotional stake from the Star Wars fandom. Looking through Duffett's (2013) fan culture theory, we can agree that many fans make strong bonds with the brand. Over time, the narrative can become even more meaningful towards the fan. For those Star Wars fans that may have children, they will want their children to experience the same emotions, as they did as children which also adds to the expectations to the sequels. This study shows how fans had built up many years of emotional expectations which disappointed fans from the negative and mixed group due to a lack of continuity to the previous films. *The Force Awakens* (2015) was first released followed by *The Last Jedi* (2017) and fans were ready to relive their experiences they had accumulated throughout their life as fans. They were hoping for a recreation of nostalgia and the themes from this study show that not all fans had been satisfied.

If these fans can successfully relieve the positive and meaningful aspects of Star Wars, they can keep Star Wars an ongoing conversation in the future. In order to keep a fan base long-lasting, companies must find a way not only to recycle the storylines but the feeling the narrative gives the fandom (Williams, 2014, pp. 54-55). This encourages more fan practices giving the brand a higher value.

We can therefore conclude, that these are the explanations as to why certain themes recurred and some fans had negative and mixed reactions in this study to *The Last Jedi* film. These fans felt cheated of their favourite character, Luke Skywalker, as they had built expectations for the narrative only to then reject Johnson's approach on the character and storyline; the fans rejected the mythos. They did not believe the film to fit in the emotional realism within the Star Wars franchise and disagreed with Johnson's view.

Fans wanted new stories told in the old way in order to reconnect to the fans inside of them; recycling elements of nostalgia in a new way to continue the fandom legacy. Star Wars is only special to its fandom and it is they that make up the brand community with their loyalty. According to this study, it is this brand community that therefore adds to the brand value which The Walt Disney Company must understand and find a way to connect to its (mixed and negative) fans. Without this, the brand will be threatened as well as its future.

6.2 What factors should be accounted for when managing this brand community? (RQ3)

Media fans are positive and engaged customers of the brand and in this case, the Star Wars brand. They are ideal customers due to their loyalty and in order for the Star Wars franchise to be successful, managers need to understand the importance of their brand community and what makes the franchise successful. The Star Wars fandom is directly involved in the Star Wars brand creation. They were fans first and then became directly involved in the brand equity evolution of Star Wars. Over the years, the traditional sense of marketing has shifted to a more consumer centric and in order to answer RQ3, the following points, implications found, are what managers must take into consideration when managing the Star Wars brand community. These implications are found as a direct result and analysis of this study:

- 1) Recognise the Star Wars brand community
- 2) Protect the Star Wars meaning and brand
- 3) Differentiate between casual and dedicated Star Wars fans
- 4) Protect the future of Star Wars

Recognise the Star Wars brand community

The term brand communities has evolved since an evolution of customer culture behaviour. A brand has a social aspect to it which helps bring value to the brand (Berry, 1995). Having a strong brand community means having a higher brand loyalty in a collective form which is what is interesting to brand managers due to strength in numbers. They should focus on these loyal communities. The Star Wars fandom has been supporting the franchise for many years, the older fans for 42 years. Managers should understand the relationship these fans have with Star Wars and why their relationship with the franchise has lasted so long. It is about building a long-term relationship and expanding that onto other potential fans with a customer-centric building brand strategy. What the Star Wars brand community values is important and without their support, the brand value would decrease.

The Walt Disney Company should have a better understanding of their relationship marketing. In the three websites, we can see that only the Jedi Council Forums had a 52.3% positive view on The Last Jedi. Even compared to the other pie charts, the percentage of those that had a mixed view, or a

negative view is still too large when considered together. Management should want Star Wars films to be as successful as possible and therefore they should understand the complaints or mixed feelings the fans had towards The Last Jedi.

It is not questioned whether The Last Jedi has been successful (data proves it is), what is being analysed is the future success it can have and if this new Star Wars formula can make the brand more successful in time than the other Star Wars films. The mixed group and negative group have to be analysed against the positive fans and that data compared to the overall picture (casual fans plus dedicated fans). Figure 5.9 shows its rating compared to other Star Wars films which poses the question, does The Walt Disney Company want to have another normal success or an ensured legacy amongst the dedicated fans, who will remain loyal, and attract a newer generation?

The Star Wars franchise's brand community therefore should be recognised and protected. They are the ones that will ensure that the brand lives on by being loyal. Their social function also includes passing on the torch to the younger generations so while The Last Jedi was accused of only catering for the younger audience, we can see from this thesis' data and supporting data that the (older) dedicated fans still matter. The data showed that with the mixed group being persuaded to the positive side and/or part of the negative, the rating would have increased. The Walt Disney Company managers should find a balance of how to cater to the older and newer generation of fans. They should find a balance that respects both authorities, both the company's position but also respect of their fan base i.e. the Star Wars brand community. The data shows us that The Walt Disney Company can overlook its brand community in favour of a box office smash without recognising why The Last Jedi was such a disappointment to some of fans. They will also be more likely choose the new style over what the Star Wars legacy represents, once again and prompting dedicated fans to leave the fandom as many stated in the discussion boards. Therefore, this study shows fan reactions should be accounted for to avoid future backlash and ensure success.

Protect the Star Wars meaning and brand

Throughout this study, we have established that The Last Jedi as an overall film was very successful. However, the dedicated fans' opinions, were left divided. This study supports that there is indeed enough data to support the claims of the mixed and negative groups of dedicated fans. Managers must therefore always protect the Star Wars brand meaning and brand for the future.

The success of the past Star Wars films, especially the first films of each trilogy have generally been the most successful in the box office leading the critics of the Star Wars fandom to simply say it is the usual pattern of a sequel's performance.

However, many fans showed their confusion or displeasure against of Rian Johnson's new view. In the previous implication, we show that the Star Wars brand community does in fact matter. Their voice is important and once the managers recognise that it is, they must understand what the positive, negative and mixed opinions on *The Last Jedi* were. Managers must also understand how important Star Wars is to its brand community, (RQ 2): this is what makes Star Wars important to begin with.

Dedicated fans from the mixed group and negative group complained about the themes mentioned in chapter five, but dedicated fans who enjoyed *The Last Jedi* disagreed. They found Johnson's take was new, refreshing and bold while the others said it was a mixture of plots from *The Empire Strikes Back* and *The Last Jedi*. Dedicated fans have a long-term relationship with Star Wars as they continuously bond with the characters during fan practices and some even 'seem' as old friends. There's a sense of old nostalgic feelings that characters from the previous films bring up when fans re-watch them. *The Force Awakens* (2015) was able to capture that sense of nostalgia through its rhythm, old familiar characters, new characters connected to the old ones with a fun adventure. This is the reason why the box office ratings and fan opinions were overwhelming for *The Force Awaken* in comparison to *The Last Jedi*.

This idea showed up repeatedly in the results and in the mixed and negative groups of the fan opinions from the three websites. Fans wanted new stories with the same sentiment along with a respect of the continuity of the previous stories. They felt the new humour childish and out of place. The built-up scene from *The Force Awakens* leading to Luke Skywalker throwing his lightsaber in a comical way in *The Last Jedi*, was not well received by both the mixed group and the negative group. The lightsaber is a figure embedded in the Star Wars mythology, almost like a character on its own. It is an extension of the character it belongs to as they are designed specifically from character to character. The lightsaber in effect, holds a huge emotional meaning.

The mixed group although they enjoyed aspects of the fresh and new outlook on Star Wars, they also had a sense of respect towards the more traditional story blocks of Star Wars. The lightsaber represented to many fans their past emotional investments in the stories they grew up to love and pass on. There were other examples that made fans feel as if *The Last Jedi* did not have respect for the past which some fans even took personally as seen on the discussion boards.

The dedicated fans from the three websites all agreed that passing on the torch to a newer set of characters and a new generation was a good idea. However, they differed in terms of how it should be done. While the mixed and negative fans agreed it should be done respecting the continuity, positive fans agreed it was better to scrap everything and start again in the manner Johnson had done. With characters with such a heavy meaning to many fans, this was bound to cause a disagreement.

A way for managers to protect the Star Wars legacy and respect the fans would be to respect the balance of the new and old. The emotional realism is real so new storylines must be within the mythos parameters. Characters story arcs should also be handled with sensitivity. Luke's storyline indeed fits in with the hero's journey on a practical level (Bronzite, 2019). However, mixed and negative fans agreed that flawed Luke did not fit into the mythos of Star Wars. To keep the characters successful not only must they resonate with the audience but also keep within the emotional realism of the character. Luke's character represented the legacy of all the Star Wars stories but without him now the future of Star Wars depends on the new characters which the mixed group fans and negative group fans did not find the characters to not be strong enough and compelling enough to carry on the torch. They did not have the same depth or mystery as the original characters.

Managers by protecting the brand's meaning, they protect the brand community and vice-versa; they ensure the brand community's continuous loyalty and their existence. Keeping the brand community alive means that the Star Wars franchise has a future. As we can see, the Star Wars narrative is an important component to the fandom and without it being respected, fans will stop supporting Star Wars. Star Wars is only as important as its narrative and its fandom that gives it meaning. However, fans can be forgiving of weak film storylines or other elements if the canon is overall respected. A strong franchise narrative equals a strong brand community and The Walt Disney Company needs these dedicated fans to continue the Star Wars legacy.

There is some discussion as to whom this legacy belongs to and the entitled actions of some fans, but they are in the minority and should be ignored as they bring toxicity to the fandom, as paraphrased by the fans from the three forums. However, understandably fans feel the need to be heard as they are the continuous keepers of the narrative but there must also be an understanding to the leadership; managers must first understand what the fans want and desire and then transmit those desires to products onscreen and off screen. Profits are made when the business plan and strategy is efficient all the while also respecting the brands and fans.

Differentiate between casual and dedicated Star Wars fans

In chapter 5 we were able to see data highlighting casual and dedicated fans. The general data for *The Last Jedi* showed information regarding those two groups added together but understanding the differences between those who are casual fans and those which belong to the fandom is important from the managerial perspective. In the previous implications we have established that managers must understand and recognise the Star Wars brand community as well as protect the brand. To add to those implications, part of understanding the Star Wars community in a better light is to understand the different types of fans that belong to this community.

Casual fans are explained as those who will watch Star Wars out of curiosity, some become fans and others remain as casual viewers who will not return. The dedicated fans are those that belong to the groups in the three websites from this study. As we saw in the multiplier figure, *The Last Jedi* did not have the highest multiplier which showed that although, while still average, managers should aspire for that figure to be higher. While *The Last Jedi* had a high box office gross total, the problem the multiplier showed was a reflection of the lack of dedicated fan interest in the future of the franchise. *The Last Jedi* seemed to cater to the overall needs of an audience which are different needs to those of the fandom.

Managers should aspire to meet the general audiences' needs to gain those box office numbers but at the same time also aspire to meet the needs of the fandom in order to achieve a long-term success. Not differentiating the audience is something the fans criticised on the three websites. The mixed and negative groups stated that *The Last Jedi* was a good Science Fiction film but not the best Star Wars film. They also said they could feel the film had gone the route of the Marvel rhythm and sense of humour (not the real Star Wars). While the Marvel films are successful in their own right, the Star Wars is a different narrative altogether. Star Wars has a more traditional approach. The Walt Disney Company however, had a clear target group where fans from the three websites felt as if their time had passed and they no longer fit the target group. While reaching out to a new generation of fans is ideal, keeping the atmosphere traditional friendly is also ideal.

Each different type of fans will have different levels of emotional investments in the franchise and managers must realise this if they want to keep the fandom numbers high. Fans will also have different levels of fan practice participation; their consumption of the narrative and archiving information will differ from person to person. The level of fan participation creates the value for the

brand and companies should nurture these fan practices (Duffett, 2013) and rituals and traditions (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001) and value creating practices (Schau et al., 2009).

Understanding these types of practices is what gives a further understanding of the Star Wars brand community where managers can imitate the practices onto other products and communities. These practices should cover as much as possible as it will encourage more interaction between its community members. The level of activity in the practices will act as an indicator to show the managers where there is a higher or lower level of demand within the brand community; the practices reveal the want of fans while the evolving practices reveal the need of fans within the fandom.

Schau et al. (2009) were not able to state how these practices come to exist therefore passing on the strategy to other products impossible. However, for that, we can look into Duffett's (2013) fan culture theory and Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) and state that community members while bonding find ways to interact and create rituals. These rituals then blossom and expand enhancing the collective value creation. Brand community products will have similar rituals, but media brand communities will have even more rituals in common; the more similar the product, the more similar the rituals. However, there will also be specific rituals that exist only within the brand community but the way to encourage them is to give some freedom to its fandom. Managers should be the guides but allowing the fandom a bit of air to create these practices, similar or specific, will generate business consumer opportunities and build up the company equity.

People become part of the brand community because of their journey as fans surrounding the services the company gives them. This is important for The Walt Disney Company to remember that the more dedicated fans will act as advocates for Star Wars through. They will attract new members as part of their community responsibilities but in order to do so, they must maintain their membership within the fandom. Strong brand communities will have a big and diverse range of value creating practices which managers must focus on (Schau et al., 2009).

Differentiating the types of fans and the value creating fan practices they participate in, is no easy feat for management therefore flexibility to correct one of the Schau et al.'s (2009) four thematic categories and 12 value creating practices is imperative. Also, by taking a look at the value creating practices we can connect them to the fan culture theory and brand community theory to the Star Wars fandom. Managers need to pay close attention to dedicated fans and why they become fans of the Star Wars. It is not just about pleasing a general audience by making a box office hit, as stated before, it is about ensuring the future of Star Wars. Dedicated fans as in this study, will ensure

loyalty but also will ensure that these value creating practices spread onto new aspects of the Star Wars brand. They will also add new potential fans giving the brand an even higher value. Without these dedicated fans, there would be no potential for future generating value creating practices.

Protect the Future of Star Wars

The previous implications have shown us the importance of the Star Wars brand community as a collective force. It has also shown us the importance of protecting the Star Wars brand in order to keep the brand community together and in doing so, it also shows us the importance of the actions of these members. They do not only engage in fan practices, but these fan practices generate newer and more evolved value creating practices. All of these implications add up to the building up of the brand's equity. This shows us that it is important to convince the mixed and negative fans of The Last Jedi to keep following the franchise and participating in fan activities. In doing so, managers must follow the already mentioned implication of acknowledging the dedicated fans and protecting the Star Wars meaning.

How managers can ensure that the other implications are followed through is by ensuring the future of Star Wars. Aside from increasing fan brand loyalty and generating new fan practices/value creating practices through the other implications, managers can also protect Star Wars from a business company perspective. The company can find new ways to stay ahead of the game. By analysing the market and predicting the future of the media business, they can steer the fan practices and value creating practices and encourage certain activities. They can also look into modernising their business model and changing strategy.

A way to succeed is find new ways always to engage fans and attract others through fan and company collaboration. By having different types of fans from different backgrounds The Walt Disney Company can ensure they will always have a diverse fandom base. Keeping the Star Wars stories relevant to their times is a way to maintain that fandom base and ensure new fandom. While the dedicated fans were not a fan of the new characters due to their storylines, they however agreed with the other fans that they enjoyed the new inclusions of different racial and gender characters. They enjoyed the new diversity the prequel films were offering them and by adding characters from minority groups; it gives fans more characters they can relate to. Even though this expanded their fan base, it seems that Star Wars tends to follow mainstream politics rather than taking the initiative and being the revolutionary ones (De Bruin-Mole, 2018, p. 240).

This is something The Walt Disney Company can look to change. If they can find a way to lead the charge and change, it will give Star Wars an innovating advantage. Managers should take a closer look and gather inspiration from the members of the Star Wars community as they are continuously and actively engaging in ways to expand the boundaries of the narrative world. They work on their fan practices (creative works) to reflect the surrounding society and its problems.

The focus of this study has been to show the fan reaction and to try and understand the mixed and negative reactions. We have established that the dedicated fans do matter and that managers should take into account the reactions of The Last Jedi in order to predict the future. Some fans from the three discussion boards feel unsure of the future of Star Wars and if they still belong to the franchise. It is the managers' job to make sure that all fans, or almost all fans, are represented in the Star Wars future one way or another. It is not feasible to target all the audiences, but The Walt Disney Company must find a balance to reach the dedicated fans and the casual fans. Lastly, the transition between the different generations of fans should be smooth and not as abrupt as the negative and mixed group fans felt Rian Johnson had done. After all, Star Wars and its brand, is a legacy brand and managers should aim to keep it that way as legacies get passed down, box office hits on the other hand, can be forgotten.

7. Conclusions

7.1 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the fan culture theory behind the reaction of *The Last Jedi* and how the Star Wars brand community (fandom) functions as a collective, from a managerial perspective. The results showed us that *The Last Jedi* had frustrated a decent amount of the dedicated fan base, entertained the casual fans but also provoked an adoration by the other half of the dedicated fans. To finalise and conclude this study, we will answer the main research question: *“What does the reaction of Star Wars: The Last Jedi tell us about the relationship between their brand community and their brand management?”*

The results from this study showed us that it is important for managers to understand the behavioural patterns behind the Star Wars brand community in order to build up brand equity. The Star Wars fandom has been around for 42 years and for that fandom to keep existing, the company needs to provide occasional injections of new narrative over time in order to both continue the fandom and the franchise. LucasFilm and later The Walt Disney Company recognised that and released the prequel trilogy followed by the sequel trilogy. *The Force Awakens* was received with open arms after a wait of 12 years but *The Last Jedi* caused problems. Director Rian Johnson had a new vision to bring Star Wars forward into the future, however, the reaction was mixed. It is unknown whether Kathleen Kennedy, Bob Iger and other production managers were aware of the possible backlash or they underestimated the fan importance and reaction. It is important for managers to predict this fan reaction and not make the future production of Star Wars films a concept of management versus fans.

This study also showed us that the management team of The Walt Disney Company supported Rian Johnson’s *The Last Jedi* but also showed how they had a discord with the fandom. Whether these expectations were unwarranted and unreasonable can be argued, but the data suggests that only a minority of these fans had opinions in that extreme line of thought. Yet the fans from both the mixed group and the negative group also had negative reactions that Duffett’s (2013) fan culture theory explains why. This shows how this fandom group is the constant and devoted market for the Star Wars brand.

Therefore, by using Duffett's (2013) fan culture theory, it was possible to investigate why some fans felt disappointed by *The Last Jedi*; their long-term emotional investment had not been satisfied. However, it is easily possible to get carried away in the arrogance of whom Star Wars belongs to and who makes executive decisions from both sides: management and fans. When George Lucas was still head of the Star Wars brand, he was also the original creator, and fans, while some disagreed with him accepted him as the obvious authoritative figure. With LucasFilm merging into The Star Wars Company, this changed. Many fans became sceptical with the transition and transfer of power. Would The Walt Disney Company be able to maintain the Star Wars narrative intact along with everything it represents?

The Force Awakens left fans hopeful that The Walt Disney Company had achieved a safe yet respectful Star Wars film but with *The Last Jedi*, The Walt Disney Company was sending a message of looking into the future that would end the Skywalker saga with Episode IX. The managers at The Walt Disney Company did not seem to think that considering the veteran fan base would be important – hence, the discord. The company seemed to underestimate the importance of the dedicated fan base and forgot the pillars of the narrative that attracts people who later become fans of Star Wars. They thought they could hook a new generation while keeping the existing fandom but all they got were the casual fans and approximately half of the dedicated fan base. While that is a great commercial success as the data shows us, it will not be enough to continue the Star Wars franchise in the future. Perhaps for the next 10 years, it will suffice but they must keep the people bonding with the franchise in order to recreate another 42 years and more.

With a few tweaks of the film to show more respect for continuity, that would have changed the mixed group and negative fan base's opinions as that was their biggest problem with the film; not sensitive enough for the past films and their characters. Fans felt that they did not represent the base of the narrative strongly enough to carry on the franchise which shows that management did not look further back into the Star Wars mythos to build a better storyline in *The Last Jedi*.

Maintaining the Star Wars universe seems to not leave much room for change and improvement; however, this is why fans and management must work together to take the franchise into the future. Rian Johnson's bold take mixed with the sensitivity from the fan base would have probably made the most resonant Star Wars film. It would have had a modern new take with a large budget, modern technology etc. and therefore had infinite amount of possibilities. This could have taken the story ahead all the while keeping the meaning of Star Wars intact.

This study can hopefully be used to understand other franchises and how to manage them. Fans make memories while consuming the narrative. They relive these experiences through fan practices which managers should always remember. The brand has become infused in the meaning of Star Wars therefore, as fans keep the brand alive, managers must make sure the brand survives. Understanding this is the key to management in transmedia storytelling franchises and other brand communities.

7.2 Limitations and future studies

This thesis was drafted from a point of view of how to optimise the success of The Last Jedi while analysing three discussion boards with other supporting data. However, to analyse further into the fan reaction of The Last Jedi, future studies could be done from each of the different individual groups which then can be contrasted against non-fans. The fact that this thesis had time and data limitation makes this thesis somehow lacking from so much more potential as well as important works that might have been missed by accident.

As it was a qualitative study, a future quantitative study regarding more data surrounding the Star Wars films' success could be useful. A more accurate analysis of the success of The Last Jedi in comparison to the other Star Wars films could paint a more accurate picture. Human error must also be accounted for in the method and data collection process.

Ethical considerations for this study account for the transparency, objectivity and diligence in recording any evidence from the threads or existing literature and data. The fact that this study is conducted by an acafan (academic who is also a fan) might pose the danger of bias (Duffett, 2013, p.289). However, this is a study that highlights the negative and mixed fan reactions.

Further research to understand the gap in the field studies between religion and fandom could prove to be helpful to understand the devotion Star Wars fans dedicate to the narrative. Another gap in the field to further analyse is how someone becomes a fan in the first place. Duffett's (2013) theories of fandom explain the reasons from a sociological point of view but mixing his view with other academic fields could provide with a more rounded and full answer. If no exact answer is ever found, then it will give more insight to the difficulties and delimitations on fan culture theory. Also, understanding nostalgia better and including it in a study to contrast this study and other fan theories could also be useful in future to understand the bonds and connections fans make and how they transmit those personal feelings onto the fandom of their choice. Can nostalgia be recreated to

all sorts of fan types? The answer to that could be beneficial to brand and strategy managers as well as marketing managers.

The fan reaction analysed throughout this study were Star Wars fans, concerning The Last Jedi. It would be interesting to contrast this study against other fan reaction of other Star Wars films and their performances, to see if there are any pattern in the Star Wars behaviour which would indicate the backlash received from The Last Jedi will not pose a threat to the future of the franchise. By analysing future Star Wars films also, we could see if indeed The Last Jedi hurt the franchise as once the Phantom Menace (1999) was accused of doing once before but ultimately the Star Wars fandom is still alive and strong.

Lastly, by analysing other types of brand communities and franchises we can see if there are any common elements in their successes and failures which can also further the understanding towards fans and their brands.

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