

Tayven Taylor

Professor Haas

WR 39A

14 March 2021

Disney's representation of female agency in Star Wars

Like many, I was introduced to Disney at a young age watching classics like *Beauty & the Beast*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Aladdin*. At the time, these fairy tales seemed like perfect stories as I overlooked how Disney films contribute to society's social construction of gender roles. You might be wondering, what exactly is a social construction? A social construction is a theory that believes that people form rules or norms that are agreed upon and respected by everyone in society. For example, Money is a social construction—it only holds value because society gives it importance. Language, symbols, colors, food, gestures, and even people are social constructions (Sharp and Wade). These constructions are subject to change and vary from culture to culture due to difference in social norms or values and once social constructions are adopted they are especially difficult to change. Despite what you might believe, your behaviour may not be as unique as you have previously thought as this theory suggests that our values and perceptions are formed by the collective thoughts and behavior of others. Media has the ability to make a major impact on social constructions as it has the power to influence or reinforce social constructions. Everyone interacts with media in various ways throughout their lives granting it the ability to impact society's social constructions. Furthermore, media itself is influenced by social construction.

Disney is an example as their films are heavily influenced by social constructions, specifically gender constructs. Disney has developed generations of trust having been a

household name for decades while generating a global revenue of 65.39 billion (statista). Disney has not only influenced people, but has also impacted the entire entertainment industry. In Hailey's *Walt Disney* article published by MyHero, she states that "Disney revolutionized the entertainment industry by creating films, theme parks, and characters such as Mickey Mouse. Walt Disney not only changed the entertainment industry; he also created a family friendly place known as Disneyland. But most importantly he inspired others to use their imagination and to do the impossible. The accomplishments he made and the messages he gave is what makes Walt Disney a true hero." Walt Disney charisma and character formulated a brand image that inspires its fans gaining their trust. Unfortunately, despite their robust brand image, many of the values seen in their older films are outdated and deplored in modern society; however, these values have begun to change over time following the evolution of society's social constructs. After acquiring the rights to Lucas Films' Star Wars series, Disney has taken a progressive stance on female gender roles, expectations, and female agency. In previous Star Wars films, female characters were often portrayed lacking independence and strength, often in distress, dressing seductively, and rarely a main character of interest; however, after Disney's acquisition female characters became the main characters of nearly all Star Wars films produced by Disney. Disney debuted female main characters like Jyn from Star Wars: Rogue One and Rey from Star Wars: The Force Awakens. These female characters, featured only in Disney produced Star Wars films, redefine gender roles and expectations as they are strong, capable of saving others and dressed appropriately. In The Atlantic's *With Rogue One, the Star Wars Franchise Gets Even More Feminist* article, Megan Garber claims that "Jyn is the star of this Star Wars story. It is her story, fundamentally: She is the axis around which everything else spins." For the first time in the Star Wars series' history, Disney allows a female character to take the spotlight and lead others as the

main character. Disney's representation of female agency in Leia, Rey, and Jyn has reinvented how The Star Wars series defines female gender constructs.

In the Star Wars films produced by Lucas Films, female characters were often sexualized through their revealing attire. For example, in Lucas Films's 1983 Star Wars film, *Return of the Jedi*, after being captured by Jabba the Hutt, Princess Leia was made a sex slave and forced to don a metal bikini. Leia became a sex symbol in the Lucas Films Star Wars series and the company capitalized on the sexualization of her character, producing merchandise featuring Leia in her infamous metal bikini. In Noah Berlatsky's article *The 'slave Leia' controversy is about more than objectification* article for The Guardian, he wrote that "It's one of the most memorable, weird, gross and resonant moments from *The Return of the Jedi*, and from Star Wars in general – and Disney is working to disavow it. The company is rumored to be retiring their slave Leia figurine – a move which has prompted commenters on social media to declare 'good riddance'." As Berlatsky noted in his article, Disney is trying to enshroud this controversial and deeply sexist moment in Star Wars history moving past sexualizing female characters. In Disney-produced Star Wars films, female characters are sporting attire that compliments their rugged dangerous lifestyle instead of revealing clothes that appeals to a male audience. For example, Jyn, the main character in Disney's *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, is always seen in "an insistently practical uniform: pants that are neither too loose nor too tight, a jacket, clunky combat boots, and a shawl that doubles as a scarf and a head covering." (Garber) allowing her to be stealthy and mobile while on her perilous journeys. Disney continues to push the envelope when it comes to female gender roles and expectations as they take a progressive stance while portraying female characters.

Star Wars' representation of female agency, a female character's influence on the plot, has changed significantly under Disney's production. Lucas Films portrayed female characters as weak, lacking independence, and rarely were they featured as main characters. Leia never wielded a lightsaber and was only a support character in dangerous situations. She never had the strength to save or lead others in battle. However, after acquiring the Star Wars series from Lucas Films, Disney decided to focus on female characters being the main characters of Star Wars films. Starting with Rey, a completely independent orphan from Jakku awaiting her family's return, Rey can use the 'force' and wields a lightsaber. She is self-sufficient and stubborn, often refusing any assistance from others; even declining Han Solo's attempt to give her a gun to protect herself. She argues that she can handle herself to which Han replies acknowledging her strength and independence, justifying that that is the exact reason he is entrusting her with a blaster (55:39). This scene not only demonstrates Rey's independence and stubbornness, but it shows that Rey has proven herself to Han. Rey's strength and resilience is often portrayed alongside her eventual love interest, Finn. She often surprises Finn with her resourcefulness, saving him from several critical situations. While running away from the First Order in Jakku, Finn doubts that the two can outrun them. After Rey suggests that they escape in a quad jumper Finn says "We need a pilot!" to which Rey responds "We've got one." Shocked Finn asks "You?!" (31:15). Finn and Rey then steal the Millennium Falcon and Rey flies them away to safety. Unlike female characters from the original Star Wars, Rey is capable of wielding a lightsaber to fight off enemies, piloting ships, saving others, and leading the resistance in battle. Furthermore, after Finn emotionally attacks Kylo Ren after seeing Rey injured Rey manages to defeat Kylo Ren, saving Finn and giving new hope to the resistance (1:52:39). Like Jyn, Rey is capable of fighting enemies and saving others as the main characters of their respective films.

Jyn “is not the kind of heroine who needs rescuing. She, instead, is the kind of heroine who rescues others. She is no damsel; even when things get dire, we do not see her in distress.”

(Garber). Both protagonists illustrate the progression of female agency in Star Wars films under Disney's influence.

Despite Disney's lengthy history of films exemplifying sexist values and gender roles, Disney has managed to take on a more neoteric approach to their Star Wars films. Contrasting from Lucas Films' original values which lack female agency, Disney presents refreshing new female characters that defy gender roles and expectations. These characters represent strength, resilience, and independence as they lead and protect others. Disney has finally ended a perpetual cycle of female Star Wars characters following outdated gender roles and expectations to cater to a new audience. Ultimately, Jyn and Rey are products of Disney's representation of female agency that has helped to reinvent how The Star Wars series defines female gender constructs.

Works Cited

Berlatsky, Noah. "The 'Slave Leia' Controversy Is about More than Objectification." The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, 5 Nov. 2015, www.theguardian.com/film/2015/nov/05/slave-leia-controversy-star-wars-objectification.

Garber, Megan. "With 'Rogue One,' the Star Wars Franchise Gets Even More Feminist." The Atlantic, Atlantic Media Company, 16 Dec. 2016, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/with-rogue-one-the-star-wars-franchise-gets-even-more-feminist/510944/.

Haley. "Walt Disney." The MY HERO Project, 8 Feb. 2017, myhero.com/W_Disney2_dnhs_rh_US_2017_ul.

Rosenberg, Alyssa. "The Fraught History of Princess Leia's Infamous Bikini." Chicagotribune.com, Chicago Tribune, 18 Dec. 2018, www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/movies/ct-star-wars-princess-leia-bikini-history-20151027-story.html.

Sharp, Gwen and Lisa Wade, directors. Social Construction and Why It Matters.

Watson, Amy. "Topic: Disney Statistics." Statista, www.statista.com/topics/1824/disney/.