

Costume Evolution During the Development of Romantic Relationships and its Impact on the Positions of Power in the *Star Wars* Prequel and Original Trilogies

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

For years, *Star Wars* has been praised for its portrayal of strong and independent female characters. Padme Amidala and Leia Organa, the most developed female characters in the *Star Wars* series, are women who have strong influence in the political arena and prove to be formidable fighters in battles, and are both involved in romantic relationship throughout their respective trilogies. The goal of this study, guided by objectification theory, was to see how the costumes of strong female characters, in *Star Wars* films, evolve as romantic relationships are introduced and established. Additionally, this exploratory study aimed to investigate how female characters’ position of power was communicated through their dress.

Objectification theory is a theoretical framework that recognizes and understands the consequences that result from the sexualization of women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) indicate in their research that objectification of women occurs through the evaluation and “visual inspection of the body,” otherwise known as the observer’s or male gaze, which then results in women being treated as bodies that exist only for the purpose of pleasing others. Since the *Star Wars* films have a target audience of male viewers it is important to investigate the portrayal of women within these films and gain a better understanding of how the male gaze affects the development of the female characters in the films.

Method

The researchers carried out a content analysis of the audio and visual content of the first six films, known as episodes, of the prequels and the original *Star Wars* trilogy. Objectification theory and the male gaze was used as a foundation and guide for this study by observing changes in costumes as romantic relationships were introduced and established throughout six *Star Wars* films in order to investigate of the claims of how clothing and relationship status diminish the positions of power. Each film was watched twice. Detailed notes were taken for each scene that featured Padme Amidala or Leia Organa, and focused on the visibility of skin, costume detail, and hairstyles within the context of the scene. This context included the considerations of position of power, relationship status, scene location, other characters in the scene, physical gestures, and what the conversation of the scene entailed. These notes were then qualitatively analyzed to look for emergent themes within the context of costume, position of power, and evolution of romantic relationship.

Results

The results of the analysis indicated that both Padme and Leia were objectified through costume in their respective trilogies. Before the introduction of a romantic relationship, both women were recognized and acknowledged in the films for their high positions of power. These power levels were emphasized by the characters' costumes. Costumes were typically conservative in design and style with minimal skin exposure; only the face and hands were usually shown. Hair was styled sleekly to have a harsher and more masculine appearance. Romantic relationships were introduced and became established as the films progressed which was reflected in the costumes of Padme and Leia. Padme's costumes exposed more skin and her hairstyles were more feminine. Leia's costumes began using more color and also had more feminine hairstyles. In one notable scene, most of Leia's skin was exposed when portrayed as a captured slave. Both female characters saw a diminishment in their positions of power as the films progressed which paralleled with increased skin exposure. The frequency of the use of their titles dropped considerably and demonstration of both characters being active in their positions of power is shown at a minimum. It was observed that as both women progressed in their romantic relationships, their perceived power decreased, and an increase of objectification through greater skin exposure occurred.

Discussion

Padme and Leia are examples of how objectification and the male gaze can diminish the position of power female characters hold. Neither woman lost their position of power completely, but as the romantic relationships of each character developed the films depicted their leadership roles far less. The lack of focus on their positions of power, coupled with costumes that evolved into more skin-revealing and form fitting styles, paved the way for the viewing audience to view them with the male gaze. With both women, the attention is drawn to their physical attributes. In spite of it being unusual for being portrayed in a leadership role in film, they ultimately are reduced to the value Lang (2013) found typical for portrayals of female character: through their romantic relationships.

The study revealed that the *Star Wars* films objectify Padme and Leia through the changes in their costumes and shifts in their positions of power as their relationship statuses evolve. As the women were more established in their relationships, costumes became more revealing or colorful, hairstyles became softer and more feminine, and there was less focus on their power levels. This depiction of Padme and Leia communicates the idea to a viewing audience that in order to be appealing to a romantic counterpart, a woman should be objectified and have her position of power diminished.

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